

Chapter Two

The jeans that Trowbridge had rued as a size too small were yanked back on. By the time I'd tossed on my T-shirt and slipped on my panties, Ralph had been retrieved from his lonely splendor on the lampshade, and thrown over his head.

My would-be murderer, Knox, had come to Creemore with two thugs. While the thinner of the NAW's henchmen had been dispatched by the pack that very same night, the other—a burly guy I'd dubbed "Fatso" though his license had revealed that his true name was Kenneth Newland—had melted into the caves near Collingwood and had managed to escape capture for almost twelve hours.

Until now. Trowbridge had told Harry to call in their best tracker three hours ago when it was clear that the pack's search team of accountants and insurance adjusters wasn't putting their all into it.

At the door, my lover tilted his head to study me with narrowed eyes. "You might not be ready for this. This could get ugly."

Uh-huh. Me staying behind doing needlepoint. And pigs may fly.

I followed him. The moment we passed the first bedroom, my niece, Anu, came to the door. "Blah, blah, blah," the Alpha of Creemore said to her in Merenwynian. She

halted, her green eyes wide, but when she saw me trailing behind him, her mouth firmed like a teenager denied Internet privileges. She fell into rank and filed behind me.

By the time we'd hit the landing, Cordelia's door opened. Somehow, after dinner, she'd managed to nip over to the trailer and change. She wore a dove-gray twin set and a pair of lovely trousers, tailored to fit her thin, six-foot frame. My former roommate had accessorized it with a couple of necklaces—just the right amount of flash against the cool and somber tones of her woollens. Cordelia was always tasteful, proving that not all ex-drag queens mince about draped in pink boas.

Trowbridge paused by the arch to the living room. "Hey, Biggs." When the dark-headed Were didn't lift his head, he raised his voice. "Hey!"

Biggs jumped and almost dropped the cell phone he had clenched in his hand.

"Is that Knox's phone?" Trowbridge asked.

Biggs nodded.

Trowbridge opened the door. "Bring it."

Biggs trailed me as I zipped up my sweatshirt and stepped outside to join Trowbridge and Cordelia on the front porch.

Harry had picked up a weapon and strolled out, well before my Fae ears had managed to track the sound of an approaching car. The hairs on the nape of my neck bristled. I'd never seen this side of my old cowboy before. He stood apart from us—his rifle balanced over the crook of his arm, his profile turned toward the road—a silent figure down at the far end of the veranda, hidden where the porch lights couldn't penetrate the gloom.

Everyone else's attention was centered on the Mazda that had driven at a funereal speed all the way to the midpoint of the long drive, and now waited, engine idling, for

permission to advance. The passengers were two dark and indistinct shadows.

Trowbridge, arms folded, gave a nod, and the car resumed its approach.

The vehicle stopped in front of the house, rather than going to the back where the family parked. The engine was turned off, and the overhead lights went on as the driver, a big guy who I recognized as a pack member whose name was either Derek or David, got out. A moment later, the passenger door opened, and Rachel Scawens slid out.

Trowbridge's sister gave me her habitual thinly veiled look of hatred. When her son had become embroiled with the former Alpha of Creemore, Rachel had contacted her brother for help. He'd answered her call even though doing so had placed his life at risk.

But Stuart hadn't wanted rescuing and Stuart had ended up dead.

Rachel blamed me for that.

"Your sister took her vow to her Alpha, then?" I asked quietly. Swearing fealty to the new Alpha was a required act, performed by each member of the pack.

Trowbridge's nod was abrupt.

It was cold. I wished I'd lifted a jacket from one of the pegs by the door before I'd ventured outside.

The driver, Derek/David, went around to the back fender. (Henceforth to be known as Derek because he was tall as a crane, and about as pretty as an oil rig). He sent Bridge a sideways glance, read permission, then hit the button on his key fob to pop the trunk. Immediately, a stream of foul ripeness wafted out of the enclosed space. Fatso had been on the run for his life and he'd sweated a whole bunch.

"They didn't kill him," observed Biggs, from the doorway.

A statement that the occupant of the trunk couldn't have translated as a hopeful sign. Suddenly, a foot—no, not one, but two feet bound so closely together at the ankles that Fatso's legs looked like the bottom of a Pez dispenser—slashed out.

