

Curse of the Moon Box Set

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CURSE OF THE MOON Box Set

Stacy Claflin

CURSE OF THE MOON BOX SET

by Stacy Claflin

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LOST WOLF

CURSE OF THE MOON #1

Chapter 1

Beads of sweat broke out along my hairline. I wiped them away, tightened my ponytail, and ran faster along the dirt trail, jumping over exposed roots and ducking under low-hanging branches. Pine trees, firs, and alders turned my path into more of an obstacle course than a trail.

A twig snapped behind me.

I glanced back, but didn't see anything. Probably just a raccoon.

My sneaker hit a root and my arms flew in front of me. I landed on my hands and knees, and slid down an incline. Rocks and branches dug into my skin until I crashed into a huckleberry bush.

I stood and dusted myself off. Blood dripped from my legs. I pulled twigs, dirt, and small rocks

from the cuts.

“Nice work, Victoria,” I muttered to myself.

Sasha had said I shouldn’t have gone into the forest for my first jog. But having just moved to the beautiful Olympic Peninsula, I wasn’t about to join a club when I had the great outdoors. Birds chirped all around and a stream bubbled nearby. It was like the woods were telling me I’d made the right choice.

Another snap.

“Who’s there?” I sounded a lot braver than I felt. My heart thundered against my ribcage and I whipped my head around. My roommates had said the woods were safe, but I was also trusting people who had been strangers only a couple days earlier.

Why had I gone into the woods alone? Wasn’t that how half of all horror movies started?

I thought of Sasha running on a treadmill, flirting with cute college guys. Maybe she was the smart one.

Footsteps.

“Hello?” I called.

Nothing. The birds had even stopped singing.

“Is anyone there?”

The footsteps came closer.

My pulse drummed in my ears. I fought to breathe normally.

A small gray and black wolf stepped out from behind the tree. He made eye contact with me.

I didn’t move a muscle, holding its gaze.

Instead of feeling the need to run, its presence calmed me. My heart rate steadied, and I held myself back from rubbing its nuzzle.

“Are you lost, little guy?”

He stepped closer and sniffed the air.

I should’ve run, but was too intrigued. Would he check me out and then run off? I couldn’t shake the feeling that he wanted me to pay him some attention. Or even to pet him. I wasn’t sure why, but petting him felt right, natural even. How could that be? A wolf that wanted a rub down?

He took another step and then another, continuing to stare into my eyes.

Music sounded from my pocket as my phone rang. The animal skidded back and exposed his teeth.

I reached in and rejected the call.

The wolf glanced from side to side and crept closer to me. He was close enough that I *could* have reached out and rubbed the fur. I kept my hands near my pocket.

He nudged my leg with his wet nose and sat down.

“D-do you want me to pet you?”

His nose again grazed my leg.

I hesitated, but then reached between his ears and patted the fur, surprised at how soft it was. He rested his head against my leg. I continued petting.

My phone rang again.

He jumped up and ran away.

Disappointment washed through me. That had probably been a once in a lifetime experience.

I leaned back against the tree, hoping the creature would return.

After what felt like forever—but a quick glance at my phone told me was probably only ten minutes—I decided to head back home. If the time didn’t convince me to leave, the grumbling in my stomach did. Lunchtime.

I headed back the same way I came, this time paying more attention to exposed roots. Finally, I broke free of the woods.

Was it my imagination, or could I smell lunch cooking? The house was a mile away. I shook my head.

The hunger was getting to me. My nerves were frayed.

I hurried down the concrete trail until the mansion came into view. The Waldensian stood out like a sore thumb as one of the largest homes on the edge of campus. With twenty-eight bedrooms, it housed over fifty students.

Smoke came from around back. I sniffed the air. Barbecue. My mouth watered.

“Victoria!” Sasha, ran over, carrying so many grocery bags they probably outweighed her.

I grabbed several. “What’s going on?”

“Landon found some patties in the freezer and he’s cooking those up. We decided to throw a party.”

I grimaced. “How long have those been there?”

Sasha shrugged. “No idea. I got some veggie burgers and some chicken patties. There are bound to be a lot of hot, hungry guys.”

“And tons of chips.” I shook the bags I’d taken. They weighed next to nothing, though full.

“Yep.” As we made our way inside, she told me about all the guys she’d seen between the

Waldensian and the grocery store. She'd invited every last one of them. "Put the perishables away while I get the rest."

"Sure." I dug through the bags. She'd bought enough dips and appetizers to feed an army.

Sasha came in, carrying a case of drinks in each hand. She stuck them in the fridge and then pulled her braids back into a loose ponytail. "I can't believe how hot it is. I didn't think Washington got this warm. Doesn't it rain and snow all the time?"

"Doesn't look like it, and I'm glad. I love this weather."

"Me, too. I just didn't pack for it."

I put some sandwich toppings in the fridge. "You can borrow something of mine."

Her eyes lit up. "Thank you! That cute yellow sundress?"

"Go for it."

She gave me a quick hug. "You're the best roomie ever! Can you tell Landon the food's here?"

"Yeah."

"Thank you." She squealed and ran upstairs.

The old back door groaned in protest when I opened it to poke my head outside.

Landon stood behind a smoking grill. He wore an apron that read *Kiss the Cook*, and from my angle that appeared to be the *only* thing he wore, though I was sure he had to at least have on shorts. I hoped.

"Is Sasha back with the other patties?" He turned, and I could see his shorts—very short cutoffs.

"Yeah, I just unloaded everything. I didn't think short shorts were the style for guys."

Landon grinned proudly. "When you've got legs like mine, tiny cutoffs are always in fashion."

I laughed. "Do you need any help?"

"I'm fine, but it looks like you should take care of your knees." He glanced at my legs.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Well, give a shout if you do need help."

Austin, another of our housemates, came over and smiled at me. "You can help by introducing me to all your friends. If they're half as gorgeous as you, I need to meet them all."

Heat inflamed my cheeks. "I don't have any friends, remember? I just moved here."

"You're no fun. Go away," he teased and dug through a cooler, chuckling to himself.

I went up to my room, where Sasha sat at our shared vanity wearing my dress. She spun around. "How do I look?"

“Stunning.” I closed the door and pulled off my shorts.

Sasha stared at my knees. “You’d better wash that dirt out before it gets infected.”

I grimaced at the thought.

She held up a blush palette next to her face. “Which one should I wear? I was thinking this one,”—she pointed to a light one, about the color of the flowers on the dress—“but I’m not sure.”

“It’ll be perfect.” I gave her a thumbs-up and then hurried into the bathroom to fix my wounds. I sat on the counter and scrubbed, trying to ignore the sting.

After I had bandaged myself up, I went into the bedroom.

Sasha was playing with her braids. “Up or down?” She pulled them back and then let go.

“Up.” I turned to my closet to figure out what I would wear. Maybe some capris to cover my burning wounds.

“You’re right,” she agreed.

I found a cute tank top and got dressed. My stomach rumbled.

Sasha laughed. “You’d better eat.”

“Tell me about it.”

Her phone rang. She glanced at it and her shoulders slumped. “My mom.” She groaned. “She won’t leave me alone. I swear, she checks on me every hour. You’d think I’d gone to college on the other side of the world. Ugh.”

“Can’t you just ignore her?” I asked, nudging her away from the vanity so I could use it.

“Obviously, you’ve never met her.” She sighed dramatically. “You’re lucky. Your parents haven’t called once, have they?”

I froze, staring at my reflection.

“What?” Sasha asked.

My voice caught.

“Victoria?”

I couldn’t remember my parents—or anything before I’d arrived at the Waldensian mansion, ready to start college.

Chapter 2

“What?” Sasha asked. “What’s wrong?”

Other than the fact that I had no memories before a couple days earlier? “Nothing. Sorry, I guess I’m just hungry.”

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

I forced a smile, meeting her gaze through the mirror. "No ghosts. I just need some food." Conversation drifted up from downstairs. "As soon as I finish my makeup."

She tilted her head.

I grabbed a tube of eyeliner. "Meet you downstairs?"

"Sure you're okay?"

I leaned toward my reflection and applied the makeup along my eyelash line. "Couldn't be better. Save a hottie for me."

She giggled. "I'm sure there'll be plenty to go around."

"See you in a few." I moved to my other eyelid.

"Okay, but if that really tall baseball player comes, he's mine. What was his name?" She paused. "It doesn't matter. I claim him."

"You've got it." I studied my eyes to make sure the liner was even.

She left the room, closing the door.

I put the lid on and dropped it, finally allowing myself to let my realization sink in. My hands shook. How could I have no memories? Nothing. And how could I have not realized it sooner? I'd pulled into the driveway of the Waldensian and gotten out, knowing exactly what I was doing. But without a single memory from before.

My Jaguar had been packed full of my belongings—everything I would need for a successful year of college. And clearly, I knew the skills I needed. I was a pro at applying makeup, had great fashion sense, and could text like it was nobody's business.

Did I have a mom and a dad? I had to have, but trying to remember only made my head hurt. I went into my purse and dug around, finding credit and debit cards, a driver's license, and everything else that seemed to prove I was a real person with a past. Except without any clues. The only address listed was for here at the mansion.

No clues to my previous life.

I grabbed my phone and went to my contacts. Only my roommates. There were no apps for social media, either. No photos. I hadn't subscribed to any podcasts or put anything in the notes. The only thing remotely personal was the downloaded songs, but those didn't tell me anything other than the fact that I liked popular music.

Whatever past I'd had was gone, or was at least out of my reach.

How could I remember *nothing*?

What was going on? What could have possibly happened to make me forget everything?

A crash sounded outside. I went over to the window and looked into the backyard. Someone had

knocked over a tin garbage can and a couple large guys were picking up the contents. The yard was filled with people.

I needed to get out there. If I couldn't remember my past, I needed to focus on the present, and that meant making lots of friends. Later, I would worry about trying to figure out why I had no memories. I finished getting ready and headed downstairs, eager to make college the best time of my life—not that I had much to compare it against.

Outside, all the food had been moved to a plastic folding table. I grabbed a paper plate and filled it, finding my appetite returning.

Landon turned to me with a smile. "What kind of patty?"

"Whatever's ready now." I held out my plate and he plopped one on my bun.

"Enjoy."

"Thanks." I found an empty plastic chair and scarfed the food down, listening to the conversation all around me. Everyone was talking about college life—sports, parties, class schedules, instructors.

Relief washed through me. Maybe having no past wouldn't be such a big deal. I couldn't hear one person discussing life back home. But of course, they were probably glad to be away. Would I ever discover my past?

"Hey, beautiful," came a deep voice on my left.

I turned and smiled at the bronzed, muscular, drop-dead gorgeous guy taking a seat next to me.

"Hi." I swallowed the last bite of my burger, trying not to stare at him. My eyes didn't want to cooperate.

He grinned, showing off perfect teeth. "What is someone as beautiful as you doing, sitting here by yourself?"

My face heated. "I-I... well, uh..." I paused and took a deep breath. "Let me start over. I figured I'd eat first and then talk to people."

He balanced his plate on his knees and held out his hand, acting as if I hadn't just made a complete fool of myself. "Then I'm in luck. I'm Carter. You are?"

"Victoria." I shook his hand. At least I had a name, even if no past. "What year are you?"

"Just a lowly sophomore," he said, with a hint of teasing in his voice.

"You went here last year?" I asked.

He nodded and bit into his hot dog. "You new?"

"Yeah. A super-lowly freshman."

Carter laughed. "You'll love it. I was kind of worried about the location—you know, small town and

all that—but it's cool. Lots of parties. Seattle's not that far, but I think I only went there twice all last year." He stuffed the rest of the frank in his mouth.

"What are you studying?" I asked. Why couldn't I think of anything more interesting to talk about? I'd send him running before long.

He groaned and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I have to declare soon. My dad's all over me about that. I have no idea what I want to do, you know?"

"What classes did you like last year? Maybe you could go in one of those directions."

"That's easy. Art history."

"I sense a but."

"That's not going to go over with my dad." His body tensed.

"So? Do what you want. It's your life."

Carter laughed bitterly. "If I major in art, they'll cut me off financially. Probably even take away my car."

"Oh."

"Do you know what you're going to study?" He twisted the cap off a beer and held it toward me.

I shook my head. "No thanks."

"Don't like beer?"

My mouth dropped. "I..."

"Oh, I get it. You're a wine cooler kind of girl." His face brightened. "I should have known you'd want something sweet." He winked.

Before I could reply, Carter jumped up and dug into a cooler. He pulled out something pink and tossed the lid into the garbage and handed it to me.

"Thanks." I sipped it. It tasted like strawberries.

Carter grinned. "See? Too classy for a regular beer."

How sad was it that a complete stranger knew what I liked better than I did?

"Of course someone as sweet as you would prefer those. You up for a dance tonight?"

"Which one is that?" I sipped the drink, hoping it would relax my nerves.

Carter leaned closer. "You can come as my guest. It's a really private, exclusive club. It's called the Jag."

I nearly choked on the drink. The Jag? Like my car was a Jaguar?

"Are you okay?" Carter's eyes widened.

"Started to go down the wrong way. I'm fine." I cleared my throat.

"Do you want to go with me?"

The club's name might have been a coincidence, but I had to find out. "I'd love to."

He smiled, leaned back, and sipped his beer. "Awesome. I thought I might have to go stag, but now I get to accompany the most beautiful girl in town."

My face flushed with heat. "What time? What should I wear?"

"I'll pick you up at seven. Wear the nicest dress you have. Like I said, it's very exclusive." He held my gaze.

"Mind my asking how you got in?"

Carter glanced to the side, a slight frown appearing. "My dad owns the place."

I stared at him, trying to put it all together. "Your dad?"

"Now you see why an art degree wouldn't fly. I pretty much have to choose business—or something closely related. As the oldest son, it's expected that I'll take it over."

"That seems..." I searched for the right word.

"Old school?"

"Yeah." I set my empty bottle on the ground.

"It is, but our family goes way back."

"But can't you just, I don't know, do what you want?" I asked.

"Then I'd have to start over with nothing. Dad won't just cut me off from finances, he'll find a way to make sure I can't get a job any higher than a janitor at a poop farm."

"Poop farm?" I laughed.

He shrugged.

"I've heard working there really sucks. Especially for the janitors."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "You get my point."

"Basically, he has the power to blackball you, no matter where you go?"

"Yep."

"That's harsh."

"It is what it is. So, you'll be ready at seven?" He rose and took my empty plate from me.

"Ten minutes early." I smiled.

"Perfect." He threw the trash away and then came back. "I'm actually looking forward to the party tonight. Thank you."

"No, thank *you*. It sounds like quite the opportunity."

"I guarantee all your friends will be jealous. Well, I have to get going. See you tonight."

"Wait."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you want to exchange numbers?"

He twisted a silver ring on his middle finger and his expression tightened. "Right. Of course." He pulled out his phone from his back pocket. The case appeared to be gold plated. He slid his finger around the screen. "What's your number?"

Feeling stupid, I pulled out mine and went into my contact list to find my number. I told him, and a few moments later, my phone rang. "Got it."

"Awesome. See you in a few hours."

"A few?" I exclaimed.

He glanced at the screen. "Okay, five."

"See you then." I leaned back and sighed. For someone with no past, things were working out pretty well. I had a date with a gorgeous guy at an exclusive club.

With nothing remotely close to nice enough to wear.

Sasha sat in the chair Carter had been in. "Who was the hottie?"

"Apparently my date tonight."

She squealed. "Where to?"

"Somewhere called the Jag. I'm going to need to get a formal dress."

Her eyes lit up. "Shopping trip!" She pulled me up to standing. We went up to our room to grab our purses and then headed for her car. She rattled on about parties and dances coming up. I wasn't sure how we'd fit any studying or sleeping into our schedules with so many social activities.

It was nice to have something else to focus on other than my past—or lack thereof.

I had a blast trying on dresses. Sasha and I snapped pictures of each other in all the ones we liked. I ended up choosing a floor-length teal one with straps that criss-crossed in the back and a shimmery bodice.

"You're sickeningly beautiful," Sasha said.

“Uh, thanks?”

She nudged me and snickered. “That’s a compliment.”

“Then you’re sickeningly stunning.”

Sasha beamed. “You’re the best. What did you think of that white dress on me?”

“The one with the lace?” I asked and went back into my dressing room.

“Yeah. Did it look too much like a wedding dress?”

“Not at all.”

“I’m going to get it. I heard the sororities host formal dances all the time. We can pretend to be potential recruits.”

“Sounds like fun,” I agreed. “As long as there aren’t any initiations involved.”

“During a dance?” The door closed in the next dressing room. “If that happens, we’ll hightail out of there.”

“Okay. I may as well get as much use out of this dress as possible for what it costs.”

When we got back home, the backyard was even more crowded. Landon came in and washed his hands as we passed the kitchen.

He glanced at me. “I saw you talking to Carter Jag.”

I stumbled into Sasha, unable to believe what I’d just heard. “What did you say?”

Landon’s brows squished together. “I saw you talking with Carter Jag earlier.”

I gasped for air. His *last name* was Jag?

Heart thundering, I stared between the two of them. The room spun. I took a deep breath to keep from running out of the room.

Chapter 3

“Yeah,” Landon said. “His family owns—”

“The Jag.” I leaned against the wall for support.

What was the deal with jaguars showing up everywhere?

“Right. He and all the super-rich kids always hang out together. I’ve never seen him at any of my parties. In fact, I can’t say I’ve even seen him talking to any of my friends.”

I swallowed. “Interesting. He probably doesn’t invite people to parties at the Jag, either, does he?”

Landon’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head. “Did he...?”

"He's picking me up at seven." I bit my lower lip.

"Really?" Landon stepped closer to me. "Get pictures. Lots of 'em."

"Okay."

"No, I'm serious. There are so many rumors about that place, but I've never seen so much as a picture of the inside. No one else has that I know of, either."

Sasha stared at me. "How'd you manage to get into the most exclusive place on the peninsula?"

"You've got me. Carter just invited me."

"Find out if he has any brothers."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "He said he's the oldest brother."

She grabbed my arm. "Come on. We've got to get you ready."

"Right." I opened my eyes and followed her upstairs, lost in thought. How could a girl with no past find herself with an invite to the Jag? Unless it was some cosmic joke. Either it was, or going there would shed some light on what was going on.

There were too many jaguar references for it to be a coincidence.

Once in our room, Sasha pulled out her phone and scrolled around the screen. "There's a makeup tutorial we've got to follow. You're going to be so hot, you'll set the place on fire."

I shook my head.

