



The Guardians

by
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Dedication:

To my readers for sticking with me through thick and thin. Thanks for joining me on another wild ride.

Chapter One

I propped my feet up on the Formica table and leaned back in my chair to see if Brady was done filming his scene yet. He was already running an hour and a half behind schedule. Typical, but it still pissed me off. Since he was my ride home, I was stuck. I didn't really mind. I'd also come prepared with things to do while I waited. Watching him work was rather amusing. It was especially funny when he and his co-star didn't see eye to eye as was the case now.

The skinny redhead in front of him was having trouble getting into the "zone" in regards to chemistry. She was supposed to look like she couldn't get enough of Brady in a sensual, erotic sort of way. That hadn't happened as of yet. Instead, she was coming across as a giddy teenage girl who might faint at the slightest bit of attention from him. Sadly, I think that's exactly what she was.

Every time Brady moved in to her to say his lines, she giggled. I wanted to buy her an ice cream cone and the newest heartthrob magazine before sending her on her merry way. Yeah, I was that annoyed with her. It didn't help she'd started aggravating me about forty minutes earlier, leaving me no choice but to do mischievous magikal things to her from afar. Since I didn't have to actually lay a hand on her, I looked innocent. Only Brady knew what I was doing. He was the only person present who was aware I was more than human. Each time I zapped the redhead, he laughed so hard they had to restart the scene. His running behind might have had something to do with my shenanigans but it was so much easier to point the finger of blame in another direction.

David, the director, yelled "cut" and announced another break. At this rate, we'd be spending the night at the studio. The lights came on and the set cleared almost instantly. I couldn't blame the crew for being in a hurry, I was a little sick of it all too. Though, shocking the redhead did make me giddy.

Brady grabbed his long-sleeved, white cotton shirt and tossed it on, not bothering to button it. The solid wall of tawny muscle left showing made me do a slight double-take. He was certainly a fine specimen. That much was for sure.

He nodded towards me. His tousled blond hair was purposely messy, styled in one of those shorter cuts, leaving the top about two inches long and the sides and back cut close. Brady's hair routine consisted of pouring a glob of gel in his hands and running them through his hair. That was it. Anything above that was primping in his book and just wasn't done.

Sadly enough, our rituals weren't altogether that different. I tended to avoid the gel and just let my hair air dry. I had little room to comment on his laziness. Especially since most people assumed I was high maintenance.

As he neared, I spotted smudged lipstick on his face and laughed. Leaning forward, I grabbed my red handbag and tossed it to him. "Catch, Casanova."

Brady wrinkled his nose and sighed. "Is it bad?"

Looking up into his blue eyes, I snickered. We'd been through enough of these types of scenes to know he was covered in lipstick. "It sort of looks like you've been attacked by an entire team of Great-Aunt Ednas, who all took turns laying one on you, but it could be worse." I

snorted. “They really should take that off her. It doesn’t do a thing for her. Light peach would have been a perfect color for her. It wouldn’t show so bad on you and it’d bring out her eyes.”

Brady chuckled and opened my handbag. “You know, when you go all girlie you make me wonder how we ended up friends.” Reaching into my bag, his eyes widened and the color drained from his face as he pulled out a handful of condoms. “Madelyn?”

I grinned. “Yes?”

“What are these?”

“Brady, you of all people, know what those are. Don’t even pretend like you don’t sleep with every girl who throws herself at you.”

The thick muscles in his neck worked overtime as he appeared to have momentary issues swallowing. I considered patting his back but held back. “Uhh, Mads, I thought you and Vance were taking some time apart?”

Flashing him a bad girl smile, I stood slowly. It felt good to stretch after sitting for so long. “We are on, if you’ll recall, what Vance likes to refer to as a break and I like to call broken up, because he did what...?” Tipping my head, I put my hand out to Brady, prompting him to take a guess.

Brady gave me the “I really don’t want to discuss this look” and grabbed a tissue out of my bag. “Because he cheated on you.”

“With how many women?”

“Two,” he sighed before tapping a condom package, “at the same time.”

“Ding, ding. We have a winner.” Taking my bag from him, I tossed it aside and put my hand out. A woman’s touch was needed. Brady relinquished the tissue and stood still. I moved in close and went to work on cleaning him up. I thought about putting my mule heels back on. They gave me an additional two inches of height. Not that I normally needed any more but Brady was six-four and I was five-nine. Compared to many women I knew, I was tall. Compared to Brady, I wasn’t.

Tilting his head to the side, I cleaned his cheek before going to work on his neck. I wrinkled my nose as I found something wet and slimy on him. “Gawd, did she drool on you too? This is ridiculous.” Grinning, I added my own saliva to the mix by spitting on the tissue before going back to the task at hand. Surprisingly enough, Brady wasn’t fazed.

“Tell me about it.” Brady shifted, not seeming pleased in the least. “So far today, I’ve been pushed off a building so many times I lost count and pawed by a girl who barely looks legal.”

I laughed and finished wiping him. “You noticed that too, huh?”

“Yeah.” The look on his face said he wasn’t happy about the age thing. It was surprising because I’d have guessed most men in their late twenties would be all over a hot little redhead wanting them regardless of her age. Guess I was wrong. Though, Brady wasn’t like most men I knew.

“Her file says she’s nineteen. I don’t see it.”

Brady grabbed my wrist and held it gently. “Been peeking in Daddy’s files again, I see.”

“Yep.” Bending over, I reached for my shoes and stilled as I felt Brady’s hand on my ass. “Why, exactly, are you touching me?”

“Uhh, you had something on the back of your jeans. It’s gone now.”

Right. So much for my theory on him not being like most men.

I slipped my shoes on and began the fun task of cleaning up my area. “So, how long do you think we’ll be here tonight?” I asked, tossing my books back in my bag. My Ancient

Civilizations class was killing my GPA and I was sick of staring at the text book.

He shrugged. "A while yet. Do you want me to send for a car?"

"Nah, my movie star roommate isn't home yet and since the house is huge, I get lost often." I'd have laughed but it was true. I still got a bit turned around and I'd lived there with Brady for two years now.

Brady smiled wide and nodded. "This guy must be a real winner, leaving you alone to fend for yourself."

Pushing past him, I headed towards the sound system behind the backdrop. I turned it on and selected random play. The first MP3 kicked on and I laughed. Typical Brady music came blaring out—classic rock. "My roommate's not so bad. Though he does have the *worst* taste in music."

Turning to look back at Brady, I gasped and backed up when I found him standing directly behind me. He had the uncanny ability to sneak up on me. As much as I trusted Brady, it was still a bit unnerving. Part of my life left me utilizing my skills and being on guard at all times. The fact I let it go, dropping my natural shields for Brady, meant something. What, I wasn't sure quite yet.

He took hold of my waist and steadied me. "I love catching you by surprise, Mads."

I smacked his rock hard, six pack abs with the back of my hand. The man was muscled perfection at its finest. "Yeah, well I hate it. One of these days I'm going to level your butt." Sadly enough, I meant every word I said. It would be accidental, I'm sure of it, but it would happen.

"Are you going to start tossing magik at me, too?" he asked, his blue gaze raking over me. "I almost begged you to electrocute the barely legal girl."

"Hey, I zapped her in the rump at least four times. Maybe more. Those were for you by the way. I noticed she kept grabbing your backside and you kept pulling her hand off. If you'd rather I didn't toy with her. I'll stop."

His eyes widened as I reached up and hit the search button on the sound system. "No. Please feel free to do whatever you want to her, Mads. She's purposely delaying the scene and it's pissing me off. Why the hell they picked her is beyond me. We obviously don't connect."

"You better start connecting real soon, Brady. She's your romantic lead. So in between things blowing up and you kicking the bad guys' asses, you have to look like you can't get enough of her." I gave him a droll look. "Currently, you're coming across as not being able to get far enough away from her."

"That would be because I can't get far enough away from her. Trust me, I've tried." He ran a hand through his hair and then over his squared jaw. He scratched his neck and yawned, proving what I already knew, he was tired. It had been a long day, full of action packed scenes and endless retakes, not to mention his lack of enthusiasm over the redhead. All things considered, Brady had the right to be a bit worn around the edges. As his best friend, I had the right to try to cheer him up.

I headed towards the set and smiled wide at the mock nightclub that had been erected several years back. In reality it was a half square that pulled apart for shooting purposes. On film, it was anything from a happening dance club to a raunchy bar, dependent upon what movie was being filmed there at the time. Currently, it was a high class strip club—a gentlemen's club. That struck me as funny.

Yes, often I equate a gentleman with some guy ogling chicks' breasts. Not.

Arching a brow, I cast a questioning look at Brady and let my gaze travel over his bare

pecs. "Tell me again why they have you with your shirt off in the middle of a crowded club? No other men have their shirts off. What? Was your character suffering from hot flashes? I don't get it."

Brady smiled as he stretched his arms high above his head, yawning so loud that for a moment, he covered the music playing in the background. He also did a fine job of showing off every muscle as it rippled with his movements. "I asked them the same thing. They told me your dad ordered it." A sly grin spread over his sleepy face. "Something about my sex-appeal."

It sounded exactly like something my father would say. He owned the production company and did whatever the hell he wanted. Exploiting his hottest star, Brady, was one of his favorite pastimes. I hated every second of it and always felt bad for Brady. I wasn't sure if he agreed to my father's demands because he wanted to or if he did it to please me. "Do you want me to get that changed for you?"

For some reason, I was one of the only people who could get my father to budge on anything in the way of toning down how much he tried to exploit Brady. He knew I hated it. My father also knew Brady wasn't fond of stripping down in front of millions yet he still tried to push the envelope.

"Let me think about it. If the barely legal gal keeps being all touchy-feely I might. She tried to slide her hand down my pants three times already. And I'm not trying to be a dick but the girl can't dance."

Running my hand over the black bar, I glanced around the set again. They tweaked it enough to not be recognizable from movie to movie but the general layout stayed the same.

"What ya thinking about?" he asked, watching me closely.

I laughed softly. "I was just thinking of how much fun it was to practically grow up here. I've seen just about everything. The first time I asked to go out dancing with my girlfriends, my father freaked out and had us use this place instead. I'm fairly sure we filled it to capacity. They all enjoyed it. I kind of wanted to go somewhere else but they had fun and that's what was important." I glanced back at him, recalling he was there as well. "Did you have fun?"

Brady nodded slowly as he walked towards me. "I enjoyed watching from the sidelines. I didn't enjoy every one of your little girlfriends swarming around me until your mother came to my aid by kissing me on the cheek and putting her arm through mine. Your girlfriends looked pissed. Your mom just smiled."

"Did you know she cornered me later about not coming to your rescue?" I asked, giving him the evil eye.

"Nope, but from the look on your face, it was my fault."

"*Mmmhmm*, she told me I should have done that for you. I should have been the one to rescue you from them all. I laughed but she didn't. I then went on to tell her I didn't understand what the big deal was. It's not like she looked a day over thirty. And I think you've gotten locked in some weird time warp too because you've looked exactly the same since I met you." I cast him a wary look as I flipped the disco lights on, instantly bathing us in a multi-colored shower of light.

Brady moved up behind me and gave me the courtesy of dragging his feet a bit to warn me he was there. "Why did your mother think you should have been the one who saved me from your friends?"

"I'm not sure. You know how she is. She's crazier than I am. But she went on and on about it. Mom even got to the point she told me, don't laugh, millions of women around the world would die to get to kiss your cheek."

Sure, it was true but it wasn't something I expected to come out of my mouth. I tended to ignore Brady's celebrity status unless picking on it. I wasn't one for the public eye and still couldn't understand how comfortable he was with all the attention he received. Of course, he didn't have to hide his true calling from the world for fear he'd inadvertently notify all humans that demons were not only real but living among them.

Despite what I said, Brady laughed and took my hand in his. "What did you say?"

"I shook my head and told her I was still baffled by the idea of anyone purposely lining up to kiss you. She whapped me in the back of the head. When I pointed out it was only you, she did it again. And then she told me if I dared to dance with Michael Serener one more time she'd personally see to it I never saw the light of day again."

Brady pulled me against his expansive chest, moving our bodies back and forth as the music played. He'd always been one to spontaneously grab me and dance. It always felt right. Nothing about Brady put me off. Tossing my arm over his shoulder, I smiled. He pressed his thigh between my legs and began to rock his lower body in slow circles, taking me with him. I rubbed against him, following him move for move.

"So, what you're saying is that you, my roommate and extremely close friend, do not find me attractive?"

I took hold of the hand he had on my hip and moved it to my butt. He cocked an eyebrow and I laughed softly, as I leaned back slowly, still riding his leg as I went. "You do realize we may be the only two people in the world who do this while having a full conversation like nothing is going on."

Brady's warm hand touched my bare midriff and I drew in a sharp breath as my body reacted to him. He slid it up, going under my green silk cami. I moved, backing up slowly, watching him intensely as I did. Every now and then, my body would react to him sexually. It was fairly easy to squish because he was my friend and it felt different. For some reason, it had been getting a bit harder to ignore as of late.

I thought Brady would move his hand down, like he always did. He didn't. His fingers brushed the underside of my breast before he pulled his hand away. I smiled wide at his shock. "Surprise, no bra."

A cunning smile spread over his face. "I noticed. And you never answered my question about finding me attractive."

Pressing my body against his, I licked a line up his neck to his jaw. His entire body stiffened. It was too fun to toy with him. I kept going. I ran my nails down the front of his chiseled chest as I lowered myself on him, licking and kissing as I went. Each muscle on his stomach rippled as we continued to dance. I kept rhythm with him as I headed lower. Brady jerked, his entire body went rigid.

When I got to his navel, I licked around it carefully. Moving down, I kissed the tiny start of sandy blond hair trailing its way down into his jeans. I knew I was pushing past the point of acceptable behavior but I didn't care. He'd stolen my breath when he'd skimmed over my breast. It was my turn to return the favor.

Looking up, I met his eyes with mine and slipped my fingers into the top of his jeans. I slid around the front. Unzipping him just a bit, I licked and kissed him. His stomach tightened and I nipped playfully at the skin there.

His jaw dropped as he ran his hand into the back of my hair. I stood quickly and backed away from him. He took a deep breath.

"Aww, aren't paybacks a bitch?" I asked, backing up more.

Brady crouched slightly, putting his hands out on each side of him. He shook his head. “Hey, not nice. I brushed past your breast on accident and get that punishment in return?”

I stuck my bottom lip out, hoping to achieve a sexy pout. From the pained look on his face, I did. “I’m hurt. That was so bad it’s been labeled punishment?”

“Don’t try it, Mads, you know exactly what you just did and how it qualifies as punishment.”

I glanced behind me to see what would be the best escape route and then turned to face Brady. “Women do that and more to you when you’re working. Is it considered punishment then? The horny yet scorned look you’re wearing makes me want to do it again just to piss you off, Brady.”

“Really?” he asked, circling me. Brady took on the look of a predator and I loved every second of it.

“Ooo, I can now tell everyone I licked a movie star.” I winked and backed up again. “I’ve been told that millions of women would die to kiss your cheek. How many more would join in if we were talking about licking those abs?”

“That’s it. You’re mine.”

I did a rather dramatic full body shudder. “I’m shaking. There’s no net here, Brady. If you fall, it might hurt.”

The laughter that came from him made my body tingle in ways it shouldn’t. Stunned, I gave Brady the opening he needed. Instantly, he was on me, picking me up high in the air and growling. He tossed me over his shoulder as if I weighed nothing.

“Brady!” I cried out as I found myself staring at his tight jean covered ass. I smacked it and made my hand sting. “Ouch, remind me to never do that again.”

Something pinched my butt, sending me jerking upwards. Seeing Brady’s mouth clamped down on my butt cheek shocked me to the point I accidentally let too much magik surface. I’d spent many years learning how to control it. He released his hold on me and I pushed for him to put me down. He didn’t budge. When I realized what I’d done and what he didn’t do--fall over--my eyes widened. Brady’s did too.

“I can’t believe you bit me in the butt!”

He wagged his brows. “Really, because I could bite you again so you’re sure it was me who did and that it happened. Nice touch with the trying to zap me with your power, Mads.”

My jaw dropped. I didn’t try. I did zap him. How he was still standing was a mystery to me. “Put me down.”

He quickly kissed my backside and tossed a sly grin my way. “Okay.” He dropped his shoulder and released his hold on me.

The hard floor came upon me without warning. My right shoulder hit first, followed closely by my hip then head. Pain shot through me as I laid there stunned by the fact he’d dropped me. I tasted something metallic and knew it was my blood. I’d gotten my ass kicked enough during my secret nocturnal activities to know what my blood tasted like. Demons seemed to get great joy out of making me bleed and I seemed to bleed well so all was right in my fucked up world.

Brady dropped down next to me, looking mortified and put a hand out. “Oh God, Mads. I’m so sorry. I thought you’d... umm... I thought you’d...?”

Lifting my head slowly, I glared at him as I pushed off the floor. My shoulder and elbow hurt like hell. I winced. “You thought what, Brady? Did you think I’d bounce to my feet and be fine?”

He shook his head. “Baby, I didn’t think you’d get hurt. I—”

Shocked, I stared at him, waiting for a punch line that didn’t come. “Did you just call me baby?”

Brady stopped and seemed to think about what I’d just asked him. “I don’t know. Maybe. Here.” He slid his arms under mine and lifted me effortlessly. “Sorry. Are you okay?”

I nodded. The urge to slap him upside the head was great. Somehow, I managed to resist. It was difficult.

His eyes widened as he reached for my face. “You’re bleeding. Fuck, I split your lip. Oh God, Madelyn, I am so sorry. Come on, let’s get you home.”

I rotated my shoulder and stretched my arm. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t worry about it? Are you nuts?”

I patted his chest. I couldn’t really tell him that big bad supernatural things did far more than drop me on my backside and split my lip on a nightly basis. They gave it their all to kill me. No. Brady was human and wasn’t to know the entire truth about me. I forced a smile to my face. “I’ll be fine. No big deal. Although, should I ever ask you to put me down again, could you maybe ease me to my feet? Tossing me off your shoulder doesn’t feel so good.”

Brady took hold of me and pulled me into a tight hug. It was different, very different from the way we normally embraced. When he kissed the side of my head, I damn near fell over. Pushing on his chest, I groaned. “Get off, you’re creepin’ me out. I’m fine. It happened. I’m not mad at you. Although, I am thinking of making you kiss my hip. And I’d also like to state for the record, that I promise to never lick you again as payback. It only leaves me aching. I get a bite on the ass and then tossed on it. Hardly seems fair.”

Brady sighed. “I’m so sorry, Mads. I mean it.”

The sound of people approaching made me push on Brady again until he let go. “Looks like it’s time for you to get back to work.”

Cupping my face, he leaned in close to me. “I am so unbelievably sorry, Mads. I swear.” Suddenly, his lips were pressed against mine. Shocked, I opened my mouth to protest. Brady opened his as well and slid his tongue against mine. I wanted to push him away and smack him upside his blond head. I didn’t. Instead, I surrendered to him, allowing his tongue free reign of my mouth.

His hands stayed on my face. He held me firmly as if he was afraid I’d pull away. I thought I’d pull away, too. I didn’t. Pushing my tongue into his mouth, I could barely breathe as my entire body began to tingle.

Hello? It’s Brady you’re kissing! Snap out of it.

Never one to listen to anyone, including myself, I kept my lips pressed to his. I slid my arms up and took hold of the back of his neck as I rose onto my tiptoes. The kiss became more aggressive, our tongues diving in and out of the other’s mouth. The coppery metallic taste of my blood mixed in and I went to draw back. Brady held me tighter and went nuts, licking, sucking, as though it were no big deal I was bleeding and we were kissing. He moaned. I followed suit.

Brady tasted so good, unlike any other man I’d ever kissed. Our tongues maintained constant contact, each naturally following the other as if they’d had years and years of practice when in truth, it was their first encounter. He pressed his body to mine and moved to the beat of the music. I swayed with him, thrust for thrust. Something came over me and I had to touch more of him, feel his skin under my fingertips. Sliding my hands down him, I moaned into his mouth as I retraced my way down his torso.

The feel of hands going up and under the sides of my cami threatened to send me into

overdrive. I broke free of the kiss and went to turn away. I managed to make it a whole step before Brady captured my hand and spun me into him. Suddenly, my back was pressed to his front. He moved again, rubbing his body against mine. I gasped when the hard bulge beneath his jeans rubbed against my low back.

Rocking with him, I moved my arm up behind his neck. Tilting my head back, I locked gazes with him. For a second, neither one of us did a thing. Then, Brady bent his head and took control of my mouth once more, sliding his tongue in and finding mine. His hands splayed across my stomach. I dropped my free hand and grabbed the back of his thigh, pulling him tighter to me as we simulated sex to the beat.

Every ounce of me wanted the sex to be real. I wanted Brady buried to the hilt in me, ramming his cock in me as I clung to him. The very thought of that made my pussy damp and shocked me to the core. What was happening to me? To us?

It's Brady you're kissing!

Tearing my mouth free of his, I turned my head slowly and looked up. I froze. Brady did the same. The entire crew stood there staring at us with their mouths wide open. "Umm, Brady?"

He shifted behind me. Sighing deeply, he pressed lips against my ear and whispered, "I'm sorry, Madelyn. I forgot where we were. Don't be upset. Please. I know how you are about keeping your private life private."

Brady was right. I did guard my privacy heavily. So did he, to a point. But he always took it in stride when a tabloid ran something about him. Nine times out of ten, it was false but he never got worked up. As I stood there, frozen against Brady's warm body, I knew I had two choices—freak out or go with the flow. Surprisingly enough, I chose option B.

"Ah, Brady, do you know what's going to happen now?"

"Mads, I'm—"

I elbowed him in the stomach and he shut up. Nodding, I tossed my hands in the air. "Great, just great! Now my parents are going to find out we're having quadruplets. You swore you were going to tell my dad first. Now it'll be plastered all over the front of every tabloid from here to infinity. Wait until they find out I'm already four months pregnant. They'll not only freak over you and me but the poor babies will be subjected to them, as well. It's a good thing I'm not showing yet."

Brady was silent. Turning to him, I found him with his mouth hanging open. His brow furrowed as he stared down at me. "Madelyn...?"

"Oh, don't you stand there pretending to be shocked. You know damn well you're their father! Don't try to get out of it this late in the game."

He touched my shoulder gently and tried to speak again. Nothing but a strangled cry came out. I did my best to hold in the smile wanting to come. When it was clear Brady was lost and looking a bit nauseous, I gave in and patted him on the chest.

"Sorry, everyone else claims they're giving birth to your child. I felt left out." I glanced back at the crew. "I bet he goes with double layering his condoms from now on. What do you guys think?"

The entire group burst into laughter. Turning back to face Brady, I winked and pulled his head down. Planting a tiny kiss on his forehead, I whispered to him, "Breathe. It was a joke. We'd have to actually have sex for you to get me pregnant. Relax."

He remained locked in his state of shock.

I drew back and pointed at his redheaded co-star. "You, come here."

Her eyes widened but she ran to me all the same. I took her hand and put it on Brady's

shoulder. “Now, try to stop acting like a complete and utter idiot around him. He’s human not a god. He doesn’t find your behavior cute or attractive. None of us do. Pull yourself together and act a hair above your age.” I smacked Brady’s abs lightly. “He should be all set for the scene now. Try not to drool on him again or leave him covered in lipstick. Take care now.”

I walked past her and winked at the crew. They clapped and laughed harder. Grabbing my backpack and handbag, I headed towards the door.

“My work here is done.”

Chapter Two

“Mads, wake up.”

Opening my eyes slowly, I saw nothing but my mattress. Never a good sign. “Why am I face down? Did I get drunk and not remember? Because I could have sworn I came home and went to bed.”

Brady laughed and touched me gently. “It’s time to get up.”

“It’s Saturday. I don’t have to get up on Saturdays,” I said, groaning and pulling my pillow over my head. “Go away and come back on Monday.”

He slid the sheet down and gasped. “Mads, you don’t have a top on!”

“I know.”

“Uhh...?” He swallowed hard.

“Brady, I don’t have *any* clothes on.”

His weight lifted off the bed and I laughed softly, still facing the mattress. “You don’t have to go. I don’t particularly care who sees me this morning. I had a hell of a night. Do you realize how many creepy things are on the loose in—” I stopped short of what I was going to say. I kept a big part of myself from Brady. In fact, aside from immediate family, no one knew my secrets.

“How many what are where?” he asked, his voice sounding off.

The phone rang and I did a silent thank you for not having to answer his question. I hated lying to him about that part of myself. Actually, I hated lying to him period. Brady went to get up and I grabbed his leg. “No. I don’t want to talk to him.”

“At times, you scare me,” he said, playfully.

“I scare everyone.”

Chuckling, Brady leaned forward to answer the phone. Knowing it was Vance, I tried to stop Brady from answering it. I moved forward, in an attempt to beat him to it. Suddenly, I slipped off the bed. Brady went, too.

Before I knew it, Brady was flat on his back on the floor and I was spread out on top of him—naked. Brady’s body went rigid. “He-ll-o?”

“Oh, he’ll *never* suspect you of anything with that voice,” I whispered into his chest. I knew I should have raced off him screaming like a fool but what was the point. The man had seen more naked women than a gynecologist. Aside from scars that I wasn’t about to let him know I had, he’d seen it all. Not mine personally but naked chicks in general.

“Why am I answering her phone? Uhh, I was close to it.” Brady laughed nervously and shifted a tiny bit. “Yeah, I’m trying to get her up right now.”

I wiggled my hips against him and snickered as his cock grew hard. “I’m not the only thing getting up.”

“Madelyn!”

Keeping my head down, I felt around above me for a sheet. When I found it, I yanked it off the bed and covered myself. Not wanting to move, I turned my head and put my cheek against Brady’s warm chest. Closing my eyes, I settled in and got comfy.

“Yeah, uhh, Vance. She’s awake now but she really isn’t in the best of moods. I’ll tell her

to give you a call later today.” He chuckled. “Well, I wouldn’t necessarily say bitchy.”

Putting my hand up, I waited for Brady to hand the phone to me. When he did, our hands lingered as they touched. I pulled the phone to my ear and was anything but kind. “Bitchy? Me? Aww shucks, I wubs you, too. Now, what the hell do you want?”

Vance snickered. I wanted to reach through the phone and wring his neck. “I can see you’re still upset with me. Don’t you think it’s time we moved past this? It’s been three weeks now, Madster.”

I cringed. I hated to be called Madster. What the hell was a Madster anyway? It sounded like something that belonged at a raceway with checkered flags and men in flame retardant suits not a pet name. It wasn’t as though I hadn’t told Vance I hated it. He was just too thick headed to let it sink in. “I’d explain myself but I’m tired and finally found a face down position that’s just right so I’m hanging up now.”

“Madster, come on, sugar. I said I was sorry. You can’t possibly want to throw what we had away.” He let out a long breath. “I was wrong. I should have never done what I did. It’s just you never seemed to make enough time for me.”

I snuggled in tighter to Brady, enjoying the feel of his gray t-shirt against my cheek. “If you were lonely, Vance, you should have bought a puppy not two whores and four cases of beer. Going now and not answering the phone again. Bye.” I hung up and handed the phone back to Brady. “Please don’t subject me to him again.”

“Uhh, Mads?”

“I realize I’m naked and on top of you.” I looked up and couldn’t help but laugh when I saw Brady’s pained expression. “I thought we could work on those quadruplets now.”

His blue eyes lit as his full lips pulled into a smile. “Very funny last night. They teased me for twenty minutes after you left and I can only imagine what they’ll do when I show up today.”

I gave him a “what” look. He quirked an eyebrow not about to let me get out of it. I grinned. “It was the least I could do after you dropped me over six feet to a hard floor.”

Brady’s smile faded rapidly. “I am so—”

Pressing my finger to his lips, I silenced him. “Sweetie, that was nothing.”

“What? Men do worse to you?” he asked in a joking manner.

Of course men did worse to me. A hell of a lot worse. Unwilling to lie to Brady anymore than I had to, I forced a smile to my face and decided to change the subject. “Care to tell me why I have to get out of bed so early?”

“The barely legal redhead walked off the set about five minutes after you left last night and quit.”

“No way.”

Brady began to twirl my hair lazily. It felt too good for me to stop him so I didn’t. “Oh she did. She was scared to touch me. I thought it was hilarious. David didn’t. He called your dad and told him what you did to her. Your father then informed him that since you chased her off, you would take her place.”

My first reaction was to sit up and yell. But something on Brady’s face made me wonder if this wasn’t a crafty way to get back at me for the whole babies thing. I wagged my eyebrows and grinned. “Oh he did, did he?”

“Mmmhmm,” he pulled my hair out far and held it in the air, “and David wanted to have your hair cut short and dyed red. I told him if he came near you with scissors or dye I was done filming. I reminded him that I have an out clause to cover just about anything so don’t attempt to

go around me.”

Glancing up, I watched as he twirled my hair. “Hmm, it’s a shame he wasn’t willing to accept me with black hair. Though, it touches my butt so I could probably stand to lose a few feet.”

Brady narrowed his gaze on me. “That’s not funny, Madelyn. Don’t even think about cutting your hair.”

Easy for him to say. It wasn’t his head that had to feel it every time something supernatural decided to try to lift me by my hair. Unfortunately, it happened a lot.

“Wow, got it. Cut hair, bad. Leave hair long, good.”

He smiled, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “That’s about it in a nutshell. And we need to get a move on. We’ve got a few errands to run and then we need to be on the set.”

I put my head back down and laughed. “You’re good. Feel better now? I only said the quadruplet thing because we had two choices, we could have stood and denied everything they’d seen or run with it. I know you don’t give a shit about what people say or print about you but I do. I’d rather not see ‘Brady and Mason girl sex tape’ all over the newsstands. Christ, they’ll have us engaged by noon.”

Brady chuckled. The sound moved through me. “They really come up with some good ones. I love the one where they had you listed as a trained killer, Mads. I damn near let my publicist book me on every morning show just to tell them all how clumsy you are.”

I smiled even though I didn’t want to. I’d wanted to tell Brady the truth about me for years but it was forbidden. I wasn’t even sure what, if anything, would happen to me. My concern was Brady. The things I dealt with weren’t forgiving and they didn’t really care what your position in life was. Get in the way and you die.

“Hey, they called you a werewolf once,” I said grinning. “I especially enjoyed it backfiring in their faces when your publicist agreed with them but told them to wait until you were done filming the movie to see it.”

Brady laughed and released my hair. “Yeah, that was one of their better ones.”

Tucking the sheet around me, I sat up slowly, careful to stay covered. I straddled Brady’s waist and laughed. “Why the hell they ever used the word werewolf to describe you is beyond me.”

Brady’s brow furrowed as he did his best to keep his eyes on my face. It was cute. “What makes you say that?”

“Easy, if you were a werewolf, you would have a certain scent, not bad but distinctive. You don’t. Therefore, they’re wrong or you’re a lycan—born with the ability to change into the form of a wolf, not bitten and infected. Not a slave to the cycles of the moon and you can control your bloodlust.” I climbed off him and went for my bathroom.

“Mads?”

I stilled. Had I really just spit out all of that information? I thought about it. Yep. I had.

Holding the sheet tight, I headed straight for the large double sinks. I pulled my toothbrush out of the cabinet and went to town on my teeth, hoping Brady would laugh off my lycan talk. I glanced in the mirror and choked on my toothbrush when I saw Brady was directly behind me. How he hadn’t bumped me was a mystery. I gave him the evil eye as I finished brushing. “Don’t do that, especially when I have something in my mouth. I damn near rammed it down my throat.”

Brady grinned and looked me up and down in the mirror.

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking. There are things I love to put in my mouth,” I turned

and glanced down at his groin before meeting his gaze once more, “that I’m guessing are much bigger than my toothbrush.”

He flushed and it was adorable. Brady wasn’t prone to blushing. Turning back to the sink, I spit and finished. When I stood back up, I flashed him a smile in the mirror. “For reference, I swallow.”

Brady turned at least three shades of red at the comment. He put his hands on my hips and shook his head. “Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

I locked gazes with him. “I kiss a lot of things with my mouth.” I went to start the shower and Brady stopped me.

“Nope. For one, I can still smell soap on you so you showered last night. For two, it’s easier to let make-up and wardrobe do your hair on the set. Trust me.”

Turning, I brushed my body past his and smiled. “We’re still going with the joke then?”

“Nope,” he said, so close that his warm breath fanned over my lips making my entire body react to him. “We’re going to grab something to eat, run a few errands and then we’re heading to the set.”

Oh, he was good. I should have known better than to screw with him. He was a master at the art of giving better than he got.

“Great, since you have the day planned, what am I wearing?”

“I vote for the sheet.”

Smacking his stomach lightly, I looked him over. “How exactly is that fair? You’ve got jeans and a t-shirt on.”

He gave me his famous shit-ass grin. “I can wear a sheet too if you want.”

“Why bother. The world has seen your naked hind end on numerous occasions. Just go with a fig leaf.” I slid to the side and went to walk around him. I made it about three feet before the sheet pulled tight and I could go no further. Turning around was pointless. I already knew Brady was standing on it. “Off, or I’m walking anyways.”

“I dare you.”

My mind raced with hundreds of reasons for each side of the decision of dropping it or keeping it. Making my mind up, I released my hold on the sheet and kept walking, giving Brady a full view of my naked backside. I could feel him staring at me.

I kept going forward and had to concentrate on not running and diving into my closet. The second I reached it, I broke into a silent thank you and headed in. I did give in at the end, speeding my pace and going straight to the drawer holding my undergarments. I grabbed a white thong and put it on quickly. Moving three drawers down, I pulled out a pink cotton V-neck tank top with a built in bra. The minute I got it over my head I adjusted my breasts to fit comfortably and pulled some of my hair out of the back of it.

A warm hand brushed past mine. Gasping, I turned slightly and found Brady with a wicked little smile on his tan face. “Let me help you.” He took hold of my hair and pulled it out of the back of the tank top.

“Thanks, do you think you could hand me a pair of white pants? Any will do.” I wasn’t about to face him head on.

Pressing his mouth to my ear, he chuckled. “I think you should get them.”

There was no way in hell I was going to let Brady see the scars I carried on my front half. “Ha, ha, I’m not turning around. You don’t do full frontals and neither do I.”

Brady laughed and moved back from me a bit. “I’ll do a full frontal for you any time you ask. I’ve told you that before. Besides, you’re partially dressed so it wouldn’t count.”

I rolled my eyes. “The answer is still no. And going back to your previous offer of a personal peek at you completely naked, I politely declined. Remember?” I sighed. “Though, I’m thinking of calling your bluff one of these days.” I put my hand out and he placed the pants in it. I immediately put the linen draw string pants on, doing my very best not to bend over. The last thing I wanted was his engorged cock pressing against my thong-clad ass. I’d never make it. No. I’d end up doing something stupid like begging Brady to fuck me.

Brady let out a small laugh. “Looking a little stiff there, Mads. Sleep wrong?”

I tied the drawstring and flipped him off. The tiny growl he made told me he’d accept the challenge. “Heels or something more comfortable?” I asked, doing my best to steer the conversation away from sex.

Before I could even turn around, Brady had his body pressed to my back and a pair of slip-on sneakers held out for me. They were white and light gray. I leaned forward to put them on. My butt pressed directly against Brady’s groin and I froze. He ran his hand down my back, swatted my cheek lightly and backed away.

“Mmm, Mads, whatever you pick is absolutely *fine*.”

Chapter Three

“Brady, do we have to go here?” I asked, not wanting to go somewhere so public with him. He attracted women four blocks over wherever we went and I hated it.

Brady put his hand on my thigh and offered me a soft smile. “I don’t hide, you know that. You shouldn’t have to either.”

I stared at the dashboard of his Saab SUV and took a deep breath before looking at him. He wasn’t doing this to piss me off. He seemed to have taken it upon himself to get me out more. Snatching my pink handbag, I opened it and fished out a hair tie and my sunglasses.

“You have a purse for every occasion, don’t you?”

Nodding, I took the top and the sides of my hair and pulled them back. Wrapping those portions into a loose bun, I let it lay against the rest of my hair. As I went to put my dark sunglasses on, Brady took them from me. “Brady?”

“You have the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen yet you cover them everywhere we go.”

Yeah, probably because if I sense danger they have a tendency to swirl. That freaks humans out.

I didn’t spit out my first thought. “They’re green. Lots of people have them.”

“No. They are not just green, Mads. They’re emerald green, exotic in a way that’s hard to describe. They’re shrouded by thick black lashes and are always soaking everything in.”

Stunned, I stared at him. “Uhh, you should take up writing greeting cards. They’d sell.”

“Don’t get me started on your pale skin and lush rose-colored lips,” he said, giving me an expression I couldn’t quite read.

“You said lush. Ha.” Taking hold of the door handle, I shrugged. “Remind me to never kiss you again. You just end up weird the next day.”

I got out and took a deep breath in, preparing myself for whatever may come. Brady had picked a strip that had some of the hottest restaurants, clubs and shops in the district. People were everywhere. I felt it then, the pull, the warning that things not human were in the area. Since it was broad daylight, I relaxed a bit. Only a select amount of supernaturals were dangerous to the general population. The others, such as myself, peacefully co-existed.

As confident as I was that no one intended to harm anyone, I still had to worry about what my eyes might do. They were unpredictable. In fact, as far as Guardians went, I was considered the most unpredictable. I was also the only female they’d ever had. Coincidental? I think not. Once a month I was a riot.

Brady slipped his arm around my waist and handed me my sunglasses. “Here, you look uncomfortable.”

I turned into him and gave him a soft smile. “Thank you.”

“No problem, now let’s enjoy ourselves.” Taking my hand in his, he zigzagged through the people and opened the door to the Japanese restaurant. He got me in and pressed me against the wall. “See, we made it in safely.”

“You’re real funny.” If he only knew how many things lurked around us as we spoke he’d stop laughing.

“Mr. Devens, welcome,” a man said, approaching rapidly. “Let’s get you set up.”

Rolling my eyes, I huffed. “Trust you to be a regular. Aww, if I’m getting the ‘Brady slick date’ treatment I’ll vomit. I swear I will.”

Brady laughed as he pulled me with him. We reached the edge of the Sushi bar and Brady sat down. Glancing up at me, he laughed. “What? Did you think I’d hide away in a back room?”

