

To readers of romance novels

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CHAPTER ONE

Four days after losing control of her car and sliding into a mercifully shallow embankment during a Sierra Nevada snowstorm, Katie Connelly's entire existence had been pared down to only one thought: *I don't want to die.* Amazing, the way four days of freezing cold and hunger could change one's priorities. Last weekend her biggest worry had been that she would grow old alone. Now it was that she would never grow old at all.

She'd started out optimistic in the hours after the accident. Despite the fact that her cell phone got no reception this far into the woods, she'd never dreamed that help would prove so elusive. Too far from town and without proper clothing to hike to safety, she'd told herself that a car would surely come along and spot her eventually. After all, she couldn't possibly be the only idiot to ignore a winter storm warning and venture out onto the back roads. It might take a day, even two, but rescue would come. While she waited, she sang to keep up her spirits, read the bestseller that had been languishing in her backseat for the better part of six months, and rehearsed what she'd say to whomever freed her from her frozen prison. When that first night had fallen, she'd drifted off to sleep shivering but full of hope that she'd awaken to the sight of a clear sky and some sign of humanity.

The second day in the car had been more difficult—natural biological urges reared their ugly head and hunger set in. She started to worry about the snow that was drifting perilously high around her useless car. Day three consisted of a lot of crying, mentally cataloguing all her regrets, and cursing her lack of foresight in not packing more food. And now, day four: she was emotionally numb, starving, so cold she feared she might never thaw out, and quickly losing hope that anyone else was stupid enough to drive around in a raging blizzard.

Mostly, she really, *really* didn't want to die.

And all because she'd left girls' weekend in Tahoe a day early. If she'd waited until Sunday to head home, as planned, the storm would have already been in full swing. She wouldn't have even made it out of town. Being snowed in would have pissed her off, but at least she wouldn't be preparing for a slow, untimely demise. Spending one more day feeling lonely and pathetic among her happily partnered girlfriends sounded like a dream compared to a slow death inside a cheap economy sedan. One whose payment was now two days overdue.

This really was the perfect ending to a shitty weekend.

Sighing, Katie burrowed deeper into her sweatshirt and glanced at the window. It was completely covered in snow, so she couldn't determine if the

weather had started to clear. She hadn't been able to see outside since yesterday morning. For all she knew, her car was buried to the point where it couldn't be seen from the road.

That was a terrifying thought. This wasn't a well-traveled route, to say the least. She couldn't count on many people passing by even on a good day, so she desperately needed to attract the attention of anyone who did. She wasn't going to get many chances.

She considered her options. She could try to dig out the car or else leave the possibility of rescue to ever-diminishing luck. Getting out of the car didn't feel like a good idea, but neither was ignoring that the odds of being found were close to zero if nobody could see her. Pretty soon she wouldn't have enough strength left to do anything about that problem. She had no idea how many more days she could survive with no food and only melted snow to drink. As it was, the idea of stepping outside into the frigid wind exhausted her—and it wouldn't get any easier if she waited. This was truly a now or never kind of situation.

"Damn it. I don't *want* to." She'd been talking to herself a lot over the past few days. The sound of her own voice comforted her like nothing else could. Proof that she was still alive, she supposed. What could be more comforting than that?

Not going outside, her brain supplied. *Staying in the car*. Her fingers were already frozen, she'd been trembling for what felt like weeks, and all the clothes from her suitcase couldn't keep her warm even within the confines of her car. If she got wet or even lingered outside too long, she might never warm up. Hypothermia was a serious, persistent threat, and going out into the weather could mean speeding up the process of freezing to death.

Then again, doing nothing might easily lead to the same fate, if the starvation didn't kill her first.

"Damn it," she whispered again. Mustering the very last of her energy, she fumbled through the small mountain of clothing she'd piled on top of her body to stay warm. Her mind was cloudy and her movements felt sluggish, like she was a children's toy that was slowly winding down. Worst was that she couldn't stop shaking. "*Focus. Focus.*" If she was going to clear off the car, she needed to get as much extra clothing on her body as possible. Anything to keep the heat she had left from escaping into the frigid Northern California air.

Layering shirt-upon-shirt, she stopped only when it became too difficult to move her arms. Pants were even harder to manage. She tugged on a pair of pajama bottoms over her jeans, but she couldn't fit another pair of jeans over those. The final touch to her ridiculous outfit was the adorable blue hat and gloves set that she'd purchased especially for this trip. At the time she'd thought the snowflake pattern was darling. Now she no longer cared how well the color complemented her auburn hair and fair complexion. If she never saw another snowflake, it would be too soon.

Girls' weekend had been a bust in every way—this was just the icing on the cake. She'd arrived full of pride about her booming web design career and excited to catch up with college friends, but by the end of the first night, it had

become clear that she was the pathetic old maid of the group. At least that's how the rest of them treated her. Stripped of the vibrant, unique personalities she remembered from school, now each of them seemed singularly preoccupied with alternately bitching and waxing poetic about the men in their lives. And when they stopped talking about their love lives, they'd start in on Katie's. After just twenty-four hours, their repeated, well-intentioned reassurances that she'd find someone, too, threatened to drive her crazy. None of her many accomplishments mattered to those people. Just the fact that she was thirty-three and perpetually single.

Katie tugged the snowflake hat onto her head, then scowled at the gloves. They were totally impractical for this situation. Knit wool was adorable in the store, but it would never keep her hands dry. Leave it to her to buy stupid, girly, useless gloves.

"Worst weekend ever." She took a deep breath and opened the car door. Or tried to, at least. It moved less than an inch, then got stuck in the snow that had blown and drifted over the past few days. She grimaced as a stream of powder fell over her hands and onto the car seat. "Shit!"

She pulled the door closed with effort. The car was covered, all right. And she was trapped inside.

Katie lay back against the seat and closed her eyes. Every bit of her energy went toward not bursting into tears. She didn't want to cry. It wouldn't help, and even if the hot tears felt good on her skin for a moment, they would quickly freeze and make an uncomfortable situation even worse.

Exhausted by the effort she'd just exerted, Katie struggled against the seductive pull of sleep. The last time she'd roused from a nap, hours ago now, she'd promised herself she wouldn't fall asleep again. Not until she was rescued. She'd worried that next time, she wouldn't wake up. But now she was so tired and so very powerless, making it difficult to hang onto her resolve.

A sudden sense of calm washed over her. Things were well and truly out of her hands. There was nothing she could do except sit and wait. The thought freed her somehow, and she sank down into the peaceful oblivion of sleep once again.

CHAPTER TWO

Eventually time ceased to have meaning. Katie didn't know how long it had been since she tried to open the car door—probably hours, maybe days. Each time she drifted into consciousness, she was less tethered to reality. Her perceptions were muddy and it was painfully difficult to stay awake. So she slept whenever she could. Her lucid moments came less frequently, then seemed to stop altogether.

She dreamed—of rescue, of not being able to find her classroom on exam day, of being in love. The last one was her favorite. It made her feel safe, like everything would be okay no matter what happened. Waking from that dream was particularly disappointing, and she immediately yearned to float away again into the refuge of her own mind. Reality had nothing to offer her anymore.

At some point her dreams took a strange turn, and in a moment when she'd actually thought she was awake. But she couldn't be awake, because she saw bare hands begin to clear away the snow on the windshield, and that was impossible. The hands were attached to muscular arms—also bare—that worked furiously to dig her out.

She managed a weak chuckle. Naturally she would imagine a rescuer who wore even more impractical winter clothing than she did. She closed her eyes and listened to the muffled sound of digging, the moving of snow, then the startlingly loud crunch of a fist crashing through the frozen windshield. A frigid blast of air stole her breath, violently shattering her numbness. She curled away from the icy wind on instinct.

Then she was floating, cradled against solid warmth that barely penetrated the chill that had settled into her bones. She tried to get closer to that heat, to cuddle up to it, but she just couldn't get enough. The cold surrounded her, she was drowning in it, and no matter how badly she wanted to claw her way out, she lacked the strength and, sadly, the will.

Was this what it felt like to die?

Katie surrendered. Relieved, she sank into the strong arms that cradled her and waited for the cold to abate. Surely she wouldn't be forced to endure this icy chill for eternity.

Images came in disjointed flashes. Snow. The trees. Impossibly warm, bare skin against her frozen cheek. Then a cabin lit by a golden glow from within. Perhaps that was heaven. All she wanted to do was get inside that glow, to bathe in it. To forget that she had ever frozen to death alone.

The next time she came to, her body hovered between intense pain and

razor-sharp ecstasy. Her skin tingled as though a thousand bees were stinging her at once. She wanted to scream, but a heavy pressure building low in her belly caused her to moan instead. Waves of incredible pleasure nearly overwhelmed the agony of whatever was happening to her body, leaving her breathless and disoriented. The sensation was like teetering on the edge of orgasm, and she wanted nothing more than to tip over into oblivion and leave the pain behind.

As though the universe had finally decided to cut her a break, the excruciating sting receded until all that remained was bliss. And now she could feel—soft sheets against her naked skin, the firm press of a male body against her own. Swept away by swift, aching need, she snuggled closer to her dream companion, desperate to sate her desire. Still foggy, she struggled to find the friction she craved, hands roaming over coarse hair and hard planes, but total satisfaction proved elusive.

She had a vague thought: *Why do my sex dreams always end in frustration?*

Then another: *I'm safe.*

With that, the last trace of her consciousness slipped away.

CHAPTER THREE

Katie clawed her way out of sleep with fierce determination, aware that something wasn't right even before she opened her eyes. Her mattress was too firm. The air carried the unfamiliar scent of cedar. A solid shape rested against her side, breathing evenly—one that was far too big to be her cat. Alarm quickened her breathing as she finally broke free from her heavy slumber and took stock of her surroundings.

She was in a strange bed in a strange room. Wood paneling covered the walls, log cabin style. The framed nature photographs hanging from them gave the space a rustic feel, as did the redwood furniture that looked handcrafted. A lamp served as a dim sentry on the nightstand beside her, casting soft light over the large, brown mixed-breed dog curled up at her side. He stared at her with soulful chocolate eyes and then yawned, clearly unmoved by her rising panic.

Heart pounding, she sat up slowly. Where the hell was she? What had happened?

She dropped her head into her hands and tried to make sense of her jumbled memories. She vividly recalled the accident. Her internal debate about whether to walk miles in the desolate cold or wait for help. The four long days huddled in the backseat of her car. Losing track of what was real and what was delusion, dreaming of rescue one minute and death the next.

Then nothing. And now this.

Clearly she had been saved, but by whom? And how was it possible that she'd just woken up feeling so...*refreshed*?

Improbable as it was, she was in tip-top condition: rested, healthy, and most importantly, toasty warm. Confusion about how she'd gotten here aside, her mind felt sharp and alert in a way it hadn't in days. Except for the intense hunger that twisted her stomach, she was in far better shape than someone who'd just spent the past few days stranded in the frigid cold with only two candy bars and a snack-size bag of pretzels had any business being.

She lifted the comforter that covered her body, unsettled to discover that she was dressed in a pair of men's sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt. The clothes didn't belong to her, which meant that someone had undressed her. Like, *really* undressed her—she wasn't even wearing a bra. She snuck a hand beneath the waistband of the sweats and confirmed that she didn't have panties on, either. Her rescuer had obviously gotten an eyeful.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, the bedroom door opened and a man stepped inside. He stopped short when he saw her. "Oh."

She snatched her hand from the sweatpants and opened her mouth to say something, but the words caught in her throat. Dark and rugged and handsome, with vivid green eyes she could see from across the room, the stranger pretty much ticked all her 'perfect man' checkboxes. He was powerfully built, exuding strength and physical confidence, yet seemed to have as much trouble meeting her gaze as she did forming a coherent sentence. The dog perked its ears and whined at his master, but Katie could only manage a weak nod.

"You're up." The man hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his well-worn jeans and nodded at the dog. "I hope Shilah didn't startle you. I left him here to keep you warm."

She forced herself out of her stupor. "No, Shilah was fine. And very warm."

He shivered almost imperceptibly, still not meeting her eyes. "Do you remember what happened?"

"I had an accident." She pulled the comforter up around her body, slightly uncomfortable with the way he refused to look directly at her. Maybe he was only trying to protect her modesty—though it was a bit late for that, if he was the one who'd undressed her—but his uneasy avoidance seemed to hint at deep-seated guilt. Between his obvious discomfort and her instant, uncontrollable attraction to a complete stranger, Katie felt painfully vulnerable. Determined to act normal, she mustered a polite smile. "I lost control of my car. I was afraid I'd freeze to death if I tried to walk for help, so I decided to wait for someone to find me. But...nobody came."

"You'd nearly frozen to death by the time I got to you. You were unconscious, then delirious." The man leaned against the doorway, angled away from her. Almost as though he was ready to bolt at any moment. "Do you know how long you were stranded out there?"

"No." She gathered the comforter closer. "I lost track of time after the fourth or fifth day."

"I'm not surprised nobody found you. Your car was almost completely buried under the snow." He folded his arms over his chest, drawing her attention to his firm, muscled physique. She couldn't help but wonder what he looked like without his shirt. "It's lucky I spotted you when I did."

"Yes, very lucky." She dragged her gaze from his biceps to his face. The tender concern in his voice was at odds with his distant demeanor. "So where am I now?"

"In my cabin, about three miles from where your car ran off the road." Hesitating only momentarily, he walked across the room to the window and drew back the curtains to reveal angry, swirling flurries and frozen trees blanketed in white. "Storm picked up again this morning—it's Friday, by the way. All the roads are closed, otherwise I would've taken you into town."

"Friday," Katie whispered. It had been almost a week since she'd left Tahoe. No doubt her clients wondered where she was. Not to mention her parents and her older sister. *Oh, God.* Alarmed, she threw the blankets off her body and scooted to the edge of the bed. "Do you have a phone I could use? I need to let my family know I'm not dead—my clients, too. Everyone probably thinks I am."

The man raised his hand and took a step closer. "I don't have a phone. Listen,

be careful. You're probably very weak."

No phone. That meant she was trapped in a cabin in the woods with a strange man, and with no way to let anyone know where she was. A very real feeling of helplessness overwhelmed her, followed by a jolt of stark fear. She didn't know the first thing about this guy, who had apparently seen her naked already. Desperate to regain at least the illusion of control, she struggled to stand. "How about a computer? With Internet?"

"No, I'm sorry, but—"

He stopped talking and raced forward as she finally pushed up off the mattress, and caught her around the middle when her legs dissolved beneath her. Cradled in his powerful embrace, she felt instantly safe. Protected. The sensation triggered another burst of memory—being held in these arms, surrounded by this scent, his naked skin against hers. A hot surge of lust rocketed through her body and wrenched her back into the present. Gasping, she stared at him in shock.