"Here it is. What do you think of the look?" She showed me the screen. The girl in the video looked like she belonged on the red carpet.

"Gorgeous," I whispered.

"Wash your face while I get this video set up on my laptop."

"Okay." I trudged into the bathroom, still trying to pull my thoughts together. Nothing made sense.

When I came out, Sasha was swearing at her computer.

"What's the matter?"

"Stupid thing won't start." She chucked it on her bed. "I'm going to have to get a new one. Can we use yours?"

"Sure." I found the backpack where I'd seen it while unpacking and set it on Sasha's dresser, closest to the vanity. When it powered on, I nearly passed out.

The desktop image was a jaguar lounging in a tree.

"Don't just stand there," Sasha said. "Open your browser."

"Of course." I shook my head to clear my thoughts. It didn't work.

I opened the browser and Sasha found the video. "Sit. I've got work to do."

"Should I get the dress on first?"

"And risk spilling something on it? No way." She guided me to the vanity and got to work.

I let my mind wander as she followed the video and chatted excitedly about my date. It was impossible to piece everything together when the majority of the puzzle was missing. I really hoped Carter and the club would offer something—even a small clue would help.

Jaguars obviously meant something, but what?

"Done," Sasha said, interrupting my thoughts.

"That was fast."

"Because you were in your own world," she teased. "Daydreaming about Carter?"

"You caught me." I sighed.

"Hang onto that one."

"I'll try."

"You gotta get me in. I'm dying to see the club now. What do you think?"

I studied my reflection, barely recognizing myself. "Wow. You should become a makeup artist."

She scrunched her face. "My mom would love that. She and my aunt own a beauty parlor in the Bronx."

"You don't want to carry on the business?"

"Not back home. Maybe in the city or something—if I even choose that route. Maybe my creative writing class this quarter will send me in a whole new direction."

I turned back to the mirror. "You definitely have a talent with this."

"Meh. I can use it on my daughters."

"You have children?" I teased.

"I'm going to have five. All girls."

"Really?" I tugged at my hair, trying to figure out what to do with it. "Does your future husband know?"

"It's going to be his idea." She winked. "Do you want your hair up or down?"

"What do you think?"

She closed out the video and brought up a ton of hair images. "It's up to you, darling."

I scrolled through the pictures while she looked at herself in the mirror. "I'm going to have to get my braids done again." She sighed dramatically.

"Why not go natural?"

Sasha laughed and fell on her bed. "That's funny."

"Why?"

"I'll have an afro that'll reach to the ceiling."

"Can't you just straighten it?" I asked.

"Promise me you'll never go into the hair industry."

I turned away, embarrassed. "Why not?"

"Do you know how long straightening locks like mine would take? I don't have time for that. Braids. Then I don't have to worry about my hair every single morning."

"If you say so. Back to my hair. What should we do with it tonight?"

She studied my hair, holding it out and rubbing it between her fingers. "It's nice and thick with a great texture. We can do a lot." She leaned over, glanced at the screen, and pointed to a wavy style with half the hair in a loose bun at the base of the head. "That would look so beautiful on you."

"You don't think it would cover the straps in the back?"

Sasha pursed her lips. "Hmm. Good point, but you could pull half of it over the front. Best of both worlds, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that might work."

"We'll try it, and if it doesn't work, I'll do an updo."

She got to work, and before long, my phone buzzed.

"It's Carter." Blood drained from my head.

"We'd better get that dress on you!"

I accepted the call. "Hi, Carter, I'll be right down."

"I'll be waiting." His voice was so smooth it made it easy to picture him in a tux.

The call ended. I put my phone down and squealed.

Smiling, Sasha pulled my dress out of the bag and unzipped it. "Step inside."

I did and she zipped it back up.

She stepped back and looked me over. "You could be on the cover of *Glamour* magazine."

Curious, I went into the bathroom and looked in the full-length mirror. My mouth gaped. Though I wasn't sure what to expect at the exclusive party, I was sure I wouldn't have any trouble fitting in.

"Come on," Sasha called. "Can't leave that hot guy waiting."

I hurried out, slid on my new, sparkly silver pumps, and grabbed my purse.

"You can't take that," Sasha exclaimed.

"Why not?"

She rolled her eyes. "You've got to be kidding me. It's a good thing you have me." She went into her closet and pulled out a tiny sparkly clutch.

"Will my phone even fit in there?"

"Of course. That and your wallet and a few makeup items. All you need for a date."

"You're the expert." I dumped the contents of my purse onto my bed and stuffed what I could into the miniature bag.

Sasha gave me a once-over. "Girl, you're going to be the best looking one in the place."

"Stop." But I couldn't help beaming. "Do you really think so?"

"Of course. If I was your mom, I'd be taking a million pictures right now. Wait, gimme your camera. I'll take some so you can send them to her."

My chest constricted. Maybe one day I could.

"Hand it over."

Fumbling, I pulled it out of the clutch.

She grabbed my phone and held it up. "Say cheese."

I forced a smile, feeling the start of a lump in my throat.

The flash shone a couple times and Sasha studied the screen. "Perfect."

"Come on, we've made Carter wait long enough."

My knees felt weak. I reached for my phone.

She shook her head. "I'll need pictures of the two of you."

I couldn't argue with that.

We headed downstairs. I could hear Carter before I saw him. He was discussing baseball with Landon. We came into the kitchen.

Carter had his back to us, but Landon looked at me and whistled. "Lookin' good, roomie."

Sasha pushed me closer to the guys. "I know, right? Makes me want to go out somewhere fancy."

Carter turned around and our gazes met. His hair was slicked back and he was even more gorgeous in a tux. I almost dropped the handbag.

"You look beautiful." He picked up a plastic box from the table, pulled out a corsage with white roses, and slid it onto my wrist.

"Stand over by the wall," Sasha directed. "Picture time."

Carter flashed me a handsome smile and put his arm around my shoulders. We stood where Sasha pointed, in front of an empty wall.

She snapped a few pictures and handed me my phone. "I'm so jealous."

I glanced down at the image on the screen. We did look great—he was gorgeous and I barely recognized myself. I slid the phone into the clutch. "I'm sorry it took me a little longer to get ready than I thought."

"Not a problem. You were well worth the wait."

Sasha raised her brows. "See?" she mouthed. Then she turned to Carter. "Have fun, you two. Bring her back by midnight."

"What?"

"I'm kidding!" She laughed and grabbed my arm. "I want to hear everything when you get back."

Maybe I didn't need a mom with Sasha as my roommate. "Sure."

Sounds of shattering glass came from the backyard.

Landon groaned. "I better get out there. Things are starting to get rowdy. See you guys!"

I gave a little wave and Carter, who still had his arm around me, led me toward the front door.

Sasha caught my gaze and gave me a thumbs-up. I smiled, my heart thundering in my chest.

"Is your friend always like that?" Carter asked and chuckled.

"I'm not really sure. We just met a couple days ago."

"Right. Well, it's nice to have someone who cares."

I couldn't deny that.

He stopped in front of a cherry-red Ferrari and unlocked it with a remote.

My mouth nearly dropped to the ground. Next to his car, my black Jaguar seemed like a

run-of-the-mill sedan.

Carter removed his arm from my shoulders and opened the passenger door. "M'lady."

I hurried over and climbed in. It smelled of leather, and I sank into the super-comfortable seat. It was so soft and supple and conformed to me as I sank in. It relaxed me, and almost made me forget my troubles—much in the same way Carter did.

He got into the driver's seat and started the engine. It purred like a kitten. He turned to me, a devious smile on his face. "Wanna see how fast she can go?"

My eyes lit up. "Yeah, of course."

"Once we get off the main road, we'll have a nearly straight shot to the Jag. I'll show you there."

"I can't wait."

He turned on the music, and the same song played as on my phone when I received a call.

"You okay?" He pulled out of the parking spot.

"It, uh... I was just listening to that song earlier."

Carter tapped his temple. "Great minds." He pulled out onto the main road.

Every other car slowed for him. Quite a few pulled out phones and snapped pictures.

"Is it always like this?"

"Yeah, especially at the beginning of the year. Give 'em a few weeks, and everyone will be used to seeing her around." He pulled off the main road. "You ready to see what she can do?"

I hoped so. "Let's see."

Carter punched the gas, sending the back of my head into the headrest. Everything outside seemed to pass in a shapeless blur.

"This is unbelievable," I gushed.

"You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until you see how she handles the corner coming up."

I couldn't see a corner.

He turned the steering wheel to the right and we took a sharp turn so smoothly I didn't even feel a thing.

"Wow," I whispered.

"Now prepare to really be impressed." He slowed down and pulled into a parking lot. Most every car parked was a luxury vehicle, many as impressive as the Ferrari.

The building in front of us stood tall and sleek, black with no windows in sight. The three letters—Jag—stood out, the same color as Carter's car.

He turned to me. "Are you ready to see the inside?"

My breath caught. Ready or not, that's where we were headed.

Chapter 4

Carter and I walked around the building to where a long line led to a single door. Two enormous men wearing all black stood at either side, checking IDs against their tablets.

My feet hurt just thinking about standing in the line.

Carter laced his fingers through mine and marched to the two burly guys.

Everyone in line stared at us. Their chatter quieted.

"Ringo," Carter said.

The nearest bouncer turned to us and he broke into a grin. "Carter, my man. Come on in."

Both of the huge men moved out of our way and opened the door. The couple in the front of the line tried to go through, but Ringo blocked them with one arm and shook his head.

Carter tugged on my hand, and I followed him inside. The door slammed behind us.

It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkened hallway. Tiny lights lined the floor at the wall. The hall went off in two directions. Loud music with a strong beat sounded from the far end.

He squeezed my hand. "Do you want to start with dinner or dancing?"

"Can we eat first?"

"Whatever you'd like." He led me down the quieter hall and we stepped into a formal restaurant.

Waiters in suits hurried about, taking food and orders. I couldn't see a single empty table.

A man with salt and pepper hair wearing a tux came over to us, smiling warmly. "Greetings, Carter." He nodded to me.

"Hello, Mac. Is a table available?" Carter asked.

"For you? Always. Would you like to dine with your father or at your own table?"

Carter arched a brow.

Mac nodded. "Your own table. I understand. Hold on just a moment." He scurried away.

I glanced around the dim restaurant. Fancy artwork decorated the walls. Everything seemed to be gold-plated. Overhead lamps lit each table illuminating the guests, all dressed in formal wear. Compared to all the other women, I was nothing special. I would fit in, but barely.

Why had Carter brought me? If he never spoke to most people at school, why stop by our barbecue and invite me? Could it have something to do with my elusive past?

Mac returned. "Your favorite table is ready for you."

We followed him, zigging and zagging around booths full of happy customers. People laughed and toasted each other. Finally, we stopped at a corner booth. Two tall candles sat on the middle of the table on either side of a champagne bottle.

Carter let go of my hand and gestured for me to sit. He sat across from me and turned to Mac. "Thank you."

Mac nodded and then rushed away.

"So, this is your favorite table?" I couldn't help wondering how often he brought guests here. Was I merely one of many?

He adjusted himself in the seat. "It's my favorite place to study."

"Study?" I exclaimed.

"It's much quieter during the day."

A server came over and placed a plate of dark bread in the middle of the table and then set three sauce cups around the basket. He poured champagne into the glasses. "Are you ready to order, Master Jag?"

Carter cleared his throat and turned to me. "Do you know what you'd like?"

I glanced around for the menus.

"Order what you'd like. No limitations here—unless you're looking for a rare delicacy from another country. You'll have to order that ahead of time."

I stared at him, unable to speak.

"Master?" asked the server, staring at Carter.

"We'll need a few minutes."

The server bowed and walked away.

"Master?" I asked.

Carter shook his head. "My dad likes things old school."

"Right, you said that."

He nodded. "If you like lobster, I recommend that. Our fishermen go to a spot that no one else knows about, and the seafood is second to none."

"You have your own—? Never mind. Lobster sounds wonderful."

"Dig in." He took a piece of bread and dipped it in garlic butter.

I took one and dipped it in a creamy sauce. It tasted like crab and melted in my mouth.

The server returned. "Have you decided, Master Jag?"

"We'll both have a lobster from today's catch."

"Would you like to kill it yourself?"

My eyes nearly popped out of my head.

Carter glanced at me. "No thank you. We'll let the chef take care of that."

"Very well." The server bowed and left again.

Three violinists and a harpist came our way and stood in the middle of the adjoining booths.

I arched a brow at Carter, who nodded toward the musicians. He appeared amused.

They set up their instruments and played a soft, romantic melody that lulled me into a trance.

After the song ended, I shook my head to clear it. I couldn't tell how much time had passed. Everyone else clapped. I blinked a few times and joined them. The musicians picked up their things and moved to a different part of the restaurant.

I turned to Carter. "This place is amazing."

He rested his chin in his palm. "It's fun to watch it through the eyes of an outsider. Especially one as lovely as you."

My face flushed, and I sipped my champagne. I wondered how far out of my element I was. Without any memories, it was hard to judge, but with or without them, it was impossible to not be impressed. It didn't feel like my normal stomping grounds.

Carter took another piece of bread. "Have you registered for your classes already?"

I nodded. "Nothing exciting this quarter other than psychology."

"Really? I have psych, too. Wonder if we have the same one."

The way things were going, it would have surprised me if we didn't. "Could be."

He pulled out his phone and slid his finger around the screen. "One o'clock with Massaro."

"Sounds familiar." I pulled out my phone and checked. "That's the one."

Carter grinned. "I'm glad you'll be there. I heard he can be a real jerk when he wants to be. What else do you have?"

I glanced over my schedule. "Intro to Statistics and World Geography."

He sipped his drink. "I aced both, so let me know if you need any help. You know where I study." He glanced around the table.

"Thanks."

"Johnson for geography? You'll like her."

I nodded. "And Foley for stats."

His face clouded over.

"Something wrong with him, too?" I asked.

Carter sat taller and his brows came together. "He's new. I wouldn't know."

I tilted my head. "Sure you haven't heard of him?"

The server arrived and placed the two lobsters in front of us. He held up a pepper grater as long as his arm. "Pepper?"

"Please," Carter said.

Once we both had our dishes seasoned, the server again left.

The grin had returned to Carter's face. "Dig in and tell me this isn't the best you've tasted."

I forced a smile. It wouldn't be hard to say that.

"Go on." He stuck a forkful into his mouth and closed his eyes. "It doesn't get any better than this."

Curious, I stabbed the largest piece and took a bite. The taste exploded in my mouth. "Oh, my."

Carter flicked a nod. "Told you. Oh, and be sure to save room for dessert."

We ate in silence as my taste buds screamed in delight. Even the side vegetables were mind-meltingly delicious. It was hard not to scarf everything down, but I kept control, making eye contact with him every so often and smiling.

As soon as the plates had been emptied, the server returned. "Would you like more, or some dessert, perhaps?"

I leaned back. "As much as I'd love some more, I hear the dessert is just as good."

"Very well. What would you like?"

"Good question." I turned to Carter. "What do you recommend?"

He chuckled. "Just about anything, but then again, I've never found a sweet that disagreed with me. Pick your favorite, and we'll have two."

My mind went blank. "I, uh, don't really have a favorite."

"Really? No favorite?"

I shrugged. "Not really."

He turned to the server. "Bring us tonight's special."

The server balanced the plates and bowed. "Coming right up." He spun around and left.

"What's the special?" I asked.

"No idea, but it'll be good. Did you like the dinner?"

"It was hard to save room for dessert."

"Yeah, once you eat at the Jag, everything else pales in comparison. I hope you won't be too full to dance." His eyes shone.

I studied his handsome face and let my gaze linger down to his muscular arms before looking back into his eyes. "I don't think that'll be a problem."

A slow smile crept across his face. "I'm so glad I ran into you at the party. You're such a breath of fresh air compared to everyone around here."

Did he mean at the club or in town? I didn't have the chance to ask, because a loud sizzling noise distracted me.

Our server was headed our way, carrying two flaming dishes.

I turned to Carter. "Is that our dessert?"

"It most certainly is."

A moment later, the two fiery plates were in front of us. Underneath the flames was an enormous slice of cake that looked like layers of sponge cake, ice cream and meringue.

"Enjoy." The server bowed and hurried away.

My eyes widened as I stared.

"Blow it out," Carter said. "If you just watch the show, your dessert will be charred."

I watched him blow his out, and I imitated him. The sweet smell arose and made my mouth water. "What is this?"

"Pure heaven." He took a bite and closed his eyes. He opened them and winked. "If you mean the name, it's called Baked Alaska. Dig in."

I grabbed my fork and scooped as much as I could. All the flavors worked together to create something I was sure I'd never tasted before.

"A rare rum gives it that kick," Carter said. "Father has it imported from a dangerous little town in Russia."

"Not Alaska?" I took another bite, letting it melt on my tongue.

"Where's the challenge in that?" He ate the last of his and pushed the empty plate to the edge of the table. "Are you going to be able to finish that?"

Half of my enormous slice remained. "I'm going to try."

Carter chuckled. "It's hard to leave any on the plate, I know. Once when I—" He sat taller and stared at something behind me.

"What is it?" I asked.

He groaned and scooted away from the booth's edge. "It's my father with some out of town guests."

"You don't want to talk to him?"

"Not if I can avoid it."

I pushed my plate toward him. "Help me finish this—I hate to see it go to waste—and then we can sneak to the dance floor."

His expression relaxed. "I like the way you think." He picked up his fork, and soon we had the plate emptied.

"Are you ready to dance?" I asked, just as eager to have his arms wrapped around me again as I was to burn off some serious calories.

Carter sat taller and glanced behind me. "He's distracted. Let's go."

"We don't have to pay?"

"Not when my last name is Jag. Come on."

I reached for Sasha's clutch and followed Carter out of the restaurant. We went down the dimmed hallway again, following the loud music. Laughter and happy screams sounded as we neared.

"Sounds like a real party in there."

"It really is." He put his arm around me and ushered me inside. The enormous room was as dark as the hall, but with multi-colored lights all around. Most of the dancers wore glowing or flashing lights and multicolored lasers danced around the ceiling. On the second floor, the DJ had a massive setup, and he wore a mask—jaguar, of course—with lit whiskers and eyes. He danced around, encouraging everyone else to move with the music.

A large bouncer stepped in front of us we walked in. He took one look at Carter and went back to his place. "Master Jag, do you need anything? Martini?"

"Just here to dance." He turned to me. "Unless you want a drink?"

I shook my head. "I'm stuffed."

"Have fun," the bouncer said. "If you need anything, just say the word."

"Can you keep my purse somewhere safe?" I asked.