“Do you ever shut-up?”

“Nope.”

I grunted and sat next to him. “It was a rhetorical question.”

“I know,” he said, leaning into me and bumping my shoulder slightly. “Hey, how are you feeling? I meant to ask first thing this morning but I... uhh... got a little distracted.”

I thought back to laying on him naked and smiled. A slow tingle moved over me and I shivered. Pushing it away, I concentrated on Brady’s question. “I’m good. Though it’s weird, I could have sworn I split my lip. There’s not a mark on it.”

Brady turned my face to him. “I think my kiss healed you. Yep, that’s what happened. Let’s test it and see.” He leaned in to kiss me and I pushed his forehead back. He whimpered and I laughed.

“Did you hit your head when they were tossing you off the building on the set yesterday?”

Putting a plate in front of me, he shook his head. “Nope. Why?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way but you’ve been acting weird all day.” I filled his plate and then went to work on mine. Setting a tiny bowl of green wasabi paste next to his plate in the process, I glanced up to find him watching me with an odd expression. “What?”

Brady looked down at his plate and back at me. “Uhh, would you like to put a bib on me too?”

Confused, I followed his gaze. My eyes widened when I saw that I’d waited on him like he was child. “Wonderful, I’ve turned into my mother. Here, I’ll get you a new plate. I’m sorry.”

He grabbed my arm. “No, it’s fine. It’s actually exactly what I’d have picked.” His blue eyes locked on me. “Exactly.”

I nodded and took my sunglasses off slowly, no longer feeling the strong presence of supernaturals. “Yeah, well, I’m still sorry. I honestly wasn’t paying attention.”

Brady smiled and motioned to my sunglasses. “Taking them off for a bit, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask why you wear glasses everywhere but the studios and home?”

I’d rather you didn’t, but I’ll do my best to give you an answer you’ll accept.

Leaning forward, I pressed my mouth to his ear and whispered softly, worried someone would overhear, “Because, my eyes sometimes change a bit when I’m nervous or if something’s not quite right. It’s tied into the other stuff. They sort of swirl, Brady. It’s not something others can be allowed to see.”

Brady took my hand in his and kissed it gently. He put his mouth to my ear. “No one’s taught you to control that?”

“No. No one who knows about the *other* stuff understands anything about it. I really don’t want to talk about this. It’s hard enough, wondering what you think about everything as it is.”

Brady surprised me by kissing my ear. “Mads, you know you can talk to me about anything, and I do mean anything, right? Magikal or not, hon.”

I glanced around frantic someone might have overheard him. Humans were not to know anything paranormal existed. If one should happen to be a witness to something, I and other

Guardians like me were equipped to erase those memories and replace them with pleasant ones. I'd already put Brady in enough danger by letting him keep his memories of me and what I could do magikally. I wouldn't risk him any further. "I do. Thanks."

"I mean anything."

Turning my head slightly, I kissed his neck and held my lips there a moment. "There are some things that can't ever be talked about outside of our home and I need you to be okay with that. Please."

We looked like two lovers taking turns kissing each other and at the moment, I didn't care who saw us. Brady always made me feel safe. I let my guard down around him. It was stupid but something that happened often.

"I know you can do a hell of a lot more than you let on. I have never betrayed you, Madelyn, and I never will."

My chest tightened. Brady had been in my life a long time and he never had betrayed my trust. He'd walked in on me when I assumed I was alone in the prop room. I was fifteen or sixteen at the time and was still very into exploring what I might be capable of doing. I'd been sitting before a chess set, moving the pieces without touching them. I never heard him come in. All of the sudden, he was next to me. An overwhelming calm came over me even though I'd never laid eyes on him before. When he looked down and smiled, I relaxed. He then told me to move over—that it was depressing to watch me have to play alone.

I sighed and wrapped my arms around his neck. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Then leave it alone, Brady."

He growled lightly, as he always did when something bothered him, and pulled back from me a bit. He whispered, "I'm here for the long haul, Mads. Nothing will scare me away."

I directed my attention back to eating and sat quietly next to him. He didn't say a word but I could feel him staring at me. I wanted to turn around and blurt out the fact I was a Guardian, a chosen one who protected humans from that which would do them harm. I didn't slay every demon, vampire, werewolf or other supernatural thing I came across. That wasn't what a Guardian did. We only took out the ones who'd killed, injured innocents or who reeked of evil. If they were bathed in the scent of hell, we weren't allowed to take a chance on them. If we didn't do our job, people died.

I didn't want to think about it all. I sat and stared at my plate.

"Excuse me, but are you, like, umm, Brady Devens?" a bubbly voice asked from behind us.

Brady turned in his seat. "Yeah."

"Ohmygod, Jackie, I told you it was him, I told you!"

The girl was about to draw the attention of every person in the damn state if she kept it up. Slowly, I faced them. Three of them stood there, each one looked thinner than the next. At five-nine, I wore a size six and looked damn skinny too, these gals looked like they needed to huddle around us and eat. All three bleached blonde girls stared starry eyed at Brady. It was nauseating.

One stepped forward. "Can I touch you?"

Oh, please.

"Ooo, I want a kiss. Can I have a kiss?" another one asked.

The last one pulled a pen out of her purse. "Will you sign my breasts?"

What breasts? You're like thirteen.

Brady glanced at me for help. After the rather unpleasant experience of having my mother whap me in the back of the head for not lending a hand, I caved quickly. I stuck my bottom lip out a bit and did my best to be a bubble headed idiot he'd normally date. "Honey, you told me you stopped doing that. You said my breasts were the only breasts you wanted. Are they not good enough anymore?"

Brady bit his lower lip and did his best not to laugh.

I took hold of my naturally ample breasts and lifted them. I thought he'd fall off his stool. "But when you bought them you said you liked them. Now you're going to... going to..." I closed my eyes, lowered my head and laughed silently, knowing full-well it looked like I was sobbing.

Brady stood quickly and wrapped his arms around me. "It's okay, baby. I'm not doing anything, just like I promised. And your breasts," he choked a bit, "are perfect. It was money well spent. How about we go home now and I'll prove it to you?" He drew back a bit. "I'm sorry, ladies but... umm... I need to see to her."

"You have a girlfriend?" one asked, sounding so shocked at the idea Brady would actually have someone that I thought she might hit him.

Please say no. Please say no.

"No," he said, allowing me to let the tension out of my shoulders. "No, I don't have a girlfriend. I have a fiancée and I can't leave her this upset. I'm sorry. Do you have any paper? I could sign it for you."

Fiancée?

I jerked and coughed. Brady patted my back gently. I wanted to break every one of his fingers.

They all gasped. "Young and Modern did an interview on you last month and you said you were still single."

"Technically, I am. We're engaged. Not married. Not that it matters to me. She's got me and I won't let her let go. We met right after the interview. I have Young and Modern to thank for her."

Liar. Young and Modern to thank? I'm so going to kill him.

Brady pulled away from me and I listened as he signed what they wanted. He bid them goodbye and apologized again. He bent down next to me and rubbed my back. "There, there, baby, don't be upset. You're still number one in my eyes."

"Get your hand off me before I rip it off," I said, half joking, half serious. I peeked out and found him doing his very best not to grin from ear to ear. "Fiancée? You could have said date. Hell, you could have said escort. Did you have to say that? You know as well as I do that'll be everywhere by Monday."

Licking his lower lip, he gave in to the grin he'd worked so hard to hold off. "I thought it was great when your mom bailed me out with a kiss on the cheek. Damn, she was right about you helping. You are much better at it. A pro. Grab your breasts again. That was the best part." He put his hand under my hair and rubbed my neck. "That is payback for the quadruplet thing. I'll go take care of the bill. Be back in a minute, honey."

I stood and laughed. Yep, he gave better than he got. That much was for sure. Putting on my sunglasses slowly, I felt my eyes swirl to a vibrant green as the sense of danger came over me. Something was in the area and it wasn't friendly. It was stalking someone. My instincts kicked in. I couldn't let Brady know what was going on but I needed to move, now. I headed straight for the door. Glancing over I saw him laughing and talking to the man who'd seated us.

The sense of danger hit me like a tidal wave. My breathing increased and my pulse sped. I was going to be too late.

“No!” I dropped my purse and thrust the door open. I closed my eyes to sense which direction I needed to go. Instantly, I was hit with the urge to go to the right. I took off running full force, tossing up enough magik to keep humans from seeing me.

I turned and ran down the narrow alley. Whatever was giving off the evil vibe was close. I could smell it now. It was a werewolf. I’d had more trouble with them in the last three months than I’d ever had. They’d been crawling out of the woodwork. I spotted the break between the buildings and came to a grinding halt. Listening, I heard a man talking.

“I can smell how much you want me. And you do want me, Tammara, don’t you? I’ve wanted you since I first saw you. Now you can’t run. You’re mine.”

A tiny whimper followed. I rolled my eyes. They were always saying shit like that. Taking a large calming breath, I strolled around the corner like I was out for a walk.

A huge man stood there with a tiny auburn haired woman pinned to the wall before him. Her face was stained with tears and dirt. The giant with a buzz cut ran a clawed finger down her cheek, not breaking her skin, yet.

“Ohmygod! Tammy, is that you? Get out! What are you doing all the way over here?”

Her light blue eyes locked on me. She pleaded with them, begging for help, knowing whatever stood before her wasn’t human. The man looked at me and snarled. I thought about pretending to be scared but gave up. Really, what was the point?

“You, little girl, are in the wrong place at the wrong time,” he said, his voice deeper than a man’s should be.

Little girl?

“I think Tammy would beg to differ. Wouldn’t you, Tammy?”

She stayed glued to the wall. I tossed power out at her, yanking her hard and fast out of his grasp with my magik. I kept pulling until she was safely behind me. Putting my hand up, I spoke to her using my power so she had no choice but to listen, “Stay.”

The man’s eyes widened. “What the hell are you?”

I took my sunglasses off and handed them to Tammara. “Hold these.” As much as I wanted one of my guns with me, I didn’t have time to go get one and Buzz couldn’t be left to kill again. He smelled of death. This wouldn’t have been his first kill and it wouldn’t have been his last.

I visually scanned the area for any sort of weapon. If I could avoid getting clawed that would be great. I was immune to the virus but it still made me sicker than a dog. Guess I should just be happy it didn’t *make* me a dog. The possibility of turning into a wolf was bad enough.

Two metal trashcans were close enough for me to grab. I didn’t need the whole thing. The lids would do. Buzz launched at me as if spring loaded. I seized hold of the lids and smiled as I walked in a tiny half circle. He sniffed the air. “You don’t smell human.”

Really?

“News flash, neither do you.”

His eyes flickered from green to gray. I gave him a hard thrust with my magik. Scared of using too much and leaving myself drained, I only gave him enough to move him far from Tammara. He snarled.

I felt my eyes swirling and he stopped. I snorted. “Well, I’ll be damned the eye thing scared you and not me. Wait ’til I tell the boys about this.” I walked towards him slowly. This was going to be fun.

He swiped a clawed hand out at me. Lifting the lid, I deflected it. He swiped his other hand out and I did the same thing. Buzz continued to try to claw at me only to hit the lid.

Rolling my eyes, I laughed. "Do you not see a pattern here? Swipe, lid? Swipe, lid?"

"You won't be laughing soon."

Oh, that was rich. So very cheap movie, bad actor of him that I had a hard time keeping a straight face.

"Nope, soon I'll be standing over your dead body hoping your smell comes out of my hair. Now, you want to fight like a man or hide behind those filthy claws."

Looking down at his hands, he spoke, "You fight behind magik."

I dropped and swung my leg around, sweeping his legs out from under him. He flipped high in the air. Waiting until just the right minute, I reached out and seized hold of his head. Twisting rapidly, I snapped his neck instantly. He hit the ground with a sickening thud and didn't move. If he was a full-blooded lycan, I would have had to stuff him with some silver or break as much as I could to keep him down. He wasn't, so I didn't.

Dropping the trashcan lids, I stared down at him. "I hide behind magik because I don't have nifty built in weapons like you and I'm a woman not a man. So what I said doesn't even apply, jackass."

I put my hand up and drew on my power, letting it rise around me. Already I was winded. A bad sign indeed. "Frankie, I need you to send Dillon out."

"It is Franco, Madelyn Mia. Why do you insist on calling me that?" The sound of a deep, accented voice resonated all around me and always sort of creeped me out.

I laughed. "Because it pisses you off and because you seem to like to insert my middle name in our conversations."

"That is what I thought. What happened?"

I wanted to sit down and continue our discussion. I held back. Mostly because my pants had remained white by the sheer grace of the gods, purposely plopping down in a dirty alley was pushing it. "Another were attack. I'm tired, Frankie. I mean really tired. It's getting so bad that while playing around with a friend I got hurt from only falling several feet to the ground. I don't even have enough left in me to heal myself anymore."

He sighed. "I am yanking you off your rounds. The Elders gather as we speak. We have all sensed something coming, as they have come so many times before and as they will come so many times again."

I laughed. "You don't have enough Guardians left as it is. We have lost six men in a year, Frankie. We hadn't lost one person since I've been with you before that. Ten years is a long time to go with everyone safe only to lose six in a year. What the hell is going on?"

"I do not know the answers you seek, Madelyn. But I do not wish to have to come and pull you from your rounds myself. You are currently off until further notice. Handle your innocent and return to your friend."

My eyes widened. "Uhh, how did you know I was with a friend? And you can't stop me from going out on rounds. I'm up to five nights a week with two to three attacks each night. You do the math. I won't let that many people be hurt, Frankie."

"Tell me, Madelyn, do you not think it odd you are the first female warrior in the history of battle? Men have fought this battle since the dawn of time. And then ten years ago a little girl with the most amazing green eyes comes to me while I sleep, telling me 'the big guys' told her to come. I find it hard to believe that in all the time the Guardians have been here that ten years ago The Powers That Be randomly chose a female. No, you were sent to us for a reason. While we

are still unsure what their reasoning is, we can be certain they have intentions for you. I do not wish to see you dead before they get around to laying their cards on the table.”

This was a bit deeper than I wanted to go. “Frankie, you really need to lighten up and get laid. It’ll work wonders for the whole ‘I’m a big scary vampire’ thing that seems to chase chicks off. You’re a good lookin’ five-hundred-year-old corpse, run with it.”

His deep laughter surrounded me. It stopped instantly, taking on a concerned feel. “Madelyn! Handle your innocent and leave the area!”

“Huh?” I asked, glancing around, doing my best to figure out what was going on.

“Do as I say now! Find your friend.”

What the hell was going on? He wasn’t prone to outbursts like this. He was normally just cryptic and annoying. The sad thing was, I thought he was perfect just the way he was.

“Franco?”

“*Madonna!* Go! I will hold the link. Drop what power you have left and get her to safety.”

He only said Madonna when he was extra pissed or upset. This was bad. Very bad. Quickly, I drew my power back and went to Tammara. She stood in the same spot I’d left her. I took my sunglasses from her and touched her forehead. “Go home, Tammara. Clean up and throw these clothes away. You never owned these and you were never here today. You were out and felt sick to your stomach. You went home to rest. You dreamt of happy times from childhood. Go! Quickly!”

I pulled back and watched as she ran down around the end of the building and into the alley. Bending down, I started to pull Buzz’s body back into a section where he wouldn’t be so visible.

Franco’s energy surged around me. “Madelyn! I said go! Leave him. I will risk the human authorities finding him before I risk your life.”

“Geesh, Frankie—”

Something struck me hard in the back. I cried out and fell onto Buzz’s body. I tried to push off, only to be hit again. I kicked out swiftly and came into contact with something. It moved back. Rolling over Buzz, I looked around at an empty alley. I wasn’t alone, that much I knew but I couldn’t sense where or what was with me. I got the distinct feeling there was more than one of them.

Wonderfuckingful.

The only things I couldn’t sense were pure lycanthropes. I had no silver with me and couldn’t spare much more magik. I’d been drawing on it too much in the last few months. Joking with Brady on the movie set didn’t help but he was the only break I got from the madness.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice shaky.

No one answered. Not that I really expected someone to. It never hurt to ask. There was always an off chance that I’d run into that friendly bad guy. Doubtful but entirely possible.

I glanced around the alley but found nothing. “Franco?”

“I am here. I am trying to sense where they are hiding. There are three. They are pure lycan and they know they are your weakness. Find your friend.”

Lycans. Shit. One was bad. Three was really, really bad. I stared around, frantically trying to watch everywhere at once. “Stop telling me to find my friend. He can’t help here and I won’t let you erase his memory of me!”

“I give you my word. He will not be harmed by any of us. His memory will remain intact.”

The sound of a can rolling caught my attention. I stayed low, watching all around me, doing my best to stay vigilant, knowing it was my only defense. It would be a cold day in hell before I allowed harm to come to Brady. “No deal, Franco. I’ll stay and take my chances with the lycans. I will not bring him into this life. He’s a good, happy man and I’ll be damned if I rain on his parade.”

“Madelyn, you do not understand that he is—”

Danger. Danger. Roll now!

I listened to myself and rolled to the side with a speed no human possessed. A half man, half wolf dropped to the ground and flashed a big scary smile. His incisors were huge. One chomp with those and I’d be missing some vital pieces.

“Gaston, no! This does not involve Madelyn. It is between us. Allow her to walk away and I shall come to you at sunset. You have my word. Just, allow her to leave. That is all I ask of you,” Franco said, his voice sounding strained.

Gaston? The bad guy’s name was Gaston? He had to be kidding me. I thought it best to hold all smartass comments until the end. I had a bunch. It would be difficult.

The lycan turned and looked at me. Slowly, he morphed back into a man. If I hadn’t seen the show at least a hundred times before, I’d have freaked out. He stared down at me with light grey eyes. His shoulder length, brown, curly hair bounced around a bit. And his rock hard, naked, glistening body was tanned to his toes.

“Franco, to hide Madelyn Mia in the open was genius. Who would think to look right under their noses?” He took a step towards me and I stayed put. “Oh, look, she has her father’s stubbornness and her mother’s eyes.”

Uhh, big crazy lycan boy was on crack. My mother’s eyes were light blue.

Franco’s power continued to circle around me. “Gaston, she is young. We are not. Let this remain between us. Madelyn Mia did not ask to be included in our battle.”

Gaston laughed and stared down at me. “I sense she truly will fight me to the death. You have raised her well, Franco. She is just like you. Or, should I say that you have allowed—” he stopped in mid-sentence, sniffed the air, and took off running in the other direction.

Shocked, I glanced around, waiting for a bomb to go off. When none did, I panicked. Lycans didn’t just take off without a good reason. “Frankie? What the hell just happened?”

He exhaled loudly. “I have officially died twice.”

“Oh, this is really fucking bad, you made a joke.” The man wasn’t known for his sense of humor. The situation was grave.

“*Sānāre*,” he said, slowly. Instantly, his power wrapped around me, mending everything on me and around me, returning it to its original condition. Not even a wrinkle was left in my clothing. “They left because one who is more powerful than they could ever hope to be revealed his presence to them.”

I visually scanned the area, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. If there was another lycan, he was well hidden. “But I don’t sense danger. I at least sense that around lycans who want to harm me. Why can’t I sense this one?”

Franco laughed softly. “Why is it you insist on asking me questions which you have answered?”

“Because I just live for your cryptic answers.” I shook my head.

His laugh enveloped me, making me feel better about what had happened. “Ah, Madelyn Mia, you bring light into my otherwise dark existence.”

Great, the greeting card response was catchy. Not only did Brady have it but apparently

Franco had caught it as well. Deciding to ignore it, I changed the subject. “What time are we meeting tonight? I’m tired and need a nap. I have to get enough strength to leave the illusion of me in my bed again. Brady would freak if he knew I wasn’t really there.”

Franco let out a small laugh.

I put my hands on my hips and stared into thin air. “How is it funny that I’ve had to lie to people close to me since I was ten? Hmm? It’s not!” I pointed up into thin air, not caring that I looked and sounded crazy. “You and your stupid fucking council rules. No human can know this, they can’t know that. If any of us slip and tell them anything then they, if they’re lucky, have their memory wiped clean of us and all that they learned. If they aren’t lucky they end up dead. Yeah, real funny, Frankie. Keeps me in stitches when I have to look someone I trust in the eyes and give him half-assed answers like you give me. Brady deserves better than that!”

I felt Franco’s cool energy wrapping around me again. I knew he wanted to comfort me but I’d had my limit.

“Go to your friend, Madelyn Mia. All will be well. I promise.”

My temper got the better of me. I folded my arms defiantly and stuck out my bottom lip. It was childish but called for. “No. I’m going to stand in this damn alley next to Buzz and not move until Dillon gets here.” I pointed at the nothingness. “And stop telling me to go to Brady. I won’t expose him to this. He can still sleep at night. I don’t even remember what that feels like.

“On the rare occasion that I’m home before sunrise, I can’t sleep. I sit against the hallway wall outside Brady’s room scared to death I might have missed one. That I might have led something evil, powerful and deadly straight to him. Scared whatever *may* have followed me will go after him to get back at me.”

A choked sob tore free from my throat as I fought back tears. “Franco, you’re the one who told me they’ll go after the ones we care most about. They’ll come for Brady. I know they will. I won’t let them.”

My mind raced. As sleep deprived as I was and it was beginning to show. “I sleep fine once the light comes *if* Brady is still home. If not, I traipse along behind him like a whipped puppy and rest on one of the sofas at the studio. Franco, I have slept more on the bedroom sets at the studio than I have in my own bed.”

I put my head down and shook. “I should have never agreed to move in with him. I should have gotten my own place but you, Mom, Dad, hell even Vance pushed me to do it. You all told me to move in with Brady. Why?”

Franco sighed. “I know it has been hard on you. And I, of all people, understand why you feel comfortable around him—normal. You do, Madelyn Mia, don’t you?”

I shook my head yes and then realized Franco couldn’t see me. “Yes, I do feel comfortable around Brady. I remember the first day I met him. It was the first time since I’d learned about Guardians, demons, the battle between good and evil that I let my guard down.” I laughed but sounded anything but amused. “I do that a lot around him. I know I shouldn’t but I feel safe with him.”

Franco’s power encompassed me and I didn’t thrust it off. I let him provide a bit of comfort for me.

“I don’t walk around on high alert around Brady. I feel like I felt before it all started, Franco. I feel happy, free and like I’m a real person not a whatever-the-hell-I-am. I don’t do that around *anyone* else. Not even you, Franco. Why do I let go of what I know around the very person who needs me to be at my strongest? Brady can’t protect himself from these things. No human can. Hell, I’m having issues as of late. Tell me why I feel it’s safe enough to take a

break.”

“Madelyn Mia, he knows of your magik, at least a portion of it, does he not?”

My heart leapt to my chest and my eyes flooded instantly with unshed tears. “How do you know that?”

“Because it is my job to know it.”

Visions of Brady being hurt because of my foolishness flashed before my eyes. I drew in a sharp breath. “If you or anyone else come for him I will kill you, brother in arms or not and I will stake you myself. Gaston can save his energy.”

Franco was quiet. I let him have his moment to reflect.

“You would kill those that have loved and been with you all along to save one man who is not a lover, merely a friend?” he asked, his voice low.

“For Brady, I would kill anyone. And I do mean anyone.”

Franco let out a soft laugh. “You are so like your mother. It is good to hear this.”

Confused, I arched a brow and stared up at the sky. “Wait, I tell you I’ll stake you and you say it’s good to hear. Uhh, I think you got a hold of some bad blood.”

Franco chuckled. “No, I am of clear mind. I know you would kill me if you had to, as it should be. It is a truth I welcome openly. It is what allows me to sleep sound. I shall check in on you soon. And, Madelyn Mia...”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful. Gaston is aware of who you are now and what you mean to me. He will stop at nothing to seek revenge. I cannot go into detail now but know it is you he will try to strike at me through.”

Closing my eyes, I thought about what Franco always told me. “They strike at the ones we hold the dearest.”

“Yes, Madelyn Mia. That is how I know he will come at you,” he said, making me realize I’d spoken aloud. “I must go. Find your friend and stay close to him.”

Franco cut the link before I could say anything else. Shaking my head, I looked down at Buzz’s dead body and sighed. My job was oh so very glamorous. “Looks like I get to move you. Dillon is probably asleep like the rest of us should be. I should still be in bed. One hour of sleep is not enough. But no, I get pulled out of bed by Brady for a sick joke.” I took hold of Buzz’s arms and began to drag him a bit. My hand slipped. My arm slid back and I caught myself on his claws. Hissing, I dropped his arms completely.

Looking down, I found two large gashes running from my inner elbow to my wrist. Instantly, my body’s natural immunity to the virus that caused one to turn into a werewolf kicked in. “Ow, ow, ow,” I said blowing on my arm. “Who the hell had the bright idea to give me built in hydrogen peroxide?”

I looked at the dead body and shook my head. “I don’t care if I pass out here and Gaston and his buddies come back. They can eat me. I’m tired and sore.” I moved my hand and used my power to push Buzz to the very back corner of the alley. Glancing at the two trash cans, I nodded and they took flight. My magik moved them quickly to where Buzz was and dumped trash all over his body. I set them in front of Buzz’s body to hide it until Dillon could arrive and dispose of it.

Chapter Four

Pulling my power back into me, I swayed and took a moment to adjust to the extreme fatigue. Drawing in a deep breath, I rubbed my eyes with my good hand. “God, I do not want to lie to Brady again. I hate this.” I lifted my arm slowly and shook my head as blood dripped to the ground. I snickered but was anything but amused. “I could tell him that the thought of being his fiancée drove me to slit my wrists. He thinks I’m clumsy, he’ll assume I missed.”

Shaking my head, I turned around and ran directly into what felt like a brick wall. Looking up, I found Brady staring at me. I forced a smile onto my face and put my wounded arm behind my back.

“Mads, you wanna to tell me why you’re in an alley talking to yourself?”

Batting my eyes, I did my best to look innocent. “Not particularly.”

He tipped his head a bit and looked me over slowly. “Why did you run out of the restaurant? You were in such a hurry that you dropped your bag.” He handed it to me and I reached out to grab it forgetting all about my bloody arm. His eyes went directly to it. “What in hell did you do?”

“Umm... uhh... erm... want to go home and play with the breasts you supposedly bought me?”

Brady never missed a beat. “Yes, but I want to take you to the hospital first. This needs stitches. A whole lot of them.”

Laughing, I pulled my arm back towards me. “Pffft, you should have seen the time that my entire stomach got... err... umm, a rash and I, umm had to—” I stopped. It was getting harder and harder to lie to Brady. I didn’t have a problem lying to Vance or anyone else. Only Brady.

“Madelyn, what’s going on?”

My shoulders slumped as my will began to crumble. I couldn’t give in. I had to stay strong to keep him safe. “You said you trust me, right?”

He nodded.

“Then let’s get going. I have a barely legal girl to make fun of today.” I flashed him a wide smile. “I promise it will heal very fast. I can’t tell you how or why but it will.”

Brady didn’t move. His blue gaze fell upon me and my breath hitched. “I told you already and I mean it. You can tell me anything. Don’t worry about how I’ll take it. And don’t worry about what you *think* might happen.”

Did he know? Had he seen what had happened? No. He would have freaked out on me. I was just being silly, paranoid that Franco would hurt him anyways. I’d walk out of Brady’s life before I gave them any more reason to hurt him.

My cell phone rang and I went to dig it out of my handbag. My hand was a bit numb from the injury on my arm and I dropped it. I rolled my eyes. It stopped right between Brady’s feet. He bent down and picked up my phone. To my surprise, he answered it.

“Hello?”

My jaw dropped.

“Yes, this is her phone. I’m standing with her now.”

I made a mental note to kill Vance and held my hand out. Brady shook his head no and backed up. Okay, odd.

“Really? Hmm, thanks for the heads up.” Brady looked me dead in the eye. “I’d do that regardless. Threatening me is overkill.”

My heart went to my throat. I moved forward and snatched the phone from Brady. “Who is...?”

“Madelyn Mia, you should know I will not tolerate you running away when you are what Gaston now seeks,” Franco said in a warm voice as if it was no big deal that he’d read my thoughts from a distance and just threatened Brady. “You mean too much to me to allow them to get to you. Your friend has agreed to keep a close eye on you.”

“How did you know I’d run? How...? Franco?” My voice shook, “Please don’t do anything to him, Franco. I’ll stay. I promise. Please don’t...”

“Shhh, I have given you my word. We will not come after him nor will we wipe his memory. He is safe from us, Madelyn. He is your friend, therefore he is mine. And anyone who dares to harm my friends will suffer my wrath.”

I let out a soft, nervous laugh. “You’re like the world’s scariest dad. How did I get lucky enough to end up with you? Did they teach you that when you were little or did it develop over the years?”

“Dad?” he asked.

I thought about what I’d just said. Why in the hell did I call him Dad? Franco didn’t have any children. The man had only Guardians in his life. We were his adoptive family. I guess in some bizarre way that did make him a father figure for me. Well, that and I did tend to go to him with issues one would normally go to their parents over. “I meant vamp, sorry.”

Franco’s power pushed around me and it was beyond comforting. It seemed almost happy. Franco and happy power just didn’t mesh. Yep, something was off. “Madelyn, put Bradonis back on the phone.”

That made me laugh. “Frankie, I have a Brady behind me but no Bradonis. Though if you add Brady and Adonis together it would fit.” Raking my gaze over Brady, I had to smile at the idea. It was oddly accurate.

“Madelyn Mia,” Franco let out a slow breath, “look down.”

I did. My arm was completely healed and not one drop of blood was on me. “You just did that so I’d have to try to explain it to him. Well I won’t, so here, talk away.” I thrust the phone back at Brady. He took it without question. “Brady, I’d like to introduce you to Frankie. Call him that. He *loves* it.”

No part of me could deal with what was going on. This was too much. I could handle vamps, weres and lycans with names that made me want to burst into song and the rest of the crap that came my way. I couldn’t handle Brady and Franco talking on the phone together. Those two chumming it up messed with me.

Walking forward, I glanced down at the end of the alley. It took a second for my mind to register what I was seeing. Buzz, the supposedly dead werewolf, was standing with his back to me. He twisted his head and rolled his shoulders before turning and facing me.

You’ve got to be shitting me.

“Hey, Brady!” I shouted, doing my best to keep my voice neutral when all I really wanted to do was either laugh hysterically at the absurdity of it all or crawl under a rock and shiver at how spooky the bad guys were getting. “Why don’t you grab your SUV and I’ll meet you at the end of the alley. I lost an earring and need to find it. Have fun talking to Frankie, he’s known me

a long time. He's got lots of great stories to share with you. Okay?"

Brady pulled the phone away from his ear and gave me a questioning look. "Swear you'll meet me and not run off to another dark alley."

"I swear. I'll be right here in this one." I held back the part about killing a bad guy who doesn't seem to want to die.

"Fine. I'll be right back." He laughed. "You're right, Mads, he does have some interesting stories about you."

Buzz's claws re-emerged from the tips of his fingers. He ripped his shirt off as if this would do what seeing him come back from the dead didn't—scare me. I rolled my eyes. So many supernatural men had superhero complexes. It was sad, really. I think he was compensating for something but what did I know. I went on full alert which hopefully meant Brady was out of the area. I watched Buzz but stayed aware of my surroundings not wanting to get jacked by Gaston again.

Buzz licked his lower lip. "Bitch, you bested me once. It won't happen again."

Bested? Did he really say bested? Was he like a billion? Who used that word anymore?

"What's the matter no smart comebacks?"

I shrugged. "I'm tired and pissed that papa-lycan gave you extra juice. If I think of anything great other than how you were the first were I have found unattractive in my entire time fighting them, I'll let you know. I mean, really, did the barber not tell you that your head is shaped like a penis? The cut does nothing for you. And what's with the shirt thing. Did you think I'd be so stunned by your body I'd roll over and play submissive? Uh, I'm not impressed."

He walked towards me slowly. His body rippled and I sighed when I saw him doing a partial shift. That always made them harder to kill. My best chance at taking him down was to get him so pissed he was blinded by rage. Since inciting big bad things was a hobby of mine, I knew it wouldn't take me long.

I put my hand up. "Wait! Don't move! I was just wondering if you guys' dicks get bigger when you shift." I waved my hand and rolled my eyes. "Never mind. I should ask one who had something to begin with. Hey, where's that Gaston guy? I got a glimpse of him naked. He was impressive. Not my taste, with the whole, I'm evil to the core thing but to each his own."

My comment sent Buzz into a heated rage. His breath was choppy and his eyes narrowed to slits. I surveyed the area one last time and waited for him to come to me. "If I whistle, do you feel compelled to come? Oh, if I show some leg would you want to hump it?" I cringed at the thought. "Aww, I got a visual. Forget I mentioned it."

Buzz ran at me full-force, giving me only seconds to react. I flipped forward and sprung high into the air. He ran right past me. Dropping to the ground, I spun around and kicked him directly in the back of the head. I saw him turning for me and ran in the opposite direction. I knew he was faster than me now that I wasn't at full strength. I didn't care.

The second I sensed him swiping out at me, I dropped down to the ground. He kept going. Thrusting my hand up, I punched him in the groin as hard as I could and stood, sending him head over heels. A tiny giggle escaped me. "Gawd, that never gets old."

I stepped back and slammed my foot in his face. His clawed hands came in at my leg. Without thought, I did an aerial and just missed getting my leg ripped off. "I'm getting too old for this shit."

Knowing he'd only be down a second I ran steadfast towards the other building, praying what I was about to do would work. When I felt Buzz right behind me, I found religion almost instantly. "Oh God."

Running full speed, I didn't stop as I neared the side of the building. I eyed up the drainpipe and ran directly up the wall, momentarily defying gravity. I seized hold of the pipe, ripped a section free and flipped backwards, careful to bring it with me. Buzz had tried to follow up the side of the building, something I didn't think he'd be stupid enough to do.

Grinning, I dropped to a seated position on his shoulder and threw myself backwards as hard as I could, allowing my weight to topple us over. Our bodies went high into the air and I twisted more. The second the pavement came into view, I held the pipe horizontal and opened my hands to keep from landing on my knuckles. Nothing hurt worse than skinning them down to the bone when I didn't have to.

Opening my legs into a wide split, I got them away from his body to avoid being pinned under him. I hit the ground, protected by my hands. Buzz was protected by nothing but his face.

Oh, life is good.

Throwing my extended legs forward. My body popped upright leaving me facing away from Buzz. I clutched the pipe tight and spun around, driving it directly into his back where I knew his heart would be. When it hit the pavement, I stopped pushing and backed up. Relief flooded through me as I heaved, doing my best to catch my breath.

"I'd like to see you heal that one before Dillon gets here, asshole."

I staggered backwards. Putting my hand up, I drew on the last of my power. "Frankie, send... send... Dillon now. I don't have it in me to do this again."

He didn't answer.

I looked up into the air and rolled my eyes. "If you're ignoring me because I'm more than willing to stake your five-hundred-year-old ass, get over it. This asshole came back to life. He shouldn't have been able to heal a snapped neck. He's just a werewolf. They don't heal that kind of stuff."

He still didn't answer.

"Dammit! I can't leave here until he's handled. You don't even want to know the count of women he's raped and killed that I got every fucking time I had to touch him, Franco!"

No response followed.

"Hey, Mads, umm, Franco says Dillon's about ten minutes away and that you were ordered to find me."

I froze. *I'm hearing things. Brady isn't behind me. Nope. I'm delirious. I'm probably dead. Buzz killed me and now I'm in some screwed up version of purgatory.*

"Madelyn, he says you didn't die and end up in some screwed up version of purgatory. And he says it's obvious I'm behind you."

Ohmygod, did Brady see the entire thing?

Brady chuckled. "Franco says yes, but he didn't say what about."

No! I won't let you hurt him!

"Mads, he says you need to open your ears and listen. He has already told you he wouldn't."

Please don't pick now to be the first time you go back on your word, Franco. Please. I can't lose him. Please. I'll do anything you want. Anything.

"He wants you to know he will never go back on his word. He and I would like to let you know that I'm not going anywhere and since you're offering to do anything, he wants you to swear an oath to stay close to me at least until this all rides out."

Swear Brady won't be hurt by any of us and it's a deal.

"He says fine. He swears."

I put my hand in the air and waited as it broke open of its own accord. Drops of blood suspended themselves in the air. They vanished and new drops appeared. They seeped into my hand and the wound closed. Our deal was now blood binding.

Since you're clearly reading my thoughts, Franco, if I turn around is Brady going to look at me like a monster?

Brady laughed "Well, she'd be the best damn looking one I've ever seen. And since I saw her in action, I can't stop thinking about what she'd be like between the sheets... ouch. Hey, I'm fairly sure zapping me with a bolt of power counts as hurting me... Fine. I'll never talk about Mads and beds again. Do you want to talk to her?" He broke out into hysterical laughter. "Yeah, she scares me, too, but in a good way. Bye."

Turning slowly, I tried to meet Brady's gaze but couldn't. Giving up, I kept my head down and went to walk past him. He grabbed my upper arm lightly and I tried to slink away. Brady wasn't having any of that. He turned me and pulled my chin up to him.

"Is this what you couldn't talk about?"

I snorted. "Umm, yeah. I'm not secretly a man. I was... am... afraid that—"

"That what? They'll hurt me?" he asked, looking at me so tenderly it made me want to hug him. "They won't. You didn't need to make Franco swear to it. You've never had to worry about it. I've been trying to tell you that all along."

"Brady, they don't care how famous you are. They'll—"

Laughing softly, he took my hand in his and led me back to Buzz's body. I tried to move in front of him, just in case the guy had three lives but Brady wouldn't let me. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." Of course I trusted Brady. What I didn't trust was the guy on the ground. He'd already pulled an encore presentation once. I didn't want a repeat performance.

He tightened his grip on my hand and pulled me close to him. I stared into his blue eyes, wondering what it was he was up to. A worried look came over him. "Mads, I need you to be completely honest with me. And I mean completely. Guardians in the past have tipped over the edge and hated all things not human. You've heard stories about them. I'm sure of it. The rogues who have seen too much death, too much destruction to be able to discriminate between good and evil."

"Are you asking if I'm one of those?"

Brady nodded. I shrugged and told him the truth for once. "Eighty-five percent of the people in my life aren't human."