He took a shuddering breath and carefully placed her back on the bed. Then he stepped away quickly. "Let me get you something to eat. You need to regain your strength."

Katie wasn't sure what frightened her more—her strange, uncharacteristic lapse, or the realization that she was completely dependent upon a stranger. Careful not to reveal her unease, she crawled back beneath the comforter and arranged the blankets over her chest. She had no idea whether her body's memory of this man was delusion or reality, but the way she'd just reacted to his touch rattled her to the core. She'd never felt anything like it before. The fact that the guy acted like he couldn't bear to be around her only made it worse.

"I know you want to contact your people, but there just isn't any way to do that from here. As soon as the storm lifts, I'll take you to town. I promise." He turned away, but not before she noticed the impressive bulge in his jeans. That he was in a similar state of arousal didn't comfort her in the least. The man was a stranger. Nobody knew she was alone with him in his home. She was having strange flashes of lying naked in his arms, yet she hadn't been conscious in days. And apparently she was too weak to walk, let alone fight him off if it came to that.

"Are we all alone out here?" She wrapped her arms around her stomach and tried not to let on how terrified she suddenly felt.

He hesitated. "Yes." For the first time since entering the room, he made brief eye contact. "But you're safe here with me, Katie. I swear it."

When he looked at her, she nearly forgot to breathe. It wasn't just the impact of those piercing eyes finally landing on her, but also the way they seemed to see her in a way that she wasn't sure she'd ever really been seen before. She knew it was ridiculous to feel this way—not even a minute ago, she'd been worried that he was getting ready to attack her—but that didn't change how his gaze made her feel inside. He looked at her as though he loved her. As though he would even die for her. She couldn't fathom what would inspire that level of devotion from a man who didn't know her at all. It frightened her. So did the sudden realization that he'd called her by name.

"I looked at your driver's license," he said, answering her unspoken question. "Your purse is next to the nightstand, on the floor. And your clothes are drying now. I can bring them to you when they're ready." He tore his gaze away from hers. "They were soaking wet by the time I got you home. I tried not to look at... you...any more than necessary."

Katie blushed. "Given that you know so much about me already, maybe you can tell me your name?"

"Rafe Whelan." He walked to the doorway and paused with his back to her. "I'll bring you lunch, then leave you alone. I've got books, if you like to read, or paper and pencils, if you wanted to write or draw. No television, I'm afraid. No computer, either."

She doubted she would be able to relax enough to do anything except sit and worry. Her life was literally in this man's hands. His very strong, masculine, sexy hands—which could be serial killer hands, for all she knew, or those of a sadistic sexual predator. After her reaction to having those hands on her, she couldn't shake the feeling that he'd not only undressed her, but also initiated some kind of intimate contact she only vaguely remembered. And now he reeked of guilt and shame. How could she read or draw or nap, especially, with that hanging over her? Afraid to alert him to her growing suspicion, she scooted back against the headboard and pulled her knees to her chest. "A book would be nice."

He nodded and started out the door, but something made her call out to him. "Wait!"

Rafe stopped and glanced back in her direction. "Yes?"

"When do you think the roads will be open?"

"I don't know." He turned and stared at her with an intensity that raised the fine hairs on her arms. "Soon, I hope. I want to get you back to your people just as badly as you want to go. Believe me."

Hearing the sincerity in his words, but unsure what to make of it, she gave him a reluctant nod. She didn't want him to know that she distrusted him. Not while she was a prisoner in his home. "You saved my life. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Something that looked like regret passed across his face, but he covered it nicely with a smile that made Katie's stomach flip-flop despite her best efforts to remain unaffected. "If you're still cold, I can prepare a hot bath for you. And give you privacy, of course."

She couldn't think of a worse idea. "That's generous of you, but I'm okay. Thanks."

He left with a curt nod, the smile vanishing from his face before he'd even turned away. Katie shuddered as he closed the door. Alone with his dog—Shilah—she sank her fingers into the coarse fur that covered the back of his neck. "Are you here to keep me warm, or to guard me?"

Shilah rolled onto his side and exposed his belly in a clear attempt to solicit a stomach rub. She complied, feeling a little silly about her fleeting paranoia. The dog was just an overgrown puppy. Perhaps his master had a similar soft nature.

There was no real reason to assume that Rafe meant her any harm. So far he had been polite and respectful, and he was clearly trying to keep his distance—

even if to an unsettling extent. If not for the guilt in his eyes and the downright disturbing flashes of what might have happened while she was unconscious, she would have no reason to see him as anything other than a hero. But it was obvious that something was off. He seemed overly anxious for her to go, as though he couldn't stand being around her. Somehow she felt like both an intruder and a prisoner—unwelcome but stuck in his house, unable to leave.

Yet despite all that, her body stirred as she thought about him. Dark-haired with a couple days worth of scruff covering his chiseled face and a leanly muscled body, he was her fantasy man come to life. And those eyes...Katie whimpered as her inner muscles clenched, sending a ripple of pleasure down to the tips of her toes.

For a moment she sat stunned. Then she slowly eased her hand beneath the waistband of her sweats and sought out her labia with tentative fingers. Slick wetness coated her trimmed hairs, her inner thighs, her almost unbearably sensitive folds. She'd never felt anything like it. Gasping, she tore her hand out of her pants and wiped her fingers hastily on the sheets.

This wasn't normal. This wasn't *her*.

Had he slipped her some kind of drug? Taken advantage of her when she was unconscious? Even if she had vague memories of wanting it, she hadn't been in any condition to consent. Had he done something to put her in this state so that if she remembered what he'd done, she would think it was her idea?

Katie closed her eyes and fought to recall the details of her rescue. She'd been so out of it mentally that she'd thought Rafe's appearance was a dream or even a dying vision—being taken out of the car, carried through the cold, then eventually warmed in his embrace. But it hadn't been a dream. At least not all of it. That *something* had happened between them was obvious.

She wasn't sure how to stay in Rafe's house without knowing what it was.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rafe knocked on the door again some time later, startling Katie upright in bed. She'd only meant to rest for a minute, not wanting to be vulnerable when her host returned, but Shilah had put his head on her belly as soon as she'd lain down and she'd lost track of time petting him. Now Shilah grumbled as she shot ramrod straight against the headboard before calling out, "Come in."

The door opened and Rafe walked inside without glancing in her direction. He carried a bowl, a piece of crusty bread, and a glass of water. Clearly in a rush, he set the food on the nightstand and backed away. "I hope you like chicken soup."

The savory aroma hit her in the face and made her mouth water. Any concern she might have had about being drugged disappeared at the prospect of filling her stomach. She snatched up the bowl, then gave him a sheepish nod. "This is perfect. Thank you."

"You can have more if you'd like." For the first time, a trace of humor crept into Rafe's voice. "But you should probably take it easy. Your stomach needs to acclimate to having food inside it again."

"I'll keep that in mind," Katie said as she shoveled a spoonful into her mouth. She moaned, undone by the warmth and flavor of the broth, not to mention the promise of sustenance. Never again would she take food for granted. Ever. "Oh...this is so good."

She looked up and Rafe quickly averted his gaze from her chest. Swallowing, he rasped, "I'm glad."

Though he'd traded the snug jeans he'd worn earlier for a pair of loose sweatpants, Rafe's arousal remained obvious. She tried not to stare. Had he been excited this whole time, or was he reacting to her unselfconscious enjoyment of her lunch? Either way, she vacillated between being frightened, embarrassed, and pleased by the evidence of his desire. The longer he went without trying to initiate physical contact, the more convinced she became that he wasn't planning on assaulting her. Not while she was conscious, at least.

She frowned. If she wanted to know what had occurred while she was unconscious, she would have to ask him. Even if he wasn't willing to tell her the truth, she might learn something from the way he responded. "Can you tell me what happened after you got me out of my car?"

Panic flashed in Rafe's eyes. "What?"

"After you dug me out of my car...I don't remember much, and what I do recall, I'm not even sure really happened." Katie hesitated, unsure how much

she wanted to say. She hated to accuse him of behaving improperly when he hadn't done anything overtly threatening. So maybe he was a little aloof and a lot awkward. The guy lived in the middle of the woods. People skills probably weren't among his strengths. She decided to start with an easy question. "Did you carry me back here? I swear that's what I remember, but...it seems a little crazy, in my head."

Rafe crossed the room and opened the trunk that sat in the corner. He pulled out a folded comforter, but instead of offering it to her, he held it in front of his crotch, hiding his erection. "I did carry you. I went out for a hike that afternoon on foot, so..." He cleared his throat and glanced longingly at the bedroom door. Once again, he seemed desperate to leave. "Why don't I let you eat? I'll bring your clothes when I come back for the dishes."

"Wait." She set down the bowl of soup. No way was she going to let the food distract her from her most important goal. She needed to know what she'd gotten herself into. "What happened after you brought me inside? I must have been in pretty bad shape."

"You were hypothermic." Rafe's expression softened. "When I got you here, I took you straight to the guest room. Your clothes were soaked through from the storm, so I undressed you. Then I put you in dry clothes and covered you with blankets. I sat with you for a while to make sure your condition didn't deteriorate as you warmed." He glanced at Shilah, who thumped his tail against the mattress the instant he received his master's attention. "You're strong. You're a fighter. Once you were warm and I was confident you were stable, I put Shilah in bed with you to provide body heat. Then I left."

It was a good story. She wished she believed it. She didn't know *how* she knew it wasn't the whole truth, but she did, in her bones. Rafe was lying to her. His dishonesty was so obvious it made her cringe. While it shouldn't have hurt her on a personal level—she didn't even know this man—the deceit stung. Inexplicably, it felt like a betrayal, as though she'd actually expected more.

He finally met her gaze, swallowing visibly at whatever he saw in her eyes. "Let me get your clothes." He practically dashed out of the room.

Katie gave the soup a sidelong glance. Her stomach growled painfully, and against her better judgment, she picked up the bowl. Yes, Rafe was lying to her. That didn't mean he'd put something in her food. It didn't mean he wanted to hurt her in any way. Or at least that's what she tried to convince herself as she took another tentative bite. She needed to eat. If she didn't, she wouldn't have the strength to defend herself, if it came to that.

Realistically, he'd had ample opportunity to hurt her if he'd wanted. Chances were, he was just socially awkward or something equally innocuous. He had promised to take her into town as soon as the weather cleared, and right now she had no choice but to believe him. So she was going to eat.

She was surprised when he knocked on the door only minutes later. She placed the empty bowl of soup on the nightstand and called out, "Come in."

This time Rafe held a pile of folded clothing. "Looks like you were wearing everything you had with you." A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, but he sobered quickly. "I'm sure you'll be more comfortable in your own clothes."

Actually, she was certain that his T-shirt and sweatpants were worlds more comfortable than anything she'd packed for girls' weekend, but she wasn't going to say that out loud. "I appreciate that. Thank you."

Rafe took a deep breath, then dragged his gaze to meet hers. Once again, a heady rush of passion and need flooded through her body and settled between her legs, where it swiftly became a gnawing, yearning ache. She swore she could see her desire reflected in the flaring of Rafe's nostrils, the darkening of his eyes, the quickening of his breath. Katie leaned forward in anticipation, sensing that he was about to open up to her, that he may even say something that would help explain the chemistry between them.

A muffled knock came from somewhere outside the bedroom, startling both Shilah and Rafe and drawing their attention to the door. Rafe's face fell at the interruption and a look of cold dread chased away the longing in his eyes. Katie's heart rate picked up as he strode to the door. "Wait here. I'm not expecting anyone."

She nodded and rested her hand on Shilah's head, grateful that the dog made no move to leave. There was no mistaking Rafe's reaction to this visitor. He was nervous. And why not? He lived in the middle of the woods and the roads were supposedly closed. It did seem unusual that someone would just drop by. Very unusual.

Was this guest really unexpected? Or was Rafe nervous for another reason?

Perhaps his surprise had been feigned. Maybe he didn't want her to know that he'd invited someone over? Or that there was someone else living in the house? The possible implications of her increasingly paranoid thoughts turned her insides to ice.

Cautiously, she scooted to the edge of the bed. Mindful that her legs hadn't supported her the last time she'd tried to stand, she gripped the edge of the nightstand and slowly got to her feet. After a slight wobble, she found her balance and then, gradually, her strength. She wasn't sure what she hoped to accomplish, but she couldn't just sit in that bed and worry about who had come calling.

Katie tiptoed to the bedroom door, holding up her hand to Shilah in a silent plea for him to stay. He whined low in his throat as she eased the door open a couple of inches, but didn't move. Not wanting to leave the safety of the room, she closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the doorframe, listening hard.

Two male voices. As she strained to make out their words, a deep, unfamiliar baritone rose in anger.

"What the *hell* are you thinking?"

Rafe said something too quiet for her to hear, then added, "I had no choice."

"Of course you did."

"What? Let her die?" Rafe practically snarled. "That wasn't an option."

"Why not? She's a human, for fuck's sake. You should never have gotten involved."

Katie's eyes flew open. Rafe's visitor was a straight-up crazy person. He'd spat out the word *human* as though it tasted bad in his mouth. As though he truly

believed he was something else. Something better. She waited to hear Rafe's response, praying he wouldn't say something equally as insane.

Unfortunately, another low whine from Shilah drowned out Rafe's response. She tossed a glare over her shoulder at the dog, shutting him up with one hard look. Then she turned her attention back to the conversation, which had grown even more heated.

"She can't stay here." The stranger's voice radiated anger. "It's far too dangerous. She'll attract trouble. She'll be killed."

Katie's heart stuttered, then pumped into overdrive. Killed?

"You think I don't know that?" Rafe's easy acceptance of the man's warning raised gooseflesh on her arms, as did the anguish in his voice. Now she knew she wasn't simply being paranoid. Her life was in danger.

"Then why is she still here?"

"What do you want me to do with her?" Rafe lowered his voice, forcing Katie to open the bedroom door another few inches so she could creep into the hallway to listen. "The roads are closed. She's not strong enough to walk out on foot, or even travel by snowmobile, if that were possible. If we ran into anyone on the way into town, I don't know if I could protect her. You know what it's like out there tonight. Trouble would find us, and it wouldn't be a fair fight."

"Tonight is nothing compared to how it'll be tomorrow." The stranger matched Rafe's quiet tone, but she still made out what he said next: "*You* could kill her, Rafe."

She held her breath as she waited for Rafe to respond.

"I won't." He didn't sound wholly confident.

"How can you possibly—"

Rafe cut him off with a harshly whispered reply, too soft for Katie to hear.

"What the fuck is *wrong* with you?" The stranger's booming reaction shook the walls, startling her backward a step, right into the doorframe.

"I didn't know it would happen." Rafe growled the words, meeting anger with anger. "That it even *could* happen."

"You should have just let her die."

"I couldn't." Rafe paused. "I know you don't understand, but even before...I couldn't do that."