An understandable but completely futile effort. Derek was more than up to the challenge of evading flying Pez feet. Thus, the consequence of Fatso's escape attempt was a couple of nasty rabbit punches for the wolf in the trunk, before Derek and Rachel hauled their captive out.

Without much ceremony, they threw him at their Alpha's feet.

The last time I'd seen Knox's sidekick, he'd been a naked sprinter, hoping to break thousand-yard dash records as he fled the gathering field. Since then, he'd raided someone's clothesline, and he'd been well trussed—arms behind his back, double-tied with rope. His borrowed shirt had rucked up, and his gut gleamed above his jeans like the curve of whale's white underbelly.

"Is this the wolf?" Trowbridge looked down his long nose at the prey. "The one that led you to that tree?"

I thought back to the hysteria of the burn-the-bitch mentality that had begun with a trial and ended up with me chained to the old oak. There had been so many hands, so many scents. Had his been among them?

"Yes," I said, deciding it didn't matter. Fatso had hit me. He'd pushed me through the crowds, and he'd smiled when Knox had pulled out his knife.

Trowbridge jerked his head to the right toward the maple tree his mother had planted so long ago in their front garden. "Give me the chains and turn on the yard lights," he said softly to Harry, as Derek and Rachel began to drag their catch across the lawn.

Harry grunted, then bent to gather up the chains that Fatso and Know had used to secure us to our execution

posts. I didn't know what was worse—the grim rattle of those fetters as Harry stepped off the porch, or the unyielding hangman's stare he leveled at the quaking wolf as he passed the bonds to his Alpha.

Trowbridge weighed a length in his hands for a long thoughtful moment. “Untie his hands,” he told Derek and Petra, “then stand back from him.”

Fatso must have realized it was now-or-never once they'd cut the ropes around his elbows and wrists. Handicapped by his Pez-feet, he lurched forward, possibly hoping to hop his way to freedom.

There was no setup, no slow burn. Trowbridge let loose his flare. Blue electric light burst from my man's eyes with the sudden blinding intensity of a lighthouse's searching beam. Fatso froze, hunched for the next sack-race hop, his sweating face twisting in panic as its heat bathed his features.

If an Alpha's flare is leveled at you with the sole intent of flattening you? Say hello to the dirt. Few can withstand that awful wish to submit, to grovel, to plead . . .

Fatso's belligerence held for three shuddering breaths before his mouth contorted into the downward droop of a man quavering on the edge of a chest-heaving bawl. On the fourth inhale, his resistance visibly snapped, and with a defeated, high-pitched whine, he shrank back against the maple's spine.

“Biggs,” Trowbridge said, “use Knox's phone to film this.”

The heavy chains swung from the Alpha of Creemore's fist as he walked across the grass. “Stand up straight,” he murmured as he approached the flinching wolf.

The NAW's man lifted a meaty arm to block the light trained on him. “I didn't mean it,” he cried before burying his face into the crook of his elbow. Even that self-defense move proved an inadequate shield against Trowbridge's

unforgiving flare—Fatso’s subsequent moan morphed into a broken hum.

I covered my mouth, remembering what it felt like to be under that surge of dominance. I didn’t need to see this. I didn’t want to see my own misery replayed in front of me. Nor did I want it videoed. There had been enough *recordings*. Knox had made one, showing my lover and brother leaping through the gates’ round hobbit-sized window. “Trowbridge, you don’t—”

“Hush, mate,” he replied.

Did he just hush me?

Trowbridge considered the cowering Were for a moment. “Hey,” he said. When Fatso declined the opportunity to trade gazes, the Alpha of Creemore tapped his arm. “Look at me.”

It took Fatso a good two seconds to summon up the guts to obey.

Trowbridge nodded, then said evenly, “Hold this.”

The NAW’s goon whimpered, but he did as he was told—he accepted the end of the chain and held it obediently while Trowbridge did a slow, tight circle around the tree.

It’s hideous to watch a person being bound like that. The chink of the chain, the frantic expression on the face of the person as it dawns on them that there could be and would be, no escape. Oh, sweet heavens, how could the pack have stood watching it happen to me? Hadn’t the sight sickened a few? Wrenched a teaspoon of pity from at least one of them?

Fatso’s flesh bulged over the links.

“The creature deserves it,” I heard my Fae say.