No part of him seemed shocked by this news. "And you trust and care about them regardless?"

"Yes, Franco's a vampire and I can't imagine him not in my life."

Brady gave me a small smile. "Yet you threatened to stake him if he hurt me."

I tried to pull back. "You were around for all of that?"

"I was on your heels the minute you ran out of the restaurant."

Shaking my head, I tried again to move away from him. "Why didn't you tell me you were there?"

"I didn't tell you because this all needed to come out. It had gone on long enough, Mads. And if I'd have given you any indication I was there you would have backed away, afraid of me seeing, afraid of what they'd do to me. The girl would have died and you'd have never forgiven yourself."

He was right. That's exactly what I would have done. Worse yet, I'd have panicked and

gotten us all killed because of it. As I stared around at the littered alley, I knew things could have ended so very much worse. The smell of evil and of death still lingered and the absence of any real breeze meant it wouldn't be gone any time soon. Sure, Franco had returned the alley to its original state but that wasn't saying much. Still, the idea of Brady seeing me kill didn't sit well. I kind of liked having him view me as normal.

Brady looked up at the sky a minute and then back to me. The cords of his neck popped and his eyes glistened as he spoke softly. "I have never been more scared in my life than watching you fight today. It took everything in me not to interfere. Know that."

"Mmm, Brady." I stepped in close to him, needing the feeling of safety he always seemed to provide. This had to be shocking for him. It wasn't everyday that someone found out things from nightmares are very real and very deadly. "It's scary the first time you realize things exist around us that aren't like other people."

I could still remember the first time I realized there was more to life than what met the eye. It was a lesson that I thought best to share with Brady. So I did. "I was six when I had my first brush with what I thought for the longest time was a werewolf."

Brady remained silent, running his hand through my hair and staring down at me with nothing but support in his eyes as I continued on. "I know now he was a lycan, not a werewolf. Anyway, I was playing outside my family's cabin in the mountains near this stream that ran through the property. My mother had told me endless times not to go near it."

I shrugged and let out a soft laugh as I thought about my rebellious nature. It got me into more trouble. Never once did it deter my actions. No. I held true to my stubborn form regardless of the consequences. "I didn't listen to her, of course. I fell in and couldn't get out. I was so scared and cold. My mind went blank. I was young and terrified. All of the sudden this huge honey-colored wolf appeared near the edge of the river. At first I didn't believe he was really there." I squinted as I thought back. "Like maybe he was just something my mind conjured, something that wasn't real. Suddenly, he morphed into a man and snatched me out. Trust me when I say that did little to convince me I wasn't dreaming.

"It was a long time ago and I was a bit too upset to really look at him." I grinned as I recalled the events. "I was scared of him at first even though I knew deep down he wouldn't hurt me. Then I got mad at the man because I thought he ate the wolf. He put me down and turned me to face the other direction. Which I now believe was because he was naked and didn't want me to see. Nice of him. When I finally turned back around the wolf was there. I patted his head and told him he was a good boy for eating the man."

The entire event still made me laugh. At the tender age of six I didn't think it was so funny but being removed from it only served to make it funnier and funnier to me. Apparently, my sense of humor had warped over the years. "I was soaked to the bone but I forgot all about being cold. I sat there and wrapped my arms around this big wolf's neck, completely unafraid even though I knew deep down inside none of it was natural. I really wanted to keep him but even then I knew I couldn't. I named him though." I laughed and rolled my eyes. "Any other kid would have freaked out. I went home and drew pictures of him and told my mother that when I was older I was going to get my own wolf. Uhh, I never did. I got a vampire for a buddy though. That has to count for something."

Brady stood there grinning as he cupped my face. "What makes you so sure he was a lycan and not a werewolf?"

"Easy, I never sensed he was there. I sense everything and everyone else. Well, except you. You are the only human I've never been able to feel coming. I'm the only Guardian who

can't sense lycans. It's always been one of Franco's biggest concerns. He was afraid they'd figure it out and catch me off guard. I've gotten better. I can sense danger but that's it. And even when I know they intend to kill me, I still find it a bit hard to hurt them. Now, a were who wants me dead gets the shit beat out of him but it takes a lot for me to hurt a lycan. That also concerns Franco. But there's another Guardian who doesn't like to have to kill them either. I'm thinking it's because he is one. I don't have an excuse. I just have a handicap—one that will inevitably get me killed."

Brady ran his hands down my arms, causing me to shiver with delight. I should have pushed him away but the very idea of losing contact with him terrified me. "Hey, Mads, everyone has a weakness, a soft spot. There's probably a reason you don't sense them and don't like hurting them."

"You're taking this news well," I said, narrowing my gaze suspiciously.

He smiled. "Uh-huh. I am. And I'm sure there is a good explanation as to why you can't sense lycans."

Snorting, I nodded. I already knew the explanation or at least had a scapegoat in mind. "I fully blame the guy who plucked me out of the stream. I should have tagged him so I could kick his ass now. There's nothing like letting a pissed off lycan break three of your ribs, your collarbone and your jaw before you finally decide you should probably keep him away from the general public. That's it. I'm going back to the cabin and taking a dart gun. He and I are going to have a little chat, right before I have him gelded. I was nice enough to name him and he was nice enough to make me trust him, rendering me useless when it comes to my job."

Brady winced and kissed my nose. "You are very scary at times." He laughed softly and stroked my cheek. "So, you'd geld him, huh?"

"Pfft, no. I'm all talk. I can hardly raise a hand to lycans who've sliced my face wide open. How the hell would I be able to hurt the one who saved my life?"

"Good to know," he said, running his thumb over my lip. "Let's go get that dart gun. I'll take you to find Honey. He's bound to still be around. They live forever."

I couldn't stop myself. I leaned forward, closing the distance between us and kissed Brady's warm lips. I'd only meant for it to be chaste. Apparently, he had other things on his mind. His tongue entered my mouth and I wrapped my arms around his neck. I closed my eyes as I moaned softly. Our heads moved back and forth as our tongues explored the other's mouth.

Brady wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off the ground. I clung to him as fire shot through my entire body. He'd taken all that had been tossed at him in stride and made me feel better. Offering to help me hunt the big wolf I'd named Honey down was the topper.

I hadn't told him what I'd name the wolf. How did he know?

My eyes shot open and I stopped kissing him. He looked at me and smiled against my lips. "I'd have preferred something more manly but if you wanted to call me Honey, I wasn't about to argue."

My mind raced. Brady was a lycan? No. I would have... no. I wouldn't have sensed it. Just as I never sensed him. I jerked back from him. "Down, put me down."

His face fell. "Madelyn, I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't think you'd handle it as well as you had when you were little. When I found out about you and the magik, everything made sense but I was still scared to tell you." Reaching for me, he touched my cheek again. "Yesterday, when you pushed on me I almost went forward. That doesn't happen often. I knew you were holding more back from me."

"That's why you dropped me!" I glared at him. "You dropped me on a hard floor to test

me?”

“Yeah,” he said, cringing. “I almost died when you got hurt. My gut had told me you’d never hit the floor, that you’d spring up and to your feet. My gut was wrong.”

“No, Brady. It was right. If anyone else had done it, I would have. But I sort of shut that side of myself off around you.”

Okay, odd. Standing in a back alley with a dead guy at our feet talking about things I never dreamed I’d talk about with him.

Clearing his throat, he looked away from me. “I, uhh, I heard you telling Franco about it. About how it’s the only time you feel normal. And about how you can’t sleep comfortably.”

It was my turn to look away. “I sound like one of your crazy fans. I can assure you it’s not like that, Brady. I can’t explain it. It’s not sexual. It’s automatic. You asked if I found you attractive. I always have, more than attractive even, but I never thought about you sexually. I only saw you for you. It didn’t and still doesn’t matter to me that you are who you are. To me you’re just Brady.”

“Has that changed at all in the last twenty-four hours?” he asked, turning me to face him.

“Yes and no.”

The expression he gave me was so cute that I almost laughed. He looked like a puppy who wanted a table scrap. “Can you clarify please?”

“I don’t know. We’ve always hugged, danced, anything, everything--except have sex and it felt natural, with no strings, no real anything. I felt so incredibly comfortable around you that I never gave it much thought. But after we...” I stopped, unable to speak my mind.

Brady bent down and put his lips close to mine. “After we kissed it started to change for you.”

I nodded.

“I knew I should have kissed you years ago. I thought you’d punch me so I didn’t.” He chuckled. “I honest to God thought you didn’t get handed the same driving need I have for you. For the life of me, I couldn’t understand what was wrong. I decided to risk your wrath and went with it. I think it was my saliva that unlocked the desire in you, Mads.”

Chapter Five

Laughing, I pulled back from him. “Cute one, Brady. You expect me to believe you have a driving need for me? Uhh, yeah, so driving that you’ve been with everything and everyone.”

He went to answer and I sensed another Guardian coming. I took hold of his gray t-shirt and pulled him hard, until he was behind me. When the head of shaggy light brown hair appeared from around the corner, I still stood before Brady.

Dillon stopped, dropped his medical bag and stared at me. “Why do you look like you’re ready to kill me, Maddy?”

“She thinks you might hurt me,” Brady said.

Dillon bulked. “Why the hell would I hurt you? You’ve backed my ass up so many times I can’t keep track of them.”

“That’s it. I’m suffering from extreme fatigue again.” I tossed my hands in the air and shook my head. “I’m going home and when I wake up, I want everything to go back to normal.”

Dillon’s eyes widened and he immediately came for me. I ducked away. He snatched a hold of me, refusing to let me go. I tried to break free but he held tighter. “Move again before I’m done and I’ll magikally slap your stubborn butt into a four week sleep.”

“Let go, Dr. Doolittle. I’m fine. I’d have called you if I wasn’t.”

Brady moved up close to me. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said, firmly.

Dillon pushed me towards Brady. “Hold her. If she tries to move, knock her out.”

Snickering, Brady took hold of my arm lightly as Dillon dropped to one knee and opened his bag. “Umm, don’t move, Mads, or I have permission to smack you around a bit.”

Dillon stood up. He held a small scalpel in one hand and a stopwatch in the other. He narrowed his gaze on Brady. “Unless you find the idea of her dying in your arms funny then I’d stop laughing.”

Brady held me tight. “Dillon, what are you talking about?”

I shot Dillon a nasty look. He ignored me. “Who is telling him, Maddy? Me or you?”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

He snorted. “Oh really. Hmm, what happens when you run yourself to the ground, Maddy?”

“Nothing.”

“Girl, I will kick your ass and strap it to a bed in the infirmary if you dare give me mouth about this. And if he’s who I think he is to you then he has a right to know.”

“Why? Do we cater to celebrities now?” I asked, my gaze hard. Dillon moved towards me with the scalpel. I didn’t give a shit about getting cut. I cared about what would happen after the fact.

“You aren’t touching her with that.” Brady pulled me back from Dillon’s reach.

Dillon shook his head. “I’ll take you on, too, Brady. I’m not ever going to see her that way again.”

“What way?”

Touching Brady’s hand gently, I patted it. “He likes to be dramatic.”

“Dramatic huh?” Dillon asked, quirking an eyebrow. “Lift your shirt. Better yet undo your pants and slide them down. Go on! Show him how fucking dramatic I’m being, Madelyn.”

My eyes filled with tears and I worked overtime to keep them in. “Dillon, don’t.” I walked to him and put my arm out. “Do it and get it over with.”

He slashed out quickly, cutting my wrist wide open. He hit the stopwatch as Brady hit him. The thought of leaving Dillon to get the tar beat out of him while pleasant wasn’t right.

“Brady. It’s okay.”

Brady dropped Dillon to the ground and ran back to me. He tried to grab my wrist but I pulled it away. “Dammit, give it to me and I can make it stop.”

“I can’t. We have to see how long it takes my body to heal it.” I watched as blood pumped out of it. It should have already closed up by now. It hadn’t. The news would not be what I wanted to hear.

Sighing, Dillon put his hand over my wrist. White light shot forth, instantly healing the wound to the point it no longer existed. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“Like an hour ago.”

“She didn’t touch anything,” Brady added.

Oh, yah, an extra pair of eyes to add to the mix.

Dillon gave me a hard look. “Madelyn, when is the last time you ate?”

“I don’t remember?”

“Think. Because I don’t think you’ve eaten in days. Just because your body can survive without food for extended periods doesn’t mean you should do it.”

I did my best to not smack Dillon. He was our team physician and resident pain in the backside.

“When’s the last time you got a full night’s rest?”

I flashed two fingers up.

“Two days?”

“No.”

“Two months?”

“No.”

Brady grabbed me and turned me to face him. “You haven’t slept a full night since you moved in with me, have you?”

I looked away, not wanting to lie but not wanting to answer the question either. I’d lied to him enough already.

“Hudson, hey, it’s Dillon. She’s doing it again.”

I twirled around and stared at Dillon on his cell phone, horrified by what he’d just done. I went for him with every intention of wringing his neck. Brady grabbed me around my waist and held me to him.

Dillon smiled and waved at me as he continued to talk into his cell phone. “Yep, she heard. She’s pissed. She’s being held back now. But I’m thinking when he lets go I’ll be hurting for few days. Okay, see you soon.”

“Why did you do that? I’ll eat a cheeseburger and sleep for days. Call him back, Dillon. Please.”

“Nope. We made a pact. We would never let you get to that point again.”

Brady held me tighter. “Mads, what’s going on?”

“Three years ago, there was an accident.”

“The car accident. I remember.”

The minute that came out of Brady's mouth I knew Dillon would be all over it. I didn't have to wait long to hear exactly what his reaction would be. Dillon put his hand out and a bubble appeared in it.

"Don't! I'll tell him. Don't show him. Please, don't show him," I cried out. "Brady it wasn't a car accident. It was a lycan attack."

Dillon glared at me. "Not acceptable. The man has a right to know."

"Why? What gives him a right? I don't want to see that again and he sure the hell won't want to. What good will it do?"

"It's not my place to tell you why, Madelyn. My place is keeping you safe and healthy." He looked up and I knew exactly who he was pulling in as reinforcement. "Franco, you decide."

Instantly, we found ourselves standing in the isolated lot the attack had happened in. It was dark, as it had been when it originally happened. The feel of something moving through me made me still. Brady gasped and Dillon stood there like this happened every day. We watched the past unfolding slowly before our eyes.

Seeing myself walk between Dillon and Hudson made me think of old times. We'd been a unit. Dillon and I still were but Hudson had relocated shortly after all of this had occurred.

"Franco, please stop," I said, the tears I'd been holding back fell freely now. "Please don't do this."

"Madelyn Mia, you lived it yet you return to ways that left you vulnerable to it. And Bradonis... Brady, will not think less of you. He will only care more for you."

"Brady, make him stop. He'll listen to you. Please."

He lowered me to the ground but didn't let go of me. "Baby, if they're going to this length then I need to see this."

"You are the *last* person I want to see this."

We all wore black from head to toe and were heavily armed. Dillon stood two inches taller than me. Hudson was six-four and while he wasn't as bulky as Brady, he was extremely toned.

I watched as I staggered a bit. Hudson caught me and turned me to him. "Maddy, you okay?"

I smiled up at him and nodded. "Yes, just a bit tired. I haven't been sleeping so well."

He bent down and kissed the top of my head gently. "I know."

Instantly, Brady's arms tightened around me. This was only part of the reason I didn't want him to see this event first hand. Hudson was the only man I'd never told Brady I was dating and I had no idea why I held the information from him.

"If you two start going at it again, I'll make you both come down with the chickenpox," Dillon said, watching the tree line.

"Better yet, talk her into saying yes to marrying me." Hudson looked over the top of my head. "I've been asking for months. But she keeps refusing to answer me. Soon, I'm just going to knock her up so she can't say no."

I punched Hudson in the stomach lightly and wiped my forehead. "Guys, I don't feel so good."

Dillon came to me and put his hand on my forehead. His eyes widened.

"What?" Hudson asked. "You don't get to make that kind of face and not tell me what's wrong with her. This little lady means more to me than anything in this world so spit it out before I eat you and spit you out."

I took his hand in mine. "Please don't shift again in front of me. I still have issues with it

and I've known you since I was ten."

"Nine."

Dillon looked at Hudson. "All her vitals are closer to human than they should be. Maddy has the highest amount of supernatural in her I've ever seen. This can't be right. Something's wrong. Very wrong."

They both glanced around. Hudson growled and pulled me tight to him. I just looked confused. "Maddy, there is a pack of lycans moving in on us fast. Can you make a run for the truck?"

I wiped my forehead again, this time coming away with blood. I gasped and looked up at him. "What...?"

Hudson kissed my head and looked down at me. "Don't be scared. It's a warning sign."

"Of what?"

He ignored me and stared at Dillon. "Get her to the truck and get her the hell out of here!"

I grabbed hold of his arms. "No! I don't give a shit if you're just like them. You can't take on an entire pack. There could be hundreds!"

"I agree," Dillon said.

Hudson growled and bared his teeth at Dillon. "Take her now. This is not the place for her. If what you say is true, and from the looks of her forehead it is, she will not survive an attack, Dillon. Take her now!"

"I'll go on my own. Dillon, stay here." I broke free of Hudson and ran towards the direction the truck was parked in.

Half shifted men tore through the tree line. Hudson crouched a bit and they swarmed him. Dillon pulled his gun and began firing. I watched in horror as the enemy went at Hudson and Dillon in such numbers that they'd never survive. I drew the guns that were attached to my thighs and stood there looking at them. I shook my head and went to put the guns back.

"I can't do this. I can't kill lycans." I watched as Hudson took a blow to the face. He fell to the ground and two lycans went for the back of his neck. "No!" I pointed at them and fired, hitting them both between their eyes. I continued to unload on the ones around him, giving Hudson time to get to his feet.

"Go, Maddy!" he shouted out.

"No!"

I focused on the line of lycans and began to fire, hitting each one going after Hudson and Dillon in the chest. I kept going, methodically firing, taking down ten, twenty, thirty, standing in place, reloading as I went.

Hudson had at least thirty maybe forty on him and Dillon was using his magik and an Uzi to pick at the mass swarming him. I continued to shoot, never noticing the group of lycans coming up behind me. I couldn't sense them. No matter how hard I tried.

Two charged me. I stood rooted in my spot firing in the other direction. One caught my shoulder and yanked me up. I put a gun up and over my head. I fired off two shots through its head and it let go of me. I dropped to my feet and turned to find the honey-colored one standing there growling at me.

"Honey?"

Brady pulled me tight to him. "That's not me, Maddy. It's not me!"

Dillon, sighed. "It's just a memory, Brady. Nothing can be altered."

"Make it stop, Dillon. Make it stop. Brady doesn't need to see this. He doesn't need to

see—”

I stopped, knowing exactly what was coming next. I stared at the memory and watched quietly, tears streaming down my face as it continued. I watched as I tossed my guns to the ground. The confusion on my face was clear. Tipping my head, I looked at the wolf and put my hand out. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

The wolf partially shifted to a man. He smiled lecherously. “Think again.”

He lunged at me and at that close of a range he was on me before I could think. He pinned me to the ground and I fought to get him off. Blood beaded on my forehead and I found that I couldn’t budge him. He laughed wickedly in my face. “Looks like the Guardian isn’t as gifted as she thought.”

He licked my face slowly. I panted and my eyes widened. “Call for the others.”

“No.”

Bringing a clawed hand up, he ran it down my cheek, drawing blood as he went. “Why do you disobey when you know I will kill you?”

“Because you’ll kill me regardless so it doesn’t much matter.” I looked scared to death but my voice was strong. “And I’m not going to distract them so they get killed as well. I’m going to die knowing Hudson will tear you to shreds.”

“You will scream out and they will come. It is why a female should have never been allowed amongst them. They will foolishly run for you the minute they hear your cry.” He retraced his nail down my face, this time deep.

I shook and a tear came to my eyes, but I didn’t scream.

He kept going, ripping his way down my neck, my collarbone, my shirt, stopping just under my breasts. I still didn’t scream even though he’d cut me that much. Instantly, I went for his eyes. Lacking my normal speed, he saw me coming and thrashed at each of my arms repeatedly. I bit my lip hard as my nostrils flared. There wasn’t an untouched piece of my inner arms. Unable to hold them up, they flopped to the ground as tears streamed down my face.

He shifted to a man but left his claws out and his teeth sharper than a human’s. “Call for them. The pain will end. I promise.”

I glared at him but didn’t dare call out.

He licked his way down the long cut and stopped just above my bra. Instantly, he slammed his head down and sunk his teeth deep into my chest. I tilted my head and bit my lip to the point I drew blood. My hands closed ever so slightly too weak to even make fists.

“Call for them.”

I didn’t.

He sat up some and smiled down at me, blood dripping from his mouth. Lifting his hand high, he turned it so that his claws were up and rammed it directly through my abdomen, burying his hand to the start of his wrist. My eyes rolled back. He pulled his hand out and dragged both his hands down my torso digging in so hard that chunks of flesh went with him.

I stopped moving all together and my eyes glassed over. That was the last memory I had of what had happened.

Franco’s voice moved around us, “You remember no more, Madelyn, because it is the moment you died.”

Brady gasped.

I glanced to Dillon and he nodded.

“But I’m here now. How did I die then?”

Dillon pointed towards the scene. “Watch.”

The man on me looked back at his friends. "Come, taste of the Guardian."

They circled me and struck out at me. Something fell from the sky. I watched as Franco stood tall, his black hair hung right above his shoulder and his dark brown eyes looked black. He hissed and his nails lengthened. The lycans pulled back from me. I was horrified at the sight of my body. Franco was, too. His gaze fell on it and his eyes began to swirl with red and black.

He attacked methodically, cutting through them with a precision and determination I'd never seen before as if they were nothing. I'd never seen him in battle and he was captivating. Franco was fluid and lethal. It was like watching a play, so beautifully choreographed, yet so full of rage.

A group of thirty or better ran at him. Tipping his head at an odd angle, he hissed and threw power out at them. Each one burst into flames. The sounds of their cries echoed off everything. It was then Hudson came up from the center of another swarm of lycans. He looked back and saw Franco standing over me.

"No... Franco, tell me no," he panted.

Franco turned. The man who'd attacked me was injured and crawling away slowly. Franco lifted off the ground, defying gravity before dropping down next to the lycan. "You are the one who took her life."

Hudson cried out, thrashing madly through the group of lycans on him, trying to get to me, to Franco. He looked like a lethal lawn mower as he cut through them. Franco waved his hand and the man on the ground lifted into the air. He held him there as if it were nothing to do such a thing.

The man laughed. His face bloody and his chest clawed. "I know you, Franco. Stop looking like you're going to do anything other than hold me here until the lover who still fights comes to seek his vengeance."

Franco shook his head and looked completely normal. His nails pulled back in and the man laughed.

"You are so predictable, Franco."

Franco waved his hand and instantly long gashes appeared down the man's arms, though no one had actually touched him. "Apparently, I am not as predictable as you would like to believe."

The man's shirt ripped all the way down the center. A huge chunk of flesh tore free from his chest. He screamed out and Franco laughed. "Ah, she is but a child compared to you yet she never once cried out while at the mercy of a monster. How does it feel? This is what you did to her. Here," he thrust more power out and the man's stomach broke open wide, "you did this as well. I know because I am connected to her like I am connected to no other. I felt every ounce of pain she did yet she did not scream. She did not beg you for her life."

The man carried on like a fool as he saw his stomach tear open. "You can't kill me. It is law, only the lycan lover can. He is the one who will suffer the greatest loss."

Franco laughed again. "You know nothing. He," Franco pointed back to towards Hudson who was finishing up with his group, "is not the lycan who will suffer the most when he learns of this. And since that lycan is not here I will take his place."

The man laughed as he heaved for breath. "You cannot. The wolf will do it and he will do it swiftly, he is next in line."

The look on Franco's face scared even me. "You still do not get it. There is one type of love that can trump all the rules of our kind. It supersedes that of anyone else."

The man's eyes widened. "No. It can't be."

Franco lifted his arms high. The sound of something fluttering, screeching filled the air. The man looked up at the sky and shook his head. Franco laughed manically. “You had your kind feast upon her. I shall have mine feast upon you.” He launched the man high into the air. Thousands of bats fell upon him.

Hudson ran and slid down beside my body. He went to touch me and pulled his hands away. “No... wake up, Maddy. Wake up... please.”

Dillon dropped down next to him. He put his hand over me and tried to heal me. It did nothing for me. “Pick her up, Hudson.”

Looking at him with wide eyes, Hudson shook his head. “There’s nowhere to touch her that I won’t hurt her.”

“She’s gone, Hudson. She can’t feel anything. I need you to—”

Hudson snatched Dillon up by the collar and lifted him high off the ground. “She is not gone. Fix her now!”

Dillon’s eyes fluttered closed. “I can’t heal once someone is dead. Maddy is gone.” Tears came to his eyes. “She’s gone.”

Hudson tossed him down and turned to Franco. Looking up, he growled. “He is mine to kill!” He lunged at Franco only to find himself pinned in mid-air. “He’s mine, Franco!”

“No, he is not yours to dispose of,” Franco said, never taking his eyes off the scene above him.

Hudson thrashed out at the air, trying to free himself. “I don’t give a fuck about this supposed mate she has. He’s not here. You tell me he exists and that she knows him well but I have seen no proof of this! Put him down and let me at him!”

“No.”

“Franco she—”

Franco turned slowly and walked past Hudson. He lifted me off the ground and held me with one arm. I watched as he brought his other hand to his mouth and bit his wrist open.

Dillon ran at him then. “Franco, no! Maddy wouldn’t want to come back as a vampire. Her death was horrific, she’ll carry the imprint and she won’t be on our side anymore. We’ll have to kill her again. Don’t make us. Neither of her parents carries enough vampire blood to hold her to us, Franco.”

Franco ignored Dillon and held his wrist over my mouth.

“No!” Hudson yelled his voice deep.

Dillon charged Franco. Franco glanced at him and Dillon was instantly pinned in one spot. Dillon shook his head. “You care for Maddy. Why are you doing this to her?”

Franco stared down at me tenderly. “I do not just care for her. I love her. She will come back to us and be the same Madelyn Mia she was before.”

Dillon threw his hands in the air. “She does not have enough—”

“She has more blood than you think.” Franco kept his eyes on my face.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I am her father.”

The image pulled away and all went black. I felt myself slipping into the darkness and was powerless to stop it.

Chapter Six

“Mads, it’s time to get up,” Brady said softly.

Opening my eyes, I found myself staring at the mattress. Laughing, I shook my head. “I’m not moving from this spot. I had the absolute worst dream ever. I’d tell you about it but then I’d have to kill you. Oddly enough, it started like this.”

He sat next to me on the bed and put his hand on my bare shoulder. “It’s time to get up.”

“No.” I took hold of his hand and held it tight. “Please let me sleep more.”

“I will but you need to eat.”

“If you dare suggest Sushi, I’m locking myself in the bathroom and not coming out.”

He chuckled softly. “No Sushi, I promise. Move over.”

Shocked, I did as he said. “Get in. It’s nice and cozy in here. God, I love sleeping in—” I stared down at the sheets and realized they were navy Egyptian cotton. Brady used those on his bed. Not me. “Umm, Brady?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m naked and in your bed.”

“I know.”

“Wanna share with the group?” I lifted my head slightly and winced when the tiniest bit of light came in. “Wait, there isn’t a group here is there? I have horrible images of ten blonde chicks lined up against the wall laughing at me right now.”

Brady laughed hard and slid in next to me. “No, Mads. It’s just the two of us.”

Keeping my head facedown, I reached out and felt around for Brady. When I came into contact with him I ran my fingers over his bare skin. I gasped and ran my hand down his torso fast. Before I knew it, I was cupping his clothed groin.

“Mads? Umm, is there a reason why you’re fondling me?”

Laughing softly, I gave his penis a gentle pat. “Good boy, I feared your less dominant half was lying to me.”

Brady laughed. “Do you think you could at least roll over and face me? I’m not real keen on talking to the back of your head.”

There was no way I was rolling over to show him the lovely scar I had above a breast and the one I had on my low abdomen. “Could you grab a shirt or something for me?”

“Ah, not willing to bare it all, huh?”

I pulled the sheet down using my foot until it was past my butt. “There, stare away but you don’t do frontal nudity and neither do I. I’ll keep reminding you of that until it sticks.”

Brady snorted. “You’re gorgeous. Most women would kill to look like you. Why hide it?”

“I’m covered in cellulite and would rather not share. Now, could you get me a shirt?”

“Do you still love Vance?”

I let out a laugh. “I’ve never loved Vance.”

“You were with him for almost a year,” Brady said, his voice sounding funny.

“I already told you I was never in love with him. Don’t you think I’d be a bit more torn up about what happened between us if I was with him for anything above sex? Plus, have you

ever had a conversation with him? I'd rather converse with rocks if that tells you anything." I put my hand out. "Give me the sheet. I'll wrap up and then face you."

"Have you ever been in love before?"

Turning my head, I looked at him like he was on drugs. "Huh?"

Brady smiled down at me and brushed my hair back over my shoulder. "I was just wondering if you'd ever been in love before. I have questions about it."

"Buy a book."

He snickered. "I'll take that as a no. You've never been in love before."

"I need a white flag so I can put it up." I swallowed hard and nodded. "I've only ever been with two people and I'm damn positive I did not love Vance. But I did love someone else. I haven't seen him in three years so it doesn't much matter now. The only advice I have for you in that area is when you find it, don't let go. It can disappear in an instant."

Realizing I still had my hand on Brady's crotch, I lifted it and put it on his chest. "Umm, sorry. Forgot it was there and that was not a pot shot at your penis." I tapped his stomach and then ran my nails over it lightly. "Spill it, who finally did in the legendary ladies man? Who got you to fall in love? Is it wrong I feel bad for her?"

Brady chuckled and put his hand over mine. "I feel bad for her, too." He slid down more on the bed, putting us eye to eye. "See, I hate her job and want her to quit. And I do mean *hate* her job. I'm also convinced the second she lays eyes on her past lover she's going to up and leave me."

I rubbed his hand gently, offering him a warm smile. "Honey, she'd be crazy to leave you. I joke with you about how annoying you are but you're not that bad. If she can get past the movie star exterior she'll love what's on the inside."

He gave me a funny look. "Yeah, but what do you think about this past lover? I guess they went through hell together and they've known each other a long, long time. She's not been with him for a few years but still... I've never told her I love her and she's never said it to me but I think it's there."

Unable to stand the sad look in his eyes, I slid closer to him. "I can't speak for her, hon."

"What would you do? If it was you and I?"

I thought about it for a minute. Would I walk away to be with the other man? If someone like Hudson showed up? Would I leave Brady?

I sighed. "You're not going to like hearing this but there is no way in hell I'd give up a chance at happiness for a man who has never once told me how he feels. I can do a lot of things, reading minds isn't one of them. But if I knew how he felt and if I felt the same way I wouldn't leave with another man, no matter how much I loved the other man at some point in my life. The fact she's not with him now should tell you a lot."

"Hmm." A sly grin spread over his tanned, rugged face. "I've never told a woman I loved her before."

"I'm not surprised in the least."

"Hey."

I grinned.

"Can I practice on you?" he asked.

Unable to hide my surprise, I stared at him with wide eyes. "Okay, but I dreamt you went all greeting card on me and the rest was not pretty. Well, there was a funny part where you got approached by three fans... never mind. Practice away."

Instantly, I found myself being flipped onto my back with Brady on top of me. His gaze

locked with mine and he just held it. I couldn't do anything but stare at him, soaking in his beauty, his smile, the tiny dimples he had on both sides and his deep blue eyes. I found it very hard to believe that Brady would ever worry about a woman not wanting him. He was perfect in every way.

"Madelyn Mia Mason," he winked, "I think it's best to use your name. I wouldn't want to call you another woman's name. Just doesn't seem right. Mads, I'm not even sure where to start. I know that from the moment I met you that you've held a special place in my heart. I spent years searching for you, knowing that you existed but unsure how to find you again. See, when we first met, I never found out your name. When I did stumble back into your life, by accident no less, I could hardly believe it. I can remember it like it was yesterday. I caught your scent and ran like hell through the studios, searching, smelling you everywhere yet finding you nowhere.

"The minute I got within twenty feet of that prop room, I knew you were there. I was so scared that you'd send me away, reject me before you ever got to know me, that I snuck in and just watched you as you made incredible things happen. When I finally got the courage up to go to you, I waited with baited breath as you looked up at me. You never batted an eye as you moved over and let me sit next to you."

He winked again. "It's best I try to tailor this to us. Don't you think?"

Think? He wanted me to think? All I wanted to do was kick this other woman's ass so I'd get a confession like this from him.

He continued on. "I found a sassy young woman who spoke her mind and held nothing back. I was the one who held back. I did it by refusing to be anything other than a friend for so long. And it never once bothered me. I knew, or hoped, that you would recognize what we are to each other when the time was finally right. That time has come, Maddy. Our time has come. We deserve a chance at happiness, a life without secrets, without barriers, without lies.

"Madelyn, I love you for so many reasons. I love you for your spunk, your wit, your lust for life. I love you for trusting me with things that you've never trusted another with. I love you for your loyalty to me in the face of danger. I love you for how accepting you are of who and what I am. I love you for you, every tiny inch of you, regardless how you view yourself."

I just stared up at Brady, trying to make sense of what he was saying. Why in the hell did he tailor it to suit me? The girl he wanted to tell would punch him between the eyes if he slipped and said any of this.

"But mostly, I love you because you make me feel complete. I hate being away from you. That's why I ask you to come with me to shoots all the time. If a role comes up that requires me to be gone longer than a week, I pass it up. I can't be gone from you longer than that. A week already feels like months when it happens.

"Seeing you under me now only makes what I feel that much stronger. I know you love someone else and I'd never ask you to stop. But do you think you can find room in that big heart of yours for me?"

Brady dropped his mouth down onto mine. My head spun. What was happening? The second his tongue greeted mine, I bucked beneath him, needing him either off me or in me. My hands worked their way to his hair, his neck, his back. I traced lazy circles on the small of his back. He pressed his knee between my legs, spreading them wide, settling between them, feeling so right. I opened wider for him, unsure why and slid my fingers under the waistband his jeans.

The feel of his skin against mine drove me insane with need. Brady's hands wandered down me slowly. I grabbed his hand a second before he would have run it over the scar above my breast and brought it up high, holding tight to it, scared to let him go, scared to keep him

near. There was so much he deserved to know. So much I was holding back from him. So much he was entitled to know.

Releasing my hold on him, I immediately pushed on his shoulders. Brady stopped kissing me and stared down at me with questioning eyes. “Mads?”

“Whew,” I said, breathless. “If she doesn’t buy that one, call me and I sure the hell will.” A huge smile broke over his face. “Good to know.” He went to roll off me and I stopped him.

“Can , umm, can you give me the sheet before you go anywhere?”

Brady kissed my forehead lightly. “Sure.”

Instantly, my eyes shifted and the feel of something not human in the area hit me.

“Ohmygod! There’s an entire group of people they’re going to—”

Brady stared down at me with questioning eyes. “Maddy?”

“Off!” I didn’t wait for him to move or for him to hand me a sheet. I shoved him off me. I bolted for his bedroom door and hit the wall in the hallway as I turned to get to my room. When I entered, I slammed my door shut and barred it with magik. I’d tell Brady about myself when I got back. Now I needed to get to the innocents.

Tossing my hand up, I had clothing and my weapons coming straight for me in a matter of seconds. I plucked each article of black clothing out of the air and dressed with an inhuman speed.

“Mads, open the door!”

“I can’t. I’ll tell you everything when I get back.” I sent my magik to work on tying my hair back into a low ponytail and strapping my guns on. Two went to my sides, one to my ankle. I put knives in any available spot, attaching them to my wrists, as well, in the event I may need them. I’d only have to release them, keep my hands out of the way, and I’d be set.

“Maddy! Don’t do this. Dillon told you to rest. One fucking night doesn’t count!”

My breath caught. Brady knew. He knew all about me. And I knew about him. I’d wanted desperately to believe it had all been a dream. It hadn’t.

“Goddamit, Franco she’s got me locked out with her magik! Don’t let her do this!”

Instantly, I felt Franco’s cool energy around me. “Madelyn Mia, you have been taken off rounds. Your replacement has arrived. Allow him to handle it.”

I laced my boots and stared at the air. “Are you...?” I felt stupid asking him if he was my father.

“I am.”

That made me stop and think for a second.

I finished with my boots and went for the door. I had never used my power against Brady and I’d never dreamed I’d have too. But he was lycan and my friend. He’d never stand by and let me go without him. And I couldn’t concentrate if he was there.

Releasing my hold on the door, I opened it slowly. Brady took one look at me and grabbed hold tight. “I’m not letting you walk out of this house, Maddy. I love you and I’m not about to watch history repeat itself.”

I was too stunned to move for a moment. Had he just said that he loved me? No. He ran lines with me all the time, saying things that were heartfelt, erotic, whatever. He couldn’t have really been aiming that at me. Could he?

My stomach tightened. He could.

It hit me. In the bed, when he said he loved me. That had been for me, not another woman. I hadn’t thought anything about it at the time. Hugging him tighter to me, I said, “I’ll

come home. I promise.”

“You can’t go. Tell me where they are. I’ll go.”

“This is what I do and who I am, Brady. If you can’t accept it then we have nothing further to discuss.”

He gasped and pushed me back a bit. Staring at me, he made me want to stay, want to listen to him. “I accept it. I accept you. But Dillon told you...”

“I slept for a night. That’s a hell of a lot more sleep than I had before it all happened.”

“Mads, I love you and can’t watch--”

I gave him a loving look and nodded. “I know. That’s why I won’t let you watch.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry, Brady, but I can’t let you get hurt.” I hit him with enough power to put an elephant to sleep and grabbed hold of him. I eased him to the floor and took off in the other direction.

Chapter Seven

I came to a grinding halt and looked around the area. I felt them--werewolves, a hell of a lot of them. After my last alley meeting with one, I went with the assumption that lycans were among them. I tossed a small amount of power around me. It would serve as an alarm system for me. I couldn't sense them on my own but if they got close enough that they could touch me, I'd know.