"At least it would've been an easy death. A clean death. Now she'll most likely be raped, tortured, and murdered tomorrow—and I still think there's a good chance that you'll be the one to inflict one or more of those fates. It would have been better to let her go peacefully, brother."

This time Rafe growled for real. "I will *not* let that happen."

"You said it yourself—you won't be able to protect her. You know how they are. They catch one whiff of human pussy in these woods, and you'll be up against a goddamn horde trying to get at it."

"Like I said, you think I don't know that?"

More than anything, Katie yearned to close the door and stop listening. But her feet stayed rooted to the floor as she hung on every horrifying word. Terror didn't even begin to describe what she was feeling inside. The urgency in their voices was real, even if nothing they said made sense. They might be crazy, but

each of them clearly bought into their shared delusions. That meant they were beyond dangerous. Both of them.

“So what are you going to do?” Now the stranger sounded weary. Defeated.

“I’m going to keep her hidden. Keep her safe.”

“And then?”

“Then I’m getting rid of her.” Rafe fell silent for so long that Katie thought maybe both men had left the cabin, even though she hadn’t heard a door open or close. She considered venturing farther out of the bedroom, just to take a peek, but froze in place when Rafe spoke again, brokenly. “I promise. Day after tomorrow, she’s gone.”

“If she’s still alive.”

“She will be.” Rafe sounded hollow now. “She has to be.”

His ominous, sorrowful words hit her directly in the gut. Nauseated, she willed her body into motion and retreated into the bedroom. Her knees wobbled as she eased the door closed, taking care to stay silent. She didn’t want them to know she’d been listening, even if she wasn’t sure how to interpret their conversation.

Whatever it all meant, one thing seemed clear: she was in deep, dark trouble.

CHAPTER FIVE

Katie paced back and forth in front of the bed while she waited for Rafe to return to the room. The chicken soup had given her the much-needed energy to exercise her legs and regain some sense of physical confidence. For that she was grateful. Based on what she'd just overheard, she was going to need her strength.

No matter how sexy Rafe was, no matter how protective he might have seemed at times, there was no non-threatening explanation for the things he and his friend had just discussed. Hearing the words *raped*, *tortured*, and *murdered* tossed around so casually—and with such acceptance—scared the hell out of her. That his friend had suggested that Rafe himself might commit one or more of those acts upon her was beyond comprehension. Rafe's insistence that he wouldn't might have reassured her more if he hadn't seemed to indicate that something *had* happened between them after her rescue—something bad enough to draw his friend's anger.

Overwhelmed, Katie stopped pacing and forced back the sob that threatened to escape. The worst part of this whole nightmare was not being sure whether she could trust Rafe. He'd sounded sincere when he told his friend he wanted to protect her, but at the same time, he was clearly a liar. He'd been lying to her from the moment she woke up. And he was crazy. Batshit crazy.

So how could she *possibly* trust him?

"Oh, God," she whispered. Her eyes brimmed with tears and she swiped them away, frustrated. She had no idea what she was going to do, but crying wasn't an option. The pissed-off part of her wanted to confront Rafe and demand the truth, while her more pragmatic side urged her to hide the fact that she knew something was amiss. If he reacted to her accusations with violence, she had no way to protect herself, nowhere to hide. Even if she managed to escape the cabin, she didn't know how to reach civilization—and the cold would likely kill her before she could.

She inhaled deeply, trying to steady her nerves, but immediately regretted it when Rafe's pleasantly male scent flooded her senses and turned her legs to jelly. Anger surged through her, fiery and all-consuming. How was it possible that the mere hint of his smell on her borrowed clothes could make her body forget that he was obviously a lunatic? She was at a total loss, and resented the hell out of him for that.

At what was almost certainly the worst moment he could have chosen, Rafe knocked on the bedroom door again. "Katie?"

Startled, she stumbled backward a few steps and brought her hand to her

chest, shocked to feel her heart thumping in nervous excitement. Infuriated that her mind and body were on completely different wavelengths when it came to this man, she barked, "What?"

The door creaked open and Rafe peeked inside. "Are you all right?"

At the sight of his face—square-jawed, rugged, and handsome—and the concern in his beautiful eyes, Katie's thin hold on her control snapped. "No, I'm not. I am definitely *not* all right."

Rafe's expression changed instantly, as though he was dropping some pretense he realized she wasn't buying. His entire countenance hardened, even as his throat jumped in a clear indication of anxiety. "Do you need another bowl of soup?"

No, she wanted to shout, she needed to know what was going on. But she held her tongue, afraid of pushing him too far. "Who was at the door?"

He studied her as though trying to decide why she was asking. Or maybe he sensed that she already had an idea. After a long hesitation, he said, "A neighbor."

"I thought the roads were closed."

"They are. He has a snowmobile. And he doesn't live very far." Rafe took a step closer, prompting Katie to step back. The complex mix of emotions on his face confounded her. "Tell me what you're really asking."

Katie tamped down the urge to keep retreating. She could see a hint of danger in Rafe's eyes and feared that the artifice of civility was about to dissolve between them. Her gaze darted around the room as she tried to decide what she would do if he came after her. He stood between her and the door. The bed blocked her only other route of escape.

She really didn't want to get anywhere near that bed right now.

"Did you tell him about me?" Katie said. Though it wasn't what she really wanted to know, she suddenly, desperately, didn't want to push her luck. "I was just wondering...could he take me into town?"

Rafe relaxed slightly. "Yeah, he knows you're here. He agreed that the roads are impassable right now, even by snowmobile."

"And let me guess...he doesn't own a phone, either?"

Rafe's guard went back up. "No, he doesn't." He paused, then said, gruffly, "It's a different lifestyle out here. We don't rely on technology the way your kind does."

"My kind?" She took another inadvertent step backward. His labeling her as some sort of other reminded her of the way his neighbor had spat out the word *human*.

He looked away. "City folk."

"Of course." She no longer cared about getting answers. She only wanted him to leave the room. "Okay. Thank you."

But he didn't leave. He didn't even react. Instead he stood eerily still as some kind of internal battle seemed to play out, one that Katie could plainly see but didn't understand. When he suddenly lifted his hand to reach for her, she gasped and flinched away.

He jerked as though she'd struck him. "You think I'm going to hurt you."

She shook her head in weak denial.

"You do." Rafe moved out of her space. As he did, Katie's attention drifted downward, to the incredible bulge in his pants. He followed her gaze and scowled, covering himself with his hands. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Then why are you lying to me?" Katie's hand flew to her mouth as soon as the accusation escaped. She hadn't meant to say that.

"I'm *not* going to hurt you." He stepped closer and she backed up until she bumped up against the edge of the mattress. "Look at my face, in my eyes. I could *never* hurt you."

She did look, not that she needed to, because what she saw in his face was the same thing she heard in his voice. Utter and complete sincerity. Devotion. The scary part was that she believed him. But he still hadn't answered her question. With courage she didn't understand, she said, "Tell me why you're lying to me."

"What do you think I'm lying about?"

"What happened after you brought me home?" He claimed that he couldn't hurt her, and at this point, she assumed she was about to find out. "You did something to me, didn't you?"

Rafe turned and walked to the door. "Do you need anything else before I turn in for the night?"

"Are you just going to ignore me?" Somehow, his avoidance was almost worse than the anger she'd expected. Without thinking, Katie followed him for a few steps. "Rafe, please tell me what happened. Whatever it is. What did you do to me?"

"Nothing." He swiveled around and glared at her. "Listen to me: you are going to stay in this bedroom. Use the bathroom if you'd like. I will bring you food and water and whatever else you need. Just ask. You can keep the door closed, and I'll only bother you to cater to your every need. If I had some way to allow you to lock me out, I'd let you do that, too. All I can do is promise that I will not enter this room without your explicit permission."

The genuine hurt in his tone reduced her to feeling like an ungrateful bitch. "Rafe—"

"I don't know what you think I might do to you, but I promise that I will not touch you, hit you, kiss you, fuck you, or otherwise injure you in *any* way. When I brought you back here last night, all I did was try to help you. I warmed you up. That's all I was trying to do."

He sounded so genuine, but she knew what she'd heard. Disappointment burned in her chest, making it hard to breathe. She desperately wanted to believe him, to take comfort in his presence and view him as her protector, but she couldn't trust anything he said. Not when he was keeping secrets. At the risk of insulting the man who'd saved her life, she allowed her anger to surface. "Fine. Then go. I don't need anything else from you."

"Fine." He threw open the door and stepped into the hallway. "Now be a good girl and stay in your room. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be."

"It doesn't need to be hard at all," Katie snapped. "All you have to do is be honest with me."

Rather than answer, Rafe shut the door in her face. Stunned, she stared at the wood grain in disbelief. She was infinitely more upset about her situation now than she'd been only an hour ago. Apparently tomorrow would bring grave danger, and the man who swore he wanted to protect her was not only crazy, but also a liar. She wasn't safe here. Not at all.

With that thought, Katie stalked over to the pile of clean clothes and tugged off Rafe's T-shirt. She couldn't stand to smell him on her anymore.

CHAPTER SIX

She had to leave.

When it came down to it, that was her only option. Katie wasn't sure how she would sneak away or where she would go, but that wouldn't dissuade her from the only course of action that made sense. Remaining here meant willingly putting her life in Rafe's hands. Better to take her chances on her own. The bad weather and their isolated location meant escape could very well be a suicide mission, but according to Rafe's friend, she was as good as dead if she stayed. She didn't know what to believe anymore. In her heart she somehow couldn't imagine Rafe hurting her, but there was no real reason to trust him. Not after what she'd heard. Maybe he was just a really good actor—sociopaths usually were, right? Given the choice between that and being raped, murdered, and/or tortured, she'd take the cold any day.

Shilah sat on the bed at her side, ears pricked. He seemed to sense her unease, whining low in his throat and nudging her with his nose. She stroked his head to shush him, not wanting Rafe to have any reason to come back. Outside, the sky had gone dark. Rafe had indicated that he was going to sleep soon...she hoped he was at least being honest about that. Once he was asleep, she would investigate the cabin to see if he'd been lying about not having a telephone. If she could call for help, maybe she wouldn't need to venture into the night by herself. She could just blockade herself in the bedroom until help arrived.

Of course, she had no idea how she would direct the police to her location. Katie sighed deeply. "This just keeps getting better, doesn't it?"

Shilah lay his head on her thigh and matched her exhalation. Laughing despite her fear, Katie flopped back onto the mattress and closed her eyes. She had some time to kill before Rafe went to bed, no doubt, and conserving her energy was probably the best way to do it. Careful not to get too comfortable, she allowed herself to doze lightly.

Jerking awake some time later, Katie blinked in confusion, then craned her neck to glance out the window. Inky blackness stared back at her. She sat up in a rush, heart pounding as she tried to decide how long she'd been out. Shilah picked up his head and blinked, looking at her expectantly.

"What do you think?" she whispered. "Is your daddy asleep?"

Shilah thumped his tail against the mattress, clearly pleased by the sound of her voice. She stroked his head—he really was a very nice dog—then stood slowly, not wanting him to follow. She held out her hand. "Stay here."

Shilah immediately leapt off the bed and stretched with exaggerated languor.

Katie rolled her eyes and stepped between him and the door, hands on her hips. "I said stay." She gestured. "Sit." She was relieved when he obeyed without hesitation. "Now stay."

She walked to the door and, when Shilah didn't move, pressed her ear to the cool wood. Silence. She couldn't hear anyone walking around, which could mean he'd gone to bed, or else he was just sitting quietly somewhere in the cabin. Unfortunately, the only way to know was to look.

"Okay." Katie took a deep breath, resting her forehead against the door. "If he's awake, I'm going to tell him that I think you have to go outside to potty. Deal?"

Shilah's tail smacked against the ground a couple times, then stilled. When she glanced over her shoulder at him, he stared back eagerly as though waiting to see what she would do. With a quick plea to the universe, she gripped the doorknob and twisted it open. A nightlight plugged into a socket near the floor illuminated a dim path to the end of the short hallway, leaving her to wonder what lay beyond. She closed the door behind her, not wanting Shilah to follow. Before venturing any farther, she waited to see if Shilah would bark and alert Rafe to her movement.

The bark never came. Katie stood completely still and strained to catch any noise that would signal that Rafe was awake. Nothing. All she could hear was the sound of her pulse racing, and the rush of adrenaline through her veins. The silence quickly turned oppressive, startling her into action. Frightened or not, somehow the thought of doing *something* seemed so much less terrifying than continuing to stand there dumbly.

Her legs quivered as she crept down the hall and turned left to find another hallway, this one with two doors, one open, one closed. The open door was a bathroom, which she was sorely tempted to use. She hadn't peed in a long time, as far as she knew, and the very thought made her bladder burn. Unfortunately, she would have to wait just a little longer. If she wanted the freedom to explore the cabin without attracting Rafe's attention, making a pit stop wasn't exactly the height of stealth.

Pushing aside her biological needs, Katie moved past the closed door on tiptoes. There was a good chance that was Rafe's bedroom. The thought stirred an unwelcome tug of arousal that she couldn't begin to explain. Surely the fact that Rafe was definitely a liar and probably a crazy person should mitigate her inexplicable attraction to him. Right? So the fact that one part of her wanted to push open his bedroom door and crawl into bed with him had to mean that she was crazy, too. Or that he really had drugged her.

Sickened by the thought, she made her way to the end of the hallway and found herself in a large room that had been sectioned off into a kitchen, a dining area, and, separated by a long bar complete with stools, a sitting room with a couch and fireplace. The light from the nearly full moon shone in through the room's windows, allowing her to make out the dim shape of the furniture, though not the details of the pictures she could see hanging on the walls. What struck her was that everything looked so *normal*. Nothing about this man's home suggested that he was insane *or* murderous—though, she wasn't exactly sure

what she'd expected to find. A pile of bodies? Guns and knives? A sex dungeon?

Did it really matter that Rafe's cabin wasn't littered with evidence of evil intent? She knew what she'd heard. Determined not to linger in the common area any longer than absolutely necessary, she made a slow circuit around the room, starting in the kitchen. She searched the counters for a telephone, dismayed when she couldn't find one. She'd nearly convinced herself that Rafe had been lying about not having any way for her to contact her parents or her sister, but maybe he was telling the truth. She found a flashlight in a drawer next to the pantry, which she took. Then she raided the pantry, taking some beef jerky that looked homemade, a package of crackers, and a banana. It wasn't much, but she wouldn't last in the elements for very long, anyway. If she didn't find shelter before running out of food, she was as good as dead.

More and more, that seemed like the most likely outcome to this situation. Stay or go, she would be lucky to make it home alive.