"You can rest assured no one will touch it while it's with us."

I handed it to him. "Thank you."

He handed us small mesh bags with what looked like potpourri inside. I sniffed it. It smelled like catnip.

Carter held his up to his face and took a deep breath and held it in before placing the bag in his coat pocket. "Let's dance." His face lit up and he held his hand out for me.

"Okay. What am I supposed to do with this?"

He took it from me, sniffed it, and handed it back to the bouncer. Then Carter laced his fingers through mine and led me to the middle of the dance floor. He danced like a professional, moving precisely with every beat of the music.

Panic struck me. I had no idea if I could dance. What if I had no rhythm?

He motioned for me to join him.

What was the worst that could happen? I gave him my best smile and moved to the music. It felt natural and our moves matched each other perfectly.

Several around us whistled and cat-called, cheering us on. The crowd backed up, giving us room. I spun around shook my hips, laughing and having the time of my life—all three days of it that I could remember. I had years to make up for, and I suddenly resolved to do it all in that one night on the dance floor.

The cheers around us only pushed me forward. I moved in step with the beat and with Carter. We couldn't have done better if we'd spent years working on the routine.

We continued for the next several songs until a slower tune began. Carter pulled me close and I put my hands around his waist.

He stared into my eyes. "I'm having such a great time. Where did you learn to dance like that?"

I wished I knew. "Just comes naturally."

"No, seriously. I spent years in lessons."

"Maybe I did, too." I smiled, trying to be mysterious.

Over the next few songs, we glided around the floor like two professionals. I loved the feel of being in his arms. Judging by the look in his eyes, he felt the same way.

After the third slow song ended, overhead lights came on and everyone stopped dancing.

"Is it closing time?" I asked.

Carter shook his head, his eyes shining with excitement. "The DJ is taking a quick break. Then the party really starts."

Chapter 5

Bright light shone on my face.

"Rise and shine, sunshine," came Sasha's annoyingly perky voice.

I rolled over and pulled my covers over my head. "Go away."

"We have lunch and then orientation, remember?"

Every muscle ached. "I don't care."

"Are you going in your pajamas?" She yanked on my comforter.

I grasped it with more force. "Take notes for me."

"I can't. We don't have any of the same classes."

"As long as I can find my way around when they actually start, I'll be fine."

"Come on." She pulled the cover off me.

I glared at her, but then had to cover my eyes from the awful brightness.

"Get in the shower. I'm not going alone."

"Take Landon."

"He's not a freshman." Sasha pulled on my arm. "You're my roommate."

"Technically, everyone who lives in the Waldensian is a roommate."

"You're the only one who shares a *room* with me, girlfriend. Get in the shower before I throw you in."

I moaned. "What time is it?"

"Eleven."

"How can you be so perky at this early hour?" I mumbled.

"Because I didn't come home at six."

Everything from the night before flooded back.

"What did you guys *do* all night?" Sasha teased.

"Danced."

"Seriously?"

"Until it closed. Then we watched the stars fade, parked in his Ferrari. Then he brought me back here."

"Hold up. Did you say Ferrari?" she exclaimed.

"Cherry red."

She sat on the bed. "Girl, seriously?"

“Yes. Do you see why I’m so tired?”

“Hang on to that guy. Does he really own the club?”

I sat up and groaned, trying to force my eyes open. “His dad does.”

“Did you get pictures?”

Pain shot through my head. “I forgot.”

“You didn’t get any?”

“I just woke up. Would you please leave me alone?”

“It went well, right? You’ll probably be back. Get pictures next time. Lots of them, okay? Us peasant-folk want to see inside.”

“I’m getting in the shower.”

“You can tell me what it’s like, though. What is the—?”

“Can you start some coffee? I’m going to need a gallon.”

Sasha laughed. “I think Landon already started some. Hurry up, I don’t want to be late.”

I got up and tripped over my pumps.

“You really shouldn’t leave those lying around,” Sasha teased.

“So helpful.” I kicked them under my nightstand and made my way into the bathroom. The light in there was almost as harsh as the sun. I looked in the mirror and immediately regretted it. My hair stuck out in every direction, my unwashed makeup was smeared all over my face, and I had dark circles under my eyes.

I was so sore that even my bones ached.

Sasha pounded on the door. “You didn’t fall back to sleep did you?”

“You’re the most annoying roomie ever!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You would.” I turned on the shower as hot as it would go, climbed in, and let the stream run over me. It soothed my muscles, but my bones wouldn’t be comforted. I turned up the temperature, but it didn’t help.

“Hurry up,” Sasha called.

“I am!” I lathered up my hair and rushed through the shower.

By the time I was done, I felt like a new person—except for my bones. They continued hurting. I found some painkillers in the cabinet and took a couple. Then I got ready as quickly as I could, making sure to conceal the shadows under my eyes.

I adjusted the towel and went into the bedroom.

Sasha shoved a coffee at me. "Hurry up, or we're going to miss lunch. All the freshman from the Waldensian are eating together, so we at least don't have to worry about reservations."

"Got it." I sniffed the coffee steam and held it in before gulping it down. It was bitter, but I didn't care. The jolt of energy was just what I needed. Then I made my way to my closet and pulled out a gray and white yoga tank.

My roommate stared at me like I was crazy.

"What's wrong?"

"Are you seriously thinking about wearing that to orientation?"

I held it up. "It's cute."

"For the gym." She put her hands to her face. "Thank the stars that you got me as a roommate, girlfriend. Move aside."

Sasha flipped through my closet. "Remind me to take you shopping again this afternoon. Especially if you want to impress that sexy, rich, Ferrari-driving boyfriend of yours."

"Boyfriend? That's a little premature. We just met."

She snapped her attention to me. "You spent the whole night with him last night."

"He didn't even kiss me goodnight."

"Twenty bucks says you'll hear from him before dinner."

I shrugged. He'd told me that I would hear from him soon.

Sasha went to my dresser, rummaged through the drawers, and tossed some jeggings and a lacy purple top at me. "Put those on. I can't believe you were going to wear exercise clothes."

"These?" I exclaimed, holding up the pants. "Did you notice it's summer? I'm going to melt."

She shook her head, muttering to herself. "Your legs are cut up, remember?"

"Oh yeah. Still, I'm going to fry."

"At least you know you'll be smokin' hot."

When we got to the restaurant, everyone was already ordering burgers. After dining at the Jag, it was a bit of a disappointment, but it was fun to hang out with the other freshmen. We were all excited to get the lowdown on our upcoming year.

Once we got onto campus, we had to go to the stadium for the orientation. The sun beat down on us.

Sasha leaned over and whispered, "I thought it was supposed to rain all year around here."

“And the vampires sparkle, too.”

She glared at me and then laughed. “We’re on the other side of the forest from Forks.”

“Maybe that’s where it rains.”

A microphone squeaked over the loudspeakers. Groans sounded all around us.

Down on the field, several people stood on a platform. A heavy, balding guy was adjusting the microphone. “I’d like to extend a warm welcome to our newest Freshman Class. We have an exciting year planned. You all should have received a link to our handbook. If you haven’t read it already, be sure to get it done before tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Sasha muttered.

I snickered. “I thought you couldn’t wait for the orientation.”

“To check out the guys.” She glanced around. “And it looks like we’re in for a good year.”

Though after the night I’d just had, I only had interest in one particular guy.

The various staff took their turns filling us in on tedious details about our upcoming education while we roasted in the sun. Finally, the first guy returned to the podium and told us to break into groups with our staff advisers.

Sasha turned to me. “Who’s your adviser?”

“Foley, I think. He’s my stats teacher.”

“I got some intern. Maybe he’s young and hot.”

I shook my head. “Do you think about anything else?”

“No, not really. See you back at the house.”

“Bye.” I adjusted my purse over my shoulder and made my way to a courtyard with a pretty fountain. At least it was shaded. A group already sat next to a little garden under some maple trees.

I sat near the edge of the group, as close to the fountain as possible, hoping for a little spray to cool me.

The instructor stood with his back to us, shuffling through some papers.

I yawned, the coffee already losing its hold on me.

A pretty redhead who didn’t look old enough to drive turned to me. “Bored already?” She giggled.

“Late night.”

“Gotcha. Yeah, I know how that goes. I hear this guy is new. Hopefully he knows more than we do, right?”

I nodded. "Let's hope."

"My name's Grace. What's yours?" She held her hand out.

"Victoria." We shook hands.

She fiddled with a book bag. "I'm so nervous. Aren't you?"

"Should I be?" I had enough to worry about without getting anxious about school.

Grace leaned closer to me and whispered. "I'm only fifteen. Maybe that's why my nerves are on fire. You think anyone will care about my age?"

My brows came together. "Fifteen? Are you a genius or something?"

She giggled. "Hardly. I'm homeschooled and blew through my studies. If I keep doing well, I could graduate college at nineteen. Cool, huh?"

"I can't imagine hitting the real world now."

"Oh, I'm not going to work after that. Grad school. I'm going to study—"

"Attention, please," Professor Foley said and turned around.

Grace snapped her attention toward the front. I followed suit.

"Welcome," he continued.

I studied his profile. There was something familiar about him.

My heart raced at the thought.

He continued speaking, focused on the other side of the group. I couldn't understand a word he said. The longer I stared at him, the more convinced I became that somehow I knew him. Or at least had seen him somewhere.

His hair was dark and thick, his skin tanned to perfection. He had stunning features and a gorgeous profile. It was hard to believe he was old enough to be a professor. He was younger by far than all the others I'd seen. A magazine cover would have been a more fitting place for him.

Professor Foley turned toward my side of the group. "And be sure to ask questions. That's what we're here..." His voice trailed off as our gazes met. His face paled and his eyes widened. His expression held something. Horror? Shock? Whatever it was, he continued staring at me.

I was frozen in place. My heart thundered in my chest, threatening to break through my ribcage. I knew him. Without a doubt, we had spent time together. I just couldn't remember any of it. My palms had grazed that stubble and my eyes had stared into those deep blue eyes. Even with the distance, I recalled that he often smelled of woody aftershave and soap.

Those around me whispered, bringing me back to the present.

Professor Foley cleared his throat and glanced around at the other students. "Excuse me. As I was saying, the faculty is here to help you. Just don't wait until the final hour."

“What was that?” Grace whispered.

My mouth gaped and I shook my head.

“You know him or something?”

“Shh,” I snapped.

“Sorry.” She scooted away.

My hands shook. I sat on them to get them to stop.

Foley stopped talking, and everyone paired off. Grace glanced at me, her expression pensive.

I nodded and tried to push the instructor out of my mind. But how could I? He was my only clue to my past. Part of me longed to run around the other students and throw my arms around him.

Grace came over. “I wasn’t trying to bother you before.”

“I know. Sorry. What are we supposed to do?”

“We’re supposed to discuss...”

My gaze wandered back over to Professor Foley. He was speaking to a couple students and smiling. My chest constricted. Oh, that smile. It had taken my breath away countless times, though I couldn’t remember a single one of them.

“Did you hear what I said?” Grace asked.

I shook my head.

“How are you going to pass this class if you’re going gaga over the teacher?”

My face heated and I pulled my attention back to her. “What are we supposed to do?”

She shrugged. “Basically just go over the map and find all the important places. The cafeteria, clinic, our classes. That sort of stuff.”

I pulled out my phone and found the campus map. “There’s our stats building. Let’s see... there’s my geography building—all the way across campus. Great.” I looked at her. “How are you getting around?”

“My mom’s dropping me off in the mornings, then I’m going to walk.” She shrugged.

“Where are your classes?”

“My other two are kinda by your geography building.”

“I can give you a ride.”

“Really? You’d do that?”

“Yeah, my car fits two, but no more. It’s a Jaguar.”

Her eyes widened. "I'll have to ask my mom, but that would be so cool." She leaned closer and whispered, "Cute professor, three o'clock."

I spun around, and sure enough, he was headed our way. My stomach squeezed tight, and I fought to breathe normally.

My voice caught. What would I say to him without looking like a fool?

Chapter 6

Toby

I walked toward Victoria with a million thoughts swarming my mind. I'd spent so much time and energy searching for her, and then the moment my mind was elsewhere, she just appeared.

It had been so many painful years we'd been apart, especially given how we'd been ripped from each other's arms. The hope of ever seeing her again had all but vanished for a long time.

Yet there she sat, like any college freshman in orientation. She was anything but ordinary. And she certainly hadn't been born anywhere near the time her classmates had been, though she didn't appear any older.

My pulse drummed in my ears as I headed her way. When she'd looked at me, I saw a flicker of recognition—surprise, really—but nothing more.

What had they done to her?

How would I keep myself from picking her up, swinging her around, and giving her such a passionate kiss that her toes would curl?

She was alive. Alive. And right in front of me.

As I neared her and the redhead, the other girl whispered to Victoria. She whipped around and again, our gazes met.

I wanted to shout from the rooftops. My sweet Victoria was alive and right here. Enrolled in one of my courses. I would see her every day for the next three months.

She was just as beautiful as I remembered.

Her eyes widened as I neared. They seemed more filled with curiosity than joy or any other emotion I would have expected.

The crushing reality hit me.

Victoria didn't know me.

I swallowed, stood taller, and plastered on a fake smile. "Hello, ladies. Do you two need any help?"

She held my eye contact, but didn't say anything.

"I think we found everything," said the other girl.

I kneeled down to their level and focused on the redhead because I didn't trust myself to look at Victoria yet. "Well, if you have any questions, just let me know. That's what I'm here for."

"Thanks, Professor Foley," Victoria said.

The formality in her tone nearly killed me. Almost as much as not being able to wrap my arms around her and breathe in her almond-scented shampoo that I loved so much.

I turned to her and opened my mouth, but as soon as I gazed into her eyes, I couldn't remember what I was going to say.

She stared back, an intense expression on her face. That was the look she had when trying to figure something out.

Oh, how I wanted to cup her chin and tell her everything would be all right. She was alive and only about a foot away. How could things not be okay?

Aside from the fact that she obviously couldn't remember any of our time together. That was like an arrow to the heart. Worse, actually. I could pull an arrow out, but this felt more like my heart was being torn in two.

I would have to handle it with delicate care.

If I was barely more than a stranger, I would have to regain her trust. Without all our memories, she would have nothing to draw from.

But I had promised her I would never give up on her—on us. I'd sworn my undying love to her just before she'd died in my arms.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, reminding me that I needed to conclude the powwow.

"You both have my office number and email address. Don't hesitate to ask anything."

The younger girl's face lit up. "Thanks!"

Victoria nodded, her alluring eyes still wide. She seemed to want to say more.

I tried to give her a reassuring smile. "I've got to wrap things up. It was nice to talk with you two." I rose and returned to the front of the group. It was hard not to stare at Victoria as I spoke to the students and then sent them on their way.

I gathered my things and looked around. Victoria had already taken off.

My heart sank to the ground and fell through to the other side of the world.

It was little consolation that I would see her the next day in class. How would I be able to teach math with her sitting there, having no idea who I was? That woman was the love of my life, and even with her death, I'd been unable to truly love another.

"Hey, Foley!"

I shook my head and turned toward the entrance of the courtyard.

Roger, who had the office next to mine, stood there, rolling up his sleeves. He worked out every day and loved to show it off. "A bunch of us are going to lunch. Want to come?"

"Going to pass this time." I slung my bag over my shoulder and hurried over to him. "I need to make sure I'm ready for tomorrow."

"First day jitters?" he asked. We headed for our office building.

I shrugged. "Something like that."

"You taught high school before this, right?"

"Yeah."

"This is no different, really."

"I sense an *except* coming." I arched a brow.

Roger laughed. "Except the ladies are legal."

"Seriously?" I exclaimed. "You're going to go there?"

"Easy there," he said. "I was just joking. Did I step on a nerve?"

He had, but I wasn't going to let him know. I shook my head. "Like you said, jitters."

I thought back to a fleeting relationship I'd had years earlier while trying to get over Victoria, but it hadn't worked. And now Victoria was back. I rubbed my temples, trying to make sense of it all.

"Well, I'd never put my job on the line like that," Roger said, bringing me back from my thoughts.

My stomach twisted, and I suddenly realized that not only did Victoria have no idea who I was, but she was now my student. Not that I couldn't find another job if push came to shove. Since I aged so slowly, I moved around fairly often to avoid questions, but I didn't care to be fired. Even though Victoria would be worth any hardship.

I'd already chosen her over my natural family so long ago.

"What's with you?" Roger slapped my back. "You're not usually so quiet."

"Must be the impending full moon."

Roger groaned. "Seriously? Right at the first day? The students always go cray-cray then."

"Tell me about it." Although most of the kids I'd worked with over the years went nuts on the full moon for entirely different reasons than my colleague was referring to.

He stopped in front of our building. "Sure you don't want to join us? That hot new art history professor is going."

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I have some things to take care of at home."

"Your loss. See you tomorrow."

"Have fun." I went inside and up the stairs to my office. The entire floor was empty. I sighed in relief and slunk into my chair.

Did Victoria even know she was a werewolf? What would she do tonight? Would she go into the forest?

I sat up in my chair.

That was it. Maybe if we ran into each other in our wolf form, I could help her remember everything. Communication was so much easier as animals. Primal. Whoever had messed with her memories wouldn't be able to control her during the full moon.

The office felt like it was closing in on me. I grabbed my bag, headed for the parking lot, and jumped into my camouflage Hummer. The heat nearly suffocated me, so I cranked the AC and bolted off campus.

When I reached my private dirt road, I hit the gas, barreling down the long path to my home. Once the wrought iron gate came into view, I remote unlocked it, waited for it to open, drove through, and locked it behind me.

I parked and stared at my newly painted, light blue Victorian-era mansion and fought to rein in my thoughts. My pack needed me to focus. How could I though, now that I knew Victoria was so close?

Why hadn't any of the locator spells worked to find her? Especially since we were living in the same town?

I pulled out my phone and texted the witch who had been helping me find her.

Toby: I found her!

Gessilyn: What?! Where?

Toby: Campus.

Gessilyn: Can't believe it! So happy 4u!

How would I reply to that? I should have been thrilled, but I felt like punching something.

Gessilyn: U OK?

Toby: V can't remember me.

Gessilyn: O no. Was afraid of that.

Toby: I should've known.

Gessilyn: Need anything?

Toby: Got a memory spell?

Gessilyn: Not sure. Will look.

Toby: OK. Call u l8r.

Gessilyn: Day or nite.

Toby: Thx.

I took a deep breath and put my phone back. For once, I wished the full moon was out. More than anything, I wanted to shift and run the length of the forest. I hated being restricted by the moon's phases.