I double checked my row of extra ammo and grabbed my guns. Holding them up with my fingers close to the trigger, I tried to sense where the humans were. I felt it then, they had them in various points around me. They'd put them far enough apart that I'd never get to each group in time.

"I'm here! Let them go!"

They closed in on me tighter. I was standing in the center of the world's biggest trap and had no desire to move. I shot power out and found each group of humans. Tossing a thin barrier around each cluster, I tried to sense every last one of them. Something brushed my alarm. Spinning, I pointed my gun directly at Hudson. My eyes widened as I pulled the gun back.

"Hudson?"

He stood there staring at me. His chocolate gaze ran up and down my body. A slow smile crept over his face. "You look... whole... amazing."

Smiling, I blushed. "You look good, too."

"Now, that we got that out of the way. Get the hell out of here. I'll meet up with you when I'm done."

I snorted. "Eat me, I'm not leaving."

Our gazes locked. A knowing smile crept over his face. "Mmm, it's been too long since I've eaten you."

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. "Are you permanently horny?"

"I'm as horny as you are stubborn, grasshopper."

"Call me that again and I'll shoot you myself."

He smiled wider and put his hands out. Long dagger-like claws popped out. "Go, kid. I'm not about to let history repeat itself."

"What the hell is up with you lycans? Did you all get together and come up with the same argument?" I asked, referring to Brady.

"I take it he's not pleased with you being here." He looked around. "Wow, Maddy, he must *really* care for you to let you come in this alone."

I rolled my eyes. Trust Hudson to be a jackass. "He couldn't follow me. I sent enough power through him to put an elephant out for a week."

Hudson bit his lip, trying and failing not to laugh. "Hmm, you don't have enough confidence in him to trust he can take care of himself? You never had to knock me out."

Great, macho bullshit at its finest.

I gave him a sassy look. "Funny, I seem to remember a certain someone passing out cold after I gave my virginity to him and fucked him so many ways that I lost count." I winked and bobbed my head back and forth. "And since I only found out yesterday that he's a lycan, I'm

well within my rights to be concerned.”

Hudson stormed towards me. I didn't move. “No man, or lycan, can keep up with you! Hell, it was your first time out of the gate and you did things to me that no woman ever had or has. I'd like some credit. I lasted nine rounds before I gave out.”

“Ooo, master of stamina, however did I make it before you?” I asked, lacing my voice with so much sarcasm it dripped.

His jaw set and his eyes locked on me. It was a look I was a little too familiar with. He gave it to me enough over my life to know that I'd be getting yelled at in some form.

“You didn't survive before. From the minute they stuck me with this stubborn little girl who clawed my face three minutes after I met her to the woman she grew into--I was there every fucking step of the way!”

“Yeah, right up until the shit hit the fan. Then I wake up to find you requested a transfer and were already gone.” I glared at him. “Thanks for all your support.”

Looking at me like he might actually slap me, Hudson shook his head slightly. “I couldn't... hell, I still can't look at you and not remember seeing you lying there ripped to pieces. I should have known. I should have sensed that you weren't yourself.” He tossed his hands in the air and drew his claws back in. “I kept you up the entire day, Maddy. I was selfish and I wanted you so I kept you up even though you said you were tired.”

Dropping my personal shield, I closed the distance between us and slid my gun filled hands around his waist. “You didn't know it would happen, Hudson. None of us did. Don't you dare blame yourself. I was a big girl and I knew I didn't feel right before we went out that night.”

He kept his arms out and away from me, as if he was scared to touch me. “Maddy, please go. I cannot go through seeing that again. Dillon told me you've gotten yourself to that point again and I can't concentrate if I'm scared to death it'll happen again. I trained you to understand and respect your limits. Don't step on everything I taught you.”

Slowly, he wrapped his large arms around me and squeezed me tight. He sighed deeply and I felt the muscles in his body straining. Hudson wasn't a man who cried. He turned it into sarcasm or rage. Seeing him at the point he might shed a tear stabbed me in the gut.

“I don't want you hurt, Maddy.”

“And do you think I want you hurt?”

“Go home to your mate.”

I pulled back from him and shook my head. “Why does everyone keep referring to him like that?”

Hudson let out a soft laugh. “Maddy, when he claimed you, you became his wife in the eyes of our kind. You and he were predestined for each other.”

“Claimed me?”

“Yeah, when he asked you to marry him then bit you during intercourse.” He looked away after the word intercourse.

I broke out laughing and backed away.

“How is that funny?”

“It's funny because we've never had sex. We only just kissed for the first time two days ago. He has never asked me to marry him. Hell, up until three weeks ago, I was dating one of his best friends. And he just, at least I think he did because at the time he made it a hypothetical situation, confessed to loving me for a long time about twenty minutes ago. I find that funny because the man has been with more women than Heffner.”

Hudson grabbed my shoulders. “He just kissed you a couple of days ago?”

I nodded.

“So you’ve been with him... around... him for all these years and never felt anything more than a strong bond with him?”

“Yep.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me? I walk out of your life so you can be with this man, the one you’re supposedly meant for, and he doesn’t even bother to go for you.” Hudson shook his head.

I sensed the werewolves around us moving in. So did Hudson. He brought his mouth down on mine and thrust his tongue in. I just stood there, too stunned to move. He chuckled into my mouth and pulled back. “I have always been able to catch you off guard and leave you breathless. Now, go!”

I backed up from him and tossed my magikal alarm system back up. Turning, I watched as they came through the tree line at us in numbers as large as we battled that horrible day years ago. Hudson picked me up. “You’re going to get all the innocents killed because I’m taking your stubborn ass far away from this.”

I aimed out and fired. “I’m not leaving. I’ve got the humans shielded and I’m not dropping it. If you try to pull me away from here without me dropping my magik, you’ll hurt me worse than they ever could.”

“Drop the magik.”

“Nope, put me down or I’ll jack it up to the point they have all I have.”

He put me on the ground and growled out loud in my ear. “You are a stubborn little—”

“Aww, lubs you too, darling.”

“When we’re done here I’m going to kill you myself.”

“Sounds like a date.”

He stormed around me and shot his claws out. He looked beyond pissed. It would suck to be the wolves he was after. Hudson would show no mercy as he took out his anger at me on them.

“Get your ass up here. We fight side by side or we don’t fight.”

“Fine,” I said running up next to him. I aimed at a group of them charging at us and began firing one shot after another, hitting each in the heart or head. One after another they dropped. Hudson stepped out a bit from me. He knew how he fought and he knew he couldn’t do it that close to me without risking hurting me.

They rushed us from every angle. I continued shooting and Hudson tore throats out and rammed his hand through their chests, tearing out their hearts. He was pure lycan, if he took your heart, throat or head you weren’t springing back to life.

Something brushed my shield, not wanting to shoot Hudson on accident, I looked before pulling the trigger. My jaw dropped. “Vance? What the hell are you doing here?”

Hudson spun fast and went at him. “No! He’s a friend.”

“Is he *the* friend?”

Vance struck out at the were behind my head and pulled his blood covered claws back. “I’m the ex-boyfriend. Who is trying to get her stubborn ass to forgive me.”

Vance stood there, with no shirt on, in a pair of black jeans looking like the terminator. His body was twice as big as Brady’s. That made him massive. I glared at him. “Not once in a year did you feel the need to say ‘hey, Maddy, I’m a lycan?’”

He made a pained face. “This isn’t going to win your favor any quicker is it?”

“Nope.”

Hudson laughed hard. "Glad to know you're still forgiving, Maddy."

Turning quick, I fired a shot between a were's eyes and rattled off four more at the four behind him. Each one dropped. I looked back at Vance and grinned. "You really should have told me."

"If I'd have known you could do that, I'd have told you and *never* touched another woman," he said staring wide eyed at me.

"Women, Vance. It's plural." I rolled my eyes. "Why the hell are you here?"

"Because The Head One put the call out to come."

Hudson spun around. "The Head One as in 'The Head One?'"

Vance nodded. "He's summoned all in the area on our side. They're coming in full force."

"I can't believe The Head One lives here," Hudson said before going back to killing more of the enemy.

I felt them trying to breach the shields around the innocents. I jacked up the juice a bit and hoped it would hold. "They're attacking my shields in numbers that I can't hold off forever! Can the two of you handle this? I'll go for the innocents."

They both stared at me like I was insane. Maybe I was.

"You can't be serious, Maddy," Vance said. "Just because you know how to shoot doesn't mean you can handle them by yourself."

Hudson stared at Vance and laughed. "I take it Meathead doesn't know you're a Guardian."

"Nope."

"A Guardian? Fuck, had you told me, I'd have put a leash on myself and walked behind you," Vance said, looking as though he were serious.

Hmm, that would be fun to watch.

Hudson looked him up and down. "Maddy, I'm disappointed in you. You went for bronze over brains."

Vance gave a cocky grin, obviously missing it was an insult.

I shook my head. "Nah, you're bigger, Hudson."

"Hey, look at my bicep then look at his," Vance said.

I patted his arm. "Yes, Meathead, you have very big muscles." Turning, I shot two more and let two run in. "Don't hurt them, they're friendlies!"

Hudson turned. "Yeah, after Meathead told me The Head One summoned everyone, I decided to shut off the killing machine mode and start scanning before I kill."

"Good, I'm off. Be careful." I knew they'd object that's why I didn't stand and wait for a response. Running full force, I fired rapidly, making a path for myself as I headed for the first group of innocents. The wolves clawed at me as I ran through, catching my arms and my cheek. The only thing that hurt was my body fighting off infection. I didn't stop to blow on them. I kept going. The crowd was getting thinner and thinner. I knew we hadn't killed that many yet.

Something was wrong.

Breaking through, I came to a dead stop when I saw Brady. He had his back to me, still with no shirt on and only his blue jeans. Seeing his hands clawed shocked me at first. It was different. Not bad. Just different. I gasped as seven of the weres closed in tight on him. I couldn't fire without risking Brady's life. Turns out, he didn't need my assistance. He spun in a circle with his arm out. When he was done, he stood still in the center.

Move! Strike them! Do something! Don't just stand there!

My mouth dropped when the men's bodies crumbled to the ground while their heads rolled in other directions. I had never seen a lycan do that before. And I never in a million years believed Brady was capable of it.

He turned slowly and glared at me. "Get over here, now."

I listened. Running up next to him, I immediately grabbed him, checking for wounds. He didn't have one scratch on him. "Brady, how the hell are you walking, let alone here?"

"Well, *Mads*, after you knocked the wind out of me, it took a few minutes to get my bearings. I'd have joined your little pow-wow sooner but I was too preoccupied with the conversation I'd overheard."

I holstered one of my guns and went to touch his cheek, confused by his behavior. He pushed my hand away. "Brady?"

"I'm fine here on my own. Go back to loverboy, he no doubt wants to ask you to marry him."

"What?"

He twisted quick and killed four weres effortlessly then turned back to me. "Oh, please. Do you think I'm blind and deaf? I watched you go to him. I watched him kiss you and you made no effort to pull away. And I heard you laugh at the idea of being my mate. Then told you him how amusing the idea of me loving you is because I've supposedly been with all these other women." The hurt in his eyes made my stomach clench.

He continued on, "He thought it was pretty funny that I'd never pushed you to love me. Do you think I wanted a mate who I knew was forced by something beyond her control to feel for me? To not love me for me? I didn't. I let you get to know me for me, Madelyn. That was the only way to assure when the time came to take the next step that you fully understood me. That we would have a bond based on actual friendship not just a chemical reaction."

Brady turned his back to me. "You can't possibly understand this. Go. I don't want to look at you right now. In fact, I can't even stomach you being near me. Run back to him, you still think he looks good. Maybe you two can take off when this is over and aim for ten times in one night. Breaking the nine barrier could be the new highlight of your relationship."

His words stung worse than the cuts all over my body. I'd never heard Brady sound this way. The worst part of it all was that I didn't have time to deal with this right now. My shields were dangerously close to breaking down and I couldn't spare anymore power for them without weakening myself to the point I couldn't go on.

"I'll have my things out of *your* house by the end of the night," I said, running past him towards the innocents.

I reached the tree line and kept going. I spotted the first group of humans huddled together as partially shifted weres beat on the invisible wall between them. Stopping, I whistled. All the weres turned to me.

Guess whistling really did work.

They headed straight for me. I shot them down one by one until that group of humans was safe. I didn't lift the shield. They couldn't be allowed to leave without their memories wiped and I couldn't risk another were showing up while I was gone.

Turning, I ran deeper into the woods until I found the next group of innocents. Something brushed my shields, I turned expecting to see Brady. Gaston smiled down at me. He pulled his hand back and hit me hard across the face, sending me to the ground instantly.

The entire right side of my head hurt, but I didn't give in. I pointed my gun up at him and a hair before I pulled the trigger, he knocked the weapon out of my hand. He yanked me off the

ground quickly and held me high, staring at me intently. I tapped my boot with my other foot and kicked him in the stomach as the blade shot out of my boot. I retracted it just as Gaston dropped me.

Knowing I was no match for him, I took off towards the group of innocents. "Hudson!"

I knew he'd hear me. With his enhanced senses, he could pick me up for miles. He'd deal with Gaston without a second thought. I pulled my other weapon out and fired at the approaching weres. They dropped. I went to fire at the last one there and realized I was out of ammo. I didn't have anything left to reload with. Tossing the gun to the side, I pulled two long hunting knives from their sheaths and kept running straight at him. I flipped into the air and went over his head. Spinning, I hit the ground facing his back. I thrust the knife into his back, making sure it was a blow to the heart.

I pushed him forward with my foot and held tight to the knife. He dropped hard and fast. I didn't stop to deal with the innocents they were safe for the moment and I couldn't offer anything above that. I kept running, heading for the last group of innocents.

The second I stopped sensing weres I knew I was in trouble.

Lycans.

Slowing my pace, I looked around cautiously. One hit my alarm. I spun around, double checked if they were friendly or not and sliced out, catching him by the throat. He lurched backwards and I followed him, driving my knife to the hilt in his chest. He fell back and hit the ground.

I turned to find one standing directly in front of me. He made a grab for me. I went into a handstand, tossed my legs around his neck. I crossed my legs and twisted hard to the right. I felt his neck snap. Letting go, I dropped my feet to the ground and rammed my knife into his chest.

Looking up, time seemed to slow as another hit me in the chest, slamming me to the ground and instantly going for my neck and chest. Fear gripped me as the events of that horrible night replayed before me.

No! I will not take this again!

I dropped my knives and lifted my hands up. Releasing my retractable wrist knives, I drove them into the sides of the beast's head. I thrust him off me, retracted my blades and grabbed my hunting knives before rolling to my feet.

Another one came at me. He was too close. Too fast. I cried out as he drove a clawed hand into my shoulder, lifted me off my feet and kept running with me. Pain shot through my head and my back as he threw me against a tree. He pressed his hand completely through my shoulder, pinning me painfully to the tree. No sound came from my mouth as I tried to adjust to the torture.

Something black flashed before me. The lycan holding me looked shocked. The black flashed again. The lycan fell backwards and hit the ground. Still pinned to the tree, I glanced down and almost threw up when I saw a bodiless arm sticking out of me.

"Hold still," Hudson said, appearing before me. He took hold of the arm and pressed against my body. Suddenly, he captured my lips with his and yanked the arm free from me. Hudson swallowed my screams as he continued to kiss me. Breaking the kiss, he eased me to my feet. "Sorry. I didn't want to hurt you."

"And I didn't want to have that thing in me a second longer so I'm good with you ripping it out." I went to move my arm but couldn't. "Shit, he got something I needed. I'm guessing major tendons."

Hudson's eyes widened. "Fuck, now you'll be fighting one armed. Woman, I told you to

go.”

A slow smile crept over my face. “You tell me a lot of things. I ignore most of them. Why should now be any different?”

He smiled and grabbed my good hand pulling me towards the innocents. A lycan dropped out of a tree in front of Hudson and he struck out with one hand, killing him instantly.

Something breeched my shield. “Let go!” He did, I ejected the blade in my wrist and turned to face a rather ugly lycan. Thrusting my wrist forward, I pushed the blade through his forehead and yanked it out quickly, retracting it as I went. Kicking him, I sent him to the ground.

“Two to the right. Four in front of me,” Hudson said, moving forward quickly.

Taking hold of my bad arm, I did an aerial cartwheel. I landed and tapped my boot. The blade shot out and I jumped high in the air, still holding my arm, and spun around. Lining up with the first lycan’s throat, I extended my leg. The blade swept clean through and he fell to the ground.

The other one came at me. I kicked my foot up, driving the blade between his legs. Retracting the blade, I pulled my foot away to keep from getting it pinned under him. As I let go of my useless arm to grab my knife, he swept out at me. At this close range, he could cut me in half.

My breath caught as I waited for the inevitable. Something dropped between us. Striking out, it sent both pieces of the lycan flying. My stomach turned but I managed not to be sick.

“What the fuck?” Hudson yelled.

I turned and stared at Hudson while he stared at the group of lycans dropping to their knees and holding their heads. “Maddy?”

“It’s not me.”

Vance came running in. “Holy shit! It’s been a while since I’ve seen that one used.”

Hudson and I turned and stared at him, dumfounded. Hudson tipped his head. “This is The Head One’s handy work, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” Vance said with a goofy grin on his face.

“Are you okay?”

I turned to see Brady standing almost on top of me. “Yes, thanks for splitting that one in two. While gross, it was very effective.”

He didn’t smile. He looked away, refusing to meet my eyes.

Moving slightly, I hissed as my shoulder suddenly felt like fire was shooting through it. Brady turned back and tried to touch me. I backed away and just stared at him.

“Let me see it.”

“You might have to look at me then. So, I’ll spare you.” I backed further away from him, not wanting to hear any more harsh words from his mouth. He’d already hurt me more than enough. “After this is fixed, I’ll have my father send men to box my things up. I’d hate for my scent to be in your house any longer than it needs to be.”

Hudson appeared next to me. He bent and looked at my shoulder. “Christ, Maddy it ripped out every bit of muscle. How you’ve not bled to death is a fucking miracle.”

Staring up at him, I nodded. “I...umm...I’m using what I have left power wise to slow the bleeding. I need to drop the shields and wipe the humans’ memories.”

His eyes were wide. “No. You need to pull what you have out there back. You don’t need to—”

“You can’t do it, Hudson. And you know it. We cannot let sixty people go with the knowledge of this and you know that too!”

“Maddy.”

“Don’t fucking ‘Maddy’ me. Move or I will move you.”

Looking up, he sighed. “Hey Powers, her temper isn’t getting better with age. At this rate, she’ll destroy the world by the time she’s thirty. Heaven help us all when she’s on her period.”

I would have commented but the built in cleaning agent in me grew so hot my tissue began to sizzle. I bit my lip and tried to blink away the tears that filled my eyes.

“Call Dillon.”

Hudson glanced down at me. His face went white. “Your skin is smoking.”

“I know.”

“Why?”

I gritted my teeth and forced a smile to my face. “He hit something...imp-or-tant.”

“Maddy, did this happen that night?”

“No,” I whispered, as I looked away.

He grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket and punched a key. “I’ve got Maddy standing here sizzling like fucking sausage. Why?”

I turned to Vance and smiled. “Do you...think you could...take me to my parents’ house?”

He shook his head no.

“Why?”

“Because *he* said no.”

I didn’t know or care who ‘he’ was. I just wanted to lie down and wait for Dillon to come.

“Yes, lycan you dumbass!” Hudson shouted. “Yes, she has a hole clean through her... And she knew this?”

I cringed and started walking fast. Vance moved in front of me. “Move.”

“I can’t.”

“Move.” I glared at him.

“*He* won’t let me.”

Hudson appeared next to me. The look in his dark eyes, made me step back. “Care to share with the group on why you’re fucking smoking right now, Madelyn?”

“No.”

“Maddy, did Dillon warn you that after...after...you were eaten alive you no longer had the same resistance to pure bloods?”

Exhaling deeply, I did my best to not focus on the pain. I forced a tight-lipped smile on my face. “He may have mentioned something like that once.”

“Woman, I have reached the point I am going to club you over the head and drag you home by your hair.” Hudson glanced at Vance. “Call The Head One. He can fix this.”

“I’m good, really.” The minute I got it out of my mouth, a flame actually shot out of the hole. I wanted to drop to the ground and scream but I held my happy face.

“Call him!” Hudson yelled.

Vance stilled. “He’s standing right behind you.”

Hudson backed up and his gaze locked with Brady’s. “Fix her!”

I laughed through the pain. “He’s not touching me. I’ll let my arm melt off before he lays a finger on me. Look at him. He’s keeping his distance because he can’t stand the sight of me.”

“I can fix it,” Brady said softly.

“I don’t really care if you walk on water. You aren’t touching me. Look at it this way,

Brady, if this does do me in then you can be assured you never have to lay eyes on me. Or hear me laugh at the idea of marrying you. Hey, disregard the fact you were my best friend until forty-eight hours ago. Often people make life altering decisions over a weekend.”

Hudson closed his eyes. “Maddy, tell me he’s not the guy you’re with.”

“He’s not the guy I’m with.”

Hudson exhaled and nodded. “Good.”

“He is the jackass who seems to think I should fall at his feet like every other woman does because he up and decided to tell me he loves me.” I stared at Brady. “Did you actually tell me or were you practicing for ‘that woman’ you were talking about?”

Hudson rubbed his eyes and groaned. “Maddy, your mate is The Head One.”

“He’s not my mate. And I’ll second that. He is the head asshole in my eyes at the moment. Do you know he got pissed when I hugged you, Hudson? I hugged you. I didn’t throw you down and fuck you. It was a simple hug given to a man who was a huge part of my life—not a random stranger. Then he got pissed because you kissed me.”

Hudson let out a laugh. “Exactly, I kissed you. You just stood there. You didn’t touch me nor did you return the kiss. Let him heal you, then kick the shit out of him when you’re better.”

“Nope, I turn his stomach. He made sure to point that out.”

Turning, I stormed off in the other direction. Vance stepped in the way and I thrust power out at him. He fell on his ass. Hudson touched my back and I did the same to him. Taking hold of my arm, I ran. When I hit the midway point between the three groups, I put my good hand up and dropped the shields around the humans.

Closing my eyes, I pushed out with my mind that they would not remember this. That they were to go home and never think about this again.

I went to walk towards the road and found that I couldn’t get my legs to move. Looking down, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. I tried again. Nothing happened.

“What the...?”

“Uhh, remember the little pact you made with Franco?”

I groaned as I heard Brady behind me. “Huh?”

“You know the one where you agreed to stay close to me and he agreed not to hurt me?”

“Yes,” I said, wanting to spit nails.

He walked around in front of me and smiled mischievously. “I’m exercising my rights. And since I am who I am, I have the power to decide just how tight I want my rights to be.”

I glared at him. “Let me move.”

“No.”

“Let me move.”

Brady smiled wider. “Let me heal you.”

“No.”

“Then get comfy. I’ll sit down here next to you and wait until you pass out. I can heal without your permission then.”

“Brady, stop it. Let go of me.”

“Nope.”

Hudson appeared in front of me. He took one look at me and started laughing. “Oh gods, I see why they picked him as your mate. Only a man who can do that can control you.”

My nostrils flared as I glared at him. “You are not helping here.”

“I know,” he said, sitting down as well.

“Hudson?”

Grinning, he ignored me and glanced at Brady. “Hey, Bradonis, can you make her mute too?”

My jaw dropped.

“Let him heal you,” Hudson said, winking at me.

I glared down at Brady. “Well, Brad-dumbass, if I let you heal me, will you let me move?”

“Yep.”

“Fine, work your magik.”

Brady hopped to his feet and stepped close to me. He put hands on both sides of my body and pressed them to the wound. I hissed. He looked at Hudson and Hudson nodded.

“I’ll head back to the base and take Vance with me.”

The minute they were gone, Brady pressed hard again. It felt like someone was pouring lava into the wound. I clutched onto his forearm and held tight. The pain reached levels I’d never known.

“Honey, stop...ahhh,” I murmured as a wave of dizziness hit.

“I can’t, Mads. This needs to be completely cleaned before I can heal anything.” He pressed his body to my side and kissed my temple gently. “I’m sorry I said those things. It was just hard to hear you pick him over me.”

I bit my lower lip and drew blood. I kept my hand on Brady, not wanting to let him go. “I didn’t.”

“Baby, I’m trying to hurry. I know how this feels.”

“No, I didn’t...pick...him over you.”

He snorted. “But, I heard you laugh at the idea of me loving you.”

Tipping my head to the side, I let it rest against his. I took a deep breath and focused on Brady instead of the pain. “I do think it’s funny.”

“See.”

“Brady, no one asked...ahh...me how I felt about you.” A wave of liquid hot fire washed through me, making my knees buckle. Brady eased me down and held tight to me, keeping me upright.

“How do you feel about me?”

“Uhh...” Another dizzy spell hit.

“I’ll be done with this part soon, baby. Soon. I promise.” He kissed my temple again.

I ran my hand over his forearm. “I’ve always loved you.”

“What?”

“It hurts and it’s hard to talk. Pay attention will ya?”

Instantly, the fire feeling stopped. A soft, cool energy seeped slowly into its place. Brady let out a soft laugh. “I’m paying attention. Go ahead.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing now but don’t stop.”

He chuckled. “I won’t. Now tell me what you said.”

“I said that I’ve always loved you.”

“You only thought of me as a friend, Madelyn.”

“But I loved you with all my heart, just not sexually. I don’t know why.”

Brady gasped and nodded as if something dawned on him. “It was because of our age difference. I met you when you were just a child. I don’t even want to think about what a disaster that could have been. My body shut off sexually and I think I may have inadvertently blocked you from finding me attractive sexually. When I kissed you, I think it released the hold on that

part of us. My body understood you were no longer a child and made its move.”

As I thought about his rationale I realized how right he was. It would have been a disaster if he hadn't done that. When he'd told me that he'd refused to push me to marry him until I knew the person on the inside, I hadn't stopped to think about how important that was to him. In his line of work women wanted him for his image, his status and his money--not him.

“Brady...err...Bradonis.”

Chuckling, he kissed my ear and whispered to me, “I'll go by whatever you want to call me. And yes, Brad-dumbass is fine if that's what you like.”

“I just want you to know I love you the same right this minute as I did before things changed. That's not a bad thing if you consider I've loved and cared for you since I was six. Even with other people in my life, I still ran to you just to be close to you. I didn't expect anything from you. I never went crazy and tried to pull your clothes off or get you to sign my breasts.” We both laughed when I mentioned that.

I patted his arm and kept going, “You weren't some movie sex god to me. You were you and I loved you for that. I still love you for you, lycan and all. So, what I'm trying to say is that even after you released that chemical or whatever you did, it didn't make me want to yank your clothes off or want you to sign my breast. It just made me understand it was okay to kiss you, touch you, be close to you. Didn't you notice the morning after you put the 'whammy' on me, all it did was make me feel okay about having you in the room while I was naked. It didn't make me beg you to take me.”

“Forgive me if I sound ungrateful but, why the hell not? And how is this supposed to make me feel better?”

“You should feel better knowing you didn't turn into an icon for me when you released that chemical. You stayed you in my eyes. You didn't force false feelings on me, Brady. You just opened the door for the ones I already had.”

He was quiet for a second and I thought for sure that he'd missed what I was trying desperately to explain. When he pulled his hands away I assumed he'd walk away. He didn't. Turning me to him, he cupped my face. “I can't believe that I'm going to say this out loud, but the fact you didn't beg me to take you is making me the happiest man alive right now.”

Smiling, I locked gazes with him. He didn't avert his. “I take it you want to look at me again.”

“Yes, I do. But you still turn my stomach.”

My mouth dropped as I tried to pull away from him.

He laughed and held me to him. “You always have. You twist it in knots and just when I think I have a hold on how I feel about you, you up and do it again. They don't sell anything over-the-counter to fix that.”

My heart swelled as I stared at him. “They do sell something.”

“What?” he asked, his eyebrows pulling together.

“Condoms.”

He went rigid. “Are you saying what I think you're saying?”

“Well, since I still technically live with you until tonight, I was thinking we could go home and see what happens when we take it to the next level. But if I, at any point, ask you to sign my breast, do it but then lop my head off too please.”

Brady captured my lips with his. The passion and love he was feeling came through with every swipe of his tongue. I wanted to pull him to the ground and touch him everywhere, explore every inch of his body.

Every inch? Instantly, I thought about the scars I carried. Pulling back from him, I looked away for a moment. “Brady, I...umm...I should warn you ahead of time that the attack three years ago, left some pretty bad scars on me and you shouldn’t make a decision about us until you —”

Pressing his fingertips to my mouth, he shut me up. “I know. I saw them last night when I cleaned you up and put you in bed.”

He cleaned me up? Put me to bed? He saw them?

Panic set in and I tried to get away from him. I was going to be sick.

Brady held me tight. “Shhh, it’s okay. They weren’t half as bad as you thought they were. They were part of you and I love you regardless of the packaging. Which I would like to add is the best damn packaging I’ve ever seen.”

They were a part of me?

“Why are you talking about them in the past tense, honey? They’ll always be there. They tell me that I was lucky to only have those and after seeing what happened after, I, umm, died, I’m shocked too.”

“I am so sorry.”

Laughing softly, I squinted at him. “For what? You weren’t there and you weren’t the one who attacked me.”

“If I’d have claimed you, I would have been there. We had been close a long time before that happened. And you were attacked because you refused to hurt someone you thought was me, Mads. Because you cared for me, you threw your weapons down, unwilling to hurt him.”

“It was my own fault. I should have known you’d never be with them. And I didn’t just care for you, even when I told you that you were a good boy for eating the man, I loved you.” I touched his face lightly.

Taking my hand in his, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. “Well, regardless of what you think, I know that wouldn’t have happened to you if it wasn’t for your memory of me. So, since I wasn’t there to protect you then or heal you, I did it now. That’s why it burned as bad as it did. The wounds were old so I had to use more power. I’m sorry I hurt you but I hated seeing you self-conscious about them. I don’t care if you have boils. I’ll still love you.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Eww.”

“Do you want to see how many if any are still there?”

I got to my feet and pulled him up with me. “I do but I want to do it with you at home.”

The smile that moved over his face warmed me. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard lately. And speaking of home. You can’t move out. I really mean you can’t. See I can keep you there against your will. My deal with Franco assures it. Don’t think for a moment I won’t. I’m fairly sure Hudson would help install locks.”

I snickered. “Brady?”

“Yeah.”

“Can we have sex in the shower? I’m covered in other people’s guts and your hands don’t look much better.”

His jaw dropped.

Chapter Eight

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Glancing back at him, I gave him a reassuring smile. “Yes.”

“Mads, you look nervous and I don’t want you to be nervous when you’re with me.”

“Oh, Brady, I’m not nervous about you. I’m nervous about you seeing me.”

He laughed and moved up behind me. “How in the world did you and Vance...?”

I really didn’t want to ruin this moment by talking about Vance. “Vance is a box of rocks. I can guarantee he doesn’t realize that I stayed covered in some form every time we were together. If it’s female—”

“I’ll agree with you on him being a box of rocks, but the rest of his quirks he comes by honestly.” He ran his hands down my sides, sending chills up my body. “They’re part of his nature.”

I snorted. “His nature is to fuck any woman he sees?”

“So, I take it you know there were more than two?”

I hated to admit it, but I knew all along that Vance had things, many things going on the side. Truth be told, I didn’t care. I didn’t love him. I was insane about using condoms. Dillon told me that I’d never catch anything because supernaturals couldn’t but I didn’t want to take a chance.

“Yeah, I knew.” One thing had bugged me the minute I found out that Vance was a lycan, too, was why Brady would allow me to be with him. “Why—”

“Did I let Vance sleep with you?”

Great, he’s a mind reader now too.

“Yeah, I guess you could say I am.” He let out a soft laugh as he lifted my shirt over my head. When it was off, he pressed himself against my back and wrapped his arms around me. “Sorry, I communicate telepathically with the packs all the time. It’s a hard habit to break. Before you yell, I couldn’t do it before I healed you today.”

“What did healing me do?”

“It sort of gave you powers similar to mine.”

I stiffened. “I won’t get furry will I?”

Brady kissed my shoulder and snickered. “No baby, you won’t change. But you will learn to communicate with me through your mind. Before you yell, yes, I gave you a gift that no others have. You can block me out whenever you want. They can’t.”

I unbuttoned my pants and pushed them down, over my hips, until they slid to the floor. Brady took hold of my hips and growled. “Is standing with my ass close to you a bad thing? I don’t want to be mounted every time I bend over and pick something up.”

“Baby, it doesn’t matter which way you face. I’m still going to want to mount you. Don’t you own anything other than thongs?”

“No. Why? Don’t you like them?” I asked, rubbing my butt against him and laughing. “If you say my ass looks fat in them I will stick your head in the toilet.”

Tracing his finger along the back of my thong, he chuckled. “No, the problem is that I love it. It makes it hard to concentrate when I see you in one. If I know you’re always in one I

think I'll walk into a wall or something."

"Mmmhmm, well you can walk past that door and grab condoms out of my purse. I don't want any little 'Head Ones' running around. What the hell is The Head One anyway? They make you sound like a prophet."

Brady laughed while he continued to play with my thong. "Hey, they're the ones that picked the name. Not me. I just gave them a list of things they couldn't call me and I didn't think to put that one on there."

I surrendered. "What was on your list?"

Brady reached around and caressed my stomach, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. "Promise you won't get upset?"

"If it's breeding stud, gigolo or any variation of those then I can't promise you a thing."

He was quiet and I pulled out of his hold. "Great, they stuck me with a mate who is not only The Head One but the head dick as well. Just what I always wanted. A man who services everyone."

Brady went to work on undoing my bra. "That's not my title, though there are several in each pack. Umm, Vance is one."

Shrugging, I laughed. "Figures."

"I'm the, uhh, umm—"

"Head entertainment?"

"For lack of a better term, I'm the alpha to *all* lycans, the king." He slid my bra forward but I clutched it to me, unable to believe what I was hearing.

"Mads," he caressed my arms gently, "I can't change something I was born into. I can't —"

"I don't give a shit about you being the king of the whatever. What I don't like is how you obviously sent Vance to me. He's not smart enough to figure it out on his own. You sent your fucking head male slut to me, Brady!" I turned a tiny bit, afraid that if I looked at him, I'd hit him. "Get out!"

"Mads—"

I glared at Brady, willing him to see every bit of anger I had at the moment. He'd sent some sort of designated knock up guy to my bed. That was disgusting and wrong. Knowing he knew all along only made it worse. He'd single-handedly made me feel cheap and then cheaper in less than thirty seconds. People that supposedly love someone don't do that. They don't hand the person they care about to a man whose job is to fuck everything. I wanted my clothes back on and I wanted to go. He'd whored me out to a whore.

Without haste, I pushed past him, leaving his bathroom. He didn't attempt to stop me which was good because at that moment I really would have hurt him. I had two men in my life that were important to me. One walked out of my life to make room for the other, so he could stay quiet while one of his designated dicks stuck it to me.

I slammed my bedroom door shut and looked up. "Frankie!"

Franco's cool energy surrounded me. "Yes?"

"Break this bond thing. I want to leave."

"Ah, you are upset about Bradonis sending Vance to you?"

Rolling my eyes, I gritted my teeth. "I'd like some privacy in my own head. Is that too much for you people?"

"Madelyn Mia, do not be upset with me over this. I had nothing to do with Bradonis' decision. He felt it was right. Why, I do not know. I am most curious to ask him myself. I do not

like the idea of you being offered out any more than you do.”

Gee, great, he was on my side.

“Let me out of this. You can do whatever you want to him.”

Franco laughed softly. “You do not mean that. I can sense you care greatly for him. You are hurt and rightfully so. And to answer your question, Hudson would have never done something like that to you.”

“I didn’t ask you if he would.”

“Deep down you did.”

Wonderful, now he was not only psychic he was also able to see down to my toes. I would draw the world’s scariest and oddest father out of the bag.

“You are not upset with me?”

I shrugged. “No. You don’t do anything without a reason. So, I’m sure you had one for all that you did.”

“I am sorry but could you please get Madelyn Mia Mason?”

“Ha, ha, you’re so funny.” I walked towards my bathroom and stopped. “If I get in the shower while we’re talking can you see me?”

“No. Have no fear. I would have told you that.”

“What would happen if I just left?” I asked, weighing my options in my head.

“Many would miss you.”

“Can you relocate me please?”

“No,” he said, softly.

I huffed.

He sighed. “Because I do not wish to miss you and you have been pulled off duty until further notice. Keep in mind, Madelyn Mia, we are immortal. I can take forever deciding whether or not to reactivate you.”

“Grrr, then at least let me out of the deal.”

He chuckled. “No.”

“Why?”

“Because he does not wish to miss you either.”

I tossed my hands in the air. “Am I ever going to be able to make up my own mind or will a bunch of too buff, too powerful men keep doing it? I mean really, what was the point in letting me pretend to be a Guardian when we all know you brought me on because I’m yours.”

Franco gasped. “I fought with every fiber of my being for the Elders to not allow you to be one. I hid your calling from them as long as I could. Madelyn, at no point did I ever want you involved in all of this. But they did not listen to me. They said you were chosen and were therefore vital to the cause.”

Franco hadn’t wanted me to be a Guardian? I would have never gotten to know him if I wasn’t one. I’d have never known my real father. The reality of that hit me hard.

“That is not true. I would have shown myself to you.”

“Can we talk more later? I need some time to myself.”

“Of course.”

He pulled away quickly.

Sighing, I let my bra drop to the floor. I went for my thong next and froze. My lower abdomen didn’t have a scratch on it. The section where the scarring had been was as smooth as the rest of it. I covered my mouth and shook my head. My thoughts weren’t on how wonderful it was to finally be free of them. No. My thoughts went to how quickly I’d take them back to make

things be like they were before for Brady and me.

I wanted to go back to the days of spontaneously dancing, laughing at him trying to have a successful sex scene, worrying over every stunt he should have used a double for, sitting next to him while we watched a movie, even being in public with him as he got mobbed by fans. I didn't need a damn king. I needed a Brady. I needed a lot of things I could never have.

Why had it gone south so fast for us? I meant every word I'd said to him. I had always been in love with him. I wouldn't have spent every free moment with him if I wasn't. I wouldn't have kept hoping he'd finally find that one special person so he could be happy and have something real if I didn't love him.