She performed the rest of her search in efficient silence. From what she could see in the low light, Rafe was a man who enjoyed reading, photography, and music. His bookcase overflowed with fiction and non-fiction, still more framed nature photos lined the walls, and he had an expensive-looking sound system—by far the most modern piece of technology she'd seen in the place. The fact that he liked such *human* diversions made him only slightly less ominous. There were probably plenty of serial killers and rapists with good taste in music. The fact that their music collections were nearly parallel—plenty of classic rock, with a smattering of 80's gothic rock favorites—meant nothing. It didn't mean he wouldn't kill her if that's what pleased him.

Her next big find was a closet where she found a heavy fleece jacket. She snatched it off the hanger and tucked it under her arm. It looked a lot warmer than her own winter coat, and big enough to layer over the rest of her clothing. If she was really going to make a break for it, she would need the extra protection.

She saw the two-way radio just as she was about to leave the sitting area. It sat on a desk in the corner farthest from the window, cloaked in shadow. At first she didn't recognize what it was, but the distinctive shape gave it away. Her skin prickled as she crossed the room to examine it. Rafe had said there was no way to contact the police or her family. If the radio worked, and she had no reason to assume it didn't, then this was evidence of another lie.

She hesitated. If she could use the radio to call for help, she wouldn't have to actually step out that door into the cold night. She could just sit and wait for rescue. Again. Katie frowned. Last time, that hadn't exactly worked out. Even if she could figure out how to use the radio to call for help, Rafe might catch her. It could be loud enough to wake him up, and what then? She'd be dead long before help arrived. But going outside...the closer she got to having to really make a decision about what to do, the scarier the thought of fleeing into the woods became. She would almost certainly get lost. She had no sense of direction in the best of times, and the flurries that continued to fall outside would only further disorient her. Not to mention the fact that she had no idea where she was. Rafe said they were three miles from her car, but in what

direction? Besides, that could also be a lie. She could be miles and miles from civilization—too far to walk.

After a lengthy hesitation, she picked up the two-way radio and ran her hands over unfamiliar buttons and dials. She had no idea how to use the stupid thing, but she found herself twisting a knob next to the antenna anyway.

Beep.

Katie startled and nearly dropped the radio, bobbling it between her hands frantically before finally regaining her grip. Her finger pushed another button, causing another loud *beep*. The front display glowed green, intensely bright in the darkened room. Shaking, she turned the knob to power it down, then stayed statue-still as she waited for Rafe to emerge from his bedroom. But there was only silence.

She looked at the radio in her hand, tempted to put it back where she'd found it. But she knew the better move would be to just take it with her. Away from the cabin, she could try to call for help without worrying about being overheard. Leaving her only way to communicate behind would be a dumb move, one she would surely regret if she wound up lost and alone in a blizzard.

Katie swallowed. She supposed this meant she'd made up her mind.

She had to leave.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After Katie made her decision, she moved fast. Rushing back to the guest room, she put on her heaviest winter clothes and the fleece jacket, then made a terrible discovery. Her shoes were nowhere to be found. She hadn't even looked for them before, not wanting to make noise while she skulked around the cabin. It had never occurred to her that they wouldn't be nearby. Rafe had obviously taken them off when he undressed her, but he hadn't left them in her room. Her cynical side urged her to see that as yet another sign of his ill intent. Luckily, she'd seen a pair of his boots near the front door. They would be far too big and make walking more difficult, but they would have to do.

She tucked the food from the kitchen into one of the large pockets in Rafe's coat, the flashlight and two-way radio in the other. Shilah sat next to the guest room door and watched her preparations, wagging his tail in excitement. She frowned at him, worried that his enthusiasm would give away her escape. At the door, she reached into her pocket and tore off a piece of jerky, then tossed it into the far corner of the room. Shilah looked at the spot where it landed, then at her, tongue lolling.

"Go get it!" Katie whispered. "And then *stay*."

Shilah took off running, but she didn't linger to watch him enjoy his treat. Instead she slipped out of the room and sprinted past Rafe's bedroom to the front door. She pulled on his boots, certain that at any moment, his door would click open down the hallway. She was surprised when it didn't, and even more shocked when she pulled open the front door and slipped outside without eliciting any barking or activity from any of the cabin's occupants. A frigid blast of wind stole her breath and large flurries landed wetly on her face, but Katie had never been so relieved to be out in the cold.

She was free.

In the guest room, her plan had been to carefully survey the landscape and identify where the snow-covered road began. But that wasn't how it went down. The noise of the cabin door closing behind her triggered a fearful, primitive reaction. She ran for her life.

Or at least she tried. Thigh-deep snow sent her toppling forward when her lower body didn't move as fast as she expected. Cursing under her breath, she picked herself up and brushed off the front of her coat. This was going to be a difficult walk.

Rafe's truck was parked to her right, trapped in snow that had piled up over the bottom of the tires. She could only assume that he'd parked in the driveway,

and that he'd driven straight in. There was a clearing in the trees behind the truck, probably a road. She trudged in that direction, clumsy in Rafe's oversized boots, and concentrated on walking in a straight line. It didn't take long before she had trouble seeing where the road ended and dirt and trees began. Panic kept her walking forward even when she grew less confident that she was going in the right direction. By the time she lost sight of the cabin behind her, she had no idea where she was. She'd somehow wandered off the clear path through the trees, and when she pivoted in place after finally stopping short in confusion, she realized that she had absolutely no idea which direction to go.

Oh, God. This was a bad idea.

"No," Katie whispered under her breath. "No, this was my only choice."

But was it? Maybe she had misjudged Rafe. Maybe he'd only humored a crazy neighbor, played along with his delusion. It was possible. She looked back over her shoulder, in the direction she thought the cabin might be. No longer in motion, the cold settled into her bones and she shivered. Maybe she should go back.

"Don't be stupid." She swiped at her face when her eyes teared up, partially from the cold, but also from frustration. Life had placed her in an impossible situation and she'd made a choice. Now she just had to make the best of it. She exhaled, watched her breath drift out into the night, and agonized over what to do next. Rafe could be awake by now. He could even be looking for her.

That's when she remembered the two-way radio in her pocket. She pulled it out with trembling, glove-covered hands and turned it on. The *beep* sounded startlingly loud in the middle of the peaceful woods and the display glowed like a giant, neon-green beacon. Paranoid, she glanced around, then squinted at the controls frantically. It took her only seconds to realize that she had no idea how to work the device. She pushed a couple of buttons and watched names flash across the display. Cooper. Dale. Alpha. She frowned, not exactly relishing the idea of calling up one of Rafe's buddies. She already knew what the friend who'd stopped by earlier thought Rafe should've done with her. He wasn't going to help her if she called him up.

Cooper. Dale. Alpha. Which one sounded the least threatening? She decided on Cooper, for no other reason than the face she conjured up for that name seemed kinder than the others. She pushed a couple more buttons, cringing at every beep. "Hello? Is anyone there?" She scanned the trees around her as she waited for an answer, half expecting Rafe to burst onto the scene. Engaging the talk button again, she whispered, "Please, I need help."

She was about to twist the dial to call 'Dale' when a familiar voice came over the radio. "Does Rafe know you're calling me, little girl?"

Katie gasped and dropped the handset. An eerie green light emanated from the snow where it landed, transforming the dark woods into a spooky, almost alien landscape. Her throat went dry as she cursed her instincts. She'd just called the man who'd told Rafe she was going to end up raped, tortured, and murdered—maybe even by Rafe himself.

"You there, girl?" The snow muffled his gruff voice. "Listen to me. Turn off the radio, go back to bed, and trust that Rafe will protect you. He's the only chance

you've got."

A mournful howl in the distance snapped Katie out of her temporary paralysis. She snatched up the radio and twisted the knob to power it down, then walked in a small circle, scanning the woods. She could try to call Dale or Alpha and hope for a better result, attempt a blind walk out of the woods, or simply make her way back to Rafe's cabin. Her jaw chattered as she struggled with indecision. Another howl cut through the stillness of the night, much closer than the last.

All at once, she realized that her biggest danger might not be getting lost. Despite the weather, she wasn't alone in the woods. She hadn't realized that the Sierra Nevada mountains even had a wolf population, but now she worried about a whole new threat. She would have to walk for hours to find help. What were her chances that the wolves she was hearing wouldn't find her before then?

Shit. Katie turned back in the direction of her own footprints, determined to retrace her steps. She was disheartened to see the deep imprints from her boots already filling with drifting snow, becoming less and less visible every second it took her to slog her way through the powder. She'd only taken a few steps when an ear-piercing howl rose up all around her. The sound bounced off the trees, making it impossible to pinpoint the source. Her heart thundered in her chest and she stumbled before she regained her balance and continued her frantic high-stepping through the snow.

It was official. This was a very, very bad idea.

A large white wolf leapt out from behind a tree in front of her, blocking the path made by her disappearing bootprints. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Only a puffy white cloud of terror, which floated away uselessly into the atmosphere. Unable to move, she stood frozen in place and waited to see what would happen next. Maybe it would decide to go away if she didn't move. Part of her yearned to bolt in the opposite direction, but she could never outrun a wolf and even if she did, she would only end up more lost.

The wolf stared at her. She averted her eyes, not wanting to challenge it in any way. The hair on the back of her neck stood up at movement in her peripheral vision. She turned her head, horrified at the sight of another wolf—this one gray—standing even closer than the first. Before she could react, the gray wolf surged forward and caught her leg in its mouth. Her many layers of clothing offered some protection, but sharp teeth tore into her flesh deep enough to pull a hoarse cry from her too-dry throat. Burning agony shot through her calf as the wolf jerked her violently enough to throw her off balance and into the snow. It released her leg only to reclaim it seconds later in an even fiercer grip. He shook his head back and forth, ripping her flesh.

The bloodcurdling horror inside her finally burst free from her mouth in a scream that sounded like it came from a stranger. The surreal vocalization of her own fear and suffering echoing through the desolate cold frightened her even more than the malevolence in the wolf's soulless eyes. Just when she thought he was going to tear her apart, the wolf retreated. Her stomach turned over at the sight of blood oozing from a ragged tear in her pants.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins. She scrambled to her feet and took a

slow, hobbling step backward. She didn't want to encourage the wolves to chase, but she was too frightened to play dead. Both wolves drew closer, making her tremble so violently that she nearly lost her balance again. The wolf that had bitten her advanced, baring blood-stained teeth in a terrible grin.

Then the impossible happened. In one fluid, surreal motion, the wolf's shape changed. Fur receded, smoothing into tanned skin. Paws turned into hands and feet. Rising up on its back legs, the wolf became a man.

A very naked man, whose large erection jutted out from between his legs like a weapon.

In a single breath, Katie's terror deepened beyond anything she could have imagined. Her entire sense of reality shattered at the sheer insanity of watching beast turn into man. The wolf-man licked her blood off his lips. "It tastes delicious."

The white wolf morphed into a well-built blond man whose arousal rivaled his friend's. "It smells delicious, too."

It. She was nothing to these two—only prey. Katie turned and tried to run, but a solid shape hit her from behind and knocked her forward into the snow. The gray wolf, a man no longer, grabbed onto her other leg, wrenching a pained gasp from her lungs.

"Hey!" The blond man yanked his partner away from her leg. "Don't chew it up until I have a chance to fuck it."

The gray wolf shifted back into human form, his mouth dripping with her blood. "Chewing's my favorite part."

"Well, fucking's mine." The blond bent and rolled her onto her back, pressing her deep into the snow. Claustrophobia overwhelmed her as cold surrounded her on all sides. The man ripped open Rafe's coat, then wrenched it off her shoulders. "Just give me a few minutes and then you can do whatever you want. But I'm not screwing your leftovers."

Katie twisted away from the blond man's hands, but without leverage, she couldn't pull herself out of the snow grave he'd created using the weight of her body. Tears spilled over and she sobbed as both men began to tear away her clothing.

"Fuck, you're overdressed." The man who'd bitten her released his handful of her ripped shirt and backhanded her across the face. "Stupid bitch."

She squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could. She didn't want to watch. She couldn't stand to see what they were doing. They'd barely even started and already she wished they would just kill her.

A vicious snarl arose from somewhere near. Katie opened her eyes in time to see a dark shape slam into the blond man, taking him down into the snow beside her. The newcomer, a jet black wolf, bit the blond man, who changed back into his beast form and threw himself into the tussle. Their enraged snarls filled the air as the fight migrated away from where she was entombed.

"Fuck this." The biter continued to pull down her pants. "I'm not waiting around so some other wolf can use you up."

She pushed against his chest in a futile attempt to fend him off. He caught her across the face with his knuckles, lazily, as though swatting away an insect.

Then he went back to work, grabbing her thin undershirt and rending the material with his hands.

A sharp, keening whimper caught the biter's attention. He released her and stood up, growling in the direction of the other wolves. "The *fuck?*"

A familiar voice responded. "She's *mine.*"

Katie's muscles turned to water. Rafe had found her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Yours?" The biter laughed, then spat in Katie's direction. She struggled to sit, desperate to escape from her frozen prison. "I found it first."

"Actually, you didn't. I found her a couple days ago." Rafe met her eyes when she finally sat up. Naked and also fully aroused, he stood over the crumpled body of the blond man, blood staining the snow around his bare legs. The blond's throat had been torn out and Rafe's chin dripped with crimson. He pinned her with a hard look. "I simply misplaced her tonight."

"Oh, well." The biter twisted her hair in his fist until she cried out. "Finders, keepers. I thought your pack didn't go for humans, anyway."

"We don't hunt them, no." Disdain passed over Rafe's handsome face. "We don't kill them."

"So then what do you care?" He dragged Katie up and held her against his naked thigh. "You want a turn after me? I can't promise I won't chew her up a little. I'll leave her face, though. Keep her pretty for you."

Rafe's expression hardened. "You're not going to touch her. In fact, I suggest you take your hands off her right now."

The biter sniffed, staring Rafe down, then nodded at the body on the ground. "He dead?"

Rafe's icy stare never wavered. "Yeah."

"You killed one of your own kind for a human. Think your alpha will agree with that?"

"I'll deal with my alpha." Rafe took a step closer, never breaking eye contact with the biter. "Let Katie go. Now."

"Katie?" The hand in her hair jerked sharply, bringing fresh tears to her eyes. "It has a name?"

Rafe lunged forward with a primal growl. "I said, let her go. She's *mine*. Do you understand?"

The biter loosened his grip on her hair, surprise written all over his face. Staring at Rafe, he leaned in close and pressed his nose into Katie's neck, inhaling deeply while she shuddered and tried to pull away. Laughter shook the biter's powerful frame as he shoved her back into the snow. "With a *human*? That's disgusting."

"You know I'll kill you if you touch her. Just like I killed your buddy." Rafe stalked closer, openly appraising her body as he approached. "Is it really worth it?"

"You tell me." The biter puffed up his chest and stepped away from where

she'd fallen. The two naked men faced each other, squaring off. Incredibly, neither of them seemed affected by the cold. "Is she worth it?"