Maybe a human run would help. It had to be better than sitting in my driveway. I got out of the Hummer and locked it.

A breeze blew by. I could smell several of my wolves. They were probably sleeping, preparing for the long night ahead of us. I would, too, if I thought sleep was a possibility.

I rubbed my temples. The familiar ache set into my bones, warning me of the impending shift.

Inside, the house was quiet. I stared at the newly-remodeled entryway and sniffed again. All the young wolves were home. They needed their rest most of all because turning into their wolf form was still so painful. I didn't miss those days.

Footsteps sounded on the staircase. Jet, one of my pack assistants, came downstairs. He arched a brow. "You're home early."

I hesitated, unsure if I wanted to talk about Victoria.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Everything okay?"

"No, but I can't focus on it."

Brick, one of the pack guards, came in from the kitchen and turned to Jet. "Hey, Yamamoto. You left your phone down here." He handed it to him.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." He turned back to me. "Sure you don't need something?" Protectiveness and loyalty were written all over his face. "Someone giving us trouble in town again?"

I shook my head. "Not since we ran those mutts off. No, this is something else."

Jet and Brick exchanged a concerned look.

"It doesn't affect you guys. If it did, I'd tell you."

"If it's going to distract you on the full moon, I think it does concern us." Jet's mouth curved down.

Anger flared, but I bit my tongue, not wanting to take it out on one of my best wolves. Tempers always grew during the full moon.

His eyes narrowed. "No disrespect meant, but we deserve to know what's going on. At least I do as the highest-ranked pack member."

I clenched my fists. "I need to go for a run. We'll talk after I get back."

Jet's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "A run *now*? We need to rest."

The wolf inside me was starting to force his way out early. A growl escaped my mouth. I forced him away and stared Jet down. "Stand down. I said this doesn't concern you."

"Yes, sir." Jet's nostrils flared and he stormed up the stairs, muttering to himself.

It had been a risk bringing him into my pack. He had been born alpha of his own pack, but instead chose to stay with me. We had more power struggles than any other wolf I'd encountered. He was also more loyal than any other.

"Sir?" Brick stared at me.

I counted to ten. "I need to clear my head before the others wake. I'll be back long before dusk."

"Okay. Do you want me to prepare dinner?"

"Crap." Usually, I prepared the big full moon meal. Cooking tended to calm me. We all ate ravenously before shifting, barely stopping to use our hands, much less utensils.

Brick tilted his head. "It's not a problem."

I glanced at a clock on the wall. "If I'm not back in ninety minutes, you can start. The fridge is stocked."

He flicked a nod in my direction.

"Can you put this in my room for me?" I held out my bag.

"You're going to run in slacks?"

"Right now, I don't care."

Brick took my bag and headed upstairs.

I went outside and stared at the woods. Hopefully a run would help, though the only thing that would truly help would be to have Victoria back in my arms—and I would stop at nothing until that happened.

Chapter 7

Victoria

I paced my room, holding back tears. Why was I so sure I knew Professor Foley? And not just generally? I could recall the feel of his embrace. I was certain of the scent of his aftershave. Even his kisses—when I closed my eyes, I could feel those gorgeous lips on mine. I could taste the

familiar minty sweetness.

And why wouldn't my bones stop hurting? Irritation set in and I rubbed my neck.

Why on earth couldn't I remember anything before I'd arrived in my shiny black Jaguar?

I picked up a fluffy beige teddy bear from my bed and stared at it. "Are you special? Or just some stupid random toy?" I chucked it at the bed.

"Whoa," Sasha said. "What'd the bear do to piss you off?"

"How long have you been standing there?" I snapped.

"Long enough to see you throw the poor teddy."

I scowled.

"What's the matter?" She gave me a sympathetic glance and closed the door.

How could I explain anything without sounding like a nut job? No memories before arriving, and now I was certain I'd had a romantic relationship with my *professor*. He looked about thirty, and I was eighteen. Or at least I thought I was—that was what my driver's license showed.

Sasha put an arm around me. "Take a deep breath. I'm sure whatever it is will be okay."

I grumbled. A sharp pain ran down my spine. I gasped and gritted my teeth.

"Do you need to go to the clinic?"

"No. I'm fine. Really."

She shook her head. "Do you need something to eat?"

My stomach growled at the mention of food. I was ravenous.

"Come on." She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine."

Down in the kitchen, Landon sat at the table, texting. He glanced up. "How are—what's wrong?"

"Girl needs some food," Sasha said.

He arched a brow. "You look pale."

I shrugged.

Landon jumped up. "We've got plenty for sub sandwiches."

The two of them pulled out the fixings. I opened a jar of pickles and scarfed them all down.

Sasha arched a brow. "Sure you're not knocked up?"

I shook my head, but really, how would I know if I was? Maybe I was, and the shock of it had created a serious case of amnesia. But I didn't care. I just needed to eat more food.

Sharp pains shot through my shoulders. I grimaced, determined not to cry out. It seemed to work. Neither of them noticed my agony.

Landon and Sasha piled lunch meat and cheese on white bread.

I grabbed a tomato and took a bite, sending juice and seeds flying in several directions.

"Can't you wait a couple minutes?" Sasha wrinkled her brow.

"No." I bit into the tomato more carefully, and managed to eat the rest without making a further mess. Then I reached for some cheese, but Sasha shooed me away.

"Fine," I grumbled and went into the cabinet. I pulled out a jar of peanut butter and scooped some out with my fingers.

"Gross," Landon said. "Ever heard of a spoon?"

I glared at him and ate it.

He shook his head and turned to Sasha. "I thought all you girls went out for lunch."

"We did."

"What'd she eat? A piece of lettuce?"

"Funny." I scooped more peanut butter into my hand.

"You know what?" he asked. "Just keep that jar. I'll buy a new one."

"Here." Sasha handed me a six-inch sub. The scents of meat, onions, and condiments made my mouth water.

I grabbed it without a word and had to force myself to stop and chew. Though it seemed easier. I ran my tongue along my teeth. Had they always been this sharp?

She stared at me. "How did you eat that so fast?"

"Hungry." I turned around and grabbed the one Landon made. It smelled even better than Sasha's.

"Hey," he exclaimed.

I bit into it without apology. This one had peppers—that was why it smelled so good. It tasted even better.

"I'll just make another." Landon's brows came together. He turned to Sasha. "Maybe you're onto something with being knocked up."

She turned to me. "Are you?"

My mouth was too full to answer.

"Maybe we should take you to the all-you-can-eat place," Landon said. "I can't afford to give you any more of my food."

My stomach growled.

Sasha slapped her forehead. "You're hungry after all that?"

I turned to Landon. "Where's that restaurant you mentioned?"

He gave me the directions. "Just don't put them out of business."

"Funny."

"Maybe we should get you to that clinic," Sasha said. "This isn't normal."

"I'm just hungry—ow!" I doubled over as every bone in my body radiated pain.

"That definitely isn't normal," Landon said. He grabbed my arms and pulled me to the table. "What hurts?"

"Everything," I moaned and slumped into the hard chair. The pain finally started to ease. "I think I need to lie down."

Sasha and Landon exchanged a worried glance.

"Sorry about all this, guys. Next time the kitchen's a mess, I've got it." I forced myself to stand and went upstairs, clinging to the railing for support.

They were talking about me, but I couldn't focus on a word because my bones were starting to hurt again. I finally made it to my room and climbed into bed. I knew they were right—whatever was going on with me wasn't normal.

Nothing added up. No memories, jaguars everywhere, some kind of connection with my professor, and now the ravenous hunger and bone pain. It felt like my skeleton wanted to explode.

I grasped some blankets and squeezed, trying not to cry out as a new wave hit. Would I survive this... whatever it was?

My stomach growled again. There was no way I could eat while dealing with this. What was my body thinking? I writhed and kicked, all the while biting my tongue to keep from screaming out.

If I couldn't convince Sasha and Landon that I was getting better, they'd take me to a doctor. With symptoms like these, I'd likely wind up locked away. I just needed to find a way to dig around enough to figure out what was going on.

It was *my* memories and my body. There was no reason I couldn't find out what was going on—once the pain and hunger left. I didn't know which one was worse.

But it was starting to piss me off. College was supposed to be one of the best times of life—the first shot at freedom. Time to hang out with cool people and have fun without parents controlling everything. Blessed independence.

All I had was one big, crazy mystery that would make me look twice as nuts if I told anyone. The only thing I wanted was to know what was going on. Was that so much to ask?

My phone played a tune from somewhere in the room.

I groaned. It was probably Carter. I vaguely recalled making plans with him again. Dinner?

My mouth watered and my stomach roared thinking about food at the Jag. Maybe I could even meet others and ask some questions to hopefully get more pieces to this puzzle.

The song on my phone continued. I pulled myself out of bed and crawled on all fours to the bathroom. I'd seen some painkillers in there, hadn't I?

My legs ached, the pain dulling. Heat radiated up and down my spine. Hunger continued tearing through me—I was tempted to peel the paint off the wall and eat that. Instead, I lay on the little fuzzy pink rug and stared at the ceiling.

Inside the bedroom, my phone played its song again.

Carter would think I was ignoring him. I had to at least talk to him. If only I could pull myself up and find some medicine. Then I'd be fine.

Right. That would make everything better. I rolled my eyes.

With any luck, hanging out with Carter would at least distract me from everything else. Maybe if I was really fortunate, I might find some answers, but I wasn't going to hold my breath.

I had to accept the fact that I might not ever remember anything about my life before arriving here. Not that I would stop looking, but I had to focus on school and building my future. I didn't need a past to build a future.

Groaning, I grabbed onto the handle of a drawer and pulled myself up without flinging the drawer open. When I got to my knees, I clung to the counter and heaved myself up. I went through the cabinet, knocking things down until I found some ibuprofen. Once I got past the childproof cap, I poured four onto my palm—twice the recommended amount, but I was in at least twice as much pain as was normal.

I swallowed them with some water and then stumbled back to the bed. At least I could walk. Improvement was good. Right?

"Are you okay?"

I jumped and turned to Sasha by the door. She arched a brow. "What's going on—seriously?"

"Probably just nerves." I climbed into bed and closed my eyes. "I'm feeling better already."

"Is that what all the noise was in the bathroom?"

"You saying you never knocked anything over?" I asked.

"I've never eaten like I just saw you eat. You scarfed more than two quarterbacks do after a game. No joke."

“As long as I didn’t eat more than a fullback.”

She snorted. “At least you’ve got a sense of humor. But really, what’s going on? Is this normal?”

“Maybe.”

“You haven’t talked to your family since you got here, have you?”

Tears stung my eyes. “Nope.”

“Call them. Maybe this is genetic—something your Great-Aunt Gertrude had and passed to you.”

“Later.”

She came over and handed me my phone. “Looks like you missed some calls from that hottie, Carter. And some texts. Want me to check them for you?”

I pulled a pillow over my face. Couldn’t the world just disappear for a while?

The phone sounded again.

“Want me to answer?” Sasha asked.

“No.”

“Hi, Carter,” she practically sang.

I sat up and stared at her.

She had my phone up to her face and was nodding. “She’s here, but how do I put this delicately? She’s having... lady problems.”

“What?” I threw a pillow at her.

“Mmm hmm.” She tossed it back. “Tonight? I’ll ask her.”

“Do I want to know?” I mumbled.

“He wants to take you back to the Jag. He promises to have you home in time for a full night of beauty sleep for your first day of classes.”

I rubbed my aching neck.

What did I have to lose?

Chapter 8

Toby

I stared at the moon as the rest of my pack ran off in other directions, howling and chasing each other. My inner wolf clawed to get out, but I was fighting it—not that I could hold out much

longer.

The curse of the moon.

I narrowed my eyes and cursed it for cursing me and my kind.

Pain ran through my spine as my bones shifted and prepared to change shape. I clenched my teeth and removed my clothes, adding them to the pile.

My body threw me to the ground and I landed on all fours as my wolf escaped. Fur popped out, slicing through my skin. I gritted my teeth. Fighting the process only made it worse.

I closed my eyes and waited until I could feel paws on the ground. When I opened my eyes, everything seemed brighter. I did love the night vision and heightened senses.

My wolf urged me to join the pack.

Not tonight.

Our nose sniffed out Jet, Brick, and the others.

I shook our head.

A low growl rumbled from our throat.

Typically, we werewolves were one with our inner wolves, but the exception was when we had differing motives. The wolf longed to run with the pack—our family. I needed to find Victoria—our other half.

I parked our hindquarters on the ground.

Our pack queen is nearby. We have to find her. She needs us.

My wolf stared at the moon and howled, calling out to the others.

You'd leave her to fend for herself?

Another growl escaped our mouth.

He wasn't going to win tonight. Not when Victoria was probably frightened somewhere not far away. What if she had shifted around others?

My wolf lowered our nose, submitting to my leadership. Finally. He missed Victoria's wolf form as much as I missed her in her human form.

I raised our nose and sniffed the air, weeding out the unimportant smells.

A slight breeze brought a familiar aroma.

Victoria.

She had to be several miles away, given how faint the scent was. I put our nose to work to make sure it was coming from the direction I thought.

It was.

A howl sounded in the distance. The pack was looking for us.

I returned the call, letting them know we would join them later.

A call of protest sounded.

I howled a final time to let them know my mind was made up. Jet would be happy to be the temporary alpha, anyway.

My wolf rose and took a step toward Victoria's scent. We melded together and then burst into a run, going past the house and eventually down a dirt road which led us through more trees.

We came to a large, dark structure with a bright sign. I couldn't make out what it read from my angle. I did, however, recognize that all of the cars in the parking lot were extremely expensive, many imported.

A heavy feline scent hung in the air, and it wasn't from house cats.

Shifters.

I slowed down to a near-crawl and walked around the immense building. A wide variety of odors assaulted our nose, everything from food to perfumes. I could even smell strange plant life—they had to have been imported like the cars.

Around the back of the building, I finally saw windows. People danced inside, appearing to have the time of their lives. Music sounded from inside, loud enough that I could feel the beat on the ground.

I paced, keeping my focus on the party. Victoria's scent lingered, and it was stronger here. It seemed to be coming from inside, but that didn't make any sense. Why would a wolf be in there? Especially among feline shifters?

Rumors abounded of jaguars and cougars, but this was the first real proof I had of any of it. Though I couldn't tell if what I smelled was jaguar or cougar, I had a feeling I'd soon know the difference.

My wolf and I sat, focusing all the more on the dancers. I could sense that he wanted to leave, not that I could blame him. We were in dangerous territory, and if any of the other shifters caught wind of us it might get ugly. No way we could take on an entire pack—or herd, or whatever cats traveled in.

Then I saw her. Not only was Victoria in human form—during the full moon—but she was dancing with a tall, muscular man.

A low growl escaped our throat. I wasn't sure if that was from me or my wolf. I didn't care.

What was she doing with that guy?

I growled, exposing our teeth. I would tear him apart.

My wolf urged me to back down.

Have you lost your mind?

An annoying feeling of calmness washed over me.

Stop it!

He didn't. Another few minutes of this, and I would curl up and go to sleep.

A thought crossed my mind—I knew nothing of what had happened to her during our time apart. Running inside to fight wouldn't solve anything.

Back before her death, we had been in rival packs. Both of our fathers were alphas, and had expressly forbidden us from seeing each other. We had both been chosen to marry others from our respective packs.

Not that any of that had kept me from falling head over paws for her.

My wolf finally relented with his force to calm me. I brought my focus back to Victoria.

I let out a yelp.

She was wearing a white lacy dress. I jumped up and paced. This couldn't be a wedding, could it? She hadn't somehow been turned into a cat shifter?

No. It wasn't possible.

Victoria was a *wolf*.

Yet she was human during the full moon.

What had they done to her?

I growled and inched toward the building.

A twig snapped nearby.

It was only someone taking a bag of trash to the dumpster. He didn't even look my way.

I snapped my neck back toward Victoria. That pompous jerk held her close and spoke into her ear. She threw her head back and laughed.

My wolf urged me to return to the pack.

Never.

A wave of calm pulsated through me.

Sometimes I hated him. It was my turn to give in to his leadership. Later, I would probably agree that he was right. But right then, staring at Victoria in the arms of another man—a feline shifter—nothing other than an attack made sense.

Why was she wearing what looked like a wedding dress? Could that just be the style of formal wear this year?

My wolf stepped away from the building. He'd calmed the fight out of me. When he burst into a run, I merely went along for the ride. I would need to find out as much as I could the next day when she showed up to class.

That was it. Tomorrow was the first day of classes. She wouldn't be getting married right now.

My own relief washed through me.

I'd overreacted, and my wolf had been right.

We traveled through the woods, again passing my home. The air pressed our fur back like a heavy wind blows down blades of grass. Our pack's scents grew stronger.

My wolf called out to them.

Joyful howls sounded in return. All except Jet's.

He would get over it.

Our pace slowed as we neared the others. We were near the Faeble, a lively bar open to all supernatural creatures. Often, after shifting back to human form, we would stop in for something to drink to relax after the grueling changes of shifting. The owner let us keep spare clothing around back.

I, for one, was ready for both shifting back *and* a strong drink.

One quick glance at the moon told me it would be a while. My wolf urged me to go on a hunt.

Wouldn't you rather curl up and sleep? Busy day tomorrow.

He growled. I would have, too, if I could only be in my preferred form one day a month.

I lowered our nose to our chest.

My wolf burst into a run, sniffing for something to chase. Our mouth watered and our stomach growled at the thought. He wanted to go after a deer, always preferring the thrill of getting a larger animal.

I couldn't stop thinking about Victoria in the arms of that feline. None of it made any sense. Obviously, she didn't remember me, but what else had changed? One didn't just stop being a werewolf. Sure, we could fall in love with other species, but not become one.

As my wolf ran through the woods, I blocked him out and tried to make sense of everything. The more I thought about it, the more it made my brain hurt. Or wait...

No, that was the familiar ache of the impending shift.

My wolf's disappointment ran through us. It was so strong, it nearly felt like my own, except that I was all too aware of how badly I wanted back into my human form.

I had to find out what was going on with Victoria.

Pain shot through our spine. I gave into it, eager to be human for the next month. My wolf fought

it.

Next time, we need to get on the same page.

His resistance ran through me.

In this form, our uniting was on me. When I gave into the monthly change and went with the flow, it was as though we were one and the same. Times like this reminded me that we were two forming one.

Our front legs ached. It was about to happen. I looked around. We weren't as near the Faeble as I would have liked. Sure, I was comfortable in my own skin, and my pack was plenty used to seeing each other in the nude given the nature of our changes, but I avoided running through the woods without any clothes if I could.