So . . . she’d finally found her voice again. Following her bid for autonomy in Threall—now known as an epic fail—she’d fallen into a quiet, sullen funk. But I’d felt

her, brooding and silent, watching me and mine interact. And sometimes, I'd sensed her sampling my feelings—admittedly fleetingly—while Trowbridge cuddled me post-sexual bliss.

Comparing things, I'd thought.

Was she right?

Perhaps Fatso did deserve all of this, but I found no joy in hearing his wolf pants of distress—those pathetic heh-heh-hehs—nor satisfaction watching him blink against the dribble of sweat that trickled into his eyes.

No, this wasn't what I needed or I wanted.

I need peace. I want a fairy godmother to wave a hand over all our problems and make them go away. But that wasn't going to happen, was it? I swallowed and walked across the crabgrass that was doing a damn good job of choking the last few clumps of civilized Kentucky blue.

Trowbridge was studying his captive, his head canted to the side. "You looked different," he told me, when I was close enough to hit him or kiss him. "The picture isn't quite right."

"Because, by the time you got there, I had a blade stuck in my chest." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Let's not do this. Enough blood's been shed."

"You had something on your head," he said, as if he hadn't heard me.

"A blindfold." Actually a red bandana that carried Fatso's scent.

"That's it." Trowbridge peeled off his own shirt. He pulled it taut, then twisted it a few times so that the jersey was a coiled rope. Fatso—why can't I remember the wolf's name?—visibly cringed as my lover reached to blind him with the fabric.

Mouth flattened into a hard line, the Alpha of Cree-more rocked back on his heels to embrace the overall

picture. His flare died. He examined the shaking wolf for a long beat then said, “So you’re Ken Newland. Somehow I pictured you differently.”

“Biggs,” I said quietly. “Stop recording this.”

“You take your finger off that button and you’ll lose it,” said Trowbridge in a tone I hardly recognized.

Bile rose from my stomach. “I don’t want a record of this—we don’t need to see—”

“Not now, Hedi.”

Unbelievable. He did it again. He shushed me.

“Want to tell me why the NAW sent you and Knox to Creemore?” Trowbridge asked the blindfolded Were.

Ken wet his lips. “We came to charge Helen Stronghold—”

“Hedi Peacock,” Trowbridge corrected.

“Hedi Peacock,” the other Were parroted, then with an overeager nod, “For crimes she committed in the absence of the true and rightful Alpha of Creemore.”

That sounded wordy and well rehearsed. I had a mental picture of Knox and his two goons singing that chorus all the way up the 400 Highway to Creemore—three happy summer campers heading up toward the Muskokas for a spot of weekend fun.

“Did one of my pack lodge a complaint?” inquired Trowbridge.

“What?”

“That’s the only legitimate reason the NAW could use to enter my territory. Unless we were behind on our tithes?” He lifted his shoulders in mock confusion and called, “Hey, Harry, come on over here.”

The older Were was leaning against the porch column, filling in time by pruning his nails with a wicked-looking knife. “Coming.” He closed it with a click and sauntered down the steps.

Trowbridge waited until his second was nicely framed

for the camera before asking, “Was the pack behind in the accounting?”

Harry’s mouth pruned then he shook his head. “No, boss.”

“So all the usual shit had been taken care of? The monthly meeting reports, the paperwork—all that useless bureaucratic crap that the council insists we send them like clockwork—had it all been done? Sent in on time?”

Not by me.

“Yes,” replied Cordelia. I turned. She stood where I’d left her, underneath the soft golden glow of an old porch light. Harsh grooves bracketed her mouth.

“Then I’m confused,” drawled Trowbridge. “Why would the NAW feel that my pack was in need of their assistance?”

“But . . . the pack didn’t have an Alpha. They only had her . . .”

Rachel blew a huff of air through her nostrils. It was her only comment, but it carried weight, because Weres are all about the body cues.

“A mate can act on behalf of her consort in times of great need,” he said coldly. “There’s been incidences in the past where an Alpha’s consort has done so for the pack’s overall best interests. So, I don’t see a problem.”

“Yeah, for a week, maybe, but—”

“Irrelevant,” my mate replied. “The precedent’s been set. So, Kenny, you tell me who complained and we’ll bring him or her here and give them a chance to explain.”

I bet Fatso would have given away his entire collection of Guns N’ Roses albums to have been able to produce a name at that precise moment. Any name would do.