"She's mine. That means I'll die to protect her. Even if she is *just* a human." Rafe ran his worried gaze over her bare skin, which had gone numb in the freezing wind. The reason for his fierce devotion was a mystery, one that should have unsettled her. Instead it made her feel safe. Protected. Her eyes met his. "Go take your friend's body back to his mate, if he had one."

"He does. A mate, and a son."

Rafe cringed. "No one else has to die tonight. Just leave us. This was a misunderstanding, but now it's over."

The biter chuckled. "Oh, this isn't over. Not at all." With one last, dismissive glance at Katie, he walked over to his friend's corpse and nudged it with his foot. "This murder won't go unanswered. I promise you that."

"He was going to rape and kill my bond-mate. Nobody will fault me for protecting her."

Shivering at Rafe's words, Katie gathered her torn clothing around her exposed body. His *bond-mate*? What the hell had happened while she was unconscious?

"We'll see." The biter loped toward Rafe, shooting him a stern sidelong glance as he passed. "Take your human slut and get out of here." He paused in front of Katie and gripped his erection in his hand. "I'll see you soon, *Katie*. Next time I'll bring more friends. Hope you're ready."

Rafe moved between them, a flesh-and-blood shield. "Come back and I'll kill you. *All* of you."

"Good luck with that." The biter winked and melted back into wolf form. He threw his head back and howled, then took off running through the trees.

As soon as he was gone, Rafe rushed to her side. "How badly are you injured?"

"I..." Katie's head swam with everything that had just occurred. She didn't know what was most disconcerting: the fact that werewolves existed, Rafe's delicious nudity, or her desire to fall into his arms and let him protect her. "I'm not sure."

He knelt in the snow, took her leg in his hands, and gave her a careful examination. "He bit you. I won't know how badly until we get back to the cabin. Which we need to do *immediately*, by the way, before any more come." He shoved the oversize boots back over her socks, which were soaked through and heavy.

She let Rafe help her to her feet, then fiddled awkwardly with her torn clothing. Modesty seemed ridiculous in this situation, especially since he'd already seen her naked, but it was the only thing she had left. Being treated like a piece of meat had stripped away her humanity; denying Rafe the right to see her body helped restore a tiny piece of what made her who she was.

"Here, put this on." Rafe draped his coat over her shoulders and pulled it closed over her chest. "I'll lead you back in wolf form. Someone took my boots, and my feet are starting to get cold."

"I'm sorry." Katie felt well and truly chagrined. "Rafe, I—"

“We’ll talk when we get back to my place. Until then, be quiet.” She tried not to stare at his perfect ass as he turned away from her. He glanced over his shoulder, catching her gaze. “Full moon tomorrow. The woods are crawling with my kind tonight.”

She shivered and limped after him. “Okay.”

He transformed into a wolf and stared at her with glowing eyes. She lowered her gaze and followed as he led her back over the faint path she’d made during her walk in. He trotted through the snow at a fast clip, stopping every few feet to wait for her to catch up. Her toes were like ice in the soaking wet socks, her legs hurt, and her mind raced with all she’d just learned. Werewolves were real. One of them was claiming her as his bond-mate, whatever that meant. She’d almost just died. And apparently the woods were teeming with wolfmen who could leap out and attack at any moment.

The trek back to the cabin seemed to take forever. She hadn’t realized she’d walked so far, and wondered whether she would have been able to find her way on her own. When a baleful howl echoed through the trees just as the cabin came into sight, she stumbled and caught herself on hands planted in the deep snow, then straightened and used one last burst of energy to run to the front door. Rafe made it there before she did, shifting back into human form and ushering her inside. He locked the door and stalked after her, anger evident in his every step.

Katie stopped just inside the door, not wanting to track water through the house. She was so cold. The pain in her legs worried her just as much as the imminent possibility of her murder by werewolves. She didn’t know whether she would make it through the night alive, and the one person who had shown her any kindness was furious with her.

She met Rafe’s steely gaze, breath quickening at the fire in his eyes. For better or worse, she was going to have to trust this man.

He really was the only chance she had.

CHAPTER NINE

“What the hell were you *thinking?*”

Katie shrank away as Rafe’s shout rattled the walls. Shivering, she wrapped her arms around her chest. All she wanted was to get out of her soaking wet clothes. She wasn’t sure she had the strength for a dressing down when she was this cold. “I said I was sorry.”

“*Sorry?*” His hands shook as he ran them through his wet hair. He engaged the heavy deadbolt on the door, then stomped past her to the kitchen sink, where he washed the rest of the blond man’s blood off his face. “You could have been killed!”

“I didn’t know—”

Rafe spun around and glared at her. “You didn’t know that you could freeze to death out there? You didn’t know that you had no idea where the hell you were even going?” Rage contorted his handsome features. “Forget the fact that it’s the night before a full moon and we’re right in the middle of major werewolf territory. I get that you didn’t know that part, but surely you realized that running off into the night, in sub-zero temperatures, was colossally, dangerously *stupid.*”

“I didn’t know what else to do.” It sounded weak, even to her.

“So suicide seemed like the best option?” He advanced on her, his erection bobbling menacingly with each step. She flashed back to the feeling of rough hands pawing her body and covered, closing her eyes. Her whole body tensed in anticipation—of what, she didn’t know.

His footfalls stopped abruptly. For a moment she heard only his labored breathing, then he exhaled and walked past her. She opened her eyes in time to watch him tug on a pair of sweatpants that had been left pooled on the floor in the foyer. Relieved that he’d given her a little space, she turned to meet his gaze. “Suicide wasn’t my intention.”

“But it was nearly the result.” His expression was hard, almost cold, yet she sensed volatile emotion beneath the surface. “Just tell me what possessed you to do something like that. What did I do that was so horrible that you decided it was better to take your chances out there alone?”

Katie straightened. “I was worried you were going to hurt me.”

“Were you?” He studied her face. “Really?”

She lowered her head. “It wasn’t anything you did. I overheard you talking to your friend. He said I was going to end up getting raped and murdered—maybe even by you—and your side of the conversation didn’t exactly make me feel any better. I heard him call me a human, so full of disdain. I thought he was crazy—

that both of you were crazy, maybe.” Katie exhaled. “He told you that you should’ve let me die. And meanwhile you were making me feel things that I had no reason to feel. Emotions.” She paused, embarrassed. “Other stuff, too. I didn’t know what you’d done to me to make me feel that way. I didn’t know why you and your friend said the things you did. So I was frightened. That’s all.”

Rafe’s expression softened. He folded his arms over his muscular chest, as though he was suddenly aware of how threatening he actually seemed. “Look, we need to get you warmed up. Again.”

Katie nodded, too exhausted and frozen to argue. She followed Rafe into the guest room, greeting Shilah with a sheepish pat on the head. “Hi, boy.”

Rafe pinned him with a hard look. “You’re in the dog house for real, boy. You were supposed to be watching her.”

Shilah wagged his tail, clearly pleased to be addressed by his master, whatever the context. Katie couldn’t help but laugh. “He doesn’t seem terribly concerned.”

“He knows I’m all bark and no bite.” Rafe gestured at her body. “You need to take those clothes off. Especially if I’m going to clean your wounds.”

Shy but chilled to the bone, Katie shrugged off Rafe’s coat before hesitating. “Could I have some privacy?”

Rafe nodded. “Meet me in the bathroom down the hall once you’re undressed. Go ahead and use one of my T-shirts from the dresser. I think you still have some...” His gaze darted to the pile of her laundry he’d left stacked on the floor. “Just leave your legs bare so I can treat the bites.”

“All right.”

He stood at the door, hands laced in front of his crotch. “I’m not going to hurt you. Honestly, Katie. *Never.*”

She believed him. “I know.”

Rafe left the room with Shilah at his heels. As soon as he shut the door she began to strip off her wet clothes. Her fingers were so numb they barely worked and her shivering increased exponentially as soon as the air hit her bare skin. As a result the whole process took her longer than she wanted, and drained her completely. She probably needed Rafe’s help, but believing that he wasn’t going to kill her didn’t mean that she was ready to let him undress her again.

Once her upper body was bare, she braced herself for the hard part. She took a deep breath and stripped off her pants, sickened by the sight of a deep bite wound on her right calf. It was still bleeding lightly, but didn’t hurt nearly as much as it looked like it should. No doubt it would be really painful once the feeling returned to her body. The bite on the back of her other calf was shallower and not nearly as bad, but seeing so much of her flesh torn open and raw turned her stomach.

Naked, she limped to the dresser by the closet and got a worn T-shirt out of the top drawer. Rafe’s scent wafted up to greet her, instantly comforting. She inhaled deeply as she tugged the shirt over her head, then cursed under her breath. He’d called her his bond-mate, and the wolf who’d bitten her had clearly sensed some connection between them. Was that why simply smelling Rafe made her feel like this? Like... She shivered again. Like she was *home*.

"Katie, are you okay?" Rafe's voice came from just outside the bedroom door.

She walked stiffly to the pile of laundry and pulled a pair of her panties off the top. She had to struggle to make her limbs move so she could put them on. "I'm just so cold." She shuffled to the door and threw it open, beyond caring about her lack of clothing. All she wanted was for Rafe to dress her wounds so she could crawl under the blankets. She never should have left in the first place. "I feel like I'll never be warm again."

Rafe's gaze slid down the length of her body. His throat jumped when he saw her mangled legs. "He really got you."

"Yeah." She glanced down at her calves and shrugged, teeth chattering. "I can barely feel it. I can't really feel anything right now."

Rafe glanced over his shoulder at the bathroom door, then at her. "Why don't you let me warm you a little before we look at the bites?"

Something about his tone told her that there was a reason he was asking permission. "What does that involve, exactly?"

He smiled, almost shyly. "A hug. Basically."

"A hug." She wasn't sure she liked the idea. It almost felt like a trick. It was certainly too much for him to ask after what those beasts outside had put her through. But if there was any chance it might really help her fight off the ice that had settled into her bones, she was willing to take a leap of faith. "Okay."

He seemed surprised by her easy acquiescence. "Okay." He hesitated. "It would probably work better if we were skin-to-skin..."

Katie frowned. "No."

"All right." He held out his arms and looked into her eyes. "Come here."

She surprised herself by stepping into his embrace without hesitation. He curled his powerful arms around her back and pulled her close enough to feel his heartbeat thumping in rhythm with her own. Within seconds, exquisite heat spread throughout her body, starting at her chest and flowing into the tips of her extremities. Katie gasped and nearly pulled away, but Rafe kept her close.

"It's okay," he murmured. "It's normal. Let it happen." He rubbed a hand up and down her spine, as though comforting a child. "I've got you. Just hold on to me."

Katie clung to Rafe tightly, overwhelmed when the warmth that flowed from his body to hers bloomed into an intense rush of emotion. There was so much to process that she couldn't separate everything she was feeling—love, safety, devotion, protectiveness, peace. The rhythm of his breathing shifted to match hers, making her feel as though his body was merely an extension of her own. She buried her face in his neck, overwhelmed by the all-consuming joy of being in his arms. His scent surrounded her, drawing out a low, needy moan that made her blush. Despite her embarrassment—despite everything that had happened tonight—she had to fight the urge to raise up on her tiptoes and kiss Rafe on the mouth.

Instead, she cried out in shock when sensation returned to her calves in the form of burning, throbbing pain. Rafe released her, wiping away her tears with his thumbs. "Your wounds?"

Katie nodded dumbly. Now that their embrace was over, the surreality of the

entire situation hit her hard. Not only the existence of werewolves, but Rafe calling her his bond-mate and her body's incredible reaction to his touch. Hell, her *soul's* reaction to his mere presence. Trembling, she placed her hand on Rafe's warm cheek and looked deep into his tender green eyes. "Rafe—"

He shook his head and took her hand. "Let's go to the bathroom so I can clean your wounds. We'll talk about it there." His shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly as he led her down the hallway. "I'll explain everything."

CHAPTER TEN

Katie winced as Rafe guided her more gravely injured leg beneath a stream of warm water from the bathtub's faucet. He poured some anti-bacterial soap into the wound and carefully but thoroughly washed it. The soap and water stung like a bitch, and despite his careful touch, she had to restrain herself from lashing out. "*Fuck.*"

Rafe raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry. I really am trying to be gentle."

"I know you are." She brought her other foot up onto the edge of the tub and rested her cheek on her knee, not caring that Rafe could see her panties. Maybe it was foolish, but she no longer feared him. On the contrary, an unexpected thrill crawled up her spine when his gaze slid to the space between her legs. Beyond a discreet flaring of his nostrils, he betrayed no reaction. She watched calmly as he turned his attention back to her leg, flushing out her wound with a tenderness she never would have expected from a man of Rafe's size and strength.

"It's good that you were wearing so many layers. This could've been much worse."

"Believe me, I know." She tried not to think about the way those two werewolves had talked about her—like she was a piece of meat to be violated and then eaten. A couple of bite wounds were nothing compared to what could have happened. If this was her worst souvenir from tonight, she considered herself lucky. The thought triggered a sudden, horrifying memory of werewolf lore drawn mostly from films and television. Nausea rolled over her. "He bit me. Does that mean..." She swallowed, certain she would be sick. "Am I a werewolf now?"

Rafe surprised her by laughing. He shot her an easygoing grin, so handsome it took the sting out of his amusement. "No, it doesn't work like that. You have to be born this way."

"Oh." Katie considered that as her heart rate slowed. Then she realized how her disgust might have come across. "No offense intended. I'm sure it's not like being a werewolf is the worst thing in the world."

He snorted. "I appreciate you saying so."

"It's just that I—"

Rafe shook his head. "You don't have to apologize. I understand."

She joined in his examination of her deeper wound. Even if it didn't turn her into a werewolf, the bite was going to leave a scar. The entire attack would no doubt linger within her subconscious mind forever. "Do you think I'll need

stitches?"

"No, we need to let the wound stay open to heal." He stared at her leg as the water rinsed over it, then furrowed his brow. "It'll lower the risk of infection."

She nodded. The concern in his eyes made her belly flutter in the most pleasant way. There he went again, looking at her like she was his entire world. She knew they had to talk about whatever this bond was between them, but she was almost afraid to ask. Not ready to be direct, she said, "I'm lucky to have such a competent savior."

"You're lucky in more ways than you can imagine." Stormy emotion tightened his features. "I could have *lost* you, Katie."

"You barely know me." Clearly this wasn't exactly true, and she was pretty sure he already knew that she'd caught on. A surge of courage emboldened her to challenge him to be honest. "Why do you care?"

Rafe averted his eyes and held out his hand. "Let me see the other bite."

She extended her bent leg, suppressing the urge to whimper when he cradled her ankle and guided it beneath the water. To hell with waiting for Rafe to come clean. If he wasn't going to come out and address his big revelation, she would. "You told that—" She paused, hesitant to offend him with her labeling of his brethren. "What do you call yourselves?"