I'd run into people more often than I preferred—and *they* weren't nearly so forgiving about guys running around naked.

Clumps of fur dropped to the ground. I fought the bone pain and ran toward the bar.

I could smell the others nearby. Some were already in human form while others were still changing. The younger ones tended to have less control over the changes and often turned first.

Being over a century myself, it was unusual for my wolf and me to be at such odds. We were old friends and had been through a lot together, including loving and losing Victoria.

My wolf stopped us and put our nose to the dirt. Pain ran from the tip of our tail upwards through our spine, spread out to all four extremities and finally crashed into our neck and skull. The crunching was so loud, I couldn't tell where the shift began. It was easy to know when it had ended, though. Rocks and twigs dug into my sensitive human flesh.

I stood and pulled some leaves from my side. Stinging nettle. Great. I pulled some more off and thanked my wolf for his choice of where to stop.

The sounds of conversation reached me from nearby. The Faeble was only a hundred yards away. I ran for the back, where the spare clothes were stashed in some old lockers.

Jet was already getting dressed. He stared at my side. "Run into trouble?"

"Stinging nettle. I'll be fine."

He punched me in the arm. "What doesn't kill you, right?"

"Yeah, I'm sure this'll make me plenty stronger." I opened the locker where I'd stored some of my clothes and got dressed. "I could sure use a drink."

"You and your wolf were at odds tonight. What was up?"

I pulled on my jeans. "That obvious?"

"Dude." He arched a brow. "Totally not like you."

"It happens to everyone." I shrugged like it was no big deal.

"Yeah, but not *you*."

"I'm made of flesh, blood, and fur just like the rest of you." I pulled my shirt on and found some socks and shoes. Only a couple more outfits remained. I'd have to restock soon.

"If you say so."

A few more guys came over and threw their clothes on. We all headed inside. Music greeted us from the nightly live band as soon as the door opened. Lively conversation buzzed around from all directions and I could smell a wide variety of creatures, as usual.

Some of our pack were already seated, so we joined them. Jet grabbed a seat from another table. A siren in a fedora glared at him, but didn't say anything.

The waitress came over and took our orders. Each of us ordered strong drinks—they tended to help us ease back into being human.

I laughed and joked with everyone, but my mind was back at the large building Victoria had been dancing in with the cat. I needed to find out everything I could about both the shifters and their club.

There had never been a jaguar here at the Faeble as far as I knew, so if I couldn't find anything out from Victoria, I was going to have to get creative.

Either way, I would get to the bottom of all this no matter the cost. Nothing else mattered.

Chapter 9

Victoria

My favorite song interrupted a deep sleep. I groaned, hoping it would stop.

It didn't.

"Would you turn that off?" Sasha asked. "I've got another hour to sleep."

I reached for my nightstand, with my eyes still closed, and found my phone. The music grew louder as I brought it closer. I found the snooze button and jammed the phone under my pillow.

A moment later—or at least that was how it felt—the song played again.

"Guess I better get up," I mumbled. The last thing I needed was to be late for class on my first day of college. I was setting the stage for my entire college career. No pressure.

I opened my eyes and turned off my alarm.

"What were you doing out so late?" Sasha mumbled. "I heard you come in at, like, two or something."

"I lost track of time." I yawned and stared at my pillow, wishing I could flop back onto it for another five or six hours.

"Dancing with Carter again?"

"Yeah. It's so much fun at the Jag."

"Did you get pictures this time?" she asked.

"Sorry, I forgot again."

"Some friend you are."

"Didn't you want more sleep?"

"Yep." She flipped over and pulled the blankets over her head. "You're the one who wanted a ten o'clock class."

"It sounded good at the time."

"Live and learn."

She was right. I'd just have to make sure I got to bed at a decent hour in the future. Maybe dancing with Carter would have to be a weekends-only thing. We could still do dinner other nights.

I forced myself out of bed and stared at my clothes. They all seemed so boring after wearing formal dresses the previous two nights. "Thanks again for letting me borrow your dress last night."

Sasha mumbled something.

I picked a gray tank top with splotches of pink and some cute denim cutoffs and headed for the shower. The hot water soothed my bones. The ache lingered, but the harsh pains seemed to have disappeared.

When I got out of the bathroom, Sasha was in her bed, texting. She glanced up and nodded with approval. "Cute. I see you did your eyeliner like I showed you."

"Yeah, I like how it makes my eyes catlike."

"Definitely suits you, girl. Good luck today."

"You, too." I grabbed my already packed backpack and my purse. It was kind of awkward with both. I'd need to figure something else out.

Sasha's forehead wrinkled. "A backpack? Really? What is this—the third grade?"

I frowned. "I saw plenty of people with those at orientation."

"And how many of them are dating Carter Jag?"

"Who said we're exclusive?"

“Two nights in a row and plans for studying this afternoon? I’d call that serious.”

“We’ll see. I gotta go.”

“Better eat breakfast. I’d hate to see you empty out the cafeteria.”

I grabbed one of my pillows and chucked it at her. “Funny.”

“You’re never going to live that down. I hope you realize that.”

“Just wait until you do something crazy.”

She snickered. “I don’t do crazy. Well, not like that. I’m more likely to get drunk and dance in someone’s yard, singing old 90s songs. In my bikini.”

“Nice. See you later.”

“We’ll go shopping tonight.”

“For what?” I asked.

Sasha rolled her eyes. “For a better bag. Just try not to ruin your reputation today with that ugly thing.”

“Won’t dating Carter make up for that?”

“Let’s hope. I have a reputation to manage, also. Can’t be roomie of a geek.”

I threw my other pillow at her and went downstairs. The TV blared from the living room, but I had the kitchen to myself. I dug my frozen waffles out of the freezer and ate them quickly. I was surprised I had any appetite left over after all I’d eaten the night before. After pigging out on sandwiches, I’d eaten two main dishes at the Jag.

Carter had been amused by my appetite—not knowing about how much I’d eaten earlier—and luckily hadn’t been put off by it. The sparkle in his eyes actually made me think he enjoyed seeing me scarf down so much. Most girls probably tried to impress him by barely eating, but I’d been so ravenous I’d had no other choice except to give in to my appetite.

I’d had such a great time dancing with him, but the entire time I felt pulled outside. In fact, I’d glanced out the window so many times, he insisted we just dance in front of it. For some reason, the moon was so gorgeous I couldn’t stop staring.

But now it was the first day, and if I didn’t hurry, I’d find myself late for my first class. I hopped in my Jaguar and drove as fast as I dared until I reached the parking lot nearest my class.

Once I found the room, it was nearly full. I recognized most of the faces from the orientation.

Grace waved me over to where she sat on the far side of the room, halfway back. She patted the desk next to her. “I saved it for you.”

I sat down. “Thanks.”

“I can’t believe you were almost late on the first day.”

"Life happens." I pulled my laptop out of my backpack.

Professor Foley entered the room, chatting and laughing with a couple guys wearing school football uniforms. He set his things on the front desk and arranged them.

Grace rattled on about a band, but I couldn't stop watching the teacher. He was so gorgeous, as evidenced by the three pretty students who had jumped up and now surrounded him, chatting and obviously flirting.

Something deep within me awoke with fury. I had to literally force myself to stay in my seat, gripping the sides so tightly that my knuckles turned white. I wanted to tear those girls to pieces.

"You okay?" Grace asked.

I gritted my teeth. "Fine."

"That vein in your forehead is going to explode if you're not careful."

Not that I cared. Those twits were practically all over him. If it would have been socially acceptable for them to actually crawl on top of him, I was sure they would have.

I sniffed the air. I could actually smell their lust and desire.

Okay, I was losing it. I shook my head. How could I smell their emotions? I had to get control of myself. Who cared if they were flirting with Professor Foley? Why should I, when I had Carter to focus on?

I turned back to Grace. Now she was talking about a virtual game her mom didn't like. I tried to focus on what she was saying, but Toby's aftershave wafted over to me.

Wait.

Toby?

I didn't know Professor Foley's first name. I hadn't even seen it anywhere.

Or had I? I found the online course syllabus.

Introduction to Statistics

Professor T. Foley

My breath caught. His name actually did start with a T.

Maybe I remembered reading that and just gave him the name in my mind.

That had to be it. There was no other explanation. Not that smelling his aftershave or the desire of those girls all the way from my seat made any sense, either.

He stepped back and told everyone to take their seats. His gaze ran across the classroom and stopped when it landed on me.

My heart jumped into my throat and my pulse raced. We stared at each other for a moment before he continued looking around the room. I shook.

What was it about him that sent me into such a frenzy? I didn't feel this out of sorts even when Carter laced his fingers through mine or when he held me close as we danced to slow, romantic music.

Toby—Professor Foley—introduced himself again and then told us to open the syllabus. He went over the expectations of the class and told us that he was available for anyone who needed help.

“Call my number or email me, day or night.” His gaze held mine for a moment. “If I'm available, I'll help you then. If not, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. I want all of you to succeed.” He scanned the rest of the room, explaining the schedule. “And there will be a pop quiz every Wednesday.”

Half the class laughed.

“I'm telling you so you know to be prepared for it—and to be here. I know the ten o'clock classes tend to be considered early, but don't miss any because you're tired. You can't make the quizzes up. I hope you're taking notes.”

The sounds of laptop keypads being struck sounded all around the room.

Professor Foley smiled.

It was such a beautiful sight. I nearly melted into the chair. It was hard to breathe as he grinned. I wanted to reach out and stroke his stubble. To lean in close and smell his musky personal scent.

He gazed into my eyes again from the front of the room. It was like he wanted the exact same thing.

I swallowed. How would I ever learn math in such conditions?

He turned from me and spoke, but I couldn't understand a word that came from those gorgeous lips.

Maybe what I needed was a new teacher. Except that I'd been one of the last to register for classes and nothing else was available.

Somehow I made it through the rest of the class. He had us take an assessment quiz to find out where we all stood.

After he collected the papers, he said, “This will help me figure out how fast or slow to move through the material. I don't want anyone overwhelmed or bored.” He smiled again.

I looked away. No way would I allow myself to get sucked into that vortex again.

When the class was done, I bolted into the hall without a word. I couldn't look at him for another moment. More than anything, I wanted to. Oh, how I wanted to get lost in those eyes and feel those luscious lips on mine.

Stop.

I sat on a bench, closed my eyes, and tried not to think of him. His beautiful, smiling face was the first image in my mind.

What had Carter said the other day?

Poop farm. I pictured piles of dung. Many piles. Everywhere. Covering all kinds of things.

"You okay?" Grace's voice broke through my disgusting thoughts.

I looked up. "Just tired."

"Something going on between you and the teacher?"

"No."

"You still willing to drive me to the other side of campus?"

I blinked my eyes a few times. Right. I had about ten minutes to get to my geography class. Then I would have time for lunch before psychology. Maybe that class would help me figure out what was wrong with me.

"Sure." I rose. "We'd better hurry."

Chapter 10

Victoria

By the time I stumbled out of my geography class, I had a roaring headache. Carter had been right about Johnson being nice, but she had loaded us with work. It was almost like she thought we had nothing else in our lives other than her course.

One look at the world map told me that I had never put any serious time into learning most of the countries. I knew the major ones, but could barely find anything else by memory.

My stomach rumbled. I didn't feel like running back to the Waldensian, so I checked the campus map and saw the main cafeteria was only a couple buildings away.

I stuffed the map into my backpack and followed the mob outside. The sun beat down on me, so I hurried over to the cafeteria. A line of people extended out the door.

Wonderful. I hurried over to the back, hoping it wouldn't take too long. If it did, then I would have to plan on eating lunch at home in the future. I made small talk with the girl in front of me while we wound our way inside and up the stairs to the register. At least the line went pretty fast.

"Twelve dollars," the cashier said without looking at me. He readjusted his backwards baseball cap.

"Seriously?" I exclaimed.

He shrugged. "It's cheaper if you get a meal plan."

"I'll have to look into that." I dug into my purse and found a ten and no change. "Do you at least

take credit cards?"

"Sure."

I handed him one. He compared the picture on the card to me and swiped it through the machine. I waited for him to hand me the receipt, but instead he swiped it again.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"You sure the card is current?"

"Yeah, what's the problem?"

He swiped it one more time and studied the screen before handing it back to me. "You'd better call your bank."

I groaned. "I checked the balance two days ago."

"Got another one?"

I dug into my purse for my debit card and handed that to him.

"Hurry up," someone shouted from the line.

"Yeah," said another. "We're hungry."

My shoulders slunk. "Sorry."

The cashier handed the card back. "This one doesn't work, either. Got cash?"

"Ten dollars." My face and the back of my neck heated.

He shrugged. "Sorry. Can't help you."

Professor Foley walked by, carrying a tray with a double cheeseburger and fries.

My head heated all the more.

He turned and smiled. "Hi Victoria." Concern washed over his face. "Is everything okay?"

I straightened my back. "Yeah, I'm just going to have to skip lunch today."

"You don't have enough to cover it?"

"Apparently not." I looked away.

"That's no way to start your first day. I'll cover it."

I stared at him. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not. I'm offering." He dug into his back pocket and handed the cashier a card. "I've got her meal."

He shrugged, ran the card, and handed the receipt to Toby—Professor Foley. Why did I keep wanting to call him by his first name? If that was even really his name.

The cashier turned to me. “Head on in. Trays are straight ahead.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled and turned to Professor Foley. “I swear I’ll pay you back tomorrow. I don’t know what’s going on with my cards. Maybe someone hacked into my account.”

“Computers make mistakes all the time. Well, have a nice lunch.”

“Uh, thanks. You, too.”

He held my gaze like he wanted to say more.

I couldn’t pull away from his enchanting eyes. Again, I found myself wanting to throw myself at him.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I usually sit near the back if... uh, you don’t find anywhere else to sit.”

My voice caught. I nodded and hurried over to the trays, nearly running into a guy wearing black skinny jeans and thick eyeliner.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Whatever.” He glared at me before taking his silverware.

My college career was off to a *fabulous* start. I sighed and grabbed a tray. What would I do if I couldn’t sort out my money situation? I didn’t even know who was supplying the funds.

What kind of daughter doesn’t even keep her parents’ contact info in her phone?

Suddenly, I felt so small and helpless. Not knowing my past was more than just annoying and embarrassing. It was beginning to look like it might be dangerous.

I got in line for food and piled on things without paying attention. What if someone stopped paying for my car? How would I get around? Or what if my college payments came to an end?

The noise around me grew louder. Everyone around me felt closer, like they were pressing into me. I jumped out of line and ran toward the tables. I couldn’t breathe.

All sound merged into a cacophony. The room grew hot. I sat at the nearest empty table and stared at my plate. My stomach rumbled, but I couldn’t feel the hunger anymore.

I ran my hands through the length of my hair and tried to breathe. Still, only shallow breaths came.

What was I going to do? Who was I leaning on to pay my bills? What if I’d done something wrong, and this was a warning? If only they would have let me know what I’d done to offend them. Or was I supposed to somehow know, but since I couldn’t remember anything at all, I didn’t know where I’d gone wrong?

What was I doing? How had I thought I could get through the school year without knowing

anything about my past?

My stomach twisted in tight knots. I probably should have just walked away after the card was declined. My time would have been better spent calling the banks to find out what was going on. Now I would feel guilty if I didn't eat what Toby—Professor Foley—had paid for.

Wait. Had he asked me to eat at his table?

I looked around and spotted him at a table near the back of the room. A group of pretty girls sat around him, giggling and talking with him.

Well, at least he wouldn't miss me. He'd probably already forgotten all about me. I glanced at my plate, but still felt guilty about not eating it. I'd just pay him back, but I didn't even have the means to do that. Plus, I knew I'd be hungry once my emotions calmed down. Since I'd been given the opportunity to eat, I needed to take advantage of that.

Who knew what would happen once my stash of groceries dwindled? I needed to figure that out along with everything else—my tuition, rent, car payments, and whatever else I could think of when I could think straight.

Surely, I wouldn't end up on the streets. Or would I?

I had to stop thinking so catastrophically. There could be some simple reason for the cards not working. It didn't mean my Jaguar would be repossessed and that Landon would throw me out. I'd gotten those things somehow, and I could find a way to keep them.

People started getting up from their tables in droves. I glanced at a clock. There was only about fifteen minutes until my next class started. I scarfed down the food on my plate, despite not being hungry. Then I followed the crowd and returned my tray.

My mouth was parched since I'd forgotten to grab something to drink. I found the soda machine and filled a plastic cup with too-sweet iced tea and drank it.

I was tempted to skip my next class to figure out my finances, but that could wait an hour. I couldn't miss my first day. At least the building was close. And my heart had stopped racing. Maybe eating had been a good idea after all. It didn't feel like the world was going to crumble around me anymore.

Once inside, I found the classroom easily enough. It was on the first floor. I walked in and froze.

Carter sat in the middle of the room. My mind spun back to our first date, and I remembered he was in the same psychology course.

He glanced up and smiled wide, lighting up his entire face.

I slid my bag off and walked over to him and sat to his right. "It's nice to see a friendly face."

His expression darkened. "You're not having a good first day?"

Part of me wanted to talk about something else, but I found myself spilling my money problems to the one guy who had probably never once had to worry about anything like that. "I nearly didn't get lunch today because I had no money. It was awful—right in front of so many people."

Carter's brow wrinkled.

"My cards were declined." I frowned.

"It happens. System glitches or a new employee pushes a wrong button. One time—"

"But two different cards?" I asked. "Not even from the same bank."

He wrinkled his brow. "That is odd. Want me to look into it for you?"

"Thanks, but it's my problem."

"Well, I happen to want to help. Did you eat anything?"

I nodded. "Someone took pity on me and paid for my meal."

"Tell you what. Make your calls and then send me a text. We'll go study at the Jag, okay? Either to celebrate or commiserate. Sound good?"

"Do I need a formal dress?"

"Not for a weekday afternoon. You're fine."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Even though I hadn't unloaded all my problems, at least I had someone to talk with about some of them.

The professor walked in. He was a large man with thinning hair and a thick beard. He wore a scowl on his face. "Take your seats, everyone," he ordered and then set his things on the table as everyone scrambled to sit.

Carter and I exchanged a curious expression.

"Remember what I said about Massaro?" he whispered. "Grumpy old man."

Professor Massaro hit his desk, causing several people to jump. "Let me get this out of the way," he said. "If you don't plan on taking this course seriously, I suggest you leave now. Some people think of psychology as an easy elective, but I assure you it's not. It's one of the most important fields out there, and if you're looking for something to breeze through while you focus on Calculus or Thermonuclear Physics—get out!"