Before he could fabricate, Trowbridge said, “Don’t even go there, asshole.”

Inspiration came to Newland. “There were formal charges! Signed by Whitlock himself! Knox read them in

front of your pack before . . .” His voice trailed off as he realized the danger of completing that thought.

Before they tied Hedi to the old oak tree.

“What charges were read that night?” asked Trowbridge, his tone soft, deadly.

A pause as Fatso frantically tried to recall them.

I couldn’t stand it; the scent of the trapped wolf’s base fear melded to his urine; the way his chest rose and fell like he’d been run to the ground. I answered for Fatso. “I was charged with killing Robson Trowbridge.”

“Yet here I stand,” he said, his voice clipped.

“And with breaking the Treaty of Brelland.”

My Trowbridge turned at his waist and looked over his shoulder toward Biggs and the cell phone that was recording every word, every lie.

And part of me wondered as I watched my man . . . did he know? That those cheekbones, those glittering eyes, that aquiline nose—even that shorn hair, which made him look tough and battered and three times the predator than the world-weary rogue he’d been before—all of it would play so well to the camera’s eye.

The hero returns.

“The Treaty of Brelland,” he said. “Jesus, I hate the word ‘treaty.’ It sounds like an agreement, but it’s not. The Alphas that signed that treaty never had the option of choosing death over exile.” He shook his head. “Making those men sign that piece of paper in their own blood . . . each one of those Alphas knowing that their own DNA would be used to key the portals to recognize Were blood so that no wolf could ever travel through the passages between the two realms again.

“My mate sent me through the gates. Not only did I survive the trip, but I’m back. Do I look weak to you?” His smile was grim and quick, just a flash of teeth. “The only person that seems to care about the treaty is you,

Whitlock. The Fae didn't retaliate. The Great Council has had six months to act and they haven't said squat. You know why? Half of those old farts remember the good old days when the portals were open, and trade between our races was profitable to both parties. They're watching and waiting to see what will happen. I can tell them what will happen—not a damn thing. It won't change anything.”

A muscle tensed in his jaw, then he turned back to Ken Newland—the Were whose stink of welling terror was forming a knot at the base of my throat. “Why'd you really come here?”

“We were serving justice,” the blindfolded Were said weakly.

That camp song is getting old.

Trowbridge's tone dropped to a threat-promising whisper. “I told you not to lie, you fucking asshole.” He leaned in close until I knew that his breath must have warmed Newland's lower jaw as Knox's had heated mine.

“This is how I see it: the NAW waited until the last night of the moon, and then they sent in their team, waving papers and talking about trials ‘by peer.’ They gathered up the pack an hour before the moon's call—breaking I don't know how many council rules of protocol—knowing that few wolves can think beyond the hunt when they're that close to their change. They tried to strip the civilization from my Weres, which is no easy thing to do because most of my pack has been living the fat life for so long they hardly recognize their own balls.” His voice was low, almost reflective. “My mate was supposed to die at the hands of her own, and when that didn't happen, Knox tried to finish the job with a knife.” He dug into his pocket.

Ken Newland miserably wagged his head. “I didn't—” “Why did you come?” Trowbridge suddenly shouted.

“Knox said we had to kill the fat little Fae bitch! It was

business—she was going to screw up everything!” Fatso rocked his head in distress. “I was just doing what I was supposed to. I was just—”

“Harry,” said Trowbridge. “Give me your knife.”

“Don’t,” I said, so quietly.

My lover stepped to the side, so that the camera could see both him and Newland; the Alpha and the condemned. “I am not this guy’s peer, any more than you are mine, Whitlock. And I’m not a ‘civil’ man anymore. Nobody threatens my mate. Nobody sends a guy jacked up on sun potion into my territory. And *nobody* tries to take what is mine. I am the Alpha of Creemore. If you want my ass, you better come for me. Not fuck around threatening my mate.”

Harry’s bowie knife opened with a click. “This isn’t silver,” Trowbridge said, placing the tip of the knife to Kenneth Newland’s belly. “And it’s not as big as the one Knox used on my mate when she was helpless, but it will do.”

Then he told me, “Close your eyes.”