"Just call him a wolf. That's all he was. A mean-ass wolf."

Beneath the cold judgment in Rafe's eyes lurked a hint of shame—for his own kind, she assumed. He was obviously made of different stuff than those animals in the woods, or even his friend, Cooper, who'd urged him to let her die. But why did Rafe care about her seemingly worthless human life when none of the other wolves did? What set him apart? She sensed that it had everything to do with the answer to her next question. "You told that wolf that I was your bond-mate. What did you mean?"

Pain and sorrow radiated from his tense frame. "It's...complicated."

"Yes, it does sound complicated." Katie waited a beat, then said, "Tell me. Please."

Rafe rattled her with a look of genuine fear. "You were so cold, Katie. So cold. And unresponsive." He continued to cradle her ankle as he spoke. "You were dying—and I had to do something. So I just...followed my instinct."

"What did you do?"

He exhaled slowly. "I warmed you just like I did a few minutes ago. I took off my shirt and got beneath the blankets with you, then held you while I focused all my energy on raising your body temperature with mine. And it worked." Guilt tightened his features. "But something happened. Something I didn't expect."

Enough with the build-up. She needed to know. "Rafe—"

His next words came out in a rush. "We bonded. I had no idea it would happen—that it even *could* happen. It's rare enough for two werewolves to bond, so I never imagined that it would be possible for me to do it with a human."

"We *bonded*?" Katie wrestled with disbelief as he turned off the faucet and opened the drawer beneath the sink. She had no idea why it would be a struggle

to accept the concept of bonding souls on a night when she'd seen men transform into wolves, but her logical mind rebelled at the idea. She wasn't even sure what it meant. "Explain what that involves. Please."

He avoided her eyes as he uncapped a tube of antibiotic ointment and began spreading it over her wounds. "It means our souls are connected."

She waited for more. When he didn't elaborate, she huffed in exasperation. "And?"

"When you hurt, I feel pain." His fingers glided over her skin, so very careful. "When we're together, I'm whole. And when we're apart, we'll both...feel that loss. Acutely."

Katie couldn't wrap her mind around what Rafe was telling her. When she hurt, he felt pain? Did that go both ways? "What do you mean, we'll feel the loss? How?"

"It's my understanding that separation will mean tremendous suffering for both of us. But I can't say for certain...I've never experienced it before." Rafe shook his head and closed his eyes, pausing in his movements. "I'm so sorry. If I'd known..."

"You would have let me die?" In saving her, he'd fundamentally altered the course of her life. Right now she wasn't certain whether she was better off alive. "Why didn't you? You could have easily left me in my car. As far as I can tell, the rest of your kind would've. Either that or made me into a meal."

Rafe lifted his shoulder in a vague shrug. "I couldn't." He met her eyes, sending another shiver through her. Even if her brain wasn't sure about the idea of souls bonding, her body obviously recognized him. More than that, *wanted* him. She was pretty sure she should be furious about this bonding thing, if only she could focus on the repercussions and not the strange-yet-familiar touch of his strong hands. "I...value life."

"Even *human* life?" It was either laugh or cry, and luckily she still felt capable of the former. "I'm nothing more than a piece of meat out here." Her levity quickly dissolved into tears. "Am I?"

"The full moon is tomorrow night. That's why it's so dangerous for you right now. More than it might normally be."

Katie wiped away a tear, not wanting to look weak. She refused to fall apart over this, no matter how dire the situation seemed. "What's so special about the full moon? It seems like you guys turn into wolves whenever you want."

Rafe nodded. "We can, but the moon forces us to shift. And for a day or two before and after, its energy gets us hyper-aroused. Puts us into hunting mode. For some of us that means going on longer runs than normal. For others, it's an excuse to engage in a little unchecked brutality."

"Terrific."

"As far as I know, I've never killed anyone on one of those nights." His jaw tightened. "But the reality is, I'm not in my head when the moon is full. None of us are. That's why Cooper was concerned that I could harm you." He flexed his fingers on her ankle, a gentle squeeze. "But I won't. I don't honestly believe I could."

"You don't believe you could," Katie echoed, stomach rolling. "And yet

before you met me, you had no idea that this bonding thing could even happen the way it did. So what the hell do you know?"

"I know that I will die before I let anyone hurt you." Rafe couldn't even look at her, despite his heartfelt words. "And I know that tomorrow night, I'm locking you in this cabin with Shilah, a gun, and strict orders to shoot anything that comes inside." He paused. "Including me."

Great. She hadn't held a gun in years, let alone shot at a living creature with the intention of killing it. While she wouldn't hesitate to defend herself against the mouthy gray wolf who'd bitten her tonight and others like him, she was pretty sure there was no way she could ever knowingly hurt Rafe. The thought—errant, instinctive, *true*—pissed her off. "You said that if I hurt, you feel pain. If we're apart, we'll both feel the loss." She pinned him with a hard look. "So how, exactly, am I supposed to shoot you?"

He gently dabbed the last of the ointment on her calf. "It won't come to that."

"No, of course not. Because I'm your goddamn *bond-mate*."

His shoulders stiffened and he actively avoided making eye contact. "Yes."

The enormity of that concept flooded her with fresh panic. What did this mean? She couldn't exactly leave her life in San Francisco to be with a werewolf who lived in a cabin in the middle of scary, werewolf-infested woods. It wasn't like she loved him—no matter what her heart and body kept telling her. "Okay, I can see the advantage of our connection if you think it'll protect me from you tomorrow night. But after that, how do we undo it? How do we break the bond?"

"We don't." The words sounded hollow. "It's done."

Though she'd expected him to say as much, Katie's anger swelled. "So, what, I'm supposed to want to be with you now? You take off my clothes, cuddle with me in bed while I'm unconscious, and suddenly you're my soulmate? Without my *consent*?"

"I said I'm sorry." Rafe's voice turned gruff, as though he was holding back his own torrent of emotion. "I don't know what to tell you. I don't expect you to stay with me—in fact, I don't expect *anything* from you. What I said before still stands. Once the road clears, I'll take you to town. What you do after that is your choice. I'm not going to force you into something you don't want."

His kindness only stoked the fire of her fury. "Well, great. Except according to you, if I leave, it'll devastate both of us."

He stared at her with a blank expression. "I don't know what you want me to say."

She didn't either. All she knew was that she'd nearly died tonight, *again*, and she was apparently connected forever to a werewolf she barely knew. And according to him, leaving him would break both their hearts. That was if leaving was even an option, now that she had an entire forest full of werewolves out to get her. She dropped her head into her hands and exhaled. "I guess...I want you to say this is all a bad dream."

"I wish it were."

Katie sniffled, knowing she must seem pathetic but too overwhelmed to care. She wanted to scream at Rafe, maybe even hit him, but that required energy she

didn't have. At least her legs didn't hurt anymore. Which seemed...odd. She peeked through her spread fingers at her calves, still cradled in Rafe's large hands. "The pain is gone."

"Good." Rafe released her and stood. "Let me know if it starts to bother you again."

She touched the area next to the more severe bite mark, confused by the lack of sensation. Just minutes ago she'd been in agony. All Rafe had done was flush her wounds and cover them with antibiotic lotion. He'd given her nothing for the discomfort. At least nothing she could see. "Why? What did you do?"

His shoulders tensed as he washed his hands. "I sent you some healing energy. Or at least I tried. I'm hoping it helped."

Healing energy. Wasn't that what had caused their predicament in the first place? "Don't do that again. What if you make it worse?"

"Your wounds? I won't."

"No, the...bond." Katie didn't want to admit how nice it was not to hurt anymore—not when the price was eternal devotion to a man she knew nothing about. A man whose friends wanted her dead. "You say we can't undo it, but maybe there's a way. And if there is, I'm pretty sure it starts with you keeping your damn hands off me."

Rafe flinched. "I apologize. I was only trying to help."

"Well, I've had enough of your help." She struggled to her feet, then shot out a hand to brace herself against the wall. She was so tired she could barely stand. "What was the deal before? I stay in the guest room, shut the door, and you won't bother me?"

Jaw tight, Rafe stared straight ahead. "Yup. That was the deal."

"Great." Katie moved to leave, then froze when Rafe caught her by the wrist. She jerked away from him, glaring. "I *said* don't touch me."

He stepped into her personal space but stopped short of making contact. "The other part of the deal is that you pull the curtains closed as soon as you get in there, you go straight to bed, and you let me know if you need to leave the room for any reason—even if it's only because you have to pee."

Katie deflated as the power of suggestion awakened her bladder. "Actually, I do. Need to pee."

Rafe edged past her and out the bathroom door. "I'll put Shilah in your room. He stays with you from now on. Always."

"Fine." Her problem wasn't with Shilah—and she didn't want to be alone, anyway.

"Good night." He didn't even look at her as he shut the door. When he left the room, it was as though all the air left with him.

Katie felt the loss.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lying in bed after washing up, Katie mused that the worst part about being mad at Rafe was how hard it was to *stay* mad. Once again warm beneath his comforter, surrounded by his masculine scent and protected by his faithful dog, she struggled not to succumb to the urge to go to him. The seductive pull of his comforting presence only a room away kept her from tumbling into much-needed sleep. Her body hummed with desire, a buzzing awareness that true peace and satisfaction was hers for the taking. All she had to do to find it was seek out her bond-mate and let him fill up all the emptiness inside her. Here, she was scared and lonely. With Rafe, she would be whole.

"Damn him," Katie whispered. She didn't *want* to need him. It wasn't fair that she did. Based on his dark good looks alone, she would date Rafe in a heartbeat. But *love* him? A werewolf? One who lived in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by other, murderous werewolves? He wasn't exactly her dream guy.

And yet she had to will herself not to crawl into bed with him. She was exhausted but every time she closed her eyes she saw those wolves—those naked men—and felt their teeth and hands all over her body. Unable to sleep, she had nothing to do except stare at the moon's glow creeping in beneath the curtain, and worry. How many more were out there? Did the rest of the pack know about the one Rafe had killed? Were they coming to exact revenge at this very moment?

She really would feel better with Rafe next to her.

No. Katie closed her eyes, determined to stay in her own bed. She was mad at Rafe, after all. He'd married their souls, for lack of a better term, while she was unconscious. He'd probably ruined her for any other man. That meant he'd also ruined her chance for a normal life, with kids and family vacations and 401k retirement plans. What was she supposed to do now? Move to the middle of nowhere? Or perhaps they could they find a little apartment in the city. One with enough room to build a giant cage to contain Rafe during his "time of the month". Katie smiled despite herself. How *would* she manage a relationship with a werewolf?

"Stop it." Katie kept her voice too low for anyone but Shilah to hear. "You won't. You can't." She took a deep, measured breath, then exhaled. "Besides, I hate him." She knew that was a lie—a huge lie, actually—but it helped fan the flames of her dwindling anger to say the words. "I *hate* him."

Beside her, Shilah sighed. She was pretty sure he didn't believe it, either.

A low growl pulled Katie out of fitful sleep. Her eyes snapped open and she battled momentary disorientation before she remembered where she was. She sat up, then froze at the sight of Shilah crouched at the foot of the bed. His fur was raised in a line down his back, his tail held rigidly at attention. Holding her breath, she followed Shilah's gaze to the curtained window. It was still dark outside. She was beginning to feel like this night would never end.

Katie's heart pounded when Shilah growled again. The last thing she wanted to do was search for some sign of movement outside, but she couldn't look away. The curtain swayed lightly, caught in a subtle draft, revealing bare glimpses of moonlit sky and snow-covered trees. She could barely stand to watch, afraid that a shadow would pass across the window and literally frighten her to death. Just as the thought occurred to her, a muted howl arose from somewhere in the distance. Her breathing hitched as adrenaline surged through her body.

She needed to go to Rafe. Now.

Slipping out of bed, Katie nearly made it to the door before she stopped, conflicted. A howl outside didn't mean they were in danger. Of course there were more wolves in the woods—some of them were even Rafe's friends. If she went running to him now, it was as good as forgiving him. And she wasn't ready to do that. Not yet. Not unless she absolutely had to.

She turned and studied Shilah's body language. He was still on high alert, attention fixed on the window. Katie took a deep breath, then crossed the room to stand at his side. She put her hand on his head and stared at the window with him. As quietly as she could, she murmured, "What do you hear, boy?"

He uttered a soft half-bark and growled once more. Then he took a few cautious steps forward, planting himself squarely in front of the window. Before she could stop him, Shilah poked his nose beneath the curtain and peered outside. Time stood still as she waited for chaos to erupt. But nothing stirred, and at length she released a shaky breath. A lazy tail wag from Shilah relaxed her further, though she wasn't about to let her guard down. There was no way she was getting back to sleep now. All the exhaustion she'd felt earlier was gone. Her entire body crackled with nervous energy. Like any good prey animal, her fight or flight instincts were on high alert.

Rafe wouldn't be upset if she woke him. She knew that. He wanted to protect her and if she allowed him to do so, he would give his life for hers. She was certain of that not because of what he'd told her about their bond, but because she could *feel* it deep in her soul. He would die for her. All she had to do was ask.

"No." Katie straightened and took a tentative step closer to the window. She had some self-respect, didn't she? Even after what those wolves had done to her, she wasn't without dignity. She wasn't going to let the craziness of the past few days turn her into a weak little girl who needed a big, strong—*gorgeous*, her mind supplied—man to help her make it through the night. "Woman up, Katie. Go look out the stupid window."

Shilah turned his head at the sound of her voice. His soft, brown eyes gave

her the courage she needed to close the distance between them. She knelt at his side and very carefully pushed the bottom corner of the curtain away from the glass, creating an opening just large enough for her to peer through.

Outside there was snow. And trees—lots of trees. Trees and snow surrounded them, stretching as far as Katie could see from her vantage point. Rafe's truck was on the other side of the cabin, as was the path she'd taken into the woods. The nearly full moon cast an eerie glow over the forest, illuminating the immediate area while creating impossibly dark, sinister shadows in which evil undoubtedly lurked. When one such shadow shifted, melting into the shape of a man, Katie's palms went damp. A second shadow moved close by—another man, standing beside the first.

Katie fell backward and landed hard on her ass. Then she scrambled to her feet, a single thought racing through her mind on endless loop.

Rafe. She needed Rafe.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Katie flung open the guest room door, slamming into Rafe as soon as she ran into the hallway. He caught her in impossibly strong arms and held her against his bare chest, and she buried her face in his neck before she could remind herself that she shouldn't. He tightened his embrace, then smoothed a hand over her hair and shushed her panicked breathing.

"Someone's outside." Katie clutched at Rafe's shoulders, battling a mixture of gratitude and embarrassment about how effortlessly his touch soothed her. "I saw two of them."