One kid ran from the room.

A few chuckles sounded around the class.

"Do you find this funny?" the professor bellowed.

The room went silent.

"Most instructors like to go over the syllabus on the first day. Not me. You can read it on your own. I assume you can read if you made it in here. We're going to start with a paper tonight. Pick a lesser-known psychologist—in other words, skip Freud, Jung, Pavlov, and anyone else you've ever heard of—and write a three-thousand word paper on everything you learned about him or her. Email it to me before the start of class tomorrow. I hate wasting paper, so we're going to do as

much online as we can. Any questions?"

Silence.

"Good. Get to work." He opened his laptop and started typing. "Three thousand words exactly. No more, no less."

I turned to Carter. He shrugged and opened his laptop. I did the same. Part of me wondered if I should have run out of the class with the other kid. I took a deep breath and began my search for little-known psychologists.

The only sounds were exasperated sighs and the clacking of keyboards.

After a while, Massaro's voice broke the relative quiet. "Class is over. Three thousand words emailed to me before class tomorrow." He left the room.

"He lives up to his reputation," Carter muttered.

"Why'd you take the class, then?" I asked.

"It sounded like a nice break from my other courses."

"Don't let him hear you say that." I put my computer back into my bag.

He chuckled. "I didn't say I thought it would be easy. I knew it would be a challenge."

"When do you want me to text you?"

"I've got another class, so give me at least an hour."

"Sounds good. Thanks so much, Carter."

He took my hand and gave a little squeeze. "Glad to help. Sorry to run, but my biology course is a few blocks away."

"No problem."

Carter held my gaze before hurrying out of the room.

I took a deep breath and thought about what I should do. My best bet was probably to call the banks before starting in on my homework, but I didn't want to do that at home. I didn't want anyone overhearing me and knowing I was having money issues.

Outside, I wandered toward my car and saw a shady area under some spruce trees. That seemed like a pleasant place to make my calls. I sat at the base of a tree and pulled out my phone and cards.

Not far away, a group of guys played a game of what looked like tackle Frisbee. Just past them, a group of girls were sunbathing. Other various people sat texting or studying. And best of all, no one paid a bit of attention to me.

I called the first number, and finally managed to talk to a person after about five minutes of pressing numbers.

"This is Sheri," said a bored-sounding woman. "What can I help you with?"

"I need to find out why I can't use my card."

"And you're Victoria?"

"Yes."

"Let me verify that." She asked a bunch of questions that luckily I could answer between the information on my driver's license and student papers.

"So, what's the problem?" she asked.

"My card won't work!"

I could hear her typing in the background. "It's been frozen."

"What does that mean? Why?"

"It was issued by the main card holder. You'll have to ask him."

How was I going to do that? "Who is that?"

"I can't give out that information."

"But it's my card! My name's on the account."

"Yes, but it's been frozen."

"I know that! That's why I called you."

"You'll need to speak with the main account holder. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"You can't tell me anything about my money?"

"Not beyond what I've already said."

"Why can't you at least give me his name?" I exclaimed.

"Because I have a note on the account not to."

I threw my head back and dug the tree bark into my scalp. "Thanks for your help." I ended the call.

After a few deep breaths, I called the next company, but didn't have any better luck.

Whoever controlled my finances didn't want to be found.

Chapter 11

Toby

I took another swig of my drink and slammed the glass on the bar.

“Easy there.” Tap mixed a drink, sprinkled in some faerie dust, and then dumped in ice. “What’s eating you up?”

“Nothing I feel like talking about.”

“I suppose that’s why you’re here in the afternoon without any of your pack mates.” He added the drink to a round tray with some others and stepped out from behind the bar. Tap went from eye level to four feet as he stepped from his platform behind the bar.

“Want some help?” I asked.

The troll shook his head. “I’m fine. It’s just not usually so busy around here in the afternoons. Maybe I’ll hire one of your college pups.”

“Just don’t call them pups to their faces.”

“Noted.” He went to the next room and handed the drinks to a group of witches.

I took another sip and became aware of the loud buzz of conversation around the Faeble. It wasn’t often I came in the afternoon, but when I had, it’d never been this busy.

Perhaps I wasn’t the only supernatural creature having a bad first day. It was a college town, and the number of inhabitants had tripled, if not quadrupled, in the last several days.

Someone sat next to me, but I didn’t turn to them. I had no interest in talking about Victoria or my overwhelming disappointment concerning her memory loss or complete lack of interest in me. Even providing her lunch hadn’t phased her.

“What has you tied in knots, sugar-cup?”

I held in a groan and turned. My eyes nearly popped from my head and the glass shook in my hands. I set my glass down and scooted away.

The tall, slender blonde smiled. “Don’t worry, handsome. I’m not here for you.”

“I-I... you’re a valkyrie.” My heart thundered against my ribcage.

Her grin turned crooked. “Like I said, I’m not here for you.”

My mouth dropped.

“You... you...”

“I take souls. Yes, I know.” She leaned against the bar and yawned.

“What are you doing here?” I wasn’t sure I could take any more bad news—and a valkyrie couldn’t mean anything good.

Tap sauntered back over to the bar. He grinned when he saw the angel of death. “Soleil.”

She leaned her chin against her palm. “Tap, my old friend. How are you?”

“Much happier now that I’m running the Faeble. I got tired of fighting the ogres for my lake. You want your usual?”

“Yeah, but go easy on the unicorn horn flakes. I don’t like my drinks too sweet.”

Tap muttered something about picky valkyries.

Soleil turned to me. “Isn’t he adorable?”

I stared at the tough-as-nails tattooed troll mixing the drink at hyper speed. “Uh, if you say so.”

The valkyrie shoved me, and I struggled to stay on the barstool. “Well, I find him cute as can be.”

Tap turned around and handed her a tall rainbow-colored drink. “Light on the flakes.”

She sipped it and closed her eyes. “Perfect.”

I eyed Tap. “How do you two know each other?”

He gave a slight nod, seeming to understand my unasked question—why was an angel of death sitting next to me?

Tap leaned against the bar. “Soleil and I met centuries ago during a particularly bloody revolution against my people. We quickly became friends.”

“I helped him defeat the ogres he mentioned earlier.”

“Until they came back with their cousins.” Tap grimaced.

“That was practically fifty years later.” Soleil shook her head.

“I suppose, but like I said, I’m much happier running this place.” He turned and mixed more drinks.

Soleil and I sipped our drinks in silence. I hoped to sneak out unnoticed once mine was gone, or better yet, that she’d leave.

“So, what has a gorgeous wolf such as yourself so upset?” she asked.

“Girl trouble,” Tap answered for me as he poured yellow alcohol into a cup.

“Ah.” The valkyrie nodded as though that explained everything. “Maybe I can help.”

“I’d like to keep her alive, actually.”

“You know, I don’t take the souls of everyone I come in contact with. Tap will tell you.”

“She doesn’t,” he assured me. “I’m living proof.”

“Great.”

“What’s the problem?” Soleil asked.

"She can't remember him," Tap said.

I glared at him. "Thanks."

"Give her a chance, she could get to the bottom of this quicker than anyone else in here."

"Really?" I turned to her, suddenly curious.

Soleil nodded, her expression an odd mixture of knowing and boredom. "Care to hear more?"

"You should," Tap said.

Why had I told him anything at all?

The valkyrie shrugged and sipped the rainbow concoction. "Whatevs."

I took a deep breath. "What does it involve?"

Her face lit up. "You want my help?"

"I'll hear you out."

Tap gave me an encouraging nod before taking another tray to patrons.

Soleil put her glass down. "All I have to do is drink a little of someone's essence. I can learn a lot that way."

I stared at her. "Drink her essence?" I exclaimed. "What does that even mean?"

"Let me show you."

Tap walked by, his tray empty.

Soleil stared at him.

"What?" he asked, stepping back up to his platform.

"I need to show wolfy, here, that drinking someone's essence isn't the kiss of death. I save that for the ones I have to kill."

"Of course," I said.

"It's close, though." Tap mixed another concoction.

"Wait, what?" I exclaimed.

"I can show you." Soleil leaned close.

I shook my head. "No way."

"Tap?" she asked. "It was your idea."

"Mine?"

“Come on.” She batted her eyelashes.

“Fine. Just a little, okay?”

She clapped her hands.

My stomach twisted. What had I just gotten my friend into?

He leaned over the bar, across from the valkyrie. She stretched toward him, and as she did, wings pressed through her shirt. They spread out, one nearly knocking me over. I jumped out of the way just in time.

Soleil put her hands on Tap’s cheeks and closed her eyes. He closed his, also. She opened her mouth, but didn’t kiss him. His mouth opened, seemingly in response to hers. A couple inches remained between them.

After a few moments, I wondered if they were playing me. But then a light purple mist appeared from Tap’s mouth.

I stumbled back, knocking over my stool.

Soleil widened her mouth and the mist swirled in a circular pattern until it entered her mouth.

I stared back and forth between them, never having seen anything like that.

Tap seemed okay. He wasn’t resisting in any way.

She let go of his face and closed her mouth, breaking the flow of the swirls. The remaining purple mist returned to Tap’s mouth. Her wings disappeared into her back, leaving her shirt torn and bloody.

His eyes flew open. Peace and relaxation flooded his expression.

Soleil’s eyes remained closed for a minute. She opened them and leaned back, staring toward the ceiling.

I arched a brow at Tap. He took a deep breath, but didn’t respond.

“What was that?” I asked.

Her mouth curved upward. “Like I said, drinking his essence.”

“Did it hurt?”

Tap smiled. “Heavens, no.”

Soleil giggled. “It’s pleasant on both sides—unless of course it turns into a kiss of death. Then it’s only fun for me.”

“What exactly does that do?”

She leaned on her palm again and studied Tap. “So, a trickster has been giving you issues?”

He blinked a few times and moved to mix a drink. "You tell us, essence-drinker."

"You think he came from the south somewhere. He's been playing pranks on your customers."

Tap nodded. "Shaved a young wraith bald as she ate appetizers over there a few days ago." He nodded toward a table in the middle of the room. "All her hair was gone before anyone noticed—even her."

"This is all interesting," I said, "but what does it have to do with Victoria and me?"

Soleil sat up straight. "Oh, pretty name. Not one you hear much anymore."

"It was pretty common when we were young." I sighed. "How do you think sucking her soul is going to help us?"

The valkyrie scowled. "Drinking her essence. It's an entirely different thing. I can see into her thoughts and experiences. If she can't remember you, I might be the only way to find out what's behind that. You two were in love?"

My heart constricted. "Madly."

She frowned and tilted her head. "Tell Soleil everything."

"Can't you just suck—drink—my essence to find out?"

"I could, but I like to hear people tell their stories."

"She does." Tap disappeared with another tray of drinks.

"So, what happened, wolfy?"

"My name's Tobias, but everyone calls me Toby."

"Ah, Tobias. Another one that's been left by the wayside. Tell Auntie Soleil your troubles." She twirled a blonde strand around her finger and stared intently at me with her dark green eyes. Her gaze seemed to bore into my soul—it probably did, given her nature.

I squirmed, finished off my drink, and then returned the stiff stare. "We grew up in rival packs, but we were always drawn to each other. As we grew older, we'd sneak off together whenever we could. We'd planned to run away and start our own pack... but that didn't work so well."

"Meaning?"

"She died in my arms." I looked away and cleared my throat before the quirky blonde angel of death could see my eyes misting.

"Aw, that's horribly tragic." Soleil sighed dramatically. "And now she's back to life, and can't remember anything? Or just you?"

I shrugged and swirled the ice in my otherwise empty glass.

"Leave it to me to figure out the missing pieces to your puzzle."

“Why do you care?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” she countered.

“Don’t you have better things to do than to play matchmaker for werewolves?” I asked.

“Not really. I’m taking a break from my mission.”

I turned to her. “What do you mean?”

She blew air up, making her bangs bounce around. “I’m searching for a vindictive dictator who doesn’t wish to be found. My superiors won’t be surprised if I’m here on earth for a few decades. Gives me some time to play and have fun.”

“Oh.”

“Anything else I should know about the beautiful young werewolf?” She took a sip of her drink.

“Victoria didn’t shift on the full moon.”

Soleil choked and put her glass down. “How’s that possible? I thought the moon forced you guys to change.”

I frowned. “It does. There’s no way around it—or at least there isn’t supposed to be.”

She cleared her throat. “I’m certainly no expert on other species, but I thought it was totally impossible to avoid the full moon.”

“Me, too—and I once was alpha over a great many packs. If someone had figured out a way to avoid the curse of the moon, I’d have heard about it.”

Soleil took a deep breath. “Now I really want to drink her essence.”

“How are you going to do that? Just walk up and offer a kiss?”

She laughed. “Good one. No, I’ve been around a great many millennia, and I’ve picked up a trick or two in that time. You got a picture? Location?”

I pulled out my wallet and showed her my favorite picture of Victoria.

“What a beauty. Where’s she staying?”

“Not sure, exactly. She’s a student at the university, though. Somehow, she ended up in my statistics class.”

“You’re a student, too? Are you following her?”

“I’m a professor.”

“Sexy.”

“So, do you want something in exchange for your essence-sucking?”

“Drinking,” she corrected. “And no, that’s plenty payment.” She licked her lips. “There isn’t anything tastier or more fulfilling than the essence of a supernatural.”

“Aside from taking the entire soul.” Tap returned to his place behind the bar.

“Clearly.” Soleil finished off her drink. “Well, I’m going to make like a baby and head out. I’m dying to know what’s keeping a werewolf from shifting at the full moon.”

“Wait,” I said.

She turned to me, brows arched.

My teeth gritted. I didn’t want to say what I needed to.

“Yes?” Soleil asked.

“You might find her with the jaguar shifters. They have a—”

“Club. I’m quite familiar with it. Let me tell you what I know.”

Chapter 12

Victoria

Carter looked at me from behind his laptop. “How’s it going?”

I groaned. “Massaro’s a jerk.”

The server came by. “Would you like more appetizers, or are you ready for dinner?”

“Could I just get some more sparkling cider?” I asked.

He nodded and turned to Carter. “Master Jag?”

“I wouldn’t mind some crab cakes.”

“Coming right up.” He disappeared.

“How’s the essay coming along?” Carter asked.

“Great, but no matter what I do, I can’t get it to exactly three thousand words. First I had two-thousand-ninety-six, then three-thousand-fifteen. Now I’m eight words under. Why does the word count matter so much?”

“Because he likes to make people miserable.”

“Mission accomplished,” I muttered.

“Want me to have a look?”

I shrugged. “You have yours to worry about.”

"It's done. Scoot over." Carter came around to my side of the booth and sat next to me, pressing his side against mine. He angled my laptop toward him and read under his breath. "That's really good. You said you're eight words short?"

"Yep."

He scanned the screen. "Oh, we can beef up this one with some extra words." He typed. "Perfect. What do you think?"

I read it over and looked down at the word count. Exactly three thousand words. "You're a lifesaver."

Carter put his arm around my shoulders. "Nah. You did all the hard work, and I was serious about it being great. Did you have really good grades in high school?"

Tears blurred my vision. If only I knew.

"What's the matter?" he exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

My nose grew warm and my lips trembled. "It's been the crappiest day, that's all."

He squeezed my shoulders. "I hope I helped somewhat."

I blinked and a tear fell to my face. "You did."

"Do you want to talk about it?" He ran his fingers through my hair.

Did I dare? It would be so nice to tell him everything. Maybe he could even help—he certainly had the resources. Another tear escaped and ran down my face.

Carter brushed his finger under my eyes and held my gaze. "You can tell me anything. I could never judge you."

Another tear escaped. He leaned closer and kissed it. Then he trailed kisses down to the edge of my mouth.

My heart beat out of control. There was no way he couldn't feel that—knowing how nervous I was. He brushed his lips against mine and cupped my chin.

All my worries seemed to melt away into the background. He continued to kiss me gently, sweetly. I relaxed and kissed him back, wanting to forget about everything else in my life. I just wanted to melt into him.

Someone cleared his throat on the other side of Carter. "Your crab cakes and cider."

Carter let go of my chin and waved at the server without pulling himself away from my lips.

"Master Jag, your father has arrived with Shu Hwang."

Carter groaned and then pulled away from me. "Thank you. If he asks about me, tell him I'll find him in a while."

The server bowed and walked away.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, still recovering from the kiss.

He nodded. "Just one of Father's overseas business associates. He likes me to sit in on the meetings so I'll know what to do when my time comes. He can't wait for me to become his partner so he can shove stuff like that in my lap, but I don't want to burden you with that. You were about to tell me what's weighing you down." He gazed into my eyes.

I took a deep breath. "It's going to sound crazy."

Carter kissed my nose. "Never."

"You don't know what I'm dealing with, though."

"Try me."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came. It was too insane to say out loud.

He ran the back of his fingers along my cheeks. "I promise, you can't tell me anything crazier than I've already heard."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd never believe some of the things I hear around here. The Jag is home to a great many wild secrets."

My mouth went dry, so I grabbed my sparkling cider and emptied the glass. "I can't remember anything," I spit out.

His brows came together. "What do you mean?"

"I have no memories before arriving here on the Peninsula." I blinked away more tears. "Somehow I drove here in my packed Jaguar, all set for college life."

He rubbed his stubble. "So, you're saying you don't know who your family is?"

I shook my head.

"You don't remember going to school? Sports?"

"No," I whispered, fighting back a sob.

"And nobody's tried contacting you? You can't find them online?"

I leaned my head against his shoulder. "My phone and laptop were practically on factory settings." Minus the jaguar images. "And I don't know who's controlling my money, but they've cut off access. The banks won't tell me who he—or she—is."

"Wait." He leaned back and looked at me. "You have no money?"

My cheeks warmed. "Ten dollars in my purse."

He swore. "None of your cards work?"

“Nope.”

“Are you kidding me?”

I studied him. “What’s wrong?”

“You’ve been left high and dry. What about your bills—tuition, car? Rent?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe this!”

“There’s not much I can do. I don’t know who to talk to.”

His face contorted. “I can’t believe this.”

“You already said that. I think I’m going to have to find a job. It’s obvious I can’t rely on my family, or whoever has been funding all my stuff.”

“No, you’re not finding anything. You can work here.”

“Here?” I exclaimed. “Doing what?”

“Whatever you want. Serving food. Overseeing the servers. Setting up the dance hall. Anything that sounds good.”

My mouth gaped.