When I was seventeen, I'd screened every female around the studios trying to find one I thought would fit his personality. I finally narrowed it down to one and she announced that her boyfriend had popped the question. I wanted to pop a cap in her boyfriend.

"You really did that?"

I spun around and found Brady leaning against the bathroom door frame. His gaze raked over me slowly. "I see you got over your aversion to full frontals."

"Ohmygod!" I turned.

He laughed softly. "Baby, I told you that I saw it all last night. And I'd like to mention that I'm shocked you never mentioned how bare down *there* is."

My eyes bulged and I choked on air. His hands brushed over my skin lightly. Each touch, each caress made my body respond more and more. Before I knew it, I was leaning into him. He pulled back a minute. The stereo system in my room kicked on. A slow, sensual song came on. I knew it was from one of my CD's and I knew the CD held nothing but those types of songs.

Opening the door to my shower, I stepped in. It was as big as Brady's but mine only had one nozzle in it. He'd tried to have more put in for me but I couldn't get used to water hitting me all at once. Turning the knobs, I was instantly hit with cold water. I yelped and tried to step back. When I ran into something warm and firm, I gulped.

"Hey," Brady whispered, pulling me to him. He wrapped his arms around me and swayed us to the music.

My breath caught when I felt his large, very large, erection digging at the small of my back. "Please tell me that isn't what I think it is."

"Why?" he asked, chuckling slightly.

"Because if it is, I'd like to request a mate who will fit in me."

Growling, he brought his head down and kissed my neck, moving back up it slowly. "Oh, I'll fit."

"Cold, cold." I put my hand out and turned the hot water knob on full blast. "Oh shit. I just realized that you were standing in a cold shower and were still that... nope... I'm sorry this won't work. I will not be with a man who has to heal me every damn time we're done having sex."

Brady ran his hands up and cupped my breasts. Grinding his hard erection against me, he made moisture pool between my legs. I went for the back of his neck with one hand and the back of his thigh with the other. We danced similar to how we had the other night.

Sliding a hand lower, Brady traced a slow line down my stomach. He ran his fingers over my *mons*, making me jerk slightly. Parting my folds, he ran a finger over my clit. I jumped and he had to hold me in place. He let out a soft laugh. "Are you going to run before we get any further?"

I tried to respond. I couldn't. I'd never felt anything as pleasing as his touch. Why did it

feel this way with him and no one else? He touched me again and I came with a start. My orgasm moved through my abdomen, my inner thighs, causing the walls of my channel to grasp at the nothingness. Brady eased his middle finger in and growled as my body held it firm. He ground his hips against my back.

“So tight,” he whispered as he began to finger fuck me while he stimulated my clit.

Grabbing his wrist, I tried to pull his hand out and away from me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice low and slightly amused.

It took a minute for me to find my voice. “You tell me.”

“I’ve been told that there’s another added perk to making love to your mate.” He rubbed over my sweet spot and sent another orgasm through me. I gasped and stiffened against his body. “Hmm, looks like they were right. You can make your mate come with just a touch if you’re not careful.”

A wicked smile moved over my face. I turned what was natural in me on and pulled his hand free of me. Twisting, I had his back pinned to the shower wall in a matter of seconds.

“Good to know. Tell me, Brady, does that go both ways?”

He grinned slyly. “I haven’t made love with my mate yet. I’ll let you know when we’re done.”

I bit lightly at his collarbone. He growled and reached for me. I flicked a tiny bit of power out, catching his hands and pinning them to the wall. He jerked and drew in a sharp breath. Smiling, I moved down more, kissing the center of his steely chest. His skin tasted so salty-sweet that I couldn’t get enough of it.

Splaying my hands over his muscular body, I pulled down as I went, kissing, touching, raking my nails lightly down his chiseled chest. Glancing up, I found Brady staring down in rapture. I bit at his hip bone and ran my hands lower, sliding them over his upper thighs.

“Maddy...”

Sliding a hand up, I pulled along the apex of his thighs and over his sac. His jaw dropped. Sensing he was close to coming, I looked down and gasped. His cock was huge. I didn’t think they came any bigger than Hudson who was close to this size but not quite as big. Brady had Vance by two and a half inches in length. I couldn’t even begin to take a gander at the girth.

Bigger, that’s all I knew.

Brady laughed shakily. “Do all women compare men when they’re down there?”

“Only the men they’re considering keeping.”

Why the hell did they use Vance for a male sperm bank when they had something like this sitting around?

“Because, The Head One saves his seed for his mate, his wife. Having an endless count of children by different women would make for a disaster in the event of my death. I have to select who I allow my sperm count to raise for.”

“What, you can separate your sperm from the rest of it?”

Brady nodded. “Something like that.”

“Cool, built in birth control. Wish I had that.”

“You do.” He stared down at me as I fondled his sac gently.

“Pfft, no I don’t.”

“Mads, a little over a year ago, your body began to give off a scent, don’t freak, it was good, a little too good. It signifies you’re most fertile at that time.”

I baulked. “Good one.”

“That’s why I brought Vance in.”

I squeezed a bit too tight on his balls and Brady winched. “You sent Vance in to get me pregnant?”

“Can we talk about this when I’m not in such a vulnerable position?”

“No.”

He cast me a sexy grin. “I love you and need all my equipment for you. Please try to remember that.”

Tipping my head slightly, I licked a long line down his cock to the base. His breath hitched. I kissed and nibbled my way back up his shaft, paying close attention to the underside near the head. Pulling back quickly, I refused to touch him again regardless of how good he tasted. I needed answers. “Tell me the truth or I’m going to leave you pinned to the shower like this. I got off several times already. It’ll be a real shame if you didn’t.”

Brady thumped the shower wall with the back of his head and growled. “Fine. You were at a point in your sexual cycle that would not only allow you to become pregnant it would make you crave sex. I didn’t want you to end up going through man after man only to find they weren’t filling that need. And I highly doubted you wanted to get pregnant by a man you barely knew.”

My stomach tightened. “So you sent Vance just in case he got me knocked up?”

Brady shook his head no. “I sent Vance because he can separate his sperm as well and he was someone I trusted. I couldn’t figure out a way to get you to see me in that light and was scared to death you’d see every other male like that. Vance has a natural gift for getting women to allow him to bed them. He could avoid getting you pregnant, was used to emotionally removing himself from the situation and could get you to be with him. That’s the best I could come up with for you. And when he told me how adamant you were about him wearing a condom, he actually looked sad.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “If he’s such an expert at staying removed from the situation, why does he call me all the time trying to make things work? Did you order him to do that?”

“No. That shocked me. When he told me he loved you I thought of sending him away but you seemed happy with him so I didn’t. His joy in life is supposed to be bedding many, settling down with none. The fact he told you he loved you and continued to try to pursue you after he’d been caught in the act of doing what he does, gave me cause for concern. I told him to back off. I swear that I did.”

Brady gave me a tender look and bit at his lower lip. “I didn’t whore you out, Mads. I kept you from doing it to yourself because of what your body was going through. You’d have cycled through men at an alarming rate. Trust me, I’ve seen other unmated females who are going through the same thing end up doing it. It’s not pretty.”

I let everything he’d said soak in and stared at his hip as if all the answers were there. It would have been nice if someone told me about the damn in heat thing. Doing football teams didn’t appeal to me. Hell, doing Vance no longer appealed to me.

Taking hold of Brady’s cock, I felt him tighten, most likely afraid I’d rip it off. I didn’t say a word as I put my mouth over the tip and went down fast. Brady fought against my power, trying to break his arms free. I didn’t let him go. I took him to the back of my throat and used my hands to stimulate the remaining portion of his shaft. I scraped his penis over the hard palate on the roof of my mouth and hummed.

“Ahh... uhh... Mads,” he panted as his cock jerked and his balls drew up. Instantly, Brady was unloading his semen into my mouth. I drank it down. Looking up, I found his hot gaze on me. I sucked hard, drawing every drop of come from him and swallowing it down. It tasted divine. So sweet. So full of power. So full of Brady’s essence.

I scraped my teeth lightly over his cock as I pulled off him. “Hmm, I think they are right. I think you can make your mate come fast if you’re not careful. What’s your opinion? Was that faster than the other ones?”

A feral look came over him. “Let me go.”

I did, curious to see just what Brady would do next. He seized hold of me and lifted me high. Taking my mouth with his, he kissed me wildly as he pressed my back to the wall under a stream of warm water. He kept me supported with one hand while he moved the other one around to my butt then further to my drenched core.

Brady dipped his finger into my wet pussy and swirled his finger around. He pulled his hand away and moved it between us. The feel of him pressing the tip of his dick to my drenched opening, made my entire body burn with need. Brady plowed into me, stretching me so far and so wide that I screamed out into his mouth. He didn’t stop or slow. Instead, Brady increased the power behind his thrusts, rubbing his low abdomen against my swollen clit as he went.

I gasped. “Brady.”

“You feel so fucking good, Mads. So perfect.”

My body relaxed as pleasure began to build. “Brady.”

Our eyes locked. His thrusts continued, rhythmic yet wild, rough yet oddly gentle. He kept me pinned to the wall and water covered us. My fingers trembled as I wrapped them up and over his neck. My cheeks flushed, knowing that another zenith lay just ahead.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me.”

Brady’s words didn’t shock me, what shocked me was how my body obeyed. A tingling sensation started at my feet and worked its way up my legs. I kissed him, inserting my tongue fast, needing to feel him in as many ways as I could. When the orgasm reached my sex, a cry tore free from me. Instantly, the walls of my pussy were gripping his shaft in a vice-like state.

Brady pulled his face back from mine. Tipping his head back, he growled and put his hands out far from me. Claws shot out at the same time semen did. Each hot wave of come he spurted in me made my orgasm spasm, forcing more pleasure throughout my body.

“Brady, are you going to bite me?” I asked, not afraid of being bitten but concerned he’d do something in the throes of passion that he’d regret later.

Retracting his claws, he looked down at me and cupped my cheeks. “Baby, I will not claim you until you tell me I can. Now, before you hear it from someone else, yes, technically I’m free to do it without your permission but I won’t. I want you to have what other women have--a choice. You didn’t grow up a lycan and I don’t want to treat you like one. We’ll take our time with this even though I think we both know we share something that won’t ever go away.”

I held tight to him but looked away.

“Maddy, what’s wrong? Do you regret what we did?”

“I forgot all about a condom and I haven’t taken my pill in three days. I don’t know why. I never forget to take it.”

Brady chuckled. “Baby, the minute we kissed, your body recognized me. You’re still in one of the many reproductive highs you’ll have and it wants to accept my seed. It’s natural for mates to reproduce. That’s why something as important as this is to you just slipped your mind.”

I grabbed his face and stared into his eyes. “Did you...?”

“No, I won’t release semen with a sperm count until we agree that is what we want. It’s not my decision alone. We either both agree on it or it doesn’t happen,” he said, as he touched my lips lightly. “Are you okay with what we just did, with having me bare in you?”

Was I? No man had ever been there without a condom on. Not even Hudson.

I took a minute to think about having Brady repeating that often. Smiling at him with my eyes wide, I kissed the tip of his nose. “I am. Don’t ask me to explain it, it’ll just ruin it.”

A silly grin came over his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“It just sunk in that I’m technically the first man to be in you flesh to flesh. And the first one to ever share—”

I put my hand over his mouth and felt him smiling under my touch. “Talk of bodily fluid sharing is not romantic. Stop while you’re ahead and gloat about it when I’m not next to you. Okay?” He nodded with a gleam in his eyes. “I love you.”

Brady mumbled something I couldn’t make out. Taking my hand from his mouth, I laughed. “What?”

Wagging his eyebrows, he smiled wide. “I love you, too.”

“While we’re in the loving mood, tell me why I’m not drained, tired or hungry.”

Biting the corner of his lip, Brady did his best to look innocent. I wasn’t buying it. “Because I fixed that too while I was healing you.”

“Is there anything else you ‘fixed’ that I should know about? Christ, did you give me a pap smear while you were in there?”

He suddenly looked very serious. “No, but I did check every inch of you, again sorry for the pain. Your uterus was scarred to the point that carrying a child might have been an issue for you. I didn’t ask your permission and I’m sorry but I couldn’t leave you like that. I repaired it and your liver, too.”

Wow. He missed his calling. He should have been in medicine not the entertainment industry. Of course, the minute he shot fire-like power into someone he might find himself being sued.

“Maddy, are you upset with me? You’ve never mentioned children at all. For all I know, you hate them.”

“I don’t hate them. The only ones I’ve been around are the ones used in movies. I never really thought about having children before. Hud... err... the subject came up a lot in the past but I didn’t like to discuss it. It felt wrong.”

Brady kissed my cheek lightly. “You can say his name around me. I’ll be fine. Or so they tell me.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

Chapter Nine

“I can’t believe you want to do this. You spent the morning fighting things that would make Rambo cry.”

Running my hands nervously over my dark, flare bottom jeans, I adjusted the sleeves of my green and white rugby shirt. It had been my idea to go out on the town. We’d already killed all rising threat in the lycan rebellion and had sex before ten in the morning. It seemed silly to throw in the towel.

Brady put his SUV in gear. “Let’s go home, baby. I can think of a lot of ways we can entertain ourselves.”

“Brady, this is the first time since I’ve been fourteen and eliminated my first of anything that I’ve felt a hundred percent sure I want to be out in public. This is something you’re always pushing me to do with you and I’m ready to do it. I even brought sunglasses that are just tinted green to take the edge off in case they shift. Dillon said Hudson is now in charge of my routes and Franco is threatening to put a spell on your house so I can’t ever leave it if I dare give in to anything I sense.”

He took hold of my chin and turned my face so he could see me. “You don’t have to do this. I didn’t understand before that you were sensing everything around us, that you were walking around permanently trying to tune in a channel that could never be found. And,” he gripped my chin a bit firmer, “it’s our house, baby. Not my house. Ours. Whether or not we admit it aloud, we are a couple. We’ve always been one.”

I wanted to comment but I kept getting distracted by his smile, his eyes, how good he looked in black jeans and matching t-shirt. I made a mental note to make him sit on the other side of a wall the next time we talked about anything serious. Hell, anything at all.

Look forward and stop gawking at him. He gets enough of that from the rest of the world. At least I haven’t fallen so low as to ask him to sign my breasts. Though at the rate I’m going, the quadruplet joke will come to fruition.

Brady laughed hard, from the gut and leaned into me. He kissed me gently. “Please don’t start blocking me out of your thoughts. I’ve always thought you were funny but damn you have some crazy stuff run through there.” He kissed me again. “And I’m more than up,” he glanced down at his crotch, “for working on those babies. I’ll do anything you want. Name it, I’ll do it. I’ll sign anywhere.”

He kissed me once more as a devilish smile came over him. “And I refuse to sit on the other side of a wall to talk to you. For one, I’d go crazy if I couldn’t see you. And for another, I have the exact same problem when it comes to you. I always have. Welcome to my world. For the record, every time you took me to the beach with you, I had a hard on for days. And you were in a suit that covered more than I ever thought one could cover.”

“Brady?”

“What’s up?”

I glanced nervously at him. “I didn’t know I couldn’t have children.”

“I know.”

“I wanted to tell you what really happened but I couldn’t. I didn’t know you—”

He pressed his lips to mine and the kiss wasn't chaste, nor was it wild and untamed, it was tender, sensual and arousing. Why the hell did he wait until now to plant one on me? I never told him that when I mentioned to my mother that when I did get my own wolf-man that I wasn't just going to keep him, I was going to marry him. I also believed that I'd have tea with the Easter Bunny so I didn't really take myself seriously at that age.

"You want to do this or would you rather I take you home and make love to you until neither of us can stand?" Brady asked, keeping his lips dangerously close to mine.

"Considering we both had to sit down after our shower, umm, it won't last long."

Brady's face fell. *It's not like I didn't want to give you twelve rounds of pleasure. It's just the second I entered you three-hundred years of waiting for you and finally being in you came crashing down on me. If I tell you I love you so much at times it's hard to breathe you'll think it's a line. And if I tell you every time I look at you, I see the two of us in our home with our children climbing all over us, laughing and in love, you'll run to the nearest hiding spot. All I can think about is losing you. I love you too much to let go.*

He smiled slightly. "Yeah, sorry about that shower thing. I think we should practice that again."

Quickly, I focused on creating a mental shield before thinking about what just happened. I'd heard his thoughts. He said it would happen eventually. I sort of thought he meant years from now. If I told him, he'd guard himself from me and continue to give me lighthearted answers.

"Honey," I rubbed the tip of my nose against his, "I'm going to tell you something but you better not get a swollen head. Not like it can get any bigger. But one time with you today was the best time I've ever had. In my book, you've raised the bar significantly. If you dare laugh at me, I'll hurt you."

Brady blushed and kissed my lips. "Thanks. I can't make any promises about my ego though."

I've got to stop staring into your eyes before I flip your seat back and take you right now. The media would love that.

Smiling at his thoughts, I opened my door and climbed out. Brady ran around and stood by me. He made no move to touch me. Putting my hand out, I saw the relief in his eyes as he took it.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted me touching you in public," he said softly.

Pulling him to me, I cupped his neck with my free hand and thrust my tongue in his mouth. I kissed as I never had before, long tongue strokes while my lips just barely met his. Anyone next to us would clearly see me tonguing him and I didn't care. If the man wanted to touch me in public, I'd more than let him.

Brady's hands went to my back jean pockets. He held me snug to him while he returned my kiss. A small purr escaped me and Brady smiled while he continued to kiss me. When we pulled back, he looked at me with hungry eyes.

"You're going to eat me because of the cat noise. Aren't you?"

"I'm going to eat something associated with a cat the minute we get home." He kissed me again.

"Honey, we aren't going to be home until late tonight."

His brow furrowed. "You know something I don't?"

"Mmmhmm," I purred again just to tease him more. His eyes rolled and he pushed his lower half against me hard. It was easy to feel his erection beneath his jeans. My nipples hardened and my pussy dampened with anticipation.

Brady growled. "I can smell how wet you are. We need to stop doing this here or you'll be up against a building taking me in some form."

The very idea sent my body into overdrive, causing me to become even wetter. He groaned. Deciding to take pity on him, I took a step back, putting about three whole inches between us. "You've got to be on set later this evening."

"I told them I wouldn't be in," he said biting out each word.

"Well, while you were getting dressed my dad called. They can't delay production anymore. The barely legal chick cost them enough money." It was weird referring to the man who ran the studios as dad when I now knew Franco was my father.

"I'll pay for whatever they lost. I'm not leaving you."

Batting my eyes lightly, I tried to look like I was an angel. "Hon, I'm coming with you. I've got an invisible lasso around my waist anyway. And they found a replacement for Ms. Barely Legal for real this time."

"Great, one more girl I have to pretend to be into."

Biting back laughter, I put a serious look on my face. "You know that's the only thing the critics make negative comments about when it comes to you. They all say you seem removed from your female lead."

"Yeah, well I think I mentioned I shut something off for a while. Plus, once I saw you, it wouldn't work regardless if I liked it or not." He arched a brow as he looked me over. "I can guess what you're thinking—all the women parading around with me to events and so forth. Did you ever actually see me do more than put my arm around them?"

I thought about it. He always had a new woman with him but now that he mentioned it, he never did do anything more than put his arm around one or hold one's hand while in public. "No, but please don't mention what you did behind closed doors with them. I'd rather not know."

Brady dropped his head down and pressed his full lips to my ear. "Each and every one of them are people who, umm, I'm friends with 'wives.' They knew about you and knew I couldn't and wouldn't do anything with anyone. So, they took turns attending things with me to help me out. They may be a bit, umm, bubbly but they have big hearts."

Joy overwhelmed me. He hadn't been with every woman in the tri-county area. Suddenly, the knowledge that he'd been faithful to me for seventeen years didn't set well with me. Especially since I hadn't been faithful to him. Had I known, I'd have never looked in another direction.

"You didn't know, baby. But it's good to know if you had, you'd have been with just me," he whispered.

It was then that I realized I'd let my mental guard down. "So, what do you want to do?"

"You are the one who wanted to come out." Brady squeezed my butt with his hands in my pocket. "I just wanted to *come*." He wagged his brows.

"I don't know how to entertain a man as old as you," I said, licking my lips slowly.

"Trust me, you do."

Brady wasn't taking the hint. I didn't know what to do because I'd never been out like this. I spent my life on production lots where nothing is as it seems, sliding into a chair for a damn college course that I was already twenty minutes late for and running around after dark killing things. I considered being by him a hobby because I didn't have anything else. When I lived at home, my mother handled shopping for me. She was a shopping goddess. When I moved in with Brady, Dillon helped me find great websites and that was how I did everything. Franco

handled any weapons I'd needed.

The only movies I'd been to were the playbacks on the viewing screens on the lot. The only dance club I'd been to was the set one. Sushi with Brady had been the first meal I'd eaten out in close to three years. Every other meal was delivered since I'd never found time to learn to cook.

Can't be good at everything.

If I did happen to stumble upon something entertaining or relaxing I couldn't take it in because I was either chasing or being chased by a killing machine.

Hell, I had to be pulled out of a private school when I was eleven because I'd hide away and cry from all of the noises and sensations I couldn't explain. My power had reared its ugly head three times as well at the end. Franco handled the cleanup and pulled me out of there. Tutors came to his house and the set for me. Three of them were witches, one was a full-blooded Fae and the last was a vampire.

I did manage to find a few rare times when Brady wasn't working on a movie and I wasn't killing something to go to isolated places with him. The beach. The woods for a nature walk. Places that weren't crowded. The establishments that catered to the paranormal had never occurred to me because I thought Brady was human. And there was a better than average chance something there would pick a fight, hoping it could kick the female Guardian's ass. They left me alone whenever Dillon or Hudson were with me.

Hey, disregard the fact I kill just as many creepy things as they do. Apparently, my breasts took away from that somehow. Jude's place was good though. I had no complaints about it. But I didn't think Brady would really enjoy hanging at a vampire owned club.

Smiling up at Brady, I nodded towards his SUV. "You're right. Home sounds good. Sorry I pulled you out here with me. I swear it sounded like a good idea at the time."

Brady pulled his hands out of my pockets and grabbed my hand. "Come on, let's walk a bit first. I mean, we're here and all."

I tried to hide my smile but didn't do a very good job. He winked and I melted. I followed him eagerly, excited to just be walking around in the light of day like a normal person, doing normal things. We weaved in and out of the crowd. I sensed supernaturals all around but none felt like a threat. At least not yet.

"What sounds good to you for lunch?" he asked, pulling me close to him.

"A cheeseburger."

"We come out for the day and you want a cheeseburger?"

That's what I said. Men. Apparently, cheeseburger was a dirty word unless four of your buddies were sitting around a picnic table scratching their balls and tossing beers back.

"You pick."

Brady drew the corner of his lip up. I couldn't seem to pull my mind off the simple act. At some point I'd gone from thinking it was cute when he'd do things like that to thinking of what else he could use those lips for. I needed to see a doctor. Maybe they could take my sex drive away. Bind it. Banish it. Give it to charity. Put it up for auction on the internet. I'd take about anything right now. I was sick of staring at Brady like he was a piece of meat. He was intelligent, funny, caring, sexier than any man I'd ever seen.

I'm staking myself when I get home.

I glanced up to find Brady staring at me, clearly amused. "A piece of meat, huh? You're welcome to nibble on me any time you get the urge. And if you dare try to get rid of a sex drive I've waited so long for you to have there will be hell to pay. Oh, and not only do I do amazing

things with my lips, I can do some pretty cool things with my tongue, too. It can get very, very long when needed.”

I did my best to keep the image out of my head but the harder I tried, the more vivid it became. If he made me come in the middle of the street he wouldn't see sex again anytime soon.

“I'm done. No more.” He leaned back and kissed my forehead. “Don't cut me off. I just finally got a taste of you. I'll be good. I swear.”

“You buckle so easy. Are you sure you're The Head One?”

Laughing he took my hand and continued onward. We made it another block or so before Brady stilled. I didn't sense a problem but I didn't sense lycans so I could be surrounded by a billion and I'd never catch on.

Fuck, why did they have to pick today to pop out of the woodwork? Maddy is going to pull into a shell and never come back out again. And then each one of them will end up with a rather nasty 'dog' bite.

I tossed my shields up and held them tight.

“Mads, I think we have paparazzi following us.”

Running my hand up the back of his arm, I tried to soothe his nerves. “Want to give them something to talk about? You could show me some of those tongue tricks.”

Brady spun around, staring at me with wide eyes as his mouth dropped. “You're not mad or wanting to run?”

“If you'd rather they not see us together, I'll head into a few shops and meet you later. You've got an image and it involves being available in the eyes of the public.” I pulled my arm back and winked at him. “I'll meet you at the pier in an hour. It's one thing to mess around with three girls in a restaurant. It's an entirely different thing to have picture proof.”

“Mads, I don't care about—”

I kept going, not wanting to let him do something his publicist would have to spend weeks cleaning up. I pushed through the crowd, wondering why any of them bothered to come when it was this hard to get around. Why had I wanted to come out?

I entered the shop to my right. Not really caring what it was. About two seconds in the door, I was ready to head back out. Row upon rows of perfumes lined the glass enclosures all the way around it.

“If I beg, will you avoid wearing this stuff?”

Turning, I found Hudson standing behind me. In typical Hudson style, he wore black from head to toe. He pulled his sunglasses down and his dark brown eyes locked on me.

“Though, maybe if you put some on, I won't be able to smell *him* all over you. I take it you two fucked and made up.”

Instantly hurt by his comment, I lowered my head and went for the door. This was the first day in years that I felt a hundred percent—that I felt like myself. I was not about to let Hudson pick today to have a jealous outburst.

“Yeah, Maddy run away, that's good.”

Opening the door, I was immediately hit with the sense of something lurking close. My eyes shifted and I was thankful for the green tinted glasses. I went to turn around to tell Hudson and someone grabbed my arm. I turned and found cameras of all kinds in my face. The sense of danger continued and my eyes went nuts again. Putting my hand out and my head down, I hid them from view.

“Are you and Brady Devens engaged?”

“Is it true you're pregnant with his child?”

They crowded in on me so fast they literally had equipment bumping me.

“How does your father feel about all of this?”

“Is it true Devens paid for breast implants for you?”

The questions continued and I just stood there with my head down.

“It’s been reported Mr. Devens had a jeweler do a house call last night. Can you confirm this?”

“What’s the date of the wedding?”

“Is it true the two of you have been living together for quite some time?”

A camera hit me hard above my left eye, knocking my glasses from my face. I dropped and found myself being hit by so much equipment to the point I lost track of it. It didn’t hurt. It was just annoying.

“How far along are you?”

Huh? These people were crazy.

“Did the two of you elope?”

“Who are you going to have design your wedding dress?”

“Can we see the ring?”

“Did you meet while he was filming?”

I stood slowly as I put my sunglasses back on.

“A lot of women will be heartbroken Brady will be off the market. Any comments?”

The sense of danger grew stronger and stronger. I couldn’t smell anything indicating what it might be. My mind said lycan. My gut said no. Backing up, I ran into Hudson. He put a hand on my shoulder and walked out in front of me.

“That’s enough, folks. Let Ms. Mason have some space,” he said, in his big scary voice.

Several of them actually did take big steps back. A few, really stupid ones didn’t budge. One actually shoved a camera into Hudson’s face. “Who are you?”

A low grumble came from him. “I’m the man who isn’t going to let you take another step closer to her. You’re the jackass who just hit her in the head with your camera. You are damn lucky I don’t take it away from you and bash you upside the head with it. That would only be fair.”

“You can’t touch me. I’m well within my rights to—”

Hudson laughed. “I can and I will do anything I damn well please if you don’t get that camera out of my face.”

Brady pushed through the reporters and headed straight for me. I shook my head slightly, trying to get him to just go away. These people didn’t need any more encouragement. Brady ignored my silent plea. He pulled me protectively into his arms and went to kiss my temple.

“Why are you bleeding?”

I wasn’t bleeding. Was I? I brought my hand up and touched above my eyes. Sure enough, there was some blood there. It was small so I didn’t worry about it. “It’s nothing.”

“Did one of them do it?”

“Yeah, this asshole here did. He went directly for her and knocked her glasses off. It was no accident.” Hudson looked at me and I understood what he was saying. The guy was attempting to expose me.

The blood.

He’d done it on purpose to get a sample of my blood.

No!

Brady jerked away from me and stormed towards the reporter. “Give me the camera.”

All the reporters' mouths dropped. Brady never got pissy with the media. He was every reporters dream come true. His sudden change took all but one by surprise. The man with the camera smiled and winked at me before disappearing from my sight. He looked like he was there but he wasn't. The man now standing before Brady and Hudson could respond and provoke them but it wasn't him. It was made up of glamour—magik as old as time, an illusion. It would disappear when he let his power down.

Brady and Hudson thought he was still there. He wasn't. I knew because I could do the same thing. No one knew why. But that's how I'd made it look like I was asleep every night so Brady wouldn't worry about me.

The man was still near, I could feel him. I needed to follow him. Neither Hudson nor Brady could track him until he showed himself again. I concentrated hard on Brady, hoping he would pick up everything I was thinking.

That's not him. Trust me. He's close. I can still feel him. I can do what he's doing and still track him. The me you'll see here is an illusion. She'll respond as needed. When you're done, lead her away and 'will' her gone. She'll go. I'll show myself as often as I can. The two of you can catch my scent then.

I love you. Brady looked back me.

I couldn't stand there and focus on him. I knew in my gut that if the man got away with the blood things would not bode well for me. I popped the illusion up at the same time I tossed up magik to cover myself.

I ran fast, zigzagging through the crowd, doing my best not to brush past anyone. They'd feel it but not understand it. If I could keep rumors of the west side of town being haunted to a minimum, I would. The crowd thickened as I continued onward. I kept going. Following him as he went towards the industrial parkway that lined an isolated part of a long boardwalk, I felt someone else next to me suddenly.

"Ooo, why are we invisible and running? Is it a new game? I love new games."

Hearing the light feminine voice I knew so well, I rolled my eyes. "I'm chasing a guy who wants to cause me harm, Dymphina."

She gasped. "Is he the one who runs ahead of us?"

"Yep," I said still running at full force.

"No one should harm a Guardian. I shall stop him."

Oh, this was not going to be good. A pissed off pleasure nymph had no business helping out. Before I could protest, the man came into view and surged high into the air, camera in tow. He then proceeded to catapult high over the edge of the boardwalk. Dymphina's magik was strong. I was lucky she didn't send him to the moon.

At a full run, I dove over the rail to follow him. I'd fought enough bad guys here at night to know it was sandy under the docks. I did a double summersault and landed on my feet.

"Dymphina, are any humans near?"

She giggled. "No, why would we want to spend time with them?"

We?

Great, her sisters weren't far. Hudson was going to kill me. The pleasure nymph posse always got under his skin. Not in a good way either.

I dropped my magik and looked around to find the cameraman hanging upside down under the boardwalk with a protective bubble of power around him. Dymphina wasn't taking any chances as to how much power he possessed.

Instantly, a naked blonde bombshell with large blue eyes appeared next to me. "Did I do

well? I so hope I did. Franco is still very upset about the last time I tried to help.”

Yeah, he tended to get pissed when three naked nymphs showed up in the middle of a stadium full of soccer fans. Thankfully, that wasn't my watch or area. I still felt bad for the Guardian who had to clean the mess up.

“You did wonderfully,” I said, smiling at her.

She beamed, looking even more innocent than she already did.

“Put me down,” the man said, his face turning red.

Dymphina stared at me. “What is your wish?”

“Turn him upright but change nothing else.”

Clapping her hands and squealing, she did as I instructed. “Come, come, Madelyn is letting me play along!”

“Ah, Dymphina, don't call your—”

“Maddy, Maddy, Maddy!”

The minute I heard my name, I prepared for impact. In a flash, I was struck from the front. I hit the sand and looked up to find a naked white-blond haired nymph with ice-blue eyes that were open wide lying on top of me. “Hi, Freddie... umm... it's good to see you again.”

“Mads?” The sound of Brady's voice on the boardwalk warmed me.

“Down here!”

Two large shadows appeared over me. Hudson and Brady landed side by side and looked down at me. Brady's eyes bulged. Hudson gave a sly grin and winked at me.

“Madelyn, why exactly do you have a nude, umm, woman lying on you?” Brady asked, shock etched on his handsome face.

Freddie glanced up at him and then back to me. “Can we play with him, too?”

Brady took a step back and I had to fight to keep from laughing. Dymphina popped out of thin air next to me. She was sitting, propped up with one arm. Her blonde hair covered her breasts. She smiled at Brady.

“Yes, we would very much like to play with him.”

Brady moved back again. Any further and he'd be in the water. “Mads?”

Dymphina sighed. “Listen to his voice, Freddie. He is a god. We shall pleasure him.”

“Mmm, yes.”

Hudson broke out into laughter and the nymphs looked quickly in his direction. His face went white. “Maddy, control them.”

“You're a Guardian. You do it,” I said, grinning up at him.

Freddie looked at me, beaming and dropped her mouth down onto mine. I clamped my lips shut to keep her from slipping me the tongue—again. Brady gasped. Hudson laughed.

Pulling back, Freddie smiled wide. “We do love you, Maddy. You always bring the finest males with you.”

Dymphina stood and took Freddie with her. I used this opportunity to get up as well. Sand was all over me. “Freddie, sand, now.”

“Ooo, right, sorry.” She winked and the sand was instantly gone.

Dymphina went to Hudson and touched his cheek lightly. “It has been awhile since you have graced us with your presence.” She tapped him with her finger and he lifted high in the air, suspended by her power. “Madelyn was very sad after you left.”

Freddie went to Brady and circled him slowly. She glanced up at Hudson. “Yes, Maddy was very sad. We tried to cheer her up but nothing worked. That was not very nice, leaving without telling anyone.”

“No. Not nice at all,” Dymphina said.

Hudson’s jaw was tight. With his sunglasses on, I couldn’t read his eyes. But the fact he hadn’t ordered Dymphina to put him down told me a lot.

“Why did you leave when Madelyn needed you most?” Dymphina stared up at him with innocent eyes. “Dillon was the one who came to sit with her. He did not talk. He merely sat close as her eyes remained filled with unshed tears.”

Feddie stopped. “We wept for her because she would not. We even felt Franco’s pain because he could not make her happy. Cowel and Domhnall went to Keeva for permission to find you and cause you equal pain. Keeva considered it. Franco forbid it. He said it was for the best. We do not understand how ever causing Maddy pain is for the best. We love her.”

“As you had claimed to once,” Dymphina added.

I put my hand up. “Girls, leave him alone.”

“As you wish.” Dymphina put Hudson down and stared at Brady. “Are you the one we have heard rumors about?”

Feddie touched his shoulder. Brady flinched. “Are you he?”

“Umm?” Brady looked to me for help. I shrugged. I didn’t know what they hell they were talking about.

“Keeva!” they shouted.

“Don’t call her.” I put my hands over my face knowing I was too late to stop their eldest sister’s arrival.

Looking up, I watched as a beautiful brunette surfaced from the water. She was completely dry and completely naked. Her blue eyes settled on me and she smiled. “Madelyn, it is good to see you. You have not come for months. We were just speaking of visiting you. Franco told us you still lived with another so we did not want to risk exposing your secret to him. We tried to use a... what is the word?”

Feddie frowned. “Telephone.”

Keeva nodded. “Ah, yes. However we could not figure it out and when Cowel found us, he refused to show us.”

“Yes, he said the last thing we needed was more access to mankind. What did he mean by that?” Dymphina looked at me with puzzled eyes.

I glanced at Brady and found him trying to keep Feddie from pawing him. I put my hand out to him and he ran to me. He held my hand so tight I had to tap his to get him to loosen his grip.

The nymphs all gasped.

Brady leaned into me. “What’s wrong?”

I offered him an apologetic look. “I’m sorry to put you through this. They are to the Guardians as Vance is to the lycans.”

“Oh,” Brady whispered as he moved even closer to me. “They seem a bit pushier than Vance.”

I laughed softly. “It’s because they’re sex nymphs. Their purpose is to see to the happiness of the Guardians and that comes mainly in the form of sexual pleasure.”

“There are thousands of Guardians. How many of them are there?”

“There were six. Now there’s just five.”

Brady glanced down at me. “What happened to the sixth one?”

Two tall, built, naked, men appeared before us. Brady pushed me behind him and growled. They looked at him and then me.

“Oh, look, Madelyn has a new guard dog.”

I pushed Brady aside and glared at the one with light blond hair. “Dom, how have you been? Still as funny as ever.”

He arched a brow at me and smiled. “I do try. Though some things I do not find amusing.” His gaze went to Brady.

The other man with sandy blond hair stepped forth. Streaks of white-blond ran through his waist length hair. He stood nose to nose with Brady. “You are he. The one we have heard so much about.”

The girls all gasped again.

“Keeva, get control of your brothers, now!”

“Brothers?” Brady asked, in a surprised voice. “Are they the other two?”

“Yes.” I avoided looking at him.

He pulled me back and turned my shoulder so I faced him. “Mads, you said you’re the only female Guardian.”

“I am.”

“So, you get a pair when the rest of the Guardians share three females?”

Keeva popped in between us. “They used to share four. Ita is no longer with us. So, yes. They share the three of us. But not all the Guardians prefer the company of a woman.”

Brady locked gazes with me.

Keeva let out a soft laugh and touched Brady’s cheek. “It warms us greatly to know you are concerned about Madelyn. You sense our loss has something to do with her as well. If you are he, then that explains how you can sense her at all.”

Cowel went for Brady. I tossed my power out at him and he froze. “Let me go, Madelyn.”

“No, you have no right to hurt him,” I said sternly. “He has not harmed me.”

Cowel locked gazes with me. His blue eyes always made me feel as though he could see right through me. Domhnall didn’t make me feel that way. “You feel that way because I can... look through you, Madelyn,” he said, reading my thoughts. “And you lie. He has caused you much pain already. You have wept because of him.”

“Stop it!” I pushed him hard with power, moving him back about six feet. Brady then closed the distance. “Brady!”

“Let him go, Mads. If he has a problem with me, I’d like to help him work through it.”