Rafe pulled her into his bedroom and closed the door after ushering Shilah inside. "I want you to hide in the closet. Do you know how to shoot?" Before she could process the question, he had pressed a large revolver into her grip. "Katie, do you know how to use this?"

"I..." The gun looked strange in her hand, and holding it made her feel like a child again. Her father had taught her to shoot a .22 when she was eight years old, but this was the first time she'd handled a weapon since high school. "Yes."

"Good."

Of course, taking out soda bottles perched on fence posts hadn't exactly prepared her to face murderous werewolves. Frightened and years past her last round of target practice, she had no faith in her ability to protect herself. Rafe, on the other hand, seemed calm and in control. He was probably a good shot, too. "Don't go. Please."

"I have to check it out." He nudged her toward the closet. "Get in there. Be quiet, no matter what you hear. Shilah will stay in the bedroom with you, and I promise he'll give you plenty of warning if anyone comes in who isn't me. If they manage to open the closet door, I want you to shoot them. In the head."

The thought made her sick to her stomach. "You've got silver bullets in this thing, right?"

"What?" Rafe paused, then chuckled. "No."

Feeling a little stupid, Katie stumbled on her way through the closet door. "Another myth?"

"Yeah. Katie, hey." He took her by the shoulders and turned her around. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise."

Tears welled and threatened to spill over. She didn't want anything to happen to Rafe, either. There was no reason why she should care so much about a man she just met—no reason except the bond he'd created between them. The pain in her chest at the thought of letting him walk into danger was so staggering it

convinced her to set aside the anger that wasn't doing her any good, anyway. Katie wrapped her arms around Rafe's shoulders and brushed her lips over his in a quick but intimate kiss. "You come back to me. Okay?"

He gave her a gentle squeeze. "I will." Startled by something she couldn't hear, Rafe cocked his head. Shilah mirrored the pose beside him, eliciting an unthinking smile. It faded when Rafe walked her backwards into the closet, tension written all over his face. "Hide, Katie. Now." He reached for the gun as he guided her into the back corner. "Safety's off." Ready to fire, he pointed the gun at the floor and handed it back to her. "We'll both be fine."

He shut the door and left her in the dark. Katie blinked, waiting for her eyes to adjust, and leaned back against the row of shirts that hung behind her. She held the gun in both hands, ready to bring it up and pull the trigger the moment Shilah alerted her to an intruder. She said a quick prayer that she would be able to aim and fire under pressure. Despite being a Civil War buff and battle reenactment aficionado, her father had never prepared her for an actual life-or-death situation.

At first there was only silence. She couldn't hear anything outside her hiding place—not Rafe, not their enemies, not even the sound of Shilah's breathing as he stood guard. The darkness was oppressive and heavy like a thick, woolen blanket, making it hard to breathe. She fought against a wave of claustrophobia that urged her to throw open the closet door for just one whiff of fresh air. It would be a mistake and she knew it. Rafe had told her to stay hidden and shoot to kill if discovered. She sensed that her survival depended upon doing exactly as he said. Perhaps even more than that, she wanted to prove to him that she was trustworthy. That she wasn't the type of person to run off and get herself killed by being stupid.

Even if recent events suggested otherwise.

A muffled shout raised the hair on Katie's arms. She held her breath and strained to hear, uncertain whether it had been Rafe's voice or someone else. Shilah whined anxiously, drowning out everything else for long, tense seconds. After Shilah quieted, the same voice was audible but he spoke too softly for her to make out any words—yet somehow she knew it was Rafe. Another voice answered, deeper and booming. She couldn't understand anything the newcomer said before a loud crash shook the walls around her. Her mind conjured up a vision of a body falling heavily against furniture. Without knowing who had been attacked, Katie wasn't sure if she should be horrified or relieved. A wave of nausea rolled over her, then a dull pain throbbed in her stomach.

When you hurt, I feel pain. Oh, God. Katie clapped her hand over her mouth and fought not to vomit. Deep in her soul, she *knew* that Rafe was the one who'd been hit. She put her hand on the door without thinking, but stopped herself from turning the knob. Though her body urged her to go to Rafe, she knew that wasn't what he wanted. She also knew that she was no match against someone who could knock down a man of Rafe's size.

The man with the deep voice spoke again, and Rafe answered. Katie sagged in relief at the knowledge that he was conscious. Maybe there was still hope. Maybe he would gain the upper hand. She raised the gun and pointed it at the

closet door, in case he didn't.

The bedroom door opened and Katie's legs turned to jelly at the sound of Rafe's tense voice. "Katie, it's me. Put down the gun and come on out."

She hesitated. Something wasn't right. Nothing about what Rafe had said before he left the bedroom had prepared her for the possibility that he would return and ask her to put down her weapon. She wasn't sure whether she should do as he said, continue hiding, or come out with her gun blazing.

As though sensing her internal debate, Rafe said, "It's okay. A couple of my pack mates dropped by for a chat. That's all." He hesitated, then said, "Nobody will hurt you. I promise."

Aware that staying in the closet forever wasn't exactly an option, and too afraid to emerge shooting, Katie slowly opened the door and poked her head out. Rafe stood between two men, both of them bigger than him, with blood running from a cut below his eye. The man to his left, powerfully built yet smaller than his companion, boldly appraised her T-shirt clad body as she emerged from her hiding place. Then he smirked. "You heard him, little girl. Drop the gun."

She would recognize that voice anywhere. Cooper. Confused, she glanced at Rafe, who gave her a subtle nod. Putting all her trust into her bond-mate, Katie set the gun on the nightstand beside the bed. The man who hadn't yet spoken, who was bigger and older and somehow more primal than either Rafe or Cooper, pointed at the bed. "Sit."

There was the deep, booming voice she'd heard before. She assumed that meant he was the one who'd hit Rafe. Too afraid to push her luck in a room full of seemingly hostile werewolves, Katie sat on the edge of the mattress without argument. The big man gestured for Rafe to join her on the bed and, to her surprise, he obeyed with a silent nod. He sat close enough that their thighs touched, calming her racing heart without even seeming to try.

Cooper greeted Shilah with a pat on the head while the deep-voiced man stared at her and Rafe for the span of several anxious breaths. Katie sat ramrod straight, unsure whether to let down her guard. As far as she knew, these were Rafe's friends. But despite the expressionless look on Rafe's face, he radiated uneasy fear. Acting on instinct, Katie took Rafe's hand and placed it in her lap, lacing their fingers together. If they were going to die, neither of them should feel alone.

The deep-voiced man's gaze fell on their joined hands. He frowned. Then he stared hard into Katie's eyes. "So I hear we've got ourselves a human problem."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Katie is not a problem.” Rafe’s tone made it clear that despite this man’s clear authority over him, she remained his priority. The realization shocked her as much as it appeared to irritate their visitor.

“Not a problem?” The intimidating stranger stepped closer, causing Rafe to angle his upper body in front of Katie’s like a shield. “I got a call from Jack Devereaux at three o’clock this goddamn morning. To tell me that one of my wolves had murdered one of his. Over some *human* piece of ass.”

Rafe squeezed Katie’s hand, soothing her bruised feelings almost as soon as they arose. “She’s my bond-mate. Don’t call her that again.”

The man glowered at Rafe and puffed up his chest. “You forget who you’re talking to, *dog*.”

“I haven’t forgotten, Alpha. But you need to know that this woman is not just some piece of ass. We’re bonded—and you know what that means.” Rafe rubbed his thumb over her knuckle. “Two of Jack’s wolves attacked her tonight. She was bitten and nearly raped. If I hadn’t intervened, they would have killed and eaten her.”

Visible disgust passed over Alpha’s face. “I won’t deny that they’re savages. But killing him makes you no better.”

“Katie is my bond-mate. I had to protect her. It was self-defense.” Rafe’s jaw bunched and he sat forward, as though challenging Alpha to disagree. “You know better than anyone what it means to lose one’s bond-mate.”

Alpha stiffened. Clearly Rafe had hit upon a sensitive subject. “The alpha wolf of a larger, dangerously sociopathic pack of werewolves just spent twenty minutes yelling at me about a murder I had no idea you committed. Can you appreciate how embarrassing it was that I didn’t have a clue what—or who—he was talking about?”

Rafe lowered his head. “I apologize, Alpha. My radio was lost in the scuffle. I didn’t realize I didn’t have it until after I’d finished treating Katie’s wounds. Then I didn’t want to leave her alone to go find it. Not after what happened.”

Katie’s shoulders dropped and her stomach turned over. She’d lost Rafe’s radio in the snow and prevented him from reporting to his alpha wolf. She had no idea what the penalty for Rafe’s actions would be, but the entire thing was her fault. If she hadn’t tried to escape from the man who had sworn to protect her, she wouldn’t have gotten injured. Rafe wouldn’t be in trouble. The thought that he might be punished for her own impulsive stupidity made her feel sick.

“Sir?” Katie’s voice came out a bare whisper. She cleared her throat and tried

again. "Sir, it wasn't Rafe's fault. He told me to stay inside and I didn't. If I hadn't disobeyed him, those wolves would never have had an opportunity to attack me. Rafe wouldn't have been forced to kill to protect me."

Her defense earned her a withering stare. "You will call me Alpha."

Katie swallowed. "Yes, Alpha."

"Good." He bent at the waist to bring his face to her level. "You're right, Katie. It is your fault...but only to an extent. After all, you're just human—which means you don't know any better." Alpha shifted his focus to Rafe. "You do."

"I didn't know we would bond. I was only trying to save her life. For that I'm sorry. To Katie, to you, and to the pack." Rafe straightened and threw back his shoulders. "But we *are* bonded now. As soon as that happened, Katie became my number one priority. I won't apologize for that. I would kill that asshole again for what he tried to do to her. I wish I'd killed the other one."

Alpha moved to backhand Rafe across the face with his closed fist. Katie flinched, but Rafe stayed perfectly still. The veins in Alpha's neck stood out as he lowered his arm and exhaled. "There's no point in punishing you for something you'll do again. I know that. And I know why you did what you did...I *do* understand." He glanced at Cooper, who crouched on the floor beside Shilah, rubbing the dog's chest like a doting uncle. "I like you, Rafe. Despite what you did tonight, despite the fact that you've always been a bit of a lone wolf, you know I like you. That's why I'm so glad I managed to talk Jack down from his insinuations that pack wars have broken out over lesser offenses than you committed tonight. I would have hated needing to kill both of you myself to prevent even worse bloodshed."

Rafe's fingers tightened on hers. "I'm glad it didn't come to that, Alpha."

"We've shared this land with our friends across the river for over a generation now. Despite our polar opposite views on human interaction, we've managed not to step on their toes, and they've mostly stayed out of our way. That's the only reason Jack is willing to stop short of ordering a full-out assault on our pack. Which means this better never happen again." Alpha folded his arms over his chest and glared at Rafe, whose expression was tight. "What are your plans for Katie? Do you intend to keep her here? A human bond-mate among hungry wolves?"

"She's leaving as soon as the roads clear." Rafe didn't look at her as he delivered the news. "This won't happen again."

Katie's stomach dropped at Rafe's pronouncement. Her imminent departure wasn't a new concept—she'd wanted to leave this place for as long as she'd been conscious and had nearly killed herself to escape. Yet somehow one brief, heartfelt moment with Rafe had thrown all her earlier convictions into doubt. The comforting press of his fingers entangled with hers made it hard to remember what it was about her life that she was so eager to return to. It wasn't that her career, her apartment, and her parents, sister, and few close friends weren't important. Just that Rafe was too, to a degree that defied all logic.

Alpha must have noticed her ambivalence, because he smiled cruelly. "Is that what you want, Katie? To leave your beloved bond-mate?"

She gave Rafe a sidelong glance. No matter how strongly her soul responded

to him, he wasn't her beloved. He couldn't be. They would need to have more than just a handful of conversations and a quick kiss for her to call what she was feeling love. Right now it felt more like a craving or an addiction. An itch she was desperate to scratch, because he made her feel so damn good.

Not that she was going to admit that much aloud.

Katie chose her words carefully. "I want to be safe. And I don't feel safe out here right now."

"Nor should you." Alpha bared his teeth in a vaguely menacing grin. "Jack promised me that none of his wolves would seek vengeance for the one you killed tonight. He's ordering them to stand down in the interest of not shedding a lot of wolf blood over a..." He paused, then smirked. "A woman."

"Good. We need to make sure he understands—that *everyone* understands—Katie is my bond-mate." Rafe's voice took on a dangerous edge. "She's off-limits, full stop. She's *mine*."

Rafe's possessive tone triggered a rush of arousal that left Katie hoping that werewolves didn't have a heightened sense of smell. Otherwise everyone in the room would know she was soaking wet. That she was even capable of feeling desire after the night she'd had was almost impossible to believe. It had to be their bond. There was no other explanation.

"She's yours, but she's leaving." Alpha kept his gaze locked on Katie's face as he spoke. "Well, I hope for your sake, dear Katie, that the roads clear before tomorrow night. Because although Jack is a wolf of his word and he's commanded his pack not to seek vengeance, we all know that there's no controlling a werewolf during his time of the month." His expression became deadly serious. "So I suspect that you'll have at least one visitor tomorrow night. Probably more. And Rafe will be...out of commission."

"No, I'll be protecting my mate." Rafe reassured her with a single look. "The moon won't stop me."

"I hope not, for both your sakes." Alpha finally backed away, crossing the room to stand at Rafe's bedroom door. "If you make it through tomorrow night, come see me. We'll talk about how you can start making reparations for the damage you caused to this pack."

"Yes, Alpha." Rafe's jaw tightened. "I apologize for the trouble. I'll do everything in my power to make sure no more blood is spilled." He hesitated, then threw back his shoulders and said, "But if they come after us tomorrow night, I'm afraid that will be impossible. Like you said...there's no controlling a werewolf during his time of the month."

"Indeed." Alpha gestured to Cooper, who came to him like an obedient pet. Shilah looked sorry to see him go. Pinning Rafe with a hard look, Alpha said, "Keep her inside. Even if you have to tie her to the bed. Don't let them catch a whiff of her. Find a place for her to hide during the transformation. I have no idea what will happen, but I know it's going to be a long night for both of you." His features softened slightly and he grimaced at Katie. "Especially you."

She didn't even want to imagine the terror of hiding for hours in the dark with bloodthirsty werewolves roaming around outside, determined to hunt her down. The thought alone was enough to nearly drive her mad—until Rafe

wrapped his arm around her waist and eased her fear with his calm strength. "We'll be fine. Thank you."

"We'll see." Alpha left the bedroom and Cooper followed. "Make sure to lock up after us."

Rafe grumbled as he released her and stood. "Of course."

Katie didn't move to follow Rafe when he left the room. She wasn't entirely sure her legs even worked after the scare Alpha and Cooper had given her. She was desperate to talk to Rafe—about what was happening between them, their plan for tomorrow night, and then what they were supposed to do beyond that—but she was content to wait for him to return. She knew he wouldn't stay away long. That he couldn't.

