

Chapter Twelve

Garrett

Slowly, I let the change overtake me, bone by bone, tooth by tooth. It's agony to draw it out this way, but I want her to really see it. I want her to understand.

I hold back a groan as my spine reshapes itself, forcing me onto two legs. My joints pop as forelegs become arms, and I watch the fur recede from my body.

A moment later, I stand before her as a man, and Ava's eyes go wide. I take a slow step in her direction and hear her heartbeat ratchet up a notch.

"You're a . . ." She swallows, as if she can't bring herself to say it.

"Wolf shifter," I finish for her.

"Did you just . . ." Ava's brows knit together, and she looks as though she might be sick. "Is he . . . dead?"

"Yes," I growl, my tone devoid of any remorse. "He tried to kill you and our baby. He deserved to die."

"But . . . why?" Ava shakes her head. "Why would he want to kill me? He's never even met me."

I hesitate. I don't want to tell her that Robert was acting on my sister's orders, but Ava deserves to know how I feel about her.

"Because of who my family is, some people aren't happy about . . . us." I gesture in the air between us. "I love you, Ava, and I meant what I said. I am all in."

"I think I love you, too," she whispers, tears welling up in her eyes. "But are you . . . going to turn me? Into a werewolf, I mean."

She sounds half terrified, half intrigued, and I'm impressed she hasn't run for the hills.

"No." I shake my head. "It doesn't work that way. Shifters are born, not made."

Ava's eyebrows shoot up. Then confusion sets in. She seems to be groping for some explanation — some reason why I can't be a shifter. "But . . . it's not a full moon."

I chuckle at the look on her face. “It’s a myth that we all change at the full moon. We can shift at will.”

Ava’s lips form a surprised little “O,” and I blink as my sluggish human brain catches up to what my wolf’s senses are detecting. Blood — lots of it, and it’s not Robert’s blood.

“You’re bleeding,” I choke, closing the distance between us so fast that Ava about jumps out of her skin.

She goes completely still as I run my hands over her head and torso. I hiss when I feel the hot sticky liquid oozing from her arm, and I feel a pinch as my fangs descend. The stench of blood excites my wolf, and he’s still amped up from the fight.

“Oh my god.” Ava sounds scared and surprised, as though she just noticed it. The adrenaline from the crash must have dulled the pain from the shard of glass sticking out of her forearm.

Panic hits me all over again. She’s lost a lot of blood. Judging by the sheer volume that’s already soaked into the dirt beneath her, the glass nicked her radial artery.

I don’t know how much blood a human can lose, but I’m guessing she has minutes at most.

Through my haze of terror and desperation, an idea surfaces. It’s completely batshit-fucking crazy, but it’s the only thing I can think of.

Every time Ava and I have been together, I’ve had to fight the urge to give her my mark. But there’