But I didn’t. Even when he leaned in and sank the first inch of the knife’s blade deep into the screaming man’s belly. Though . . . I couldn’t help myself. Even though I’d clenched my teeth until my molars hurt, the sound was building inside my throat. I covered my mouth with my hands but still couldn’t quite smother my own high cracked whimper.

It is likely the thing that saved Fatso’s life; that one thin note of absolute horror that I couldn’t quite disguise.

In our absence, Anu had recovered the plastic barbecued chicken container from the garbage and was using my spoon to retrieve whatever fat dregs had been left in the bottom of the molded drip trenches.

“Can’t we get her more meat?” I snapped.

A caring comment that prompted Anu and her ferret to perform a totally unnecessary avoid-Hedi circuit around the table to place the container on her kitchen chair. Disdain etched on her face, my brother's daughter's message was clear: that was *her* seat and *her* reclaimed pickings. As was her ownership of the window by the old pantry—even if she had to slide between Biggs and the wall to get to her favorite post.

Later, I'd find a way of connecting with her. Later, when I was steadier.

He knifed him . . .

Cordelia moved toward the cabinet that held the strong spirits. She uncapped a bottle and took a good, long swallow. It did the trick, judging from her discreet shudder. My ex-roomie wiped her mouth and muttered, "Does anyone else want anything to drink?"

"I don't drink anymore," said Trowbridge, hands braced on the sink. His jeans were slung low, his spine a long, deep groove in his well-muscled back. His rib cage swelled as he inhaled for a silent sigh, then he turned to toss the paper towel he'd used to dry his hand in the trash.

"You don't drink anymore?" I said.

He shook his head but he really wasn't seeing me—his gaze was distant, like he was Einstein on the cusp of adding "squared" to $e = mc^2$.

I should have congratulated him. But I didn't. I'd run the gamut of responses over the last twenty minutes. Being witness to a replay of what had happened to me in the backfield? It had left me off balance. It had been too real, too violent. I knew that wolves weren't boy scouts. I'd witnessed a few blood-speckled Weres trudging back from their monthly hunt on more than one occasion.

But this? It had been different. Trowbridge had done it wearing his mortal skin. A man set on a cold and deliberate kill. I couldn't imagine one of the Creemore wolves

doing that. They were shopkeepers and café owners. Accountants and suits. They'd spent too many years blending in with the human populace and sitting in front of the boob tube. In their case, the cliché “you are what eat” could be modified to “you are what you watch.”

I just watched Trowbridge deliberately knife a guy.

He was protective: this was very good. Though . . . the way he'd leaned into the blade, the smell of the wolf's terror and blood, the total lack of expression on my man's face . . . it had spoken to all parts of me. My Fae had been speculative. Mortal-me—good old Hedi, the mouse-hearted—had been appalled. But my wolf had flooded me with hunger.

You are what you watch.

“I need chocolate,” I said. But I didn't move to check the cabinets. Truth was, I couldn't go another foot, so I remained where I was, just inside the back door. Four linear feet into the kitchen; two semimortal feet ready to haul ass out of it.

You know that old “last straw” metaphor?

That was two straws ago.

Trowbridge had left Fatso alive, but he'd also left the knife half in and half out of his prey's belly; the need for revenge inside him being so acute, my guy couldn't go so far as to personally remove the weapon from the wounded wolf. After, he'd pitched the chain's padlock keys to Harry and said, “I don't care if you have to put him on a plane in a suitcase or a boat in a tackle box, just get him off my land.”

That was the good part: he'd pulled back at the last minute; giving me the illusion that he was—despite all claims to the contrary—still civilized. But then, in my opinion, he'd overcorrected. He'd moved from blade to telecommunications.

Standing shirtless and barefoot on the crabgrass, he'd used his scarred thumb to work the menu on Knox's phone.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I’d said, intuiting his intentions.

My mate hadn’t deigned to answer. Brows pulled together, he’d scrolled to Whitlock’s e-mail address. “Trowbridge, it’s a really bad, bad idea,” I’d murmured as he’d attached the video to an e-mail. He’d given me a sideways glance. A flicker of blue fire in his eyes. Daring me.

I’d said, “Don’t do it.”

To which he’d replied, “Have to.”

Then the Alpha of Creemore had hit Send and with one squeeze of his scarred thumb, it was done. *No, no, no.* He already wore a “kill-me” sticker on his forehead, compliments of the Fae. One wasn’t enough? Now I asked, with remarkable control, “Did you have to send the video to Whitlock? He’s already got a reason to want to come down and hurt us.”