As though he'd heard her thoughts, Rafe reappeared at the door. "They're gone. If Jack Devereaux is telling the truth, we shouldn't have to worry about any other visitors tonight."

"And what about tomorrow night?" For the first time since she'd woken up in his cabin, Katie looked directly into his eyes and he stared back into hers. "Rafe, what are we going to do?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Let’s worry about that after we get some sleep.” Rafe walked closer to the bed, but stopped a respectable distance away. He folded his arms over his bare chest, looking far more relaxed than she could understand. If he was worried about his impending transformation or her ill-preparedness when it came to defending herself from werewolves, he sure wasn’t showing it. “There’s literally nothing we can do tonight. It’s still snowing and we’re stuck here until it stops. We’ll function better if we rest now and figure out a plan later this morning.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep.” The prospect of returning to the guest room alone—or even with Shilah—was chilling. How could she lie in bed and listen to the wind howling outside without going mad from anticipation? She was certain they would be attacked. The only question was when. Despite Alpha’s confidence that Jack’s promise to stand down was genuine, she wasn’t convinced that they wouldn’t be ambushed in the next few hours. Which was why she would feel better if she stayed with Rafe. “Not alone.”

“You can take Shilah.”

“I don’t want Shilah.” Katie hated the mild panic in her voice, a mere echo of her very real anxiety. “Do you think I could just stay in here?”

Rafe broke their eye contact with an uncomfortable smile. “Of course.”

It was obvious that he wasn’t happy about her request, but was willing to comply anyway. Katie frowned. She didn’t want to feel like she was forcing him to share his bed. Only hours ago she was frightened of the man and now she wanted nothing more than to soak up his strength and calm. But that was only if he wanted to hold her as much as she wanted to be held. She tried and failed to catch his gaze. “Unless that’s a problem.”

“It’s not a problem. Not at all.” Clad only in sweatpants—and still visibly aroused—Rafe laced his hands in front of his crotch and half-turned away from her. “If you’d like, I can stand guard in the hallway while you try to sleep.”

“No, I want you to stay with me.” Embarrassed by how forward that sounded, Katie lowered her gaze. “Besides, you need the rest, too.”

“All right.” He walked to the opposite side of the bed, hesitated, then sat on the edge of the mattress with his back to hers. She didn’t turn to face him, sensing that this conversation would be easier if she wasn’t staring into his intense green eyes. Rafe exhaled, then reached back to cover her hand with his. “Are you okay?”

She smiled at the absurdity of the question. “I’m tired, scared out of my mind, confused...at this precise moment, mostly about why holding your hand

feels so good. But other than that, I'm fine."

He gave her a gentle squeeze. "I like holding your hand, too."

"Then why don't you want to stay in here with me?"

"I never said I didn't."

She vocalized what they both already knew. "You don't have to say something for me to know it."

Rafe was quiet for a long time. "So you feel our bond, too? I didn't know if it would be the same for a human."

"I feel it." Frightened by the admission, Katie circled back to her earlier question. "Why don't you want to be around me?"

The nearly imperceptible hitch in Rafe's breathing made her stomach flutter. "I do. It's just...a little uncomfortable."

Shocked by the subtle anguish in his voice, she succumbed to the desire to turn and look at him. "Uncomfortable how?"

He grimaced. "Slightly, you know...painful."

At this point, Rafe's presence provided her with endless peace and comfort. The thought that it was unpleasant for him to be around her made her heart ache. She reached for his shoulder, then startled when he flinched away. "I don't want to hurt you."

"It's the moon." He rubbed his hands on his thighs, studiously avoiding her gaze. "That and our bond. My senses are heightened right now. The animal is coming out. Being around you isn't exactly helping." Red-faced, he gestured at his lap. "I know you've noticed. Though I appreciate that you've had the grace not to mention it."

"It didn't seem like the sort of thing that ought to be mentioned." Struck by the absurdity of the entire situation, Katie let slip an exhausted giggle. "At least not until we've had a few more dates."

Rafe smiled with her, then sobered. "Obviously I would never take you without your consent, but I want you so badly it literally hurts. And I'm afraid of offending you with..." He gestured helplessly at himself. "This."

"I'm not offended." On the contrary, she was strangely flattered. She was pretty sure no man had ever sported an hours-long hard-on for her before. Certainly not one so attractive. Somehow, despite everything she'd been through tonight and the past week, she would be lying if she said she wasn't at all pleased—and interested. She'd never been one to jump into bed too quickly and she was pretty sure sex should be the very last thing on her mind, but the intensity of their connection overrode any trauma she'd experienced or reservations she might have. If Rafe asked, she would probably let him have her.

Judging by his Herculean effort not to initiate more intimate contact, she doubted that was going to happen.

Katie drew back the covers on her side of the bed and crawled beneath. "I don't want to torment you, but it would be nice to get to know you better. Considering that our souls are basically married now."

He nodded and lay back, staying on top of the comforter. "That's fair." He rolled onto his side and looked into her eyes. "Ask me anything."

Where to start? There was so much she wanted to know—about Rafe, his

pack, werewolves in general. She opened her mouth to speak, then paused, considering. Though it was hardly at the top of her list, she burned with curiosity over one topic in particular. "Why don't you have a girlfriend already?"

"There was someone when I was younger." Rafe's eyes darkened. "She was supposed to be my mate, but she went missing one day. I tracked her scent through the woods to a spot not far from here, but then it just...disappeared. I never saw her again. A few times after that, I'd catch a whiff of her on the breeze, but it never led anywhere. She was gone."

Shit. "I didn't mean to bring up a sad memory."

He shook his head, the corner of his mouth quirking slightly. "Susan isn't a sad memory. Her disappearance is, but it was a long time ago." He paused. "To be honest, I've always suspected that one of our 'friends from across the river' was responsible. I couldn't prove anything, though, and Alpha wasn't willing to listen to my suspicions. As you just saw, he would do almost anything to avoid confrontation with that pack."

"Why do you think it was them?"

"I don't believe Susan would have run away like that. The pack was her family. She wouldn't have left because she had nowhere to go. Something happened to her." He fingered a lock of her hair, seemingly riveted by its texture. "Besides, when you live next to monsters, it's natural to look to them when things go wrong."

"So Alpha's assessment that you've all co-existed peacefully until now..."

Rafe scoffed. "They've never done anything blatant enough to encourage Alpha to push back. He tells us to stay out of their way in the hope that they'll stay out of ours. At first that just meant turning a blind eye to the humans they killed. After Susan vanished, it became clear to me that Alpha is more concerned about avoiding war than taking a stand. Frankly, I'm surprised he didn't just kill us tonight if that's what he thought Jack Devereaux wanted."

"I'm so sorry, Rafe. Really." While the thought of Rafe being with another woman made her stupidly jealous, she hated knowing that he'd suffered that kind of heartache. "Did you love her?"

"Yes." He cupped her cheek and traced her lower lip with his thumb. "But we weren't bonded. Very few of us ever find a bond-mate."

"So you're saying that what you feel for me is different than what you felt for her?"

"Very different." Rafe rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "But you're right. We barely know each other."

Katie propped herself up on her elbow. "Is your Alpha bonded to his mate? You said he should know what this means."

"No, his parents were bonded. And his father was never the same after his mother passed away." He covered his face with his arm, no longer looking at her. "Damn it, Katie. I really am so, so sorry."

"Because you've ruined me for other men?" Emboldened by the knowledge that she wasn't being observed, Katie allowed her attention to drift lower, to Rafe's tented sweatpants. If she really was ruined for anyone else, then wanting him was only natural. Even if it seemed really, really messed up.

"To start." Rafe dropped his arm and caught her looking. She appreciated *his* grace in not mentioning it. "I'm sorry I got you into this mess. That we bonded. That I didn't explain things to you and that you felt like you were better off running away into the night. If I'd handled any number of things differently—"

"If you hadn't done exactly what you did, I'd be dead. So no more apologies," Katie said. "You're forgiven. And that's that."

"I appreciate that." He entangled their fingers and looked up at the ceiling again. "But I'm not sure you should forgive me before you understand the full scope of what it means to be bonded."

"It means that you're my other half now. For better or worse. It means that without you, I'll never be whole again." She paused, watching turbulent emotion play over Rafe's handsome face. "Did I get that right?"

"Yeah." He lifted their joined hands to his face and kissed her knuckles. Then he closed his eyes. "They say that when one half of a bonded pair dies, often the other follows shortly after. Why, I don't know. Maybe it's a physical consequence of such an intense, soul-deep connection being severed."

Katie digested that news. So if Rafe died, she would either drown in sadness or join him. Excellent. "Is that the worst of it? Our bond?"

"Yeah, I think so." Rafe lowered their hands to rest between their bodies. "Having a bond-mate is an incredible gift, but it's also a burden. Especially for a human, I have to imagine." Self-loathing flickered across his face. "You didn't ask to get hooked up with a werewolf. We have nothing in common. You don't belong in my world. And I sure as hell don't belong in yours."

"Honestly? Right now I'm a lot more worried about getting attacked by angry werewolves than I am about whether or not we're compatible." Taking a chance, she rested her hand above his heart. The heat from his skin was scorching and his chest hair tickled her palm. Her rising desire made it hard to breathe. "As far as our bond goes, it is what it is. I feel it. I do. Which means that hating you—or even staying mad at you—is impossible. Trust me, I tried earlier and failed miserably."

Rafe chuckled, relaxing under her touch. "That's actually reassuring."

"Good." She scooted closer and rested her head on his shoulder. His body tensed right back up. Sighing, she wrapped her arm around his middle and cuddled closer. "Will you please hold me now?"

Rather than answer, Rafe eased his arm around her back. Katie closed her eyes and soaked up the intimacy of their embrace. She couldn't remember ever feeling so comfortable with a man. It really did defy all logic. In a way, that made it easier to just go with this situation. Clearly their connection was bigger than both of them. There was no point in fighting it.

He rubbed his fingers over his arm. "How about you? You don't have a boyfriend back in the city, do you?"

"God, no." That was a good thing, as it turned out. What if this had happened while she was in love with someone else? That would have been tragic. "No, my ex-boyfriend broke up with me almost eight months ago. Haven't dated anyone since. I decided to take a break from the whole relationship thing."

"How's that working out for you?"

She smiled at the trace of humor that had crept into his voice. "I'll tell you in a couple days."

"Deal." Rafe traced nonsense patterns on her skin with his fingertips. "So... tell me what your life is like. How do you spend your time?"

"Working, mostly. I'm a graphic designer for web, mostly, but also some print. I've been doing contract work lately and have had some luck building a pretty impressive list of clients." When Rafe didn't respond, Katie raised her head and looked at him. "It allows me to work remotely from home, make my own hours. I like it."

"I'm not sure what all of that means, but it sounds great." He gave her a sheepish shrug. "I don't completely cut myself off from human culture, but my knowledge is definitely limited. Computers are beyond me."

Apparently they really *didn't* have much in common. At least beyond the fact that they were attracted to each other. "How do you earn money?"

"I don't, for the most part. I live off the land as much as possible. When I do need tools or supplies from the outside world, I barter and work odd jobs... carpentry and construction, mostly. But I don't need much. I live a very simple life. I have a little in the way of clothing, but most of that came from Alpha." Rafe raised an eyebrow. "I don't wear them very often. Not unless I have guests."

"Probably easier to change into a wolf when you're naked," Katie said lightly. She sobered when her words registered. Rafe was a werewolf. Just like every other man she'd met over the past twenty-four hours, each of whom scared her silly. She placed her hand flat on Rafe's chest, amazed by how firm and muscular he was. She had to force herself not to look at his crotch again. The man was a wild animal and here she was snuggled up to his side. Yet she'd never felt safer in her life. "So...do you like it? Being a wolf?"

"It's all I've ever known," Rafe murmured. "But...yeah, I like it fine. I love running and playing with Shilah, both of us on the same level. I love being part of nature in a way that no human ever could. I love that I rarely get sick, that I'm stronger than your average man, that I heal quickly when I'm wounded. I don't particularly love the full moon, but everything comes at a price." He caressed her shoulder. "Right?"

"Apparently so." Like the way she'd finally found the companionship she'd craved with a man, at the expense of her autonomy and maybe even her life. Without thinking, Katie pressed her lips to Rafe's chest and planted a gentle kiss only inches from his nipple. He froze beneath her. "Have you ever been with a human woman before?"

"I'd never even touched one before the night I rescued you." Rafe's voice was strained. "Katie—"

She raised up and placed a finger against his lips. "Please don't say whatever you're about to say."

He spoke anyway. "We should sleep."

"I know." Katie let her hand slide down to his hard belly. She had no idea what she was doing or why she felt so powerless against her hormones. This wasn't like her. "But I'd rather keep getting to know each other."

He caught her wrist before she could go any lower. "You had an incredibly

traumatic night. You're injured."

"You're right, I did. And I am." She searched his face, hoping for some sign that he was just as swept away by their connection as she was. "There's not one reason I should want you right now. But my body doesn't seem to know that."

Rafe's throat bobbed as he swallowed. He inhaled, nostrils flaring, and closed his eyes. "You're not making this easy, sweetheart."

Her heart melted at the endearment. "What are you afraid of?"

"Hurting you." He tightened his grip on her wrist. "Frightening you."

"Is that what werewolves do in bed?" Katie bent and kissed the nipple closest to her. "Hurt their mates?"

Rafe trembled. "I would never hurt you."

"Then show me." She couldn't believe she was goading him like this. She'd never been the aggressor in a physical encounter. She'd never even slept with a guy before the third date. "Show me what a wolf does with his bond-mate."

Growling, Rafe rolled so that he was on top of her. He dragged her hands above her head and pressed them against the mattress, lowering his face so it was only inches from hers. Katie's chest heaved as she reacted to the pleasure of his heavy weight pinning her down. She shouldn't enjoy it. Not after the biter and his blond friend from earlier. But she did. God help her, she did.

"You're wet." Rafe kissed her neck and ground his hips into her.

Despite her assertiveness, Katie blushed. "Yes."

"I can smell it." He nipped at her earlobe. "Your scent has been driving me crazy for hours."

"Crazy enough to believe me when I say I want this?" She licked her lips as she stared up at him. "And that I might explode if you don't kiss me?"

Rafe's breathing grew ragged. "I thought you didn't want to make our bond any stronger."

"Does it really matter? Is there any undoing this?"

His gaze strayed to her mouth. "No, I don't think so."

"Then please. I feel so *empty*." She lifted her head, straining for a kiss. She felt wanton and desperate and needy and for whatever reason, she didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except sating the hunger that was eating her alive. "Kiss me, Rafe. *Please*."

His mouth crashed down onto hers.