“We pay top dollar and provide the best benefits you’ll find. If you work afternoons, you’ll even have time to get some of your studying in.”

“But—”

“Nothing. You need work. I’m here all the time. It’ll give me an excuse to see you.” His expression softened and he brushed his lips across mine. “Give me a minute. I need to speak with my father. Stay here.”

I nodded, too shocked to respond. Not only did he not question my sanity, but he wanted to help—by getting me a job at the Jag? My head spun.

A tall blonde with intense green eyes stopped at the table. “Are you Victoria?”

I studied her. “Do I know you?”

“No, but I’ve seen you around here a lot lately. Carter seems to have taken to you.” She sat across from me.

“You know Carter?” I asked, feeling a twinge of jealousy. She was gorgeous.

She held out a hand across the table. “I’m Soleil.”

I shook her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

"Where are you from?"

My emotions were too raw. "Around."

"Yeah, me, too. Don't you just love the Jag?" She glanced up at the fancy overhead light, just above our heads. "They put so much detail into everything. I'll bet even the custodian's closet is pretty."

"Maybe."

"What did you do before moving here?"

"I went to high school."

Her forehead wrinkled. "Really?"

"What else? I'm here for college."

Soleil's mouth formed a straight line as she studied me. "You seem more mature than the average freshman."

I shrugged. "Maybe I've been through more than them."

"Oh, that sounds interesting. I bet you have some great stories to share."

"Not really." I leaned over and glanced down the restaurant, hoping to see Carter. He was nowhere in sight.

"Carter's talking with his dad and some old but handsome Asian guy."

"So, you come here often?" I made myself comfortable.

"More lately. How do you like your classes? Got anything interesting?"

I stared at her. Why was she taking such an interest in me? Because I was spending time with Carter? Everyone at the club treated the Jags like they were royalty.

"Have you seen that new math instructor?" Soleil fanned herself. "Think he has a girlfriend?"

"How would I know?"

She glanced around and then leaned over the table. "Mind if I ask you something personal?"

"Go ahead." It wasn't likely I'd be able to answer. Then maybe she'd get bored with me and find someone more interesting.

Soleil curled her finger, indicating for me to lean toward her.

I did.

She opened her mouth, but didn't speak. Something from deep within me pulled up through my throat. It was smooth, like silk, and glided up through my mouth and out. My eyes shut on their own, and a warm tingle ran through my body, massaging my every fiber. A slight breeze fanned

my skin. The pulling sensation continued and the tingle grew warmer. My body went limp, and suddenly, my problems didn't seem to matter anymore.

Everything stopped. My back straightened and my eyes opened. I blinked several times and fought to find my voice. "What... what was that?"

Soleil looked deep in thought and confused. "Interesting."

"What?"

"I've never seen anything like that."

"Like what? What did you do?"

She glanced to the side. "Looks like Carter's about to head back. It was so nice to meet you, Victoria. We'll speak again soon, okay?"

"Um, sure."

Soleil smiled, her eyes seeming even greener than before. Almost unnaturally green.

Without a word, she slid from the booth and hurried away.

I leaned back against the seat, trying to figure out what had just happened. A slight tingle remained from our interaction—whatever that had been. I wanted more.

Carter appeared and slid next to me again. "Sorry that took so long. I hope you don't mind, I ordered us some dinner. No sense in you worrying about that. If you need to get home, I can have them box it up for you."

I scooted closer to him and leaned my head against his chest. "I'm happy here."

He put his arm around me. "I'm glad to hear it." He kissed the top of my head. "By the way, Father said you can either work as a manager in the dance hall or help in the spa. Apparently, they're short-staffed."

"Spa?" I exclaimed.

Carter laughed. "I always forget we have one. The last thing on my mind is getting a pedicure."

"Really?" I teased. "I pictured you with a mud mask, cucumbers on your eyes, and someone shaping your nails."

"I wouldn't mind seeing you get pampered like that. In fact, how does that sound after dinner?"

My mouth dropped open. "I couldn't..."

"Couldn't say no? Perfect. Besides, it'll give you a chance to see what it's like in there. You can decide if you'd rather work there or in the dance hall."

One corner of my mouth twitched. "Well, I don't see how I can say no when you put it that way."

The server arrived with two steaming plates of food. I pushed my laptop to the other side of the

table, and he set the plates in front of us. The one in front of me was lobster and the one Carter had was a fancy steak.

"Anything else?" asked the server.

"A bottle of our best white wine," Carter said. "Oh, and red, too."

"Coming right up." He bowed and left.

Carter removed his arm from me and scooted over. "If you'd prefer the steak, you can have it. I'm fine either way."

I studied the two plates. "Lobster sounds wonderful."

We dug in, and I was glad to have a distraction from all my problems. Plus, relaxation lingered from my interaction with Soleil and also Carter's kiss earlier.

"Father wants me to return to his meeting with Mr. Hwang, so feel free to take all the time you want in the spa. Get a full body massage if you want."

"So, if I work there, I can get pampered anytime I want?"

Carter chuckled. "You can, anyway."

We ate our dinner and then packed up our laptops.

"I'll show you to the spa," he said and took my backpack from me, "but then I have to return to business. Feel free to interrupt me when you're done—please do, actually. Those meetings tend to bore me to tears."

He led me down a dimmed hallway I'd never seen. We arrived at two enormous glass doors. He opened one and gestured for me to go through. I entered a wide-open entry with a sprawling gold desk. Mirrors lined one wall that led down a brightly lit hallway.

On the other side was a waiting room with luxurious-looking leather sofas. Paintings of hot springs, mountains, and cherry blossoms lined the walls. A long fish tank with coral and bright fish sat in the corner. Soft instrumental music played in the background.

I took Carter's hand and walked over to the tank. I could identify most of the fish. That made me sad because I had no idea why I knew their names.

"Hello," came a soothing feminine voice from behind. A slender, beautiful girl about my age with hair flowing to her waist smiled at us. She gave a slight bow. "I'm Yurika. May I help you?"

Carter nodded. "This is my special guest, Victoria. Anything she wants is hers—and on the house."

Yurika clasped her hands. "My pleasure, Victoria. What can we get you started with?"

"One other thing," Carter said.

"Yes?" Yurika turned to him.

"If she likes it here, she may decide to assist you."

The girl's eyes lit up. "Oh, delightful. Things have been harried since—"

"Yes," Carter interrupted. "For now, she's the most important guest here. After her treatment, feel free to ask her about assisting—only if she's interested."

Yurika bowed. "Yes, Master Jag." She turned to me. "Are you ready, my lady?"

I glanced at Carter. He pressed his palms on either side of my face and his mouth came down on mine. Before I could react, he pulled away. "Enjoy yourself, beautiful. You deserve it."

My breath caught.

He held my gaze for a moment and then spun around and left. I couldn't look away from the closed door.

"What would you like to start with, my lady?" Yurika asked.

I turned to her, unable to answer.

"My suggestion is a facial when you're stressed. Clear your skin and your mind." She smiled sweetly.

"Okay."

She looped her arm through mine. "Follow me."
Chapter 13

Toby

I paced the length of the bar.

Tap shot me an annoyed glance. "You're scaring away my patrons."

"Seriously?" I fanned my arm around the busy room. Not a single customer was paying me an ounce of attention.

"Friend, you're driving me nuts." The troll scowled at me.

"Where is she?" I exclaimed.

"Soleil will be here when she's done. Do you think she can just walk into the Jag and tell your girlfriend to pucker up?"

"That would be nice."

"You and I both know it wouldn't go over well. Go home. I'll send her your way when she gets back. It could be hours." His bushy brows furrowed.

"I doubt my pack will be very excited about a valkyrie showing up."

"You're the alpha. Tell them to get over it."

My skin bristled at the thought. "I'm not a traditional alpha, Tap. I'd think you'd know that by now."

"You mean you're not your father."

A low growl escaped my throat.

"See? That's exactly what you meant."

"Right. I'm not a *traditional* alpha. I don't treat my guys like dirt or the women like objects." The wolf inside me clawed to get out and attack something. Being that it was so close to the full moon, turning was possible but it would wreak havoc physically. I pushed him down.

"You can still tell your pack to chill when Soleil arrives. They're doing pretty well with that vampire in your home." Tap arched a brow.

I nodded, but didn't want to mention that I *had* used the alpha card to convince some of them to relax. Anyone following me knew I was against the ancient werewolf-vampire animosity. Hatred, really. Too many wars had been fought, too many lives lost. It was pointless.

Any werewolf who followed me had to agree to act in peace toward all other supernaturals.

"They are doing okay with her, right?" Tap asked, breaking my thoughts.

"Yeah, no one would dare cross either Jet or me." Ziamara was the lone vampire living in my home because she was Jet's wife. They'd met under my watch, years earlier when I'd been training Jet.

"So, they'll be fine with Soleil."

"An angel of death is of a slightly different caliber than a vampire."

"How so?" I asked.

"I'm pretty sure our blood isn't toxic to valkyries."

"Fine. Sit down and have a drink. Just stop your bloody pacing."

"Oh, all right. You win."

Tap wandered over to the liquor. "What do you want?"

"Surprise me." I pressed my face against my palms and shook my head. What would Soleil learn about Victoria? If she couldn't remember me, what else had she forgotten? And along the same lines, how much would the valkyrie be able to read if Victoria herself didn't know the answers?

A glass hit the counter next to my elbow.

"Try that," Tap grunted.

I glanced up to see the same rainbow drink Soleil had ordered earlier. "What *is* that?"

"I said try it." He folded his arms.

It bubbled and seemed to shine with glitter.

"Seems a little girly for me."

"Wuss," Tap muttered.

I grabbed the glass and swallowed the drink in one gulp. It tasted of citrus and other fruits, and practically fizzled and popped in my mouth. The sensations continued down my throat and into my stomach.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

It left me with a strange mixture of relaxation and energy. I wasn't as worried as I'd been, nor did I feel like pacing—I was ready to run a marathon.

"You wanna head home, and I'll send the valkyrie after you?"

I wiped my mouth. "Yeah, sure."

Half of Tap's mouth curved up. "Glad to hear it. See you later."

"Have you been to my house?"

"The old Moonhaven mansion."

I nodded. We just called it Moonhaven, though that wasn't an important detail. As long as he could point Soleil there. "Thanks, Tap."

"Hope she remembers you."

"Me, too." I ran my fingers through my hair, hoping Soleil found something we could work with, and rose from the stool.

Someone bumped into me. "Hey, watch it."

I turned to see a vampire baring his fangs at me.

"Put those away," I told him. "My blood could kill you."

He jumped toward me, hissing. "I have a silver blade in my pocket, pal. That could kill *you*." He shoved my shoulder.

"I don't allow fighting in here," Tap said. "You wanna hang out at the Faeble, you get along with everyone."

The vampire's eyes turned red as he glared at Tap. "I could take you, shorty."

"You think so, huh?" Tap came around the bar and held up a fist toward the vampire. "Ever fought a troll?"

"Always wanted to." He lunged for Tap.

I grabbed his shoulders and threw him across the room. "Play by the rules or go home."

He rubbed his head and looked at his palm. "I'm bleeding. You two are going to pay." He ran toward us.

Several others from around the room jumped up from their tables and surrounded the vampire. He was outnumbered by about a dozen angry supernaturals.

"You mess with Tap, you mess with all of us," said a siren.

"Use your song on him," said a water faerie.

"Or I could send him to Valhalla." Soleil stepped around the group and glared at the vampire. Her wings spread open and her eyes turned black.

The vampire stumbled back, his pale skin now white as a sheet. "You're... you're..."

A smile spread across her face. "A valkyrie, yes. They don't like vampires in Valhalla."

He scrambled away, but Soleil blocked him with a wing, sending him to the ground. The vampire pulled himself up with a barstool. "I'm leaving, okay?"

Soleil shook her head, her eyes still deathly black.

"What?" the vampire squeaked.

"You owe Tap an apology for coming into his place of business and insulting him."

"I-I..."

She stepped closer to him. "He opens up the Faeble to all supernaturals—even the occasional pet human. All he asks is that everyone put aside their differences and get along. Is that really so much to ask of those he serves?"

The vampire gulped and shook his head. He turned to Tap. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. My friends, they told me to come in here and stand my ground against a werewolf. We-we could smell him from the woods. I was just turned a couple weeks ago, so I don't know all the rules."

Soleil put her hands on her hips. "Then I suggest you learn them. Around here, we stick together."

Tap stepped near the trembling vampire. "Wars have been started from less. If that's what you want—"

"No. I'm sorry. I'll j-just leave."

"Maybe you should."

The vampire ran past the group, stumbling over his own feet. Several others laughed and shook their heads.

"Stupid newbie," muttered the siren and went back to his seat.

Soleil's eyes turned back to green. They seemed a much more vibrant shade than when I'd spoken with her earlier. "Sometimes it pays to be an angel of death." She winked at Tap.

"I could've taken him," Tap huffed and headed back his place behind the counter.

"Oh, I know," Soleil practically sang. She grinned at me.

"Did you find Victoria?" I asked, ready to get down to business.

Her expression sobered. "Yeah. You want to go somewhere more private to talk?"

My heart plummeted. "Bad news?"

"Well..."

I turned to Tap. "Any of your private rooms available?"

He gestured down the hallway. "Take your pick."

"Lead the way, sailor," Soleil said.

"Sailor?" I asked.

She shrugged.

I went down the hall and into the first available room.

"What did you find out?" I closed the door behind us.

Soleil and I sat across the table from each other. She stared at me with her deep green eyes. I couldn't pull my attention away from them. The color was mesmerizing. That was probably one way she lured her prey.

"Her memory has been wiped—"

"Permanently?" I exclaimed.

"I wouldn't know, but I couldn't access what she didn't know. So there's that. Make of it what you will. But I was still able to pick up plenty for us to work with."

The room seemed to spin around me. "What *did* you find out?"

"She can't access any memories before she came here, and she suspects it has something to do with the jaguars, but has no idea they're shifters. In fact, it appears she has no idea about the supernatural world at all."

My mouth dropped. "But that wouldn't keep her from turning on the full moon."

"No, but being spelled would."

"Spelled? You mean by a witch?"

"I don't know of anyone else who casts spells."

"The curse can be broken with a spell?" I slunk into the chair.

"Seems to be." Soleil smacked her lips. "Spells always leave a foul taste in my mouth. Bleh."

"Tell me everything. Don't leave anything out." I sat up straight and stared at her.

"She feels a connection with you—"

"I knew it. I could see it in her eyes."

Soleil frowned. "It's not much, though. She doubts her own feelings."

My shoulders slumped. "Oh."

"But if I were you, I'd go after her. Make it so she can't doubt. Whatever you two had together, it was strong enough to leave remnants despite that spell. She can't remember her family or anything else about her past, but she does remember you."

"What, exactly?"

Light pink colored her cheeks. "This is where drinking people's essence gets uncomfortable. I experience their memories and feelings as though they were my own."

"Meaning?"

"Though she hasn't gotten close to you, she knows you smell good, feel nice, and are a great kisser. Every time she looks at you, those memories bubble to the surface."

My pulse raced. "That's something I can work with. If I brush my hand against hers, she might remember more. I can find the cologne I used to wear—"

"Aftershave. She liked the way it smelled with your soap."

"That's right," I whispered.

"But there's something you need to know." Her tone shot fear through to my very core.

"What?"

"She seems to be building a relationship with one of the young jaguars."

"Why?"

"He keeps taking her to the Jag. I've never seen anywhere nicer, outside of a castle. I can't blame the girl. I'd start to fall for someone who took me there, too."

"No wonder she wasn't impressed with me buying her lunch today at the cafeteria."

Soleil put her hand on mine. "She's confused. Feels alone. Don't take it personally."

"Is there a way to get her memories back?"

"If I were you, I'd find a witch and try to get to the bottom of the spell. I'd also try to spend as much

time with her as possible. Tutor her or something, but don't sit around while that young leader woos her."

"He's a leader?"

She nodded. "Next in line to be their version of an alpha."

"Why are the jaguars interested in her? They view werewolves as bottom feeders. Trailer trash. Algae in the pool of life."

"They like her." Soleil shrugged. "She's a daughter of an alpha. Maybe they don't have one in the jaguar world. Jags have to marry by a certain age, or they can't be alpha, right?"

"I wouldn't know. How close is the guy who's pursuing her?"

"No idea, sorry."

I rubbed my aching neck. "None of this makes sense."

"She's back from the dead and remembers your sexy kisses. Use that to your advantage."

"I'm her professor!"

"What's more important? The love of your life or a job? If you really need money—"

"I don't. It's just to blend in with the humans. They already whisper about us because we live on private property in the middle of the woods. You wouldn't believe some of the rumors going around."

"Then don't worry about getting fired. Once Victoria remembers you, you guys can go anywhere. You can even just stay in the woods."

"And we need to act fast. Her body's going to start to deteriorate if she doesn't shift soon."

"Maybe the spell protects her from that. But I'd be more worried about the jaguar. He's probably close to the age of marrying."

"So?"

"He could be banished from his place in his family if he doesn't marry in time—and he definitely has his sights on Victoria."

My nostrils flared. "If he marries her, he won't live to see his next day."

Chapter 14

Toby

Brick came into my study. "Dinner's ready."

"I'm not going to eat with you guys tonight."

He tilted his head. "Everything okay?"

"No."

"Food will help. Time with your pack, too."

"I appreciate your concern, but not tonight." I felt bad saying no because meal times were so important to the pack—dinner in particular. We had large appetites and we tended to bond over a good feast.

"You're our alpha. It won't be the same without you."

"I said no," I snapped.

Brick stood taller and his expression turned stoic. "Yes, sir."

"Wait, Brick."

He spun around and left the room.

I stared at my—blank—notes for the next day's lessons and threw them across the room. "Damn it!"

Not much stung worse than being at odds with anyone in my pack. The only thing worse was being apart from Victoria—and knowing that a pompous jaguar was trying to win her over that very moment. The thought of the arrogant jerk staring into her eyes and running his hands through her hair was enough to distract me from everything else.

I was going to have to wing it in class the next day. Luckily I knew math like the back of my hand.

Grumbling and shuffling sounded from the kitchen. I needed to get my mind off Victoria long enough to get through dinner.

Sighing, I picked up the strewn papers and shoved them on my desk. I took a deep breath and stormed into the kitchen.

A dozen sets of eyes glanced up at me. Eleven of my pack mates and one rainbow-haired vampire.

"Toby?" Jet asked, eyeing me warily.

"I'm just on edge." I turned to Brick. "I apologize for the way I spoke to you in there."