Cowel laughed, it was heavy with disdain. “I am not afraid of you. And I will not stand idly by and watch her fall to pieces again. One man hurting her was more than enough.”

Hudson walked up and stood next to me. Crossing his arms over his chest, he smiled at Cowel. “Just thought I’d join in since I’m the new topic of conversation here. Or, the old topic.” He shrugged. “Any way you look at it, I’m involved. So here I am, asshole.”

Cowel pushed madly against the nothingness that held him. “She protects you and the other because she knows you will not survive my wrath.”

Hudson laughed. “Yeah, I’m shaking. A naked blond guy with hair longer than his sisters’ is threatening me. I’m sure Brady is just as scared. Bet he’s petrified. Malibu Ken is pissed.”

Brady cast Hudson a smile and I couldn’t believe it. They didn’t like each other but he’d still done it. That one small thing made me love him even more. How Cowel could want to do something that would cause me so much pain was beyond me. He knew my feelings for Brady and Hudson.

Cowel backed up and flashed a pair of jeans onto himself. Domhnall did the same. “You can drop your power now, Madelyn. You have my word I shall not harm them.”

“Yeah, we’re very scared,” Hudson said mockingly.

Keeva spun quickly. “Hudson, I have great affection for you. To the point in fact, that I stood and still stand my ground with two powerful men to keep you safe. That is why three were chosen to lead and three were chosen to follow.”

She moved closer to him. “Cowel stands down now *only* because he cannot do anything that will cause Madelyn pain. When we were created, thousands of years ago, each were given a purpose. Mine is to balance the lot of us and to see to the Guardians’ happiness. Domhnall has the same mission. Dymphina, Fedelma and Ita were given the task of seeing to the Guardians’ well-being, pleasure and happiness. Cowel is different from the rest of us. He was charged with watching over us, his family, and that of the female Guardian or Guardians should there ever be more than one. He waited thousands of years for her to arrive only to find she binds his hands, allowing him to do only half of what he was created for.”

Keeva put her hand on Hudson’s chest. “Imagine for a moment that you were only permitted to do half of what you were created for. That for every one innocent life you save, you must stand and watch one be slaughtered. You can do nothing to stop it but still are forced to stare at it day in and day out. That is what Cowel does. And so shall he continue to do until Madelyn frees him from his binds or he is charged to watch another.”

“How the hell does she cut him loose?” Hudson asked, his voice deepening. He’d shift soon at this rate. His level of patience wasn’t exactly high.

Keeva smiled up at him. “Do not ask that which you do not wish to hear the answer to. Besides, you are no longer the primary player in the game of her life. I do not foresee the man who is allowing it to occur. Nor do I foresee Madelyn giving herself freely to Cowel until he pleases her.”

I gasped. “Hold the phone... or in your case, don’t. Nobody told me anything about this. Cowel is pushy, grumpy and always yelling at me. I think you’ve got his purpose in life all wrong.”

Cowel answered, “They have *all* kept many things from you. To deny it is foolish. Hudson has known for years who your real father was but did not tell you. He also does not tell you that he dreamt of your death two days prior to its occurrence. That is why he kept you so close to him. That is why he spent the day making love to you. He did not know when or where, but he knew it would happen soon. Yet he did not warn you. He seemed to think you would be distracted by the knowledge. I think you would have been prepared.”

Hudson put his hand on my shoulder and gripped it tight.

“He wrestles with his inner demons still because of this,” Cowel said, with a slow smile. He looked at Brady. “And this one, the one who they call your mate, has denied you that truth.”

Cowel stopped on a dime and smiled back at Freddie. “You should play dress-up with Madelyn. She has not played in years.”

Freddie’s eyes lit up. “Dress up?”

Instantly, I was lifted high into the air. The feel of Freddie’s magik surrounded me. I dropped before Freddie as she grinned from ear to ear. I tried to pull up my power fast to stop her. I was too late. In a flash my clothes were gone, only to be replaced by a long flowing pale pink dress. “Ooo, I like that one. What you think, Dymphina?”

“Stop, put my—” I couldn’t get another word out, literally. Magik wrapped around me, silencing me. Glaring at Cowel, I gave him a look telling him that I knew this was his doing.

He smiled and nodded. "You may speak when I permit it, Madelyn. Not a moment sooner."

Brady and Hudson exchanged looks. Neither understanding what was going on.

Dymphina appeared next to Freddie, Dom and Keeva followed quickly. "I do like that one. Try another."

The dress vanished and was replaced by another dress. My eyes went wide when I saw it was a wedding dress. I shook my head madly. Dom's brow furrowed. "Does anyone else find it odd that Madelyn has not ordered Freddie to stop?"

Keeva gave me a puzzled look. "You are correct. Madelyn was most displeased with Freddie the last time she played this game."

Freddie flashed me into a tiny string bikini and I knew exactly why Cowel had made her do it. Their mouths fell open. Dymphina grabbed hold of me and spun me in a circle. "Where are all of your scars?"

"Scars?" Hudson inquired, looking me over carefully.

I tried to cover myself but Keeva grabbed hold of my other arm as she ran her hand over my bare abdomen. Dymphina skimmed her hand above my breast.

Dom stepped forward and stared intensely at me, soaking in all that was going on. He was good at that and always had been. "They are truly gone. It is not an illusion."

"Hey, as much as I'm loving the bikini that barely covers her nipples let alone anything else, what scars are you talking about?" Hudson asked. "Maddy looks exactly the same as I remember her and trust me demi-gods, I remember every inch of that girl."

Brady growled as he ran to me. "Mads?"

I tried to answer but I couldn't. Hudson couldn't order them to stop. He'd never been intimate with them. It was one of the only ways to have power over the nymphs. The only reason I could was because Franco ordered them to obey me. They couldn't sense Cowel's magik running over me.

Freddie looked at Hudson. "Oh, right. You had abandoned her right after the attack so you did not know she was left with much scarring."

"Maddy?" Hudson asked as he moved towards me. "What are they talking about?"

Cowel smiled wide. "Oh, it's nothing her mate could not fix. Tell me mate, what else did you sense while you were healing old injuries? I know that you told her about the scarring that would have prevented her from ever having a child. I know that you told her of her liver. But what did you leave out? I would love to know. Others here might as well."

What the hell was Cowel doing? He knew this wasn't what I wanted but he did it anyways. And what was he talking about? Brady wouldn't have held anything back from me.

Brady locked gazes with me and looked away. *She will never forgive me for not telling her. I only wanted to protect her. One more lycan attack, before I healed her and she would have turned into one, only she wouldn't have played on our side. I can't explain this away. I didn't want her hurt. She'd been hurt enough already.*

I stared at him with wide eyes.

"What the hell is pretty boy talking about, Maddy?" Hudson stood next to Freddie. "What scars?"

Freddie looked at me. "Do not fear, Maddy. They will not really be back. It is just to show Hudson the answer he seeks." Magik ran over me, giving the illusion that the scars were still there.

My eyes widened as I shook my head. Hudson jerked back. I closed my eyes as tears fell

down my face. I didn't want him to see me like this. Hell, I didn't want anyone to see me this way. Not ever.

"Look, Guardian. Look and see what she has lived with. See what condition you left her in. She needed your support, yet you ran. I stayed by her side, blocking her from sensing me, in an attempt to make her feel better about herself. Do you know she assumed when she woke that you'd left her because of how her body looked? Do you know that until this morning, she had never allowed another man to look upon her? She barely looked upon herself. When Freddie had played dress up with her, not knowing about the scars being there, I felt her pain on another plane of existence. And she instantly thought of you. Afraid you'd show up all of sudden and see her."

Stop it! Stop it!

Brady wrapped his body around mine. "Freddie stop, she doesn't want this. She's screaming on the inside. You are causing her pain."

Freddie gasped. The scars vanished and my original clothing returned. "Maddy, I did not know. Please—"

Keeva turned to Cowel. "This is your doing. Drop your power from around her before Domhnall and I do it for you. And I think you know what will happen if we are forced to stop you."

Cowel dropped his magik and I hugged Brady with all my might. My emotions ran wild as tears flowed freely. Wishing myself away wouldn't work. The next best thing was clinging to Brady. That, I could do.

"Shhh," he said, stroking my hair, providing much needed comfort. "You already know I love you regardless of what's on the outside."

"Aww," Dymphina whispered. "He speaks the truth. I can sense it in him. I like him even more now."

"You healed that?" A pitiful look of shame crossed Hudson's face.

Brady nodded but didn't let go of me. Not that he even could have. I had him in a death grip.

Cowel laughed. "Oh, yes, he healed her but he forgot to mention one interesting point. I think he should share it with her now."

I threw my power out. It slammed into Cowel, sending him hurtling backwards. The rest of the nymphs backed away. I held tight to Brady. He kissed my cheek and rocked me in his arms. "Mads, he's right. I did hold something back from you. But I swear—"

Covering his lips with my hand, I pulled back and kissed his forehead.

Cowel appeared next to me. Hudson went for him and I knew he would kill Cowel if given the chance. I wasn't exactly sure how Cowel could be killed but my money was on Hudson finding a way. As upset with him as I was, I didn't wish death upon him. Dom stopped Hudson from actually reaching his brother. Brady tried next, leaving me no choice but to intervene. "Why are you doing this to me, to us?" I asked, glaring at Cowel. "You," I thrust power out at him, "had," I hit him with another jolt as I closed the distance between us, "no right to take matters into your hands."

He narrowed his eyes on me as an insipid smile slid over his face. "Really? The Powers would beg to differ, Madelyn." He wrapped me tight in his magik, holding me in place and demonstrating that he could overpower me if need be.

"This has gone far enough, Cowel!" Keeva implored. Keeping the peace between the nymphs might be part of her purpose in life but the desperation in her voice told me it was more

than that. It was too much. Too personal for her.

“No.” I shot power out around us, shielding us from them and them from us.

Cowel grinned, looking very much like a Cheshire cat. “You ready to release me? Thank you for being so kind, finally.”

Unable to control myself, I punched him hard in the face. His jaw was hard but I ignored the pain the in my hand. It was worth it to get a good lick in on him. He leaned back a bit and smiled, licking the blood from his lip. “I always wondered when you’d snap and do that.”

“Why are you doing this to me, Cowel?”

He was quiet and for a moment I assumed he wouldn’t answer, or if he did, it would be a smart-ass response. To my shock, he gave me an honest reply. “Because if I upset you enough you will put an end to me.”

My mouth dropped. His truth nearly brought me to my knees. “Cowel, I am beyond mad at you at the moment but I would never kill you.”

He reached for me but I pulled away. “Just do it, Madelyn. I cannot continue on this way. It is bad enough you do not accept my help, my protection. But to have to stand and watch you with another, a man that may very well be in your life forever, is more than I can bear.”

I couldn’t kick the shit out of a man who was suffering because of me. Though, hitting him once more did sound appealing. I wasn’t exactly sure how old he was but I knew he was older than any immortal I knew. That was a hell of a long time to be denied. “Is there another way I can release you? Other than sleeping with you?”

“I am that unattractive to you?”

I raked my gaze over his body and shook my head. “Have you ever looked in the mirror? You are more than attractive. You’re what we girls today like to call a hella hunk and a half. That’s not the point, Cowel. It’s wrong some higher ups decided to saddle you with this need. You didn’t ask for it and I’ll be damned if I see you forced into it.”

He gave me a puzzled look.

“Call Franco.”

Shrugging, he did as I’d asked. The air around us crackled and the telltale feeling of Franco surrounded me.

“What do you need, Cowel?” Franco asked, sounding annoyed.

The last thing I wanted was to unleash a grumpy vampire on Cowel so I headed off a blow up. “He doesn’t need a thing, Frankie. I do.”

Franco sighed. “Madelyn you were not to be on rounds. You were told.”

“I’m not on rounds.” I crossed my arms over my chest and realized a second after I did it that the stance very much resembled the start of a temper tantrum. “I need you to do something for me.”

“And what,” Franco’s power danced around me, “is it you need?”

“You to set Cowel free of me. For you to try not to give him a new charge but if you have to, let it be his choice to be attracted to her or him,” I flashed Cowel a sympathetic smile, “Don’t force it on him. Please.”

“Madelyn, I cannot do what you ask. The one who holds the power over the nymphs may be willing to assist *you*.” There was a long pause before he began again. “To be honest, you are the only person *he* would ever assist. Ask him and do not be surprised if he talks of his distaste of me.”

Cowel grabbed me. “Do not do this.” He stared up at the nothingness surrounding us. “Franco, tell her no. He will kill her.”

“She will be safe from him, if she tells him who she *really* is. I must go now.”

With that, Franco pulled away. Gee, I suddenly felt not so great about my plan to free Cowel of me. After several calming breaths and a case of the hand shakes, I pulled myself together and gathered the nerves I needed to see this through to the end.

Chapter Ten

I met Cowel's gaze. "Call this guy, now!"

"Mad—"

"Now!"

Cowel nodded and closed his eyes, a somber look upon his handsome face. Only a moment passed before the temperature around us changed dramatically before returning to normal. I didn't need to be told the summoning had not only taken place but had been answered as well.

"What do you want?" a deep voice asked from behind me.

I gave Cowel a questioning look. "Umm, somehow I thought the guy in charge of you guys would sound a little more like you—you know, stuffy, aristocratic, pompous—"

Cowel batted his eyes. "I get it. You can stop now."

"Well, I've got no clue who you are but I like you already."

Turning slowly, I found a tall man with black shoulder length hair, enough muscle to make Vance look small and intense green eyes standing there.

He narrowed his eyes on me and approached me slowly. "Who are you?" he asked not sounding the least bit friendly.

Cowel stepped in front of me. "Gabriel, she's a Guardian."

Gabriel lashed power out at us. It was familiar. Jumping in front of Cowel, the power hit me and to my surprise I absorbed it. Cowel seized hold of me and lifted me high in the air.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his eyes wide. "Madelyn Mia, answer me now! I do not care what you think I do and don't want, I care for you greatly. I will not stand by and let him hurt you." He thrust power up and broke the barrier I'd put up.

"Put her down!" Brady yelled.

Cowel ignored him. "Pull your powers and protect Madelyn! Now!"

The nymphs gasped. "Gabriel, do not harm her. She is a Guardian."

"So I've been told," Gabriel said, staring at me with questioning, hard eyes. "But here's the thing, I'm not buying that she's *just* a Guardian."

"We will not allow you to harm her," Cowel said, still holding me high in the air.

"Did you miss the part where she absorbed my power like it wasn't even there?"

The nymphs gasped once more.

"Gabriel, don't touch her. She's my mate," Brady said, surprising me.

Gabriel glanced back and laughed. "Bradonis, it's good to see you again. I can't say I'm surprised to see you with her."

I was lost.

"Gabriel, don't touch her."

"Hey, Bradonis, we've been friends a long time. Trust me. I know what I'm doing."

Gabriel tossed power out at me again. I absorbed it easily, painlessly.

Brady and Hudson charged at Gabriel. I knew he would hit them with enough power to kill them. Quickly, I threw my power around them. Gabriel tried to throw his into them and mine absorbed his—again.

Gabriel smiled. "Put her down, Cowel. I won't hurt her or the others."

Cowel gave me a leery look. "Why do you tell me this? She defied you."

Rolling my eyes, I broke free of Cowel's grasp and walked around him. Glaring at Gabriel, I put my hand on hip. "I don't know who in hell you think you are but if you dare hurt any of them, nymphs included, I will kill you."

Gabriel laughed long and hard. "Your power can't hurt me either."

I sprung forward, flipped high in the air and spun fast. Extending my foot, I caught the side of his head and landed on my feet, glaring up at him. His head jerked back as he staggered. "Yeah, about that power thing. I've always considered it secondary to hand to hand combat."

Gabriel looked up at me and his brows drew together. In a blink, he had hold of me. Everyone came for us. He wasn't hurting me. Why wasn't he hurting me?

Brady seized hold of Gabriel's arm and yanked him off me. The minute I knew that someone else wanted to hurt Gabriel, I freaked out and ran forward to protect him. No part of me understood my reaction. It was what it was.

"Get the hell out of the way, Maddy!" Brady shouted.

"No."

His blue eyes widened. "Baby, I know Gabriel. He's not a man to screw around with. I never thought he'd hurt someone like you but I've been wrong before. Why are you protecting him?"

"He didn't attack me." I glanced behind me and gave Gabriel a weird look. "I think he... he hugged me."

"What?" Feddie asked sounding every bit as shocked as her sisters looked.

"And I don't know why I'm protecting him. I want to kick him in the head again, but I don't want you to touch him. So, I'm lost."

Gabriel put his hand on my shoulder and I thought Brady might actually slice me in two just to get to him. "It's just like they say, siblings can fight like cats and dogs, but heaven help anyone else who tries to harm them."

Siblings?

"Great, I call upon a god who is on drugs. Wonderful."

"Can everyone back up? I won't hurt her." Gabriel tightened his grip on my shoulder. It wasn't painful. It was tender.

"Gabe...err...why did I just call you Gabe?"

He chuckled. "Because when you were little, I told you to call me that since Gabriel was too hard for you to say. I didn't really like being called Gabby all the time even though you were cute as hell when you did it."

I tossed my hands up. "Everybody back up. I'm kicking crazy's ass and we can all go home. I'm hungry for a cheeseburger and Brady and I have to be somewhere soon."

Brady gasped and shook his head. "Mads, I'm not moving a muscle. If you attempt to move me, I'll tighten the mystical reigns I have on you and you'll be stuck to my leg."

"You can do that?" Hudson asked.

"Yep."

"It's becoming clearer and clearer why The Powers selected you as her mate."

"Shut-up, Hudson." I gave him a dirty look. He smiled.

Gabriel laughed. "The Powers didn't put them together. They did it themselves. Trust me. The Powers That Be would really rather not have a union as powerful as theirs is if they could help it."

“What?” Brady asked, still looking as though he wanted to rip Gabriel’s head off.

Putting my hand over Gabriel’s, I patted it gently. “Gabe...err...Gabriel, he needs to know I’ll be okay.”

He released his hold on me and I went to Brady.

Facing Gabriel, I smiled as Brady wrapped himself around me protectively. “Why did you call Maddy your sibling? She’s an only child. So are you. And what are you talking about. We couldn’t have selected each other as mates. I’ve been alive for three hundred years. She hasn’t.”

Gabriel looked to his side and a large image appeared in mid-air. It showed Gabriel and me standing in a kitchen. That shocked me and so did the fact that I looked like I was in my ninth month of pregnancy.

“What in hell is going on?” Brady asked, tightening his hold on me.

“It’s not what you think. Watch,” Gabriel said, motioning to the image.

Suddenly we got audio and we all shut up, watching the events unfold.

“Gabriel, I may be pushing two thousand but I have told you time and time again throughout this pregnancy that I am fine, so is she. And you had better be nice to her. She cannot help it if her brother is two-hundred years older than her.”

Gabriel looked down. “Mother, you’re huge. Are you sure there is only one kid in there?” He put his hand on the woman’s stomach, concentrating hard. “Yep, girl through and through and only one. Gee, maybe we’ll get lucky and she’ll be just like you instead of that vampire you seem to love so very much. The only reason I don’t kill him is because he seems to love you, too. Hell, I didn’t think that was even possible.

“I understand why you’re not still with my father, what I want to know is why were you ever with him? I mean, did you really think I’d want a lycan so hell bent on overthrowing the Devens that he convinced his brothers and hundreds to join him in forming a rebellion as my father? I may not be able to participate in the pack because of duties here but I sure the hell don’t want Dad to get a hold of it.”

“Gabriel, your father was not always that way. When I met him, he was kind and loving.”

Gabriel laughed. “No, he was not. You may be a goddess but you’re a goddess who lacks the ability to sense any sort of shifter’s presence or emotions.”

“I know,” she whispered. “And I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

“You didn’t know he was doing it. Hell, I didn’t even know.” He sighed.

The woman covered her mouth for a moment as a tiny sob tore free from her. “Corina and I had been best friends for over a thousand years, Gabriel.”

“I know.”

“No. You do not fully understand how much she meant to me. Even Marius and I were close. He acted as though he were an older brother to me. His mother was one of The Powers That Be. That made him keenly aware of what it was like to grow up with all watching you and all fearing you. He had a heart of gold and did only what he had to in order to maintain order among the lycans.”

Gabriel kissed her forehead. “His son is the same way. But you know that already, don’t you? I’ve seen you when you think you’re alone. You use your powers to check in on him almost as much as you do me. He’s more than capable of taking care of himself. Bradonis doesn’t need you to do that, Mother. And would you like to tell me why you’re doing it daily now?”

She laughed and swatted Gabriel. “I helped give birth to him.”

“Mother, your modesty is admirable but you as well as I know the only reason he exists is

because of you.”

She waved her hand in the air, dismissing him. “Don’t be dramatic. You weren’t even born yet. I merely held tight to his essence when the stubborn boy tried to go.”

“He died while Corina was giving birth to him and she did, too. You thrust your arms out and the entire room filled with light. When it dimmed, you were holding Bradonis while you held Corina’s hand. They were both very much alive.”

“How do you...?”

Gabriel leaned against the counter. “I know because Marius told me a week or so before his death. It was when you asked me to check in on them because you couldn’t stop worrying about them. And since Bradonis had been sent to help make peace elsewhere, you couldn’t reach him. That left me.” Gabriel nodded. “When I told Marius why I was there, he laughed and said you were a Guardian angel to them. And if you were worried, he’d look into it. I asked him about the angel comment and he told me all about Bradonis’ birth. He also told me that you handled blessing Bradonis instead of The Powers. Care to share what gifts, what powers you gave him?”

The woman laughed hard and patted Gabriel’s arm. “Do not worry. I made sure to stick him with the gift of finding true love. So, you are not the only one I stuck with that. I gave it to your sister as well. And yes, I made sure he would be the one to decide who his mate would be—not The Powers. They are the worst judges when it comes to selecting them. Look at your father and me. No, Gabriel, Bradonis will select his own mate. As will you.”

Gabriel twisted and held a bowl of grapes in his hand. “I’ve seen Bradonis, Mother. Tell me *all* of what you blessed him with or I’ll start guessing.”

“Fine. I gave him the gift of his father’s looks but with his mother’s eyes and hair color. I gave him added strength, as I did for you and your sister. I gave him...umm...the necessary equipment to...umm...” She glanced down as her cheeks flushed.

“You didn’t!” Gabriel choked on a grape. “Mother, do you have any idea what you did to him? Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for,” he looked down at his groin area and then up again, “yeah. But you assured he’d be good looking and if you did to him what you did to me, he’ll be fighting women off him daily.” Slapping his forehead, he laughed. “Shit, you did. I’ve seen him trying to walk through a festival before. I was grateful he was there. The unwed female population split between us. Oh, and with the added bonus of always knowing the right one is out there somewhere but you’ve got to pick her and then realize you even did select her is always fun. I get that you think you were helping but trust me, Mother. You didn’t.”

She baulked. “I gave him the ability to heal and I made sure it was a big one. That’s a help! Corina thanked me because when he was too young to shift yet, he healed his own cuts and bruises. She also thanked me for his allure because she never had a shortage of willing babysitters. Even as a toddler, women wanted to simply be near him.”

“Yeah, Bradonis has got to be *really* happy to have a godmother like you.”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t know I’m his godmother. You know I forbid anyone from telling him.”

Gabriel folded his arms over his chest. “Hmm, and you stopped visiting Corina while Bradonis was home after he turned three years old. Why is that?”

“I don’t know. I just felt the need to watch over him from afar. I especially didn’t want him to see me. Though I’m not sure why. It just felt like seeing me would confuse him later in life, possibly costing him someone he would care for greatly.”

She twisted a bit and put her head down. “When Corina called out to me—when she knew she was about to die, her only concern was sparing Bradonis the pain of sensing what was

about to happen to them. She knew it could not be stopped and she knew he would feel everything that would happen to them. I tried to go to her and she forbid it, binding my powers to aid her. I sent word to Franco that the pack was under siege before I honored her wishes and went straight to Bradonis.”

The look on her face made my stomach tighten. “He couldn’t see me or sense me. I wrapped him in my arms and held him tight, taking in every scream, every cry, every ounce of his parents’ pain that he would have had to live with for all eternity. When I realized it was my own mate causing that pain I couldn’t move. I held him far longer than I should have out of love and guilt. He had and still has a special place in my heart. He is good boy. Or rather, a fine young man.”

She wiped her cheeks and forced a smile to her face. “I watch him still now out of the same love and guilt.” Running a hand over her stomach, she glanced up at Gabriel. “I visited Bradonis early in the pregnancy, when I still could travel mystically. When I checked on him, he was sitting alone in the dark, on the porch of his cabin. He’d taken to separating himself from everyone and hiding out in the mountains. Because I am his godmother, The Powers allowed me to sense his pain. I went to him hoping to ease it.”

“Hoping?”

“Yes, Gabriel, hoping. I appeared behind him, careful to not allow him to sense or see me. He turned and looked directly at me, but I was positive he couldn’t really see me. I felt your sister move for the first time in my stomach that night and the moment she did, Bradonis’ gaze went to her. A slight smile came to his face and I could no longer sense pain in him. I’d done nothing to ease it. He seemed to find his peace. I’ve no idea what it was but I can guarantee he never actually saw me.”

Gabriel grinned from ear to ear. “Well, my dear little sister won’t have to wait hundreds of years to find the mate she selected and who selected her. I can promise you that. Hell, Bradonis won’t have to wait too much longer either.”

The woman laughed. “What are you going on about?”

“When, exactly, did you start checking in on Bradonis daily?”

She seemed to be thinking about it. “I don’t know.”

“Think of the time, a roundabout figure will do.”

“It was around the time I found out Franco and I were going to have a child.” She laughed softly and then stopped quickly. “Oh my gods! They selected each other?”

“It would appear so.”

The woman began to fan her face. “No,” she fanned more, “How is that possible? He couldn’t have seen me? And she’s not even here yet?”

“Who is not what?” Franco asked, appearing behind the woman in the kitchen. He put his arms around her and rubbed her stomach.

“Wonderful, I get to stand by while a vampire touches my mother and my sister.”

Franco tipped his head. “I touch the woman I love and our child.”

“That made me feel so much better.” Gabriel gave him a sly smile. “While you’re here, tell mother to let me bless my sister before I can’t. She’s due any day now.”

“Mia, let Gabriel bless her.”

She growled and nodded. “Fine.”

Gabriel touched her stomach. White light came from his hand. He stayed there for a moment and laughed softly. “Okay, she’s all set.”

“I am almost afraid to ask what you have given her,” Franco said, appearing cautiously

optimistic.

Gabriel leveled his green gaze on Franco. "I would never do anything to harm her. She will have her mother's looks but her father's iron will. Upon conception, you gave her your powers and mother hers. I simply added what I could to those. Mother is completely unable to sense danger of any kind. I fixed that for my sister. I offered her all that I have but I'm not sure at this late stage of the pregnancy what she will and will not accept. She may sense every type of threat out there. Then again, she may miss a few." He smiled. "I gave her something extra, too. But I'll let that be a surprise."

Gabriel pulled the image away and stared at us. "See, you picked each other. The Powers had no part in it."

This was too much. I could deal with Franco being my father. Some piece of me must have always suspected as much. I couldn't deal with this. I'd just assumed that he and who I thought was my mother had a fling. That kind of stuff happened all the time.

"Mads, you're being very quiet," Brady said softly.

Cowel cleared his throat. "She is trying to make sense of it all. Many things have been thrown at her in the last three days. Her entire world has changed. Even Madelyn has a point that she stops believing."

Cowel's statement reminded me why I'd called on Gabriel. "Umm, uhh, can you release Cowel from being bound to me and either set him free or give him a new charge. But I want him to have the freedom to choose who he loves. I don't want it forced on him."

Gabriel smiled wide. "You sound just like our mother." He waved his hand. "There, Cowel will be assigned a new charge. And he will decide if he does anything above protecting her."

I glanced towards the rest of the nymphs and they backed away shaking their heads. Gabriel laughed. "Don't worry. I won't grant her that request for the rest of you. But I'll warn you, at one point she had me wrapped around her little finger. My guess is she still does."

I snorted. "I don't even know you."

Gabriel gave me a warm smile but his eyes held a pain that I wanted to soothe away. "I know. It was hard to make that decision but it was for the best. I... we, couldn't split your memories, Madelyn. Letting you remember us, meant letting you remember mother's death. You were the one who was with her when it happened. Franco and I agreed that no one should grow up remembering that. And you heard what she did to keep Bradonis from feeling his parents' deaths and he was a hundred at the time. Still, mother knew he wouldn't survive having to live with that knowledge. You were only five. We didn't have a choice."

I tried to back up but Brady was right there. He held me tight while I tried to make sense of it. "This isn't funny. And it's not true. I remember playing with my Dad and my Mom when I was just... umm... when I was..." I meant the father who owned the production studio but my mind was muddled and clarifying seemed pointless.

"What is the first childhood memory you can think of?"

I thought about it and stopped. Turning slightly, I looked up into Brady's face. "I can only remember back to a few weeks before I met Brady."

Gabriel laughed softly. "Franco knew the perfect family for you to go to. The man is his nephew and the woman is Fae. They couldn't have children and after hundreds of years of wanting one they openly welcomed you. They understood what had happened and what needed to happen. Franco stayed close to watch over you. And you met Bradonis because Franco told who you've come to know as your parents that they had to take you to the mountains. That it was

important for you to meet your mate. It wasn't safe to drop you in the middle of one of his pack meetings so the mountains were the safest place he could come up with."

I drew in a sharp breath and took Brady's hand in mine. "We need to go soon. We have plans."

He pressed his mouth to my ear. "He's not lying to you, Mads. He's lycan as well and I'd sense it if he was. He's who he says he is. And what he speaks is the truth."

"No," I said firmly. "I don't care who he says he is. I remember you, and Franco's been in my life for a long time. I've never seen Gabriel before."

Gabriel put his hand out and another image came forth. I watched as a little girl with a head of wavy black hair and big green eyes jumped into the woman named Mia's arms.

"Mommy, he's doing it again," the little girl said in a low whisper.

Mia smiled down at her. "Who is doing what?"

"He's being a bear. I think he wants to eat me. He said gobble gobble."

Mia laughed softly. "Well, for one thing, he is not being a bear. It upsets Gabriel when you call him every animal but the one he is trying to be. Though, it is partially his own fault. Making other animal noises only confuses you. Tell him to stop and he will. He listens to you better than he does his own mother."

The little girl looked confused. "You are his mommy, too. Why don't you make him go to his room when he doesn't listen to you?"

"Because, I'm too big for 'Mommy' to make me go to my room." Gabriel appeared in the image. He wore a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. "What's this I hear about me being bear?"

"I'm sorry, Gabe. I think you were really being a donkey." The little girl took off running in the other direction, giggling as she went.

Gabriel stood there staring at Mia. "Do you get the feeling that she's catching on to just how much that bothers me?"

"She is just a baby. Be nice."

"Yeah, a baby that can—" He stopped instantly and lifted into the air magikally. Licking his lips, he laughed. "That can do this to me."

"She has no idea how to control her power yet. We're working on it. Trust me."

Gabriel waved his hand in the air and dropped down. "I did like it when she wanted Franco to come out and push her on the swing. I'm going to regret not letting her finish magikally yanking him through the front door."

Mia gave him a stern look. "That is not funny. I had to put a protection spell on him to keep her from being able to do it again. He's her father and she loves him. She doesn't understand the sun will kill him."

"Ooo, let's never tell her. I want to see a repeat performance."

Mia gave him a stern look. "Gabriel."

"Gabe? Where are you? Are you hiding again?"

Mia looked at Gabriel and her face dropped. "She can't sense danger either, can she?"

"Danger yes. Lycans no."

"Oh, Gabriel, my baby. If *he*...oh gods."

"No, I'm doing my best to teach her how but she wasn't born with it." He rolled his shoulders obviously upset. "Mother, if *he* comes, neither of you will know."

Mia waved her hand nervously. "You don't need to spend every day with us. You have responsibilities of your own. Franco is here. We'll be fine."

"Franco can't go into the sun. You know that the two of you could be attacked right

where I'm standing and he'd never make it even this far in the light of day before he burst into flames, Mother. We both know you can't physically hurt your mate. It doesn't matter that you've been separated from him since you learned of his involvement with the Devens' deaths. And Madelyn won't understand how to stop him. Do you ever wonder why I shift at least twenty times a day in front of her and play the 'can't find me' game?"

Mia shook her head. "No. I know why you do it. You want her to know your wolf form so well she won't confuse it with your father's. And you want her to know how to hide from a lycan."

"Mother, the minute he found out she was born, I felt his rage. He wants you dead and he wants to torture her to teach Franco what it's like to lose someone he loves. He's hiding from me. I don't know he's keeping his location a secret but I can still sense his rage. Something is building. Something big is coming. You need to let me take her to Bradonis. He and the rest of the lycans will keep her safe."

Mia shot up out of her chair. "I have told you no enough already. I will not give my baby away and be separated from her. I can't go with her. From the moment we figured out what she is to him, I understood the need I felt all of these years—the need to never let him see me. I knew, somehow that it would come to this. And since you made her a carbon copy in the way of looks of me it is even clearer. Do you honestly believe Bradonis would be able to love her as a mate after he sees me? When he was two he began to call me Aunt Mia. By the time he was three he listened to me better than Corina. I think he sensed it, too. He sensed that in a way, I would be a different type of mother to him. But I can't chance that he won't be able to separate me from Madelyn. I will not jeopardize their happiness."

Gabriel began to storm away, then stopped. "You won't risk their happiness but tell me, mother, how happy will he be when he never finds the mate he now seeks because she's dead? How happy will Bradonis be when he learns his mate died at the same hands his mother and father did? Huh? Tell me! I want to know because you, as well as I, know that she will die without his help."

Mia's expression grew hard. "Go. You are not needed here."

"That's your opinion and you're entitled to it. I, on the other hand know I'm needed here, Mother. I'm not going anywhere." He folded his arms over his chest. "She means as much to me as she does to the two of you. The idea that my own father wants her dead doesn't just sicken me, it terrifies me. The man is crazy. He managed to get past Marius, one of the most powerful kings the lycans had ever had. He slaughtered him and your best friend. Yet you still sit and refuse to let Franco and me put the two of you somewhere safe. You won't move to Franco's home, where he and the Guardians could protect you both and you refuse to bring Bradonis into the picture." Gabriel's jaw line was tight, telling me just how pissed he was.

He sighed. "You have until tomorrow to decide which one you will choose. You'll either move in with Franco or let me take her to Bradonis. Franco senses *him* coming as well. That's why he's gone right now. It's not a business trip, Mother. It's a meeting with the Guardians, The Powers and the Elders. They're all trying to figure out how to stop this. She's the daughter of a goddess and a vampire who is so powerful even the Elders fear what he will do if harm comes to either of you. She's destined to marry the most powerful king the lycans have ever had. Bradonis even exceeds Marius—a feat that's not easy to accomplish. All of us will overrule your decision in this matter if need be. Don't make us have to do that, Mother."

Mia put her hand on her neck. "Fine. I will agree to her being taken to Bradonis. But," she pointed at Gabriel, "he is not to be told who she is. If he senses that she's his mate then that's

fine. She is too young to recognize what they share. But, I will not leave her there. When it's safe, my baby comes back to me. Bradonis will never be able to look upon a child he practically raised as his wife and I can't live without her. When the threat is gone, she and I will go with Franco. I will not break up our family. If something should go wrong. You are to take her, Gabriel. Not, Bradonis. You are to raise your sister."

Sighing, Gabriel shook his head. "Don't you think I'd have taken off with her already if I could? I never would have stood by for five years allowing you to put her in harm's way because you're too damn stubborn to admit Gaston will kill her!" He slammed his fist into his chest. "I'd have taken her long ago if I could, Mother. But I can't. Gaston can sense where I am at all times and knows I'm guarding her. Franco and I discussed this but I'm the only one he trusts beside Bradonis to keep her safe during daylight hours. He rambles on about another lycan who might be a good choice but I won't accept a 'might be' when it comes to Madelyn."

Mia paled considerably.

Gabriel continued on, "And for the record, Mother, you know little about the ways of the lycans. Bradonis could have been there the day Madelyn was born and he would have instinctively cut his body's sexual desire, his need off."

She looked confused.

"Mother, he will still do that. Until she's of age to accept him, he'll shut down sexually. The need to be her friend. To be in her life will be what drives him. He'll protect her with all he has. He won't be able to turn his sex drive back on until she's of age. That's how it works for us. Your fears are unfounded. He'd never harm her and he would never take advantage of her. And when the time comes for the two of them to mate, he wouldn't be able to see her as anything but his wife."

Gabriel put his hand out. I knew he was going to make the image go away and I knew that something happened right after that that was extremely important for me to know. I tossed my power out and held the image.

"No! Madelyn, stop! Let me close it."

I ignored him.

"Bradonis, make her stop. This isn't something she needs to see."

"Baby, if Gabriel says you should let him close it then let him close it."

"No." I held my ground. The image stayed open. I watched as Gabriel and Mia faced each other.

"There you are, Gabe." The little girl, who I knew was me, but weird acknowledging it, came running out from the other side of the large house. She launched herself up and into Gabriel's large arms. She kissed both his cheeks and giggled before wrinkling her nose. She rubbed it and made funny faces. "Your face is prickly. It makes my nose itch when I kiss you."

Gabriel pretended to be shocked. "You don't like a guy with facial hair, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. But you make my nose itch."

He laughed loud and hard from the gut. "You, little one, need to really get used to men with hair. Lots of hair."

"Why?" She pinched his cheeks and beamed. "Oh, yuck. I am not going to kiss anyone like that. Not even a king. Eww. Why did you make him have yellow hair, Mommy? Take it back. I want black like Daddy and Gabe... ooo, and me, and you."

Gabriel dropped her fast but quickly snatched her back up before any harm was done. Mia touched her as Gabriel held her. Gabriel kissed the little girl's forehead and laughed nervously. "Madelyn, how did you know what I was thinking about?"

She puffed her cheeks out and moved her lips back and forth. "I'm hungry. Can I have a peanut butter and—"

"Madelyn, answer me."

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. "You think really loud, Gabe. Like when you tell me not to talk to strangers kind of loud. Sometimes you're so loud I can't sleep. I don't say anything because you don't mean to do it."