The Alpha of Creemore had returned to his favorite seat. Blue eyes lifted and pinned me with a pretty good impression of Clint Eastwood—but back in the day when Clint wore a sombrero and smoked thin cigars. “Whitlock will gauge my strength by my reaction to the shit he put you through. I just gave him a visual.” He turned to Harry. “Do a tour in an hour, check to make sure all the sentries’ points are well manned.”

Hello, Son of Lukynae.

By Goddess, here came the cue ball again. I could feel it there squeezed between the muscles of my throat—had felt it, on and off, ever since my brother and Trowbridge had come back. *Fear.* But I kept swallowing it down even as it kept rising up. Too large to expel, too uncomfortable to ignore. The strain of having it lodged there hurt my jaw and made the soft tender skin behind my pointed ears feel pulled and taut.

“It seemed to be overkill to me,” I said.

“A strong Alpha doesn’t hide, he doesn’t wait, and he

doesn't apologize. He takes the offensive." My mate sat sprawled in his chair, his long legs stretched out, his arm resting indolently on the table's edge. He cocked his head to study me through those thick, black lashes.

My inner-bitch did a moan.

"Go big or go home," said Biggs, trying his best to mimic Trowbridge's sprawl.

"Quiet, Chihuahua," snapped Cordelia.

I sat down. Wanting to do something with my hands, I reached for the resealable plastic bag filled with Knox's last effects and held it up to the light. He'd traveled light: a heavy ring bristling with keys, a thin faux-alligator wallet, a leather cord from which hung a coin, and one small glass bottle.

One of these things does not belong with the others.

The vial was approximately three inches long, topped by a cork stopper. It was empty now, though once it had been filled with sun potion. A single dose taken before the moon would stop the Were's body from changing into his wolf. Which is a good thing if you don't want to turn into fangs and fur. But like every other thing in the world, there was a price to it. The longer you took it, the more you craved it. My twin, Lexi, had been an addict and healing him of his increasing need to consume the stuff was the reason I'd agreed to become the Old Mage's nalera.

Its presence had bothered me last night, but so many things were happening, rapid-fire, that I hadn't processed it then. But now I studied the bottle and asked myself some questions I might have asked earlier, if my world hadn't been tipped sideways. "I thought sun potion only belonged in Merenwyn. I didn't know that our Weres ever had access to it."

"They didn't," said Trowbridge. "That's contraband,

probably came across twelve, fifteen years ago. Whitlock must really want this territory because he could have sold that bottle for a fortune.”

“Couldn’t it have been Knox’s?”

“He wouldn’t have had that type of money.” At the mention of Knox’s name, two blue comets began circling Trowbridge’s dark pupils. “No, this came from Whitlock. He knew that he needed to dose his man before he sent him into my territory.”

“Why?” I said.

“Whitlock timed your trial for a full moon. He wanted Knox to appear as strong as an Alpha. So he had to make sure he would be the last to change into his wolf.”

Trowbridge reached for the bag, then tilted back in his seat and kept going, until the chair was balanced on its back legs. He fingered the bottle through the plastic. “Knox didn’t have Alpha in him—if he had, he would have gone after me, not my mate. Besides, he reeked of this shit.”

I hadn’t noticed, being somewhat preoccupied by my imminent execution.

My mate broke the bag’s seal. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep sniff. “A female handled either Knox’s wallet or the bottle.” His pupils moved under his lids. “A halfling.”

Upon that pronouncement, the atmosphere in the room, already tense, tightened into a thick soup of emotions. There were battle-ready aromas streaming from Trowbridge and Harry and a spike in Biggs’s anxiety. But there . . . what was that? Deep disapproval. Coming from Cordelia.

Why? Was she dismayed that they’d used the word “halfling” in front of me? I’ve heard worse. To my mind it was an improvement over “mutt” or “half-breed.” There

was poetic fluidity to it. I tested it in my mind, breaking it into two distinct consonants: half-ling.

“I’ve never met another halfling,” I said. “Are there a lot of us?” That question was greeted with as much enthusiasm as the trophy wife sashaying into the Old Wives’ Club.

The lines bracketing Cordelia’s mouth turned into grooves. “You’re not one of them.”