He looked down. "You don't have to, sir."

"Yes I do, and in front of everyone. I have no right to snap at you—any of you." I took a deep breath. "I haven't told you what's going on, and you deserve to know."

They all exchanged curious and worried glances.

I sat at my spot at the head of the long table and took another deep breath. "Victoria is here on the Peninsula."

Gasps and whispers filled the table.

"Why isn't she *here*?" asked Ziamara. She was not only the lone vampire in Moonhaven, but the only female, too. She was probably eager for Victoria to join us.

My mouth formed a straight line as I considered my wording. "She's having some memory issues."

"What do you mean?" Jet asked.

I hated to say it out loud, but I had to tell my family. "She doesn't remember me."

"Sir!" Brick exclaimed.

"She also doesn't realize she's a werewolf. Someone found a way to get around the curse, and she hasn't shifted."

Mouths dropped and eyes widened.

"I'm trying to figure out how to resolve all of this."

"Have you talked to Gessilyn?" Ziamara asked.

"Not yet. I'm working with someone named Soleil. If she stops in here, I want everyone to welcome her."

"What is she?" asked Dillon, one of my newer pack members.

"Don't freak out," I said.

"I think you just assured we would," Jet said.

"She's on our side." I narrowed my eyes.

"What is she?" Dillon asked again.

"A valkyrie."

Gasps and worried exclamations went around the table. A few jumped out of their chairs.

"I said to remain calm," I reminded them. "Soleil isn't here for any werewolves. She's friends with Tap and is taking a break from hunting a dictator."

Everyone grumbled.

"Come on," Ziamara said. "If Toby and Tap trust her, she's safe."

"Easy for you to say," Dillon snapped. "You have no soul for her to take."

"Hey!" Jet jumped from his seat, knocking it over. "Take that back, fool."

"Face it, she's a vampire." Dillon narrowed his eyes. "No soul."

Jet ran over and pulled Dillon from his chair by the collar. "If you've spent five minutes with her, you'd know better."

"She's dead, stupid."

Jet balled his fist and hit Dillon across the face. "Want to say that again?"

Dillon wiped some blood from his nose. "It's the truth."

"Learn to respect your leaders." Jet threw him across the kitchen.

I jumped up. "Enough!" I narrowed my eyes at Dillon. "You will respect Jet as the assistant alpha. And when I'm not here, you treat him as alpha. Got it?"

Dillon rubbed his back and nodded. "Yeah."

I glared at everyone around the table. "That goes for everyone. We're a peaceful pack, remember? We don't fight unless provoked."

"Thank you," Jet said.

"I meant by outsiders. Sit," I ordered.

Everyone took their seats.

"You all need to relax. I know I do, as well. You're probably on edge because I am. Do I have your word that no matter who comes to our home, you'll treat them with respect? Witch, valkyrie, anything."

"Vampire," Dillon muttered.

Jet raised a fist at him.

"Do I need to send you two to your rooms?" I asked.

They both looked at me like I was crazy.

"I'd send you outside to burn off your energy, but I'm afraid only one of you would return."

Jet shot Dillon a smug look. Dillon rolled his eyes.

"Why do I feel like I'm running a daycare rather than a pack?"

"He started it," Dillon said.

"Shut it," Brick barked. "Both of you."

Dillon and Jet glared at each other.

My patience was wearing thin, and if they kept it up, I would risk losing my cool. I'd led packs long enough to know how little time it took for a couple of young wolves to wreak havoc. "You two need to stop right now."

The two of them both looked down.

“We are a pack, and sometimes not being a natural-born family, that makes things harder.”

Dillon glanced at Ziamara.

“We all treat each other with respect. You disrespect each other, you disrespect me.”

A few heads snapped their attention toward me.

“That’s right,” I said. “Look at Brick, he doesn’t get into petty scuffles. He’s mature and—”

“A guard.” Dillon scoffed. “I’d rather be a leader.”

“Is that what this is about?” I leaned forward.

He shrugged.

I was too tired to deal with this and everything else. “Maybe sending you two out into the woods to work this out like pups is the best solution.”

Jet’s expression tightened. “I’m up for it.”

“Me, too.” Dillon cracked his knuckles.

Ziamara peered at him from around Jet. She put her hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Hey Dillon, how do you feel about a vampire bite?”

“It’ll hurt you a lot worse than it’ll hurt me, babe.”

“Watch it,” Jet warned.

“I’ll risk it,” Ziamara said. “You think Toby would let me stay here without plenty of werewolf venom cure on hand?”

“Do you ever get tired of rainbow-colored hair?” Dillon asked her. “I sure get tired of it.”

The doorbell rang.

“Thank God.” I rose from my seat. “You two work this out however you need to—just leave Zia out of it. I’m going to talk with the valkyrie about Victoria.”

Several eyes widened.

“I told you, she’s not going to hurt anyone—as tempted as I am to have her deal with you two.” I stared at Jet and Dillon.

Both of their faces paled.

The doorbell rang again. I hurried to the front door.

“I was beginning to think I had the wrong house.” Soleil gave me a playful smirk.

"You know of any other Victorian home in the middle of huge acreage?"

She shrugged. "I didn't know of this place before today. Could be others."

"So, what's going on?" I asked. "I wasn't expecting you here so soon."

"I'm trying to scope out your girlfriend's life, but she's apparently working at the Jag—and they've wised up to me. I couldn't get in this time. They—"

"She's *working* there?" I exclaimed. "Doing what?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. You might have to ask her, though."

I sighed, feeling more defeated by the moment.

"Probably waitressing or something. Speaking of food, I'm starving. You got some dinner?"

A slow smile crept across my face thinking of the pack meeting her. It might help them to chill. "We're having dinner now. Why don't you join us? You should meet the other wolves, anyway."

"Thanks." She stepped inside.

I led her to the kitchen, but before she entered, I glanced at my pack. "I have someone I'd like you to meet. Everyone, this is Soleil."

They all sat up in their seats, their eyes wide and faces paling.

She stepped inside and waved her fingers. "Hi, boys. I hope you're not giving Toby any trouble."

Dillon dropped his fork.

Soleil turned to him. "Ever seen a valkyrie in action?"

"N-no. I swear, I meant no harm."

Her eyes turned black. "Behave, or you'll see what I can really do."

"I-I... Yes, ma'am."

Jet chuckled.

I pulled out a vacant seat. "Soleil is going to join us for our meal. I know you'll all show her the same respect you'd show any other guest."

Mutterings of *yes* went around the table as she sat.

"What are you boys talking about?" Soleil piled some fried chicken and mashed potatoes onto her plate.

"Want to tell her, Dillon?" Ziamara asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

Dillon shook his head and shoveled food into his mouth. He looked at Brick. "Tastes great. Thanks."

Zia grinned.

“You guys helping Toby with Victoria?”

“Not much we’ve been able to do,” Jet said. “But now, I guess that’s changed. Do you have any ideas?”

“Did any of you know her before she died?” Soleil asked. “We need as many people and things as possible to jog her memory. Who knows what will crack the spell?”

“It would have to be Toby,” Brick said. “You should have seen how in love those two were. Never seen anything like it.”

“You knew her?” Soleil asked and poured gravy over everything on her plate.

Brick nodded. “Me and Sal.” He gestured to my other guard.

“You two been with Toby all this time?” Soleil bit into her chicken and closed her eyes. “Oh Valhalla, this is so good.” She looked back at Brick. “You made this? You from the south?”

He nodded. “I did, and Mama grew up there.”

“Props to your mama for teaching you to get this right. Anyway, you and Sal have to get in with Victoria if you can. And all three of you have to think about things that will spark memories. Like, if you used to cook this before, make it for her—and be sure to invite me.”

Brick chuckled, clearly enjoying the praise. “You can take the leftovers home.”

Soleil turned to me. “I like this guy.”

“Me, too. That’s why I keep him around.”

“Where are you staying?” Brick asked.

“Here and there.” She dug into the potatoes.

“What does that mean?” Brick tilted his head.

“Depends on the day. Not sure where I’m going tonight.”

“You should stay here,” Brick said and then he turned to me, wide-eyed. “I mean, if you think that’s a good idea, sir.”

“I’m more than happy to provide a place for her to stay.” I looked at Soleil. “We have several spare rooms if you’d like to claim one for a while.”

She leaned close and whispered, “Does he always cook?”

“Mostly, yeah. I like to cook before the full moon, though.”

Soleil stared at Brick’s muscles before meeting his gaze. “You’re something else.”

He shrugged, but also smiled.

Ziamara caught my attention and grinned.

I turned to Soleil and Brick, who were still staring at each other. "We'll have to work together in finding Victoria."

"Definitely." Soleil sighed. "Brick and I will have to spend a lot of time together figuring out a way to break through her memory."

He grinned. If his wolf were out, he'd be wagging his tail and nuzzling up to her.

Chapter 15

Victoria

I stumbled into the statistics classroom, barely able to keep my eyes open. Even though I'd gone to bed exhausted the night before, I couldn't get my mind to settle down. There was just so much to think about, and now I couldn't focus on any of it.

"You okay?" Grace asked as I sat next to her.

"Yeah, sure." I sipped my latte, hoping the extra shot I'd ordered would help.

Grace gave me a once-over. "Did you get drunk last night or something?"

I nearly spit out my coffee. "No. Aren't you too young to know about that?"

She snorted. "I'm fifteen, not stupid."

"Sorry. I was just up late, that's all. Got a new job."

"Really?" she exclaimed.

"Why is that surprising?" I nursed my latte.

Grace shrugged. "I guess I figured since you drive a Jaguar, you must be sp—I mean, uh, well off. You know, like you wouldn't need to work."

"You think I'm spoiled?"

Her face turned red. "I didn't mean that. I swear."

"Trust me, I have as many problems as anyone else. And it looks like I'm meant to learn the value of hard work."

She breathed a sigh of apparent relief. "Where're you working?"

"A place called the Jag."

Her mouth dropped. She stared at me. "Serious?"

I nodded.

“Doing what?”

“Learning the ropes in the spa. I’m greeting people when they arrive and in the slow times, they’re teaching me how to do manicures and pedicures.”

Her eyes lit up. “Is it fun?”

“So far, but I’m not looking forward to touching people’s smelly feet.”

Grace snorted.

“What?”

“People who go there aren’t gonna stink.”

“Guess I’ll find out.”

Professor Foley came in and started setting his things up. Some of the girls crowded around his table, but he sent them back to their seats.

Relief flooded through me. I watched as he opened his laptop and organized some papers. His hair looked so soft, I could actually feel it between my fingers. I could smell the woody, masculine scent of his aftershave.

Grace said something in the background, but I couldn’t make it out. I didn’t care. I just wanted to know if Toby smelled the way I seemed to remember. If his stubble would tickle as I trailed kisses down to his lips—

“Victoria.”

Annoyed, I turned to Grace. “What?” I snapped.

She frowned and turned to her laptop. “Never mind.”

“Sorry.”

“Whatever. Didn’t mean to bother you.”

Toby—Professor Foley—cleared his throat and told everyone to open their text books. Some people pulled out physical books, while others turned on their tablets. I’d forgotten both. Great.

He scanned the class as he spoke, skipping over me. He held Grace’s gaze for a few moments before moving onto the next student.

I felt the sting of... what? Rejection? Disappointment?

Why did I care? I was probably just imagining that we had a past together. It was ridiculous. He was older than me—a professor, for heaven’s sake! I was just a freshman who couldn’t remember anything.

I was grasping for straws—embarrassingly too eager to find things that weren’t there. He was hot, and I just *wanted* to smell and feel his hair. Which was ridiculous, especially considering what I was

building with Carter. He was gorgeous, too—and I *knew* what he smelled and tasted like. Purely wonderful. Plus, he'd gone out of his way to bring me to the club and even get me a job.

He was who I needed to focus on. Not an out-of-reach professor who already had gobs of girls clamoring for his attention. What was I, besides some girl who couldn't even keep her credit cards up to date? That was probably why he wouldn't look at me. He might even regret having helped me with lunch. As soon as I received my first paycheck, the first thing I was going to do was to repay him. Then hopefully we could just be a normal student and instructor.

Grace poked me.

I looked up. Professor Foley and the entire class was looking at me.

My face burned.

"Answer him," Grace muttered.

"Can you repeat the question?" I cleared my throat.

He smiled, instantly relaxing me. "I asked if you have any questions about the syllabus."

Oh, good. An easy question. I shook my head. "It was perfectly clear. My favorite, actually."

A few people snickered around me.

My face warmed again.

Toby's smile widened and the kindness in his eyes nearly melted me into a puddle. "I'm glad to hear it." He turned and asked another kid something about the syllabus.

I slumped down in the seat, my heart thundering against my chest.

"Maybe you need more coffee," Grace whispered.

Or a cold shower.

Toby moved to the white board and started writing numbers with a red pen. He turned around. "Statistics is my favorite math course, and I hope to help you all enjoy it as much as I do."

Some people groaned and others giggled.

I didn't know how I'd learn a single thing with him teaching. Looking at that gorgeous face was too much of a distraction, especially when our gazes met. Somehow I needed to find a way to break my attraction to him. It would be the only way I could survive with a decent grade.

He started speaking about the real-world uses for statistics, and it piqued my interest. I followed along, typing notes, finally able to concentrate as I stared at the screen.

It seemed like time sped by, and before I knew it, the class was over.

"Can I ride with you to the other side of campus?" Grace asked. "I promise not to annoy you. Well, I'll try not to."

"Yeah, sure." I slid my laptop into my bag.

"Sorry about earlier."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure it was me. I gotta get more sleep."

"Yeah, don't you know coffee's bad for you?"

I held my latte close. "No, it's liquid heaven."

She laughed and then we headed for the door.

"Victoria," Toby said.

I froze and then turned to him, unable to find my voice.

He smiled sweetly. "It seems like you might be having trouble, is there anything I can help with?"

My mouth gaped and the room heated by at least ten degrees. Or was that me?

"Since we eat lunch at the same time, why don't we talk then?"

A group of girls stared at me, jealousy covering all of their faces. If looks could kill, I'd be dead on the floor.

I glanced back at Toby. "Okay. Thanks."

He grinned, seeming genuinely happy. "Perfect, I'll see you then."

A curvy brunette with too much makeup stepped forward. "Can we make it a study group, Professor Foley?" She batted her eyelashes.

"Shoot me an email, and we'll set up a meeting in my office."

Her face fell, and she left the room, muttering. The other girls followed, consoling her.

Toby didn't seem to notice. He turned back to me. "Maybe we can find somewhere to eat outside. The weather's so nice this time of year, it would be a shame not to take advantage of it."

I nodded, unable to stop looking into his beautiful eyes. I could get lost in them if I let myself.

"Perfect. See you in an hour."

Grace tugged on my arm. "We gotta go, or we'll be late."

"See you then," I whispered to Toby and then pulled my gaze from him.

Geography proved to be a good distraction, and by the time I made it to the cafeteria—paying with cash that Carter had given me—I felt more grounded when Toby found me at the soda fountains.

"Are you ready to discuss statistics?" His eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled at me.

"As ready as I'm ever going to be." I cringed, hoping that everything coming from my mouth over lunch wouldn't sound so stupid. "Thanks for helping me out."

"My pleasure. I saw a shaded bench outside. Hopefully it's still free."

I followed him outside, balancing my tray. He led me to a picnic bench that had a couple squirrels fighting over a nut. Toby shooed them away and brushed off the table.

We sat and ate quietly for a few minutes. After I'd finished my chicken salad, I glanced up and found him looking at me. As we stared into each other's eyes, I couldn't help noticing how at ease I felt. Like I was home.

Or crazy. He was my professor.

I pulled my gaze away and picked at some fruit.

Something inside of me urged me to ask him if we'd met before. I told it to be quiet. It said no, that I needed to talk with him.

My theory about going crazy was looking more like a possibility than ever before. Except that crazy people didn't know they were crazy, did they?

I sighed.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"I'm just tired. You know, trying to get used to college life."

"It's pretty different from high school, isn't it?" He tapped the table. The look on his face made me think he knew something about what I couldn't remember.

That only proved I was losing it.

"What was high school like for you?" he asked.

I shrugged. "You know."

Toby shook his head. "Tell me."

"I thought we were here to discuss statistics."

He straightened his back. "I'm just trying to get a feel for your background. Were you good at math?"

I bit my lower lip. "Maybe."

"You don't know?" His eyes were kind. Concerned.

The world seemed to spin around, out of control.

"Is something the matter?"

I studied his face. The urge to pull him close and make everything better was strong. My arms

wanted to reach out for him. But it was ridiculous. I was crazy.

He cleared his throat and leaned a little closer. "If it's stressing you out too much, we can change the subject. What do you want to talk about?"

My pulse picked up speed. "I don't know." I looked down at my food, but I'd lost whatever appetite had remained.

What was wrong with me?

Something inside me nudged me to tell him.

Now I was hearing voices, to top everything off. Tears misted my eyes. I tried blinking them away.

"Victoria?"

I glanced up at him. A single teardrop clung to an eyelash.

His mouth dropped. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine." I wiped my eye, brushing away the tear. "Everything's great."

Toby frowned and put his hand on top of mine. His skin was so soft... his touch, so familiar.

The voice inside of me screamed to tell him everything.

I swallowed, ready to burst into tears. I couldn't lose it in the middle of the bustling campus. In a matter of minutes, people would pour out from the cafeteria and the surrounding buildings. But somehow, crying in front of the man in front of me seemed infinitely worse.

He removed his hand from mine and cleared his throat. "Just know that if you need to talk about anything, I'm here. Not just as a math instructor or faculty adviser." He pulled out a business card. "This is my personal cell phone number. Call anytime you need something, okay?"

I nodded and stuck the card in my bag. The voice inside urged me to talk about what was going on. I rose and picked up my tray. "Thanks, Toby. The—" I froze, realizing I'd just called him by his first name.

Our gazes locked. His eyes widened and his pupils dilated. Something else registered on his face. Surprise? Hope? It was hard to tell, though it had to be shock. He'd never told our class his first name.

"I-I'm sorry," I stammered. "I don't know where that came from, Professor Foley. I meant no disrespect. I'm sorry."

I grabbed my tray and ran into the cafeteria.

Chapter 16

Victoria

I slumped into the seat and closed my eyes. Around me, everyone discussed how mean Massaro was for making us write the papers at exactly three thousand words. At least I wasn't the only one annoyed, but at this point, it was the least of my concerns. *

The complete Curse of the Moon series by USA Today bestselling author Stacy Claflin! (Individual books have over 500 reviews.)

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