Mia touched the little girl's face. "Can you hear what Mommy thinks?"

"No."

"Daddy?"

"Sometimes, but I don't see it. I just hear it. And, Mommy, Daddy really likes it when you wear your red dress." She rubbed Gabriel's cheeks and pinched his nose. "And the man with brown hair is really loud. I tell him to be quiet but he doesn't listen. He gets really mad when Daddy yells at him. And—"

Gabriel gave her a questioning look. "Madelyn, what man with the brown hair?"

"Do you want me to tell you or do you want to talk? The man with the brown hair. The one who is like you Gabe. He can be a wolf too. And he's gonna marry one of my bestest friends someday. They will be very happy."

"Who is this man?" Gabriel asked.

"Hud...Houston? No. Not that. But close."

"What?" Gabriel asked, his eyes wide.

"Geesh, Gabe, for a daytime daddy you don't listen very well."

"Huh?"

She rolled her eyes and blew raspberries. Putting her arms in the air, she giggled. The sky grew dark, ominous. "See, now Daddy can come out to play and he lets me stay up late to see him." She giggled again and the daylight returned. "Look, you're here now to play with me and give me hugs. See, daytime daddy."

Mia covered her mouth. "I can't even do that. Oh gods, The Powers blessed her, too."

"Wonderful, she's five and she already tosses me around like a rag doll. I can't wait until she's twenty-five. She'll skin me alive," Gabriel said, grunting.

"Oh no," the little girl said her eyes wide. "No I won't ever do that to you, but I will do it to the one who hurts my pretty friend."

"Who's that, Madelyn?"

"Ita."

"Aww, Ita's fine, sweetie. Mommy just talked to her this morning. She misses you and she said that Freddie wants to play dress up soon. You always like that." Mia touched the girl's nose lightly.

"Madelyn," Gabriel said softly. "What else can you do with the sky?"

"Anything the sky can do on its own. Why?"

"Show me something else."

She took one hand and traced an arch in the air. A huge rainbow spread over all of them. "I can make bigger ones but I'm hungry. The yellow haired one likes when I make him rainbows."

"Yellow haired one?"

"Geesh, Gabe. You were just thinking loud about him. I drew pictures of him but I made his hair black. But I was nice and left his wolf not black."

"Wolf?"

"I'm hungry. I want two cookies from you for this."

"Deal, tell me." Gabriel watched her closely.

She stopped and looked around before leaning in and whispering, "He's like you but he's not a black wolf. He's umm, umm..."

Gabriel smiled. "Honey."

"Yep." She kissed him quick and then rubbed her nose again. She sneezed and instantly vanished.

Mia and Gabriel began to search frantically for her. "Mother, do you sense her?"

"No!" Mia ran towards the house. "You check the grounds. I'll check the house. She has to be scared and she won't know how to get back to us."

Gabriel took off running into the woods. Mia ran into the house. Instantly the little girl came running from the other side of the house. She looked around and around. Something growled and she smiled wide. "Is that a peacock I hear, Gabe?"

Smiling, she moved slowly towards the sound. Mia came running out of the house. "Oh, sweetie. You're okay. You scared me to death. We need to make Daddy teach you how to keep from doing that. Gabe and I were worried."

"He's doing it again."

"Who's doing it again?" Mia looked puzzled.

"Gabe's being a monkey."

Mia's brow furrowed. Her eyes widened and she threw power out fast, covering the little girl in it. "Gabriel!"

"Mommy, he's right—" She stopped in mid-sentence as a large, black wolf walked out and stood directly before her. "Who are you?" She covered her mouth and mumbled, "Don't tell Gabe I talked to you. He doesn't want me talking to strangers."

"Madelyn, do not move. He can't harm you there." Mia looked frantically around the wooded area. "Gabriel!"

The wolf morphed into a man. I watched in horror as Gaston stood before them both. "I am sorry, Mia. *Our* son is sleeping and will be for some time. I have no wish to harm him and with your blood in him, he will heal the knife wounds eventually. He could not be allowed to be here. He cares for this one as though she were his own child."

He walked towards Mia slowly. "Why do you look so scared, wife?"

She put her hand up. "Franco!"

Gaston was on the porch in the blink of an eye. His claws shot out, slicing her wrist wide open.

"Mommy!"

Turning, Gaston snarled at the little girl, making her shrink back. "I will deal with you in a moment. Once she is dead, so is her power that protects you now."

Mia shook her head. "Don't do this. Leave her out of this. Please. She's just a baby."

"Not my baby so I do not care. She is the vampire's and that repulses me." Gaston tipped his head. "What a shame."

"Nighttime daddy, Madelyn! Do it! Now!" Mia screamed a second before Gaston struck her throat.

"Mommy! No! Stop!" The little girl pushed at the invisible enclosure. "You're hurting her! Mommy...no...Gabe...Gabe please...no..." She sank down on the ground, put her head and hands against her magikal bubble and cried without any sound.

Gaston ripped Mia apart to the point she wasn't even recognizable. The little girl fell

forward and scrambled to get to her feet. The magik around her now gone. Gaston turned, staring at her with a blood stained face. He dropped Mia's body and smiled wickedly. "I can smell your fear. So innocent. So pure. Your father is not here to help you and your precious 'Gabe' will not hear your cries."

The little girl grabbed a section of her long hair and rubbed it in front of her nose. Gaston laughed and rushed at her. She sneezed and vanished. The image followed her as she reappeared deep in the woods.

"Can't find me...can't find me," she whispered as she ran. She put her arms up and the sound of thunder was everywhere. It boomed loudly and didn't let up. "Can't hear me..."

Rain began to pour from the sky. She continued to run. The ground was soaked in seconds. The sky grew darker. She ran straight for a large pit-like spot and jumped in it. Mud splashed up everywhere, covering her completely. Each time she tried to climb out, she slipped back into the mud pit. Putting her hand up, she instantly lifted from the pit magikally and landed gently on her feet. "Can't smell me."

She ran more, the wind whipping around her as she went. Her eyes swirled and she froze. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and tipped her head. The wind switched directions and came at her from behind. She took off, running quickly. Putting her hand up, she whispered softly, "Daddy come!" She yanked her hand back and kept running. She tripped over something and flipped forward.

Her eyes widened when she looked down. "Gabe?"

Gabriel lay before her with so many knives in him that it was hard to make him out. Her lips trembled as the rain slowly began to wash the mud away. Her tiny head jerked back and she hissed. Looking back down, she blinked and touched her upper cheek. That didn't surprise me, what did was the fact that her eyes were now a deep blue. They remained that color as she tipped her head and sniffed the air. Throwing her hand out in that direction, lightning struck a spot about twenty feet from her. A large white wolf was thrust up high as the bolt held, shaking the wolf until it finally stilled.

She sniffed the air again, repeating the process to her right. It continued and continued. The entire time her eyes remained blue. She began to whisper something. Slowly, it became clear. "I won't color your hair black anymore. I won't color your hair black anymore. I won't color your hair black anymore."

Lycans both in wolf form and human charged at her. She went rigid and her now blue eyes intensified even more. Slamming her hand onto Gabriel's forehead she looked down. "The yellow haired man said, not you."

The lycans charged, several of them leapt into the air. She looked up and shook her head. All of them dropped to the ground. The ones in human form held their head and the wolves laid on the ground convulsing. One by one the knives in Gabriel's body were pulled free of him and instantly flew into the lycans around them.

She pressed her hands down hard on Gabriel and closed her eyes. Slowly, each wound on his body began to heal. His body jerked up and he fell back to the ground. Drawing a deep breath in, his eyes shot open. He was to his feet in an instant. "Madelyn!"

Spinning around, Gabriel spotted her and dropped down, inspecting her for injury. "Your eyes? Why are they blue?"

"Mo-mm...mom-my," she murmured.

Gabriel closed his eyes and bit his lip. Pulling her into a hug, he stilled before putting her at arm's length. He sniffed the air and went rigid. "Bradonis? What the hell is going on?"

“Madelyn Mia, you cannot continue to pull me to you every time you wish for—” Franco landed next to them, took one look at Gabriel and dropped down next to him. “Is she hurt?”

“No, she’s terrified but she’s drawing strength off her mate. Can’t you smell Bradonis’ scent? He’s helping her. Somehow, he’s helping her.”

“And Mia?”

Gabriel put his head down.

Franco hissed and his features twisted. The little girl glanced up and screamed. Scrambling to her feet, she tried to run. Gabriel pulled her into his arms and held her tight to him. “Shh, it’s okay. It’s over now. Your daddy won’t hurt you.”

Franco calmed himself as Gabriel stood. He reached out to take her and she screamed again. Gabriel turned his back so she would face Franco.

“Look, Madelyn it’s just Daddy. He won’t hurt you. See.”

She continued to hold tight to Gabriel as she began to whisper again, “I won’t color your hair black anymore. I won’t color your hair black anymore. I won’t color your hair black anymore.”

Chapter Eleven

“So, you’re saying that Mads can do all of that stuff still, she just doesn’t remember how?” Brady asked, standing next to Gabriel.

“Yes. And I can’t answer how she managed to connect with you, let alone channel you.”

Brady touched Gabriel’s shoulder and gave it a good squeeze. “You going to be okay?”

I knew exactly what he was referring to. I had inadvertently given him a firsthand witness to his mother’s murder.

“I’m fine. Franco and I took care of my mother after it happened, so we knew the extent of the damage. We didn’t know how Madelyn had managed to survive, let alone kill as many lycans as she did.”

“Hey, I don’t mean to interrupt the fun catch-up session but is the camera guy dead and suspended in mid-air?” Hudson asked.

“Shit!” I turned and ran towards him. The man hung limp in mid-air. “Dymphina!”

In a flash, she was next to me. Her eyes widened as she looked at the man. “Umm, I may have squeezed a little too hard when I saw what you went through.”

“A little too hard? He’s dead.”

“Yes, but no longer a threat.”

She had me there.

Gabriel walked up and stood next to me. “So, you’re really a Guardian?”

My brow furrowed. “Didn’t Franco tell you?”

“No. The minute we left you with your new parents, I relinquished my portion of our bond to you and Franco never brought you up again. Since Gaston has been in hiding all these years, we didn’t want to take a chance he’d find you through me again.”

I snorted. “He’s a little too dead to hide.”

Gabriel grabbed my arm and spun me to face him. “Madelyn?”

“Well, yesterday he tried to jack me in an alley. Brady showed up and he scattered like a roach with a light on. Then early this morning he pulled another big stunt only to find all of us kicking his lycan buddies’ asses.”

“But you referred to him as being dead. He’s not.” Gabriel shook his head. “I’d know. I’d feel his death.”

Turning, I looked at Hudson. “I thought you killed him?”

“Was he the one who had you pinned to the tree by sticking his whole fucking arm through you?”

Gabriel gasped. “You get arms shoved through you?”

“Only twice. How about you?”

Gabriel leveled a hard look at Brady. “You let my baby sister get arms shoved through her?”

He huffed. “I don’t let her do shit. I blame you now that I know you gave her that iron-will of her father thing. Thanks.”

“Unfortunately, it looks like she got both of her parents’ stubborn streaks.”

I waved at them both. “Uh, standing right here.”

“You have no business being a Guardian, you should be home right now caring for your five children, waiting for Bradonis to get home. You shouldn’t be out chasing down demons. You could get hurt.”

Brady smiled and wagged his eyebrows. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Cowel put his hand on my shoulder. “Madelyn has not only gotten hurt, she has actually died. If it were not for Franco, she would not be with us now.”

Gabriel’s jaw set. A tick developed in it. “You are *not* going back out again. Consider this me resigning you. Go home and have a baby. Let Bradonis take care of you.”

Hudson laughed. “Man, you really are out of the loop. Just look at her, she’s damn close to kicking you in the head again.”

“She can throw me around, blast me with bolts of lightning or anything else she wants to do. I didn’t walk out of her life and give up seeing her for her to turn around and put it in jeopardy.”

I thought about kicking Gabriel’s ass but didn’t. I had no memory of him but I did feel something for him. In fact, I felt a lot for him. Moving towards him, I saw him readying himself for a blow. I took hold of both his cheeks and smiled. Standing on my toes, I planted a soft kiss on each one then pinched his nose lightly. Something mystical passed from me to him as I thought it might. I knew just what it was—the gift of being able to locate me. The one he’d relinquished to me all those years ago. “There you go, big brother. Come find me anytime. I’d like to get to know you—again.”

He hugged me tight. “Thank you.”

“No problem. One thing, though, can you do the gobble-gobble noise for me now?”

Gabriel laughed and nodded. “If you really want me to. Looks like you never unwrapped me from your finger.”

Dymphina giggled. “Oh, Madelyn keeps a lot of men there.”

I went to object and Hudson gave me an “I dare you” look. I shut-up and smiled.

“Thanks.”

Dymphina smiled. “You should go now. Hudson wants to dispose of the man who hit you because he’s angry.” She stopped and pointed at Brady. “And that one wishes to have sex with you. From the moment he saw you in the wedding dress thoughts of how many ways he could take you have been flashing through his head. He did pay attention to all the events Gabriel showed you, but he still maintained the urge to pleasure you. He may be worse than Freddie.”

Gabriel leaned back and shook his head. “No. No No.”

“Gabe?”

He didn’t look at me. He looked at Brady. “When we figured out you were her mate, I buried the memory of my mother’s gifts to you. Now that they’ve been brought back to my attention, I don’t want you near her. I don’t care if you are mates. She isn’t to be touched by men.”

Freddie laughed and popped in next to me. “Gabriel, you are too late. Hudson took her years ago, many, many, many, many times.”

Gabriel turned slowly, his nostrils flaring. I jumped in front of him, hoping to save Hudson’s life. “Hey, Gabe, you should be happy it’s only as bad as it is. Did you think about the fact that I was Cowel’s only charge? I could have been subjected to a pleasure nymph, one I had all to myself.” He went white. Giggling, I hugged him tight. “Don’t worry. I refused him.”

Chapter Twelve

I moved behind Brady and rubbed his shoulders. He was so tense. He always was before he had to do any sort of sex scene. "You've had a full weekend. I think you can handle this."

He looked at me in the reflection on the mirror. "How do you feel about all we learned today?"

The look on his face scared me. Learning about how deep our connection was did sort of freak me out but it didn't make me want to run. I pulled my hands off his shoulders and smiled. If he didn't want this anymore then it was best it came out now instead of later down the road.

Kissing the top of his head gently, I smiled. "You need to get ready. I'll catch ya later."

"Mads?"

"Yes."

"Are you really going to be there when I get done? Because to be honest I'm a little concerned that hearing all of this today is going to make you run as fast as you can in the other direction."

I ran my finger over the doorframe to his dressing room and looked down. "I feel the same way about you. I'm scared that it was too much for you. You've been really quiet since we left the boardwalk and you haven't touched or barely looked at me since then."

Shrugging, I opened the door and glanced at him. "Everything happens for a reason, Brady. If this is too much for you, I'll understand. I won't lie and say it will be easy to be without you, but I'll try my best."

Brady sat there staring downward. The fact that he didn't respond told me more than I really wanted to know. I bit my lip and nodded. I'd love him for the rest of my life. I couldn't change that and I didn't want to.

Walking out was the hardest thing I'd done yet. The last three days had opened my eyes so wide. My fear of losing him had come true. Now I just had to make it through the next few weeks and he could be rid of me. The very idea of that felt as though someone was planting a dagger firmly in my chest but it wasn't my place to make Brady participate in something he wasn't committed to.

"Maddy! Hurry up. We need you on the set, now."

I looked up and smiled as I saw Jody running for me. "I'm coming."

She grabbed my hand and led me two doors down. Yanking me into the other dressing room, she pointed at my costume and opened her make-up box. My eyes widened when I saw the four inch black stilettos, the five inch long black stretch skirt and a black thong and matching bra.

"Where's the rest of it?"

She laughed. "Oh, sweetheart that's all of it."

My mouth dropped. "The barely legal girl got to wear more than that."

"She didn't have your figure. Plus, she was nineteen. Get into costume now."

Reluctantly, I undressed and slid the outfit, for lack of a better word, on. She plopped me down and went at my face with speed that scared me. Before I knew it, she was done. I held my breath as she handed me a mirror while she brushed my hair out.

Holding the mirror, up, I couldn't believe myself. I never wore make-up. Mostly because vampires weren't really impressed with it. Now, as I stared at my reflection I wondered what everyone would say. I thought I looked a bit like a painted whore, but I wasn't the best person to ask.

"Turn," Jody said.

I did and she sprinkled sparkly powder on my cleavage before dusting my arms, legs and torso with it. She smiled down at me. "You look like a vixen. Go knock 'em dead."

Knowing that we were on a tight production schedule, I hurried as fast as I could in four inch strappy heels. I yanked the door open and all the crew members' eyes came to me. Three men's cigarettes fell out of their mouths. Someone whistled and David looked at me like I was about to sprout a second head.

"Uhh? Is something wrong?"

They all shook their heads. It was weird.

David put his hand out. "Okay, love, go get on the stage. The pole is secure and will more than hold your weight. We need you to be sexy, sultry, a temptress. Can you handle that?"

I nodded.

"Then take the stage, love." He glanced behind him. "Dim the lights. Where's Brady?"

"Brady!"

The door to the room burst open. "Here! But I need a bit. I need to find Maddy. Has anyone seen her?"

A hushed murmur went through the room.

"Silence," David yelled. "Why don't we run through one take and then we'll break so you can find her."

Brady growled. "Fine. One take."

"Great, take your place. Remember that you're having a drink at the bar. You hear the music but you don't turn just yet. You watch the patrons carefully, making sure your enemies aren't following you. Slowly, you turn. You find yourself instantly captivated by her. Go to her, she's dancing for you."

"Yeah, yeah. We went through this already. Dancing for me. Yeah, got it."

Doing my best to calm my nerves, I mentally blocked everyone but Brady out as I watched for the action to begin. I knew I'd be in the dark as he started the scene and I was thankful for that. I needed all the calming period I could get.

"Extras, go!" David shouted and people scurried to their places. "Brady, in position."

"Here. Hurry up, you have exactly one take. I'm risking losing the woman I love so get a damn move on it or I'm leaving."

The woman he loved? Hope surged through me.

"Action."

I stood with my back to the room, still in the dark while Brady played out his portion. The music started and I began to move my hips slowly, concentrating on the beat, not on the fact I was about to pole dance in front of fifty men. The light came on me. Looking back extra slow, I looked the bar patrons over giving each one of them a sexy look.

The music sounded like someone moaning during sex so I went with, rubbing my neck, closing my eyes and opening my mouth slightly. Grabbing hold of the pole, I walked slowly around it, coming to a stop with my back facing them again. I ground my pelvis around it as I sank lower and lower. I followed it back up just as slow, thumping down lightly on every sound of panting and moaning the music made.

Throwing myself backwards, I held onto the pole with one hand while I put my leg up high and ran my hand over the back of it. When I reached my butt, I looked out at them then humped the pole twice to the moan sound. Taking a step back, I launched myself up, took hold of the pole with both hands and spun all the way around it once fast.

I didn't let go. Instead, I held tight, lifted the rest of my body off it. Knowing I had the upper hand physically over most women, I kept my grip and inched my body, still not touching the pole, to the front. Once there, I held tight, my hands over my head gripping the bar as my body faced forward. Spreading my legs wide, I thumped down several times and opened my mouth to match the pant sounds.

I let go, flipped my legs up the side and grabbed hold of the pole with them, stopping me from falling, inches before my head would have hit the stage. Putting my hands up and on my inner thighs, I raked my nails down my skin, over the tiny skirt, down my torso, over my breasts, to my neck where I moved them to my mouth and licked them.

Putting my palms down on the stage, I unwrapped my legs from the pole, went into a handstand and pulled one leg down slowly. I pulled it up only enough to clear the stage. I moved into the splits, my back facing the crowd with the pole to my left.

Swinging my legs and grabbing the pole, I pulled my body around it as quick as I could. When I faced forward I went instantly into a catlike position and slinked my body forward. It was then that I saw Brady there. The feral look on his face only served to spur me on more. Our gazes locked. I crawled right up to him, dipped down low, coming up slowly, almost touching his skin with my tongue.

Brady growled and tried to touch me. A slow, sexy grin spread over me as I caught his hand in mine. Bringing it to my mouth, I drew one finger in my mouth, taking it all the way down slowly. As I pulled off it, I went for his mouth with mine, stopping just before it, holding his blue gaze. I moved up, putting my breasts in his face. For a second, I thought he might jump on the stage and take me then and there. Oddly enough, I would have been fine with that.

Rocking my body up and back more, I ended up with my crotch almost touching Brady's face. Seeing him going straight for it, I caught hold of the sides of his face and held him firm. I thrust my hips towards him, careful not to actually touch him, before making tiny half circles. Thrusting him away from me, I rolled back and put my legs directly out in the air.

As I looked down at Brady through my opened legs, my sex dampened. The look in his eyes told me that he could smell it and he liked it. He slid his arms up and under my butt. Pulling me to him, he put his lips just above my *mons* and continued to pull me down and off the stage. His warm breath moved over my abdomen, my stomach, my breasts, my neck before reaching my lips.

I'd seen Ms. Barely Legal try this scene enough to know that we weren't supposed to kiss yet, so I ducked my head back just enough to work my entire body to the ground. Brady put his arm around my waist and cupped my ass cheek. He used his free hand to almost touch the front of my body. Turning us, he rocked his body against mine slowly, letting me meet him head on.

I still didn't understand why he needed to end up with his shirt off in the scene but he did so I went to work on unbuttoning it. I used my hand for the first two, then slid slowly down Brady's body and used my mouth. After I undid each and every one, I took hold of his jeans and unbuttoned them. I unzipped only a tiny bit even though every fiber of my being wanted to release his erect cock and take it deep into my mouth.

Licking my way slowly up his torso, I stopped and nibbled playful at his collarbone, knowing how much he liked that. Brady shuddered and dry-humped me while we danced. I

pushed his shirt over his shoulders and pulled it down to the point that he had to move his arms so I could get it off him. Instead of tossing it like the girl I replaced had done every time, I put it around the back of Brady's neck and held tight to both sides. Leaning back as far as the shirt would let me, I brought my left leg up slowly.

Brady's eyes widened as he gave me a challenging smile. Oh, I accepted it, plus some. Putting my leg all the way up, I watched as Brady took it to his shoulder and leaned into me slowly. Knowing he was afraid he'd hurt me, I tugged hard on his shirt, brought his mouth to mine and kissed him hard, fast.

He slid his hand down more, touching my thong. He went to move it aside.

"Cut!" David called out. "Anymore of that and we'll lose our R-rating."

Instantly, the lights came one and we broke apart enough for me to put my leg down. Brady pulled me back to him and kissed my lips gently. "I love you."

Grinning, I gave him a kiss back. "I love you, too."

Turning, we looked out at the crew and cast. Every eye was on us. People were fanning themselves and a few were gulping down bottles of water. Brady snickered, grabbed my hand and pulled me close to him. "So, David. How'd she do for her first time?"

"Glance around the room and count the erections. By the looks of it, she got a unanimous salute."

Brady did not look pleased by the comment. His eyes narrowed. Fearing an outburst, I took hold of his crotch and squeezed gently. "Mmm, I did do a good job and since this is the only one that matters, I'll count it as a win."

"David, I'm taking that break to talk to Maddy now. I dare you to try to stop me."

David laughed. "By all means, 'talk' to her. We need to set up for the next scene. There is no way we're messing with the take you just did. Seriously, Brady, I've worked eight films with you and I have never seen that kind of chemistry between you and anyone."

Brady pulled me towards the exit. "You just didn't have the right girl for me to work with."

"Clearly."

Brady walked quickly down the hall, almost dragging me as he went. The second we reached his dressing room, he thrust the door open, yanked me in and slammed the door shut. Locking it, he turned and came at me fast.

His blue eyes screamed sex, lust, need. I didn't get a word out before he had me off my feet and pressed to the wall.

Brady unzipped his pants and worked them down a bit. Touching my inner thigh, he raked his gaze over my upper body slowly, scorching my skin as he went. Sliding his fingers upwards, he moved them under my thong and found my pussy, already wet, already waiting for him.

"Brady..."

"Do you want me to stop?"

Did I want him to stop? What kind of question was that? I wanted him to remain permanently rooted inside me.

"Do you now?"

I gave him a slow smile and began to push my hips forward at him. "Well, we won't know unless you actually get in there."

Extending a claw from his index finger, Brady sliced the thong away as if it were nothing. I gasped. He pressed his mouth to mine. I bit at his lips, demanding he kiss me, take me,

love me. His kiss demanded that and so much more from me. I could feel how much he loved me and was ashamed that I thought he'd given up on us.

The minute I felt the tip of his cock enter my wet core, I brought one leg up and wrapped it around his hip, giving him better access. Since I was still in four inch heels we could actually pull the both of us standing thing off.

Surging forward, Brady entered me in one long stroke, filling me, making me cry out and into his mouth. My body took a moment to adjust to the size of his cock. He stretched my vaginal walls to the point they were unable to go any further. I hissed out as pain shot through my lower body. Brady reached between us and held tight to the position where we joined. Cool energy moved through me, easing the pain and settling in deep so that my womb felt cool and his cock, scalding hot. The sudden change in temperature and the feel of having him in me, near me, made pressure build quickly.

“Brady, please.”

He took my wrists and pinned them to the wall, pumping in and out of me hard. I met him thrust for thrust, stimulating my clit against his rock hard abs, reveling in the feel of his hot shaft pushing into my cool core. My inner thighs tightened and my channel followed fast, seizing hold of his cock, fisting it, milking it.

Brady stilled and dropped his forehead lightly against mine. “Uhh, we need to slow down before—”

“Fuck me hard and now. I want you slamming into me until we can't figure out who is who. Until neither of us can take it anymore and then I want you to fill me with everything you have.”

He arched a brow. “Everything?”

The first instinct I had was to yell “yes” but I held back. We weren't ready for that yet, were we? I'd never wanted anything more than to be swollen with a life Brady put in me but we were only new to each other in the sexual sense. I struggled with the decision before I gave up and left it to chance. But if we did end up pregnant that boy was signing a paper handing over his last name over to me or I'd be kicking his yellow-haired head up and down the street attached or unattached to his body.

Instantly, Brady was spearing me with his cock again. Pushing, grinding, making my nipples tingle and lower body burn. As my inner thighs tingled, a spasm went through them, leaving me gripping him tight. I tossed my head back and cried out, not caring who or what heard me.

Brady thrust his body into me and held firm as wave after wave of come shot into me, filling me, scalding my cool womb, making my channel squeeze him more, pulling, sucking in all he had to offer. I went at his mouth, needing to kiss him. The moment our lips touched, my magik raced into him, leaving him coming even more and me tightening, riding out another orgasm, clinging tight to him, afraid he'd disappear if I dared to break contact with him.

Our bodies shuddered as we stayed, pressed to the wall, each one clinging to the other. I wished that the moment would never end. A sinking feeling came over me and I didn't know why. What we'd done was amazing. There was no need for me to feel this way. But I did.

~****~

I adjusted the tight leather top that left my cleavage pressed up until my breasts damn near fell out. The outfit was ridiculous. The black leather pants and boots weren't much better. I did my best to get it to conform to my body so I could move freely.

Heading out to the new set, this one made to look like a building rooftop, I rolled my eyes

at the sound of my boot heels clicking. I couldn't think of one woman I knew who would wear these while knowing she was going to battle to the death. The enemy would hear her a mile away.

"That's a new look. How come you didn't wear that when we went on patrol?" Hudson asked appearing next to me.

Smiling up at him, I winked. "Because you'd have been too distracted to actually kill something."

He laughed. "Oh, right. Makes sense because it's true."

I stopped and looked around the set. Something felt off. Wrong. "Hudson, do you sense anything near us?"

"No," he said, stepping closer to me. "Do you?"

"I just can't shake the feeling that something's not right."

His chocolate eyes moved over me slowly. "As much as I want to see you kicking the shit out of Bradonis in that, I want you safe. Let's find him and tell him you're heading home."

Arguing was on the tip of my tongue, but I stopped. Hudson was right. We needed to go home. When I didn't argue, Hudson took my chin and aimed it up.

"Maddy, is the feeling that strong?"

My eyes shifted as I sensed danger and Hudson drew in a breath.

"Let's find Bradonis and get you out of here. I'm not sensing anything other than the three of us but I trust your gut instincts."

I gave him a big hug and laughed. "Thanks for not making me feel crazy."

"No problem." Hudson kissed the top of my head lightly.

Turning, I went to walk and found Brady standing there staring at me with hard eyes. I covered the distance between us and reached out to touch him. "Brady?"

"Sorry to interrupt."

Confused, I stared up at him. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Hudson moved in next to me. "Maddy's sensing a threat. I think we should get her out of here. I can't sense anything but I trust—"

"Let's get this scene out of the way and then you can take her home just like you've been dying to do since we got here."

I exchanged a puzzled look with Hudson and then touched Brady's shoulder lightly. He cringed and I jerked back. "Fine. Let's get this over with." The minute I said it, the sense of danger increased.

"Maddy?"

Looking back at Hudson, I just stared at him. My eyes now burned as they swirled.

"Shit, it's getting worse, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Brady groaned. "I can't sense a thing. The faster we get this over with the faster you can go."

"What in the...?"

"Find your marks, people!" David yelled.

I glanced back at Hudson, unsure what to do.

"Okay, Madelyn, you're going to jump down off the ledge and launch into a frontal assault with Brady. Are you sure you don't want the stunt double's help?"

"I'm sure."

“And you’re sure you can handle the fight scene with Brady? Pulling punches and all of that fun stuff, love?”

“Yeah, she can,” Hudson said. After years of training me, he knew I could come within a hair of hitting him, fighting full force but never touch him.

Brady snorted. “He’d know.”

Glancing back at Hudson, my brow furrowed. He gave me a worried look.

“Come on people. Time is money!”

If David yelled that one more time I was going to cram his clipboard up his ass. Better yet, I could take whatever Brady had lodged up his out and use that. I had no clue what the hell his problem was. I gave the man an open invitation to take me only a half hour ago and this was the thanks I got.

I tell him I’m worried about something and he blows me off. Yeah, I sure know how to pick ‘em.

The closer we got to our marks, the worse I felt. There was something definitely wrong. Every ounce of me said not to go out there. “Brady, I don’t think we should do this. It doesn’t feel right.”

“I’m not going to hurt you. It’s a fight scene. You lead. I’ll follow. It’s as easy as that,” he said, each word clipped.

Hudson let out a low growl. “I don’t know what the hell your problem is, but Maddy doesn’t deserve this attitude.”

Brady glanced back at Hudson, giving him a hard look and then moved his attention back to me, never once changing his expression. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

From his tone, he was talking about more than just the shoot. I nodded and left Hudson standing there to take my mark. One of the prop guys brought out our weapons and I wanted to run the other way. Something was seriously off.

“Here ya go,” the prop man said, handing Brady his. He picked mine up and handed it to me. Instantly, I wanted to throw it.

“Switch me.” I reached over and took Brady’s easing the feeling of needing to run ever-so-slightly.

Brady just stared at me and then rolled his eyes. “Trust you to change what was originally assigned as yours.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“Brady, please tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Madelyn.”

I couldn’t figure out what I’d done to him other than love him. Sure, I wasn’t centuries old but I knew what I felt and it was love. How was that wrong? And how could it put him in this kind of mood?

“Madelyn, take your place,” David said.

Nodding, I climbed up and onto the four foot ledge. Something was still wrong. Very, very wrong. “Brady, please, we need to stop. We shouldn’t do this.”

He glanced up at me. “It’s a damn staged scene. Nothing’s going to get you.”

My mouth dropped. I would have argued but the feeling only grew stronger. “Please, I’m begging. Please—”

Brady glared at me. “Are you really in that big of a hurry to run out of here with him? Hmm, here I thought I was the only thing you were in a hurry for.”

His words slashed at me, cutting me to the quick. Why was he doing this? I didn’t want to

argue with him especially when I had no clue why were arguing to begin with.

“Ready... and... action!”

I jumped down, crouched and then rose slowly with my back to the camera. I did as David instructed, I went at Brady full force. He met me half-way, his eyes still full of hurt and rage. I moved my arm out and he met it lightly with his even though to everyone else we looked as though it was anything but. Spinning, I put my leg out and put it level with his head. To the humans, I was going full speed, but to Brady’s lycan eyes, I was inching along.

Brady moved his face along with my boot so it looked as though I’d made contact. We continued doing this, working our way towards the back of the set. We locked arms and I pressed my head close to his ear. “I’m sorry for whatever I did. I love you. But I know we should stop this. Something bad is about to happen.”

Brady didn’t respond. He moved our bodies around so his back faced the camera and I faced it head on. As I drew my prop gun, I panted hard. I aimed just below Brady’s heart because the idea of shooting anything, blank or not at him horrified me. I pulled the trigger. The blank shot out and I had to fight not to smile.

As Brady lifted his gun, my pulse quickened and my eyes widened. Shaking my head, I whispered to him, “No... it’s... loaded—”

Brady fired. Silver bullets came whizzing at me. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t do anything. Each slug ripped at my chest, my stomach, my abdomen. Pain tore through me. I staggered backwards and stared at Brady with wide terrified eyes. My lips trembled as I fell to my knees, clutching my body.

“Cut!” David yelled.

I didn’t move. Couldn’t move as white-hot pain lanced through me.

Brady looked down at me and rolled his eyes. “Hurry along, Madelyn. My replacement is waiting.” Turning, he walked away.

I still didn’t move.

“Maddy?” Hudson asked, appearing next to me.

Shaking, I pulled my hands back slightly. I was covered in blood.

Hudson gasped and snatched me up in his arms. Cradling my body to his chest, a feral look came over his face. He took off running towards the exit, not wanting to alert the humans what had happened. Hudson brushed past Brady on our way out.

“Yeah, have fun, kids.”

Hudson spun around and snarled. I was now shaking so hard that my teeth chattered. Brady glared down at me. I just stared up at him horrified that he would do this to me. Tears filled my eyes. I coughed and warm liquid came out of my mouth.

“Franco!” Hudson yelled as he kept running.

“Ga... b... riel,” I whispered.

We hit the exterior studio doors and were instantly bathed in soft moonlight. Hudson kept running, heading far back away from the main section of the lot. He found a tucked away corner and put me down on the ground lightly.

Opening the leather top, Hudson jerked back. “Ohmygod, he pumped a clip of silver bullets into you!”

“Hudson, you called?”

I shook and looked up at Franco. His eyes widened when he saw me. “What has happened? She was to remain close to Bradonis.”

“That’s what she fucking did! He’s the one who did this to her.”

Franco's eyes flashed to black. "What?"

"Maddy came out of her dressing room and asked if I sensed anything. She said something didn't feel right. I didn't sense anything but I told her we," he ran his hand over my cheek lightly, "needed to get Brady and go. She gave me a hug, thanking me for believing her. We turned around and he's got a major attitude with her."

A fit of coughing over took me. Blood shot out and when I went to take a breath, I heard a raspy wet sound as pain continued to wrack my body. Glancing to my side, I saw Brady standing there looking horrified. He pushed past Franco and dropped down at my side.

"God no, baby... oh... no, baby... I didn't know it was loaded... I—"

I cringed as he tried to touch me. I told him not to do it. I said something was wrong. He didn't listen. He didn't want to hear me. He just wanted to push me away for a reason I didn't even know.

Looking directly into his eyes, I shook. *I begged you! Why didn't you listen? You said you loved me, Brady. Why?*

"I didn't know, Mads. Please believe me. I would never hurt you willingly." Tears ran down his cheeks. "Baby, I'm going to touch you. It's going to burn."

"No," I whispered.

Franco pushed in between Hudson and Brady. "Madelyn Mia, you need to tell him he can heal you. You have refused him and that means nature will not allow his power to work. You must tell him he may heal you. I cannot offer you anymore of my blood without you turning into what I am. You do not wish for a life in darkness."

Franco's face faded in and out. I tried my best to focus but couldn't.

"Madelyn!" I heard Gabriel but couldn't seem to get anything to cooperate with me. I felt him next to me. "What happened? Who? They've hit every major organ!"

Hudson growled. "Her fucking mate did this!"

Power blew past me and stuck something next to me.

"Gabriel! Bradonis is needed to heal her. And he speaks the truth. He did not know the gun was loaded with bullets, let alone silver."

"It doesn't fucking matter! Maddy told him over and over again that something was wrong that they shouldn't go through with the shoot. He ignored her. I heard her beg him not to do the gun part. Hell, I watched her refuse to take the loaded one. The one she was supposed to shoot Brady with! She fucking put herself in danger while she tried to talk him out of it!" Hudson growled out. "He didn't listen. He was too jealous of me giving her a small hug. Yeah, that warrants pumping her full of enough silver to take six fucking supernaturals down."

I felt something moving over me. It was familiar, like my power. *Gabriel.*

"Yes, Madelyn it's me. I'm going to try my best here, sweetie, but I agree with your father, you need to let Bradonis help you."

The pain lessened but didn't go away. I tried to concentrate on Gabriel but couldn't. I heard him talking but it was mumbled. Something else was loud. Too loud.

Mads, please say yes, please say yes. Ahh, what the fuck good is having the power to heal her if I can't even use it when she needs it? Please say yes, Mads. Please. Dammit, I should have known. She told me. I should have known. It should be me there. Not her! It should be me.

Hearing Brady's pain filled voice made some of the shock go away. Still to stand there and watch the man you love fire at you repeatedly wasn't something I would ever forget.

"Bradonis! She can hear you!" Gabriel shouted.

"He didn't say anything and if he does, I'll ram his teeth down his throat."

I knew Hudson well enough to know he would do exactly that.

Mads? The sound of Brady's voice filled my head.

Mmmhmm

Tell me yes.

My mind closed down and a cool hand touched my forehead. *Daddy?*

"I am here, Madelyn Mia. Allow him to do this. It does not mean you have to keep him in your life. He did not mean to harm you."

I heard him talking but something else pushed in. Something I'd never experienced before. The world around me faded. I felt myself lifting high into the air. Something changed. Opening my eyes, I was surrounded by white light. I tried to make sense of it but couldn't.

What was happening? What was causing this?

Brady?