“I’m not? Then what’s a halfling?”

Cordelia turned to my mate. “You need to explain this to her, right now. It’s obscene how she and her brother were kept ignorant.”

I hate this. Being three steps behind everyone. “Trowbridge?” I asked.

My mate rubbed his jaw, his eyes shadowed. “A halfling is sired by a Were and born of a human.”

“So there’s a subrace of half Weres, half humans?”

“No,” he replied.

“Why not?”

The fanwork of lines around his eyes deepened. “Because they die young.”

“How young?”

“For some seventeen, for others eighteen.”

Before my mouth could shape the obvious question, he explained, “They die at puberty.”

“Their puberty is delayed like ours?”

He nodded. “They don’t have enough magic in them to survive their first change. That’s why it’s drummed into you. Don’t have sex with a human.”

They died? That speculation took me to a whole other place. *Son of a bitch.* “You told me to change into my wolf.” I pointed an accusing finger. “Before you came back through the gates—when we used to meet in our dreams. You said, ‘You *must* change into your wolf.’”

“I knew you could do it,” he replied.

“You told me I *had* to try.”

“You did,” he shot back. “You couldn’t run a pack without showing your fur. And I knew you could do it because your brother could.”

“I am *not* my brother.”

“There has been some—though very limited—interbreeding between some of the Fae and the wolf packs in Merenwyn. Half-Fae, half-Were kids can turn into their wolf.”

But I can’t. That’s the malodorous statement that hovered over us like a stink bomb.

Biggs’s chair squeaked as he shot to his feet. He went to the sink, turning his back on us to stare blindly through the window. His scent leaked angst and tragedy.

“What’s up with Biggs?” I mouthed to Cordelia.

She flattened a manicured hand over her heart. Brows raised, she mouthed back, “The Chihuahua loved a half-ling.” I shouldn’t have been able to follow that—that’s a lot of silent speak—but all those years of lip-synching to Donna Summer tracks had left their mark on Cordelia.

Oh.

I’d attributed Biggs’s lack of dates to his fashion choices—tonight’s shoelaces were red. It hadn’t occurred to me that he was nursing a broken heart. My memory stirred. “That’s for Becci!” he’d shouted before pulling the trigger on Stuart Scawens.

I’d forgotten he’d said it until now—it was a detail that had been hazed over by bigger tragedies. But now, I felt a flicker of shame. I should have asked him about Becci.

One day, I will.

The door opened, and Harry walked in. He took in the scene, face carefully neutral. “So, what are the two of them going on about now?”

“Life, liberty, and—” Cordelia paused for an eye roll that set her fake eyelashes fluttering. “Love with a capital *L*. Our two lovebirds seem to enjoy sparring with each other as much as they do making those bloody bedsprings squeak.”

“It’s not the bed,” said Trowbridge. “It’s the chair.”

Someone shoot me.

“What did you do with Fatso?” I asked.

Anu’s head turned as Harry said in his low rumble, “He’s hanging from a hook in the back of a refrigerated trunk that’s on its way to Montreal.” The pack’s second gave me a reproving head shake. “Now, Little Miss. I didn’t kill him. He’s mostly alive and trussed up like Big Bird. The driver said he’d put pedal to the metal until he’s over the provincial border. I told him to leave our friend somewhere inconvenient.”

“Good,” said Trowbridge, his voice clipped.

“Super,” I added, rubbing my eyes. They burned. With fatigue. Not at all because the little comet in Trowbridge’s baby blues was calling to my flare. I picked up the bag, opened the seal and took a whiff. To me, the contents smelled of Knox, blood, leather, sun potion, and . . . fudge. If we wanted to be specific about it, maple flavored.

Trowbridge tossed Harry the bag. “Take a whiff of this and tell me if you can recognize the scent.” Harry sampled it, and shook his head before passing it to Cordelia. She didn’t have any better luck and passed it across the table. Biggs rubbed his nose before he took a delicate snort.

“Well?” asked Trowbridge.

Biggs put the bag down on the pine table and stared at it. Silently, he shook his head.

“I hate thinking of a kid being around Knox,” I said.

Trowbridge nodded, his eyes focused on the bottle of

sun potion. Absently, he flattened his hand over the scar hidden beneath his T-shirt. His thumb moved, side to side it swept, following the rough ridges of the now-healed wound.