He didn't answer.

Gabe?

No answer.

Dad?

Nothing.

The light began to fade and I wasn't lying on the ground looking at darkness. I was standing in a large circular white room. It wasn't real white. No. It was more of a soft edge, cloudy white. A large circular table sat in the center of the room. I'd missed it at first because it was as white as the rest of the room. Many seats were around it yet no one was there.

"Madelyn, I'm here. You're just not ready to see me yet."

I knew that voice. It was soft, feminine, loving.

"Well, I should hope you know my voice. I only spoke to you every day until you were five."

"Mia?"

She laughed softly. "If that is what you wish to call me then I accept that."

"Where am I?"

"Neither here nor there."

Wonderful, I had a cryptic mother, too. As if Franco wasn't already bad enough.

She chuckled. "Do you know how much it meant to him just now, hearing you call him daddy? He has watched you love the parents he picked for you, knowing the entire time that it should have been his neck you clung to, his face you saw each morning you woke. He loves you with all of his heart. That is why he risked the wrath of both the gods and Powers in pulling you off the field. Each day that you have been a Guardian he's worried to the point that he too often goes weeks without eating or sleeping."

I walked slowly around the room, staring at nothing but white. Why was she telling me all of this? It was plain to see I was dead.

"No, Madelyn, you are what you make yourself. You lie on the ground refusing to accept the help needed to make yourself well. It is the iron-will of both of us in you."

"Yeah, I saw how stubborn you were and I know how stubborn Franco is."

Mia let out a soft laugh. "Do not follow in our footsteps. I see you becoming more like me. It terrifies me. I wasn't strong enough to admit I needed help. It cost me everything and it almost cost you as well. I can never make up for the horrors you bore witness to the day of my death but I can prevent you from doing something similar."

I went to object but she didn't stop.

“The evil uprising will be like none other we have ever faced before. It will come in scattered battles and random encounters but the strength will be greater than ever. Gaston is but a small pawn in evil’s bag of tricks. He seeks to kill your father, your brother, your friends and your mate. He will wish to kill your child as well.”

I snorted and shook my head. “They won’t let Gaston win. And I don’t have a child.”

“Madelyn, he was behind the silver bullets being in the gun. Gaston was behind a crew member going to Brady’s dressing room, shortly after you left. The man joked about how hot and bothered Brady must have gotten you. The man told Brady someone just walked in on you screwing Hudson.”

Covering my mouth, I cleared my throat. “I wasn’t.”

“I know that. But Brady didn’t. It is why he was so blinded to your pleas. He had shut off his connection to you for fear he would sense or even feel you with Hudson. He knows he was wrong to have ignored it. He also now knows that he was wrong to believe something a stranger said over his mate’s word.”

She paused before continuing on, “Madelyn, I assure you that all of the people you hold dear will perish if you do not pull yourself together and be who you were born to be.”

That made me laugh. “And who exactly was I born to be?”

“Think about it. Who would have the power to control the most powerful god, the strongest warrior, the most powerful vampire and the most powerful king the lycans have ever seen?”

I thought about what she was saying. I could no more control them than I could the weather.

Mia blew soft energy around me. “But you can control the weather, little one. You just have forgotten how.”

“Right, you expect me to believe that men twice as powerful as me will let me led them around?”

“Yes, because they already do. Gabriel would have never freed Cowel had it not been you who asked. Hudson would have been one of the Guardians that no longer differentiated from good and evil. You stopped that and he knows it. It is why he will continue to care for you after you are wed to Bradonis. He will find his true mate and find happiness like he has never known. You will always have him in your life and the two of you will always hold each other in your hearts. It will never be sexual again--merely mutual love and respect. His mate is someone you know, Madelyn. Someone you love, too.”

Huh? Hudson had a mate and I knew her?

“Did you know that your father should not even be on the same plane as you? He is one of The Powers. He is the one that heads the Guardians, sits on the council and is an elder. His power is limitless. His desire to be near you keeps him not only grounded but also makes him one of the few Powers that doesn’t have a big head.”

Franco was all that?

“And who, but you, Madelyn, could make a man who, because of my help in his birth, is part god but completely unaware of it, come out of hiding and put himself in front of millions to be near you. Bradonis had no desire to act. He doesn’t need the money. In fact, he doesn’t even keep it. He supports many charities. The only reason he subjects himself to a life he’s not comfortable with is to be close to you. The parents who raised you own a production studio. He was assured to be around you in that profession.”

Brady didn’t even want to act?

“So you see, Madelyn, you have led these men from the moment they met you. With you gone, no one is there to do it. So, it is up to you. Stay, be part of us, the gods that oversee all or go back and help them oversee man’s safety.”

This was way more information and responsibility to deal with than I wanted.

“We are not human. Our lives are not easy. They’re also not meant to be short. It’s part of the reason I brought you here. You are young and so much more powerful than you know. And the child that grows within you is not even a full day old yet and already his mother is ready to give up. Give up on her family, friends and his father.”

My mouth dropped. I guess Brady went with the decision to try to have a child. He could have told me.

“Wait, I can’t go back and fight. Though I kick ass, I take a hell of a lickin.’ They won’t let me either. They’re bad enough as it is. If I’m really pregnant, they’ll lose their minds.”

Mia laughed. “I know. That’s why you will not have to worry about that upon your return. You may fight side by side with them and not risk your child or yourself. The only person who will be able to harm you will be your mate, should you actually allow him to claim you, marry you, be one with you.”

“Huh?”

Not the best response but it was the only one I had at the moment.

“The gods and Powers blessed you, Madelyn. That has never been done before. You are both a goddess and a Power. You have always had the power to be this but you haven’t tapped into it. To keep the ones you love safe, you will. And you will bestow upon them that which they need to battle evil to its fullest extent.”

Taking a deep breath in, I let my gut guide me. “Mom, I want to go back.”

Chapter Thirteen

I looked around the darkened area and saw the men huddled around something on the ground. Adjusting my now unharmed leather outfit, I headed for them. They were so caught up in what they were doing that not one of them noticed me.

My breath caught when I saw my dead body lying there, or rather the illusion of my body. Brady held me on his lap, rocking me gently. "Please baby, please say yes."

Franco touched his shoulder. "She is no longer with us."

"Come on, let's get her home and take care of things from there," Gabriel said, his eyes full of tears.

"I vote we beat the fucking shit out of her mate and then see to her," Hudson, the ever pleasant lycan said.

"You will do no such thing." Franco touched Brady's shoulder. "He has lost as much as the rest of us. Not one of you can look me in the eye and tell me that Bradonis shot my daughter in cold blood."

"Bring the bats back. Let them eat him alive. I won't even want the death. It's all yours!" Hudson stood promptly and went at Brady.

Brady never moved. It was as though he didn't know they were there any longer. That or he didn't care. Gabriel kept Hudson from hitting Brady.

I kept walking towards them, amazed at how close I got with no one noticing. I stared at the body Brady held so close to him—mine. "Hmm, yeah, you can probably let go of that now. I don't need it anymore."

Everyone but Brady looked up. Gabriel and Hudson let go of each other a little too fast, tripped and fell to the ground. Franco stared at me with wide eyes. I winked at them and moved around Brady. Squatting down, I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight.

He continued to rock what he thought was me. "Please, baby... please. Tell me yes."

"Shh, honey, I'm here. Wish it away and be done with it."

Brady stilled. He didn't look back. The illusion in his arms vanished and he spun around. His eyes locked on mine and he had me up and off my feet before I knew what was happening. He wrapped his arms around me so tight that I couldn't breathe.

"Too tight... Brady... let go."

He loosened his grip but didn't put down. "I'm so sorry. Baby, I'm sorry. I—"

"Has he been doing this all along?"

"Yes," the rest said in unison.

"Sorry."

Gabriel came around so I could see him. "Madelyn, what happened?"

"I got shot about twelve times and then found myself surrounded by a huge white light. When it cleared, I had a nice long chat with Mom. Who says to stop picking on Freddie, she can't help it that she accidentally makes men into puppies. It just happens sometimes."

Gabriel's eyes widened.

"Oh, she also said that you need to learn that not all women find you irresistible, big brother. When you find the one who doesn't, you'll know that you found *her*. I think you know

who I mean.”

Hudson moved up next to him. “Maddy, are you real or is this like a visit from an angel who pops away in a minute?”

“Umm,” I mumbled, glancing down at Brady’s back. “He’s about to squeeze me until I burst so I’m guessing I’m here.”

Hudson moved in quick and gave me a chaste kiss on the lips. “He can beat the shit out of me later. He’s damn lucky I don’t snatch you away and hide out in a cave with you.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Hudson gave me a smug smile. “He doesn’t scare me.”

“Good to know, but that’s not the reason hiding out would be bad.” I grinned. “You should probably beware of slayers in sheep’s clothing.”

His brow furrowed. “Huh?”

I winked. “Your mate is close, Hudson. She’s someone I know. The two of you will be very, very happy. She’s in the area now.”

“My... Maddy?” The shock on his face said it all. “She’s dead, Maddy.”

Dead?

“Umm, no, she’s not.”

His eyes widened.

Pushing on Brady’s shoulders, I tried to get him to let go of me. He didn’t. “Honey, I’m here. I’m fine. Better than fine. Put me down, please.”

Brady let out a small chuckle. “I don’t think I can.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to squeeze me that tight,” I whispered with my lips pressed to his ear.

“Trust me. I do.”

Rolling my eyes, I reached my hand out. “Dad?”

Franco walked over slowly, looking a bit unsure if I was talking to him or not. “Madelyn Mia?”

“I really want to hug you but Brady isn’t being very cooperative.”

His eyes widened. “Bradonis put my daughter down now.”

Brady lowered me to the ground and cupped my face. Closing his eyes slowly, he put his forehead to mine and kissed my lips gently. “I am so sorry.”

“Shh,” I whispered, kissing him back softly. “I know you’re sorry. Hell, the entire world knows you’re sorry with as much as you say it.”

Franco cleared his throat. “My daughter, now.”

I pulled back from Brady and took a step towards Franco. He stared down at me with a look I’d seen him wear often but had never understood it. It was the way a father looked at his daughter. He didn’t make a move to touch me. In fact he’d rarely touched me over the years.

Franco laughed softly. “I feared that if I did touch you, I would hug you and tell you everything Gabriel and I were trying to protect you from. That is why Hudson was brought in to train you instead of myself. Though from what I have heard, you may have selected him long before I did.”

Glancing back at Hudson, I gave him a soft smile. “No. We selected each other. He needed someone to beat back the darkness eating at him. And I needed someone to teach me about the darkness.”

Hudson drew his lower lip in and nodded slightly.

Looking back up at Franco, I searched for any memory I may have hidden deep of him

from my childhood. I already loved the man. I always had. That was part of the reason calling him Frankie and pissing him off was so much fun. I thought long and hard.

“The scarecrow!”

Franco’s brow creased.

I covered my mouth and laughed. Pointing at Gabriel, I beamed. “The cowardly lion!”

Gabriel’s eyes widened. “Franco, the Halloween that she insisted we dress up. Mother was the good witch. She made me be the lion. No doubt because she knew how much I would dislike it. And she made you be—”

Franco’s eyes lit. “The scarecrow.”

“You asked me why you couldn’t be the tin man. You thought you’d make a better one and I—”

He touched my cheek, caressing it lightly with the pad of his thumb. “And you said that the tin man was always so loud and grumpy that you felt bad giving his spot to someone else. That he’d spent a hundred years mad, the least you could do was let him be the tin man.” He looked at Hudson and smiled wide.

“Yep,” I said beaming.

Franco looked at Brady. “She then informed me that I was merely holding a spot for the yellow haired one. I would have to let him take over later. I sincerely hope I am not to be the dog now.”

“Nah,” I said moving closer to him. “You can be the dad now.” Tossing my arms around his neck, I kissed his cheek and held him tight. He held me firmly to him and stroked the back of my hair lovingly. “Dad,” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“Mom says she loves you and that she’s sending you a gift soon. She said not to try to return *her* because Mom would be upset and the gift would be ticked.”

“That is sweet, Madelyn Mia, but I will not... no... your mother was it for me.”

I rocked him gently. “Damn, she knows you well. She told me that you’d say exactly that. And I’m supposed to remind you that you still have a true mate out there. She knows because she’s been watching over her for you.”

He hugged me tighter. Cool energy wrapped around me, cuddling me close. Franco jerked back and glanced downward. He met me with questioning eyes and I knew then that he’d sensed the baby.

I nodded and smiled.

Closing his eyes, he nodded before drawing me back into a tight hug. When he pulled back he motioned towards Brady. “Go and spend time with your mate. We will all retire to my house. We have much to discuss. The gun was put there. It was no accident.”

“I know. Gaston was behind it and also behind some man who told Brady that he’d walked in on Hudson and me having sex.”

“Madelyn, try to curve your talk of sex around me. I tolerated it because you were not aware of who I am to you, but I do not wish to have to tolerate it any longer. Please, for the sake of my sanity, do not bring it up again.”

“Maddy,” Hudson said, his voice low. “We haven’t done anything in over three years. Wait, I kissed you. You didn’t even bother to kiss me back.”

Brady touched my back gently. “How do you know someone told me that?”

“I just poofed back from the dead, Brad-dumbass. Why are you even asking me that?”

Everyone laughed.

“Okay, gentlemen, I’m making Brady take me home now. We’ll catch up with you soon. We’ve got hard battles before us and we need to be prepared.”

Franco grabbed my arm. “You have no battles before you. You have,” he glanced down, “no business in the field any longer.”

Laughing softly, I patted his hand. “Aww, Mom knew you’d say that too. She knew each one of you would say it. Here’s the thing guys, I got to pick whether or not I came back. If I stayed, eternal peace and a lifetime membership to the gods’ club. The problem with that was all of you would die in coming battles. If I came back I got a front line spot in the fight and the ability to keep the lot of you unified and alive.”

“I cannot believe your mother would send you here to put your life and others in jeopardy.”

Pissing Franco, or my *dad*, off was still as fun as ever. “Hey Dad, I can’t believe you hung around this plane for so long, considering how *busy* you are.”

A knowing look passed between us and he shut-up.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” I took hold of Franco’s cheeks and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips. A white light flashed. He pulled back stunned and then looked up.

“Mia, you are every bit as crafty as you once were. Sending her to do your dirty work. You knew we couldn’t and wouldn’t say no to her.”

I went to Gabriel next. He took a tiny step back. “Are you planning on turning me into a monkey?”

Shaking my head, I took hold of his cheeks and gave him a chaste kiss as well. The white light flashed and I backed up. “No, not a monkey. A full god.”

As I walked towards Hudson, Brady growled. I didn’t look back. “Dad, cover your ears. Brady, if you to ever plan to get laid again, I’d stand down and back the hell up if I were you.”

“Standing down,” he mumbled, clearly not happy.

Hudson laughed and pulled me into his arms. “I’m afraid to ask what you’re going to do to me.”

Taking hold on his cheeks, I kissed him gently, the white light surged between us. I also pushed out how much I loved him and how much I would always love him, even when he was mated. I also let him know that we would be friends for all eternity if I had anything to do with it.

“Maddy? What did you just do to me?” Hudson asked, rubbing his lips.

I grinned. “Wouldn’t you like to know? I’ll tell you this much, you are now Brady’s First, his general along with being a Guardian. You also have some god-like abilities now, Hudson.”

Hudson shook his head. “I am not his anything.”

“Yeah, I’m with him. He is not my—”

I put my hand up and they both shut-up. “Hudson, you were born to be a warrior. It’s what pumps through your veins. The Guardians need you and Brady has always needed to take someone as his First but never has. He knew that his father’s First played a part in his parents’ deaths and he didn’t want to ever risk the ones close to him. You would never hurt the ones he loves. You would die to protect them and as much as the two of you bicker, you’d die to protect the other. Don’t deny it. A goddess told me and I believe her.”

Brady spun me around and shook his head. “I do *not* need a First, let alone Hudson.”

“So, I take it we aren’t going to get married. And I say that because I hate being referred to as a mate.”

Brady huffed and backed away a bit. “What? You’re telling me that you won’t marry me

unless I make Hudson my First?”

“No. Hudson already is your First. Try to break the bond. I dare you. I’m saying that I won’t marry a man who would put his wife and son in danger because of his personal hang-ups.”

“I can protect my wife and son just fine. I don’t need some cocky lycan who is always—”

Franco tipped his head and put a hand on Brady’s shoulder. “My daughter just told you she is having your son yet you keep rambling. If she selected Hudson to protect her and the child as well then you will accept it. Understood?”

Hudson spun me around. “Maddy? A baby?”

I nodded, unsure what his reaction would be.

Picking me up, he hugged me tight. “Congratulations!”

“You’re okay with it?”

Setting me down, his brown eyes locked on me. “Yeah. I am.”

“Good, because you’re going to be our son’s godfather. And if Brady says one word about it, he can visit him on the weekends.”

Turning, I faced Gabriel. His green eyes glistened. I went to him quickly and hugged him tight. “Are you okay with being an uncle?”

The massive hug he gave me answered that for me.

“Now, let’s figure out how to beat the first wave of attacks and get you married. The baby needs an aunt and some cousins that aren’t two hundred years older than he is.”

“Dad,” I said facing him. “The same goes for you. I don’t want to be two hundred years older than my younger whatever.”

“If we all live through what Mia says is coming than we shall see.”

I glanced back at Brady. His mouth was open and he didn’t seem to be budging. “Great, now he decides to rethink it. Can anyone help me get home?”

They all nodded.

I went to Brady and wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tight. “I love you.”

“Mads?”

Giggling, I stroked his cheek. “Yes?”

“We’re going to be...? You’re...?”

“Yes, honey, we’re having a baby.”

He held me tight and I didn’t want the moment to end. Mia had shown me a tiny glimpse of the evil we were up against and I knew deep down that we’d win—if we stayed united.

“I love you, Mads.”

“Come on, let’s go home. I want you to sign my breasts.”

My father grumbled and I laughed.

THE END

Mandy M. Roth loves hearing from readers. You can read more about her other New Concept titles by visiting www.mandyroth.com or send by emailing mandy@mandyroth.com.

Excerpt from *Seductions* by Mandy M. Roth, now available from New Concepts Publishing!

Chapter One

“re going to need to move that sexy ass or I’m going to toss it onto this sofa and carry it up four floors before having my way with it.”

Turning, I saw only the green leaves of the oversized fern plant I carried. Unfortunately, I knew the voice and knew its owner, Jake, would actually do exactly what he threatened to do. “Let me go first so I don’t have to play ‘follow dink and dork’ up the stairs.”

“I’m dork,” Jake called out, chuckling from his end of the sofa. “Your brother can be dink.”

“What’s a dink?” Gideon, my brother, asked.

Jake and I laughed. I did my best to find the door handle. Although covering my eyes and finding a needle in a haystack might have been more productive. “Nothing. It’s a good thing, really.”

“Uh-huh. Why am I not believing you?”

Jake snorted. “Probably because you’ve known her for over thirty years. Now, as for you, Devan, you need to get your ass up those stairs. This thing isn’t getting any lighter. I’ve already lifted more things in one morning than I have in ten years.”

“Hey, be nice or I’ll do *it*.”

Gideon groaned. “If she breaks into song again I’m kicking your ass, Jake. Then I’m leaving. I thought she stopped all that. Now, I’m afraid to turn my television on for fear of seeing her dancing and singing with some guy in black leather.”

“Hey, your little sister is a gem. Back off,” Jake said, laughing. “But if you do leave, can I keep her?”

“I’d like to see you try,” I said, rushing through the door. I broke out into an interesting rendition of *Do Wah Diddy* replacing the she’s with he’s and hurried through the door. I knew the staircase was directly in front of the door so I lifted the fern high in the air to watch for the first step and began to jog up them.

“Watch where you’re--”

“Nope. Not stopping until you both sing along and tell me that you will miss me horribly when you leave. Next up on the jukebox is an eighties song. I’m feeling very Madonnaish. Consider yourselves warned.” I went right back into *Do Wah Diddy*.

I made it up about six steps before I slammed into something that felt like the equivalent of a brick wall. I went backwards instantly. When two large arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me forward instead of back, I realized the brick wall was actually a person.

Before I knew it, I was being twisted around and suddenly on said person’s lap and we

ended up sitting on the stairs. The massive fern blocked my view of him but if the size of the arms were any indication--the person was male, definitely. I couldn't help it. I burst into laughter at the absurdity of it all.

Parting the fern, I peeked through to find a pair of emerald green eyes staring back at me. The squared face they were set in made my breath catch. This was no ordinary man. No. This man was amazing. He had a pronounced jaw and forehead, giving him that dark brooding look I liked so much. His black hair was cut in one of those stylishly messy ways. It stood about two inches off the top of his head but was cut close on the sides and back.

Taking a deep breath in, I caught the familiar scent of figwood and fruits. It was something I hadn't smelled in years and the memories it brought back made my insides flutter. Sighing was an option I was more than willing to take. As my gaze traveled over his thick, corded neck I laughed harder. "Only I would make an ass of myself in front of a living god. I am so sorry. Are you hurt?"

I leaned through the fern more and glanced down. The snug fitting short sleeved Roberto Cavalli shirt he wore drew attention to his steely upper body. I gulped as I looked down at his dirt covered groin. The flat front kakis he had on did little to hide the bulge growing quickly beneath them. "Looks *really* fine," I sang softly.

"eyes are..."

My gaze went to his as I soaked in the sound of his deep voice. It was the kind of voice I could get used to hearing whispering sweet nothings to me in the wee hours of the night. "Disturbing? Two different colors? Yeah, I know one is blue and one is brown. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." He shook his head. "They're beautiful."

I blushed and did the only thing I could think of, I laughed. The man's eyes widened more before he too began to laugh. There was something about him that was so familiar but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Do I know you?"

He stopped laughing and tipped his head a bit, seeming to study me. Something moved over his face that looked to be shock. "You can't be her."

"Her who?" I asked between chuckles. "If you say the tooth fairy I will kiss you. I mean, come on, dental hygiene goddesses with wands are the shit. To be perfectly honest, since I've already made an absolute fool of myself, you make me think of The Clash. Why is that? You aren't planning on rocking any Casbah are you?"

His green eyes widened. I fought the urge to trace a line with my thumb over his full lips. It was hard. Somehow, I managed.

"So, should I stay or should I go?" I asked, giving him a smile I hoped appeared to be sexy while I continued my Clash skit.

"Stay." He shook his head slightly and smiled back. His smile was for sure sexy. "How?"

"How?" I cleared my throat. "How am I me? Or how am I her? Are all sexy New Yorkers this odd? Do you feel like you know me, too?"

The slight, stunned nod was the only answer I got out of him.

"My guess is we've crossed paths. You don't play a professional sport, do you?"

"No," he said, staring at me with an odd fascination. "Is that a prerequisite?"

Liking the man more than I should, I shook my head. "No. My list of must haves isn't too long. Not playing a professional sport is at the top."

Jake snorted. "If you can pick up a phone and order a pizza she's yours. If you can actually make one yourself, you may never get rid of her. If you're able to make anything above that you just met your future wife."

“Why thank you, Jake.” I shot him a dirty look. He grinned like a schoolboy. “I always love it when my friends try to push me off on men who could be married, in a serious relationship, or not ones to pick women over men.”

“If you would spend less time trying not to drool and more time looking at the guy, you’d see he’s staring at you like it’s taking everything in him not to touch you and I don’t see any rings on his fingers.”

I snorted. “Oh, like that means anything. How many times did other women have at *you know who*?”

“Oh, right. I forgot.”

The man touched my cheek lightly and I drew in a sharp breath as familiar feelings washed over me. Closing my eyes I savored the moment.

“Devan, get off the nice man and move. This thing is heavy,” Gideon said, sounding annoyed.

The man’s eyes lit. “Devan?”

“Right.” I nodded and stood slowly. Lifting the fern off him, I gasped. “Ohmygod, you’re covered in dirt now. I’m so sorry. Here, give me those and I’ll take them to the cleaners.” I set the fern down on the stair and turned to face him. “Wait, umm, I didn’t mean to just ask you to get naked. But I’d honestly be okay with that.”

“Devan,” Gideon growled out. “I get you’re an adult. All I’m asking is to not be reminded of that--ever.”

“Jake, do you still have my wallet?” I glanced at Gideon. “Just so you know, I’m ignoring you.”

Jake laughed. “Yeah, what do you need?”

“Five hundred dollars to replace the nice man’s clothing. I’m guessing he doesn’t want to take a check from a lady he just met in the stairwell. The Cavalli alone is three. It’s in this season which tells me the guy pays attention to fashion. I’d *get* into the jeans but Gideon would demand to have his eyes gouged out and I’d enjoy it too much.”

Gideon coughed, not bothering to hide his shock. “People here wear five hundred dollar outfits? I was with you when you bought a dress for a dollar at a thrift store, Devan.”

“The one that’s brown with obnoxious orange flowers on it?” Jake asked, knowing full well it was that one.

“Yeah.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a Betsy Johnson. I saved a few hundred dollars. And how can you think brown and orange is obnoxious, Jake?” I rolled my eyes. “Ooo, I really liked the avocado green sweater I got that day, too.”

Gideon sighed. “What was that? A Lou Reed?”

Flipping him off, I smiled at the sexy man and did my best to avoid touching him. It was hard. “I feel like singing Little Orphan Annie songs. Who’s up for a night of that?”

“Put the sofa down. I’m going to tape her mouth shut and hide her wallet. She does not need to be spending money.”

Jake laughed hard. “Stop being over protective. If the girl wants to hand the man money to replace his clothes then let her, Gideon. Don’t you think she’s had enough issues with having control of her own life? Stop making her out to be on the verge of poverty. She’s worked her ass off to have what she does and I, for one, am damn happy to know that she doesn’t need to worry about money. You know, she still hasn’t accepted a penny of the, umm, other stuff.”

I wanted to throw my shoe at Jake. His code words for alimony were ridiculous. Instead,

I glared at my brother, already anticipating the coming argument. “And I’m not going to, Gideon, so don’t try to make me.”

“Milk the bastard dry, Devan. You earned the right.”

“Gideon.”

“Hey, you’re entitled to half. Ask Jake.”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. “I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

Gideon growled. “Fine, whatever.” He nodded towards the stranger before me. “Give the guy the money and get him off the step. This isn’t getting any lighter. Tell me again why I didn’t let movers do this for her?”

“Because you have a guilt complex that won’t quit and the very idea of your baby sister being so far away from you is killing you on the inside. And you keep running various ways to get her to come home, or move your practice up here, through your head.”

I snorted. “Jake, he pushed me through the living room window when I was five. I don’t think that’s it. Try again.”

“I did not push you. You were spinning around pretending to be a princess ballerina and hit my model car,” Gideon bit out. “I just moved you away from it.”

“Yeah, and right through the screen. That bush had so many wasps in it that my ass hurt for weeks. It did get me out of a few annoying recitals. Thanks for that.” I glanced down at the sexy man on the step. “For reference, wasps don’t take kindly to people invading their area.” I rubbed my butt for effect and winked.

He just stared up at me, looking as though he was both shocked and pleased. I hoped he was both. It wasn’t every day that I felt I wowed someone.

Jake laughed so hard he sounded like a seal barking. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

“You did,” Gideon said. “Remember the month I refused to come... err... couldn’t come out and play? It was because of that.”

“Mom did *not* ground you. She didn’t have to. You were a mess. You grounded yourself. Uncle Robert talked to you for like twenty minutes about how you only have one sister.” I put my hand out and started to impersonate my very Italian uncle. “Gideon, look at her. She hurts but is worried about your toy. She is a gift, a dove sent to bring us all joy and happiness. Treat her as such for you do not know when they will ask for her to return home.”

“Holy shit, that’s why you were on your porch crying your eyes out. You were upset you hurt her.” Jake’s laughter wrapped around me and was infectious.

“Worse than that,” I blew Gideon a kiss, “he kept sneaking into my room at night to make sure I wasn’t dead. Uncle Robert convinced him that angels would show up at any minute and snatch me up. Tell him what you did, Gideon.”

“No.”

Jake grinned and gave me a ‘spill it’ look.

“Gideon found a spool of ribbon from one of those overdone dresses mom used to put me in and tied my ankle to my bed. I woke up with it wrapped around me so tight that dad had to cut it off and then point out that if Gideon did it again I could lose my leg. That only made him worse. How he became a doctor is beyond me.”

Jake laughed. “See he loves you. He dedicated his life to understanding how *notto* kill you.”

Gideon growled again. “I would like to get this to the fourth floor and then beat the living hell out of you, Jake.”

“I’ll sue you,” Jake offered.

“And I’ll fuck up the meds I prescribe you next time you’re sick. How’s a little birth control sound? Having issues with feminine itch? Oh, what? You have flames shooting out of your dick?”

Rolling my eyes, I put my hand out to the sexy man staring at me on the step and offered him a smile. “I’m sorry. This is what happens when you take a doctor and a lawyer too far from home. If you give us a minute to get the sofa upstairs, I’ll get you what you need to replace the outfit and I’ll still have this one cleaned for you.”

He shook his head, taking my hand and standing slowly. Warmth spread up my arm from his touch and my nipples hardened almost instantly. “No. It’s fine.”

Yes, you are.

“, can we please get this up the stairs?” Gideon smiled at me and glanced at the sofa. “You would buy this before you moved. Couldn’t you buy it once you got here?”

My jaw dropped. “Excuse me but you bought that for me. You and your shadow,” I pointed at Jake, “insisted on it.”

“In our defense, Devan, we did break your other ones,” Jake said, running his hands through his hair.

“The idea of three grown men going at it like school boys had to be a sight to see. And for the record, you three trashed my entire lower level.”

Jake glanced at Gideon nervously. “Yeah, school boys.”

“Gideon, tell me you didn’t go all Bruce Lee on him. You’re thirty-four. You could hurt yourself.” I let out a soft laugh. “You already had Jake helping you out. What more did you need?”

Jake cleared his throat. “Umm, Devan, I was actually trying get Gideon under control. I wasn’t helping beat the crap out of anyone. I didn’t think you wanted to have to visit your brother in prison or see his career get flushed down the shitter. I can get him off of just about any charge. Murder isn’t one of them.”

I glanced at the sexy man. “One second.” I ran down the stairs, kicked my slip-on white tennis shoes off, hopped onto the sofa and walked across it to get to Gideon. Tossing my arms around his thick neck, I hugged him tight as I kissed his cheek. “I love you even though you made my ass hurt for a week.”

As I pulled back, I found his eye glistening. He nodded and kissed my forehead. “Promise you’ll call everyday, Devan. Twice a day even. Maybe I should get you a cell phone that you can leave on all the time. Yeah, that might work.”

Drawing back, I knew he was fighting tears and Gideon was a big guy who didn’t cry. I wagged my brows as I looked him up and down. “Hey, Jake.”

“Yeah.”

“Picture Gideon in a prison uniform. He’d no longer need me to buy all of his clothes so he matches. Plus, he’d land a boyfriend in about two seconds.” I instantly launched into *Jailhouse Rock* doing my best Elvis. I rotated my hips and curled my lip not caring who saw me do it.

Gideon put his hand over my mouth. I continued to sing into it, sounding muffled and still not caring. He shook his head and laughed. “Jake, get the tape. She’s back with a vengeance. If she starts laughing so hard she can’t breathe I’m going down to the corner bar and grabbing a beer. I might need two. No fear. She’ll still be laughing when I get back.”

My cell phone rang. I put my hand out to Jake who had my phone on his hip. “Devan, that ring means work, so don’t panic. It’s not an emergency.”

“You don’t say. Gee, it’s only my cell phone. The one I programmed the rings into.” I kept shaking my hips as I took the phone from him. I opened it. “Devan Charter.”

Gideon growled. “It’s Devan Seward now.”

“Everyone there knows her as Charter. It’s easier for her to let it stay that way,” Jake said, in a hushed tone.

“Fuck easier. She is divorced. I’ll put it on a billboard for her.”

I pointed at him. He shut up.

“Ah, Devan, I’m glad I caught you.”

The sound of Chas Martins voice made my eyes roll. “Mr. Martins, I didn’t realize we were on a first name basis now.”

Jake poked my arm lightly and smiled. “Is that dickhead? Dev, if it is you have to put the guy on speakerphone. Gideon never believes me when I tell him about the lounge lizard who keeps trying to get you to work for him.” He clasped his hands together and dropped to his knees. “Please, it’s funny as hell. Plus, Gideon never gets to hear you be a bitch for real. The man thinks you have no spine. Show him.”

My eyes bulged as I stared down at Jake. I nodded. “Mr. Martins, I’m currently knee deep in Open to Buy reports so I need to put you on speaker phone.”

“Certainly, I understand how that is.”

I hit the button and held the phone out. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“You can start by calling me Chas. We’ve known one another for over five years. It’s safe to say we can be on a first name basis, Devan. I consider you a friend and friends tend to share many things, including casual conversation.”

Jake grinned.

I bit back a laugh. “I’m well aware of what friends share. What I’m not sure of is the reasoning behind your call. If you are implying this is casual then I should remind you I’m on company time here.” I crossed my fingers and shoved them in Jake’s face. He laughed, planted a tiny kiss on them and stood quickly.

Chas sighed. “You do like to make it difficult for me. That is exactly the attitude I want my consultants to have, Devan.”

“Hmm, calling competitor’s top executives while they are working, to attempt to persuade them to join the team, is the absolute last sort of practice I want the company I’m with participating in. It sort of screams unprofessional. And we are all professionals here, right, Mr. Martins?”

I’d built an empire, being a Jill-of-all-trades in matters of marketing consultations. If someone had a business problem, I generally had a solution. Martins operated the same way. He provided marketing and business consultations, often placing someone in-house with the company in question.

“Call me Chas. And Devan, you’re not thinking clearly right now. This is a trying time for you coming off a messy divorce and I’d like to help ease the burden. I know we started off on the wrong foot and I’d like to correct that. I’ve been told you’re relocating to New York. This would give us the perfect opportunity to get to know one another better. I’d hate for you to be alone. This is a big city. I can more than keep you company. I think you know what I’m talking about.”

I grabbed Jake’s arm and laughed hard without making any noise. It took a second but I got myself together and stood tall. “As kind as that offer is, I’d prefer to go it alone. And when I say go it alone, that covers *all* areas. I do not currently have a red light above my office door nor

do I want one. I would strongly suggest you focus on your client's needs and not your own. As lovely as our conversations always are, I really must be going. I'm meeting with my lawyer soon. He has some rather weighty issues he'd like to get moved forward." I winked at Jake.

Chas made a noise that sounded animalistic, like one would make during intercourse. I jerked back and held the phone towards Jake who covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Devan, you are the only woman I know who dares to talk to me the way you do. You know that I'm more than willing to offer you the world. I'm in a position to do it. You just won't accept it. I am huge."

"Yeah, I'm sure you think so." I snickered. "Oh, wait. You were talking size in relevance to your position. Sorry, I got a little confused on where this conversation was headed. It seemed as though it was headed south so naturally I assumed something else. I really need to be going now."

"Name your price, Devan," Chas said fast. "Everyone can be bought. Everyone."

"I'm sorry."

He sighed. "Well, at least we've moved to the point you're sorry for turning me down."

I let out a soft laugh. "No, I'm not sorry for that in the least. I'm sorry that somewhere along the line you actually came to believe that to be true. Not everyone has a price. Money isn't the answer to everything. In fact, in the end, it means nothing. Have a good weekend, Mr. Martins." I shut my phone and handed it to Jake. "Why do you enjoy hearing that scum bag's spiel? Does anyone else feel like they need a shower to get his voice off you? I think my phone has been violated. It needs a bath, too."

Jake looked proud. Gideon looked like he was about to blow. "Devan Jazz Seward, men try to buy you while you're working? Hell, anytime?"

"I'd hardly call Chas Martins a man," I said, hopping off the sofa and laughing. "He's more like a good looking, walking lounge lizard. He makes my skin crawl. But, I will say, he's a looker. He knows it, too."

Gideon tried to come for me but the sofa was in the way. "Did this just start?"

"What? Men trying to own me or lounge lizards," I smiled at Jake letting him know that I loved his name for Chas, "trying to bribe me to 'work' for them? Come on, women want to date you all the time. When they find out you're a doctor they flip out and start talking marriage. Dork," I pointed at Jake, "has the same problem."

Jake grinned. "Yeah, Dink. Leave her alone. She's not given an inch when it comes to this. Trust me, he's been nipping at her heels from the word go. Hell, she was very married when he started it all."

"What the hell is a dink?" Gideon asked again.

I smiled as I slipped my shoes back on. "It's a good thing. Trust me." Turning, I ran up the stairs and ran directly into the sexy man again. He grabbed me fast to keep me from falling. I held tight to him and stared into his emerald green eyes. "Thanks. You're really coming in handy."

"My pleasure."

I couldn't pull my gaze away from his green eyes. They were gorgeous and the same exact color as Brody's. "I know I'm going to sound like a broken record but you look so familiar. This is going to bug me. I'm positive I know you from somewhere."

Jake went to take his spot at the end of the sofa. "You know, I normally do my best to encourage only half of your insanity but you're right the guy does look familiar."

Mr. Sexy smiled. "Would you like some help moving in?"

“No, we’ll be--”

“Yes,” Gideon and Jake said, cutting me off.

The sexy man winked at me and I damn near fell over. “I’ll run up, change and come back to help.” He turned to head up the stairs. “Oh, I almost forgot. I’m Kurt Holland.”

“Hi, Kurt. Nice to dump a plant on you. I’m Devan Seward.”

The grin that spread over his face warmed me. “Well, Devan, it was my pleasure.”

I watched as Kurt jogged up the stairs. A small sigh escaped me. “I could get used to looking at that every day.”

Gideon began to chuckle. I glanced back at him as he stood in the doorway holding one end of the sofa up while the other lay on the floor. “Didn’t Uncle Robert tell you that when one door closes another opens?”

Before we’d left Ohio, I’d finalized my divorce and said goodbye to my family. They all knew how painful the divorce was for me and my uncle did his best to cheer me up. “Yep, he sure did.”

“Ha, I bet he didn’t think you’d waylay Mr. Right before he even got to the door.”

He and Jake laughed so hard that I knew they’d be at it a while. I gave up and headed up the stairs to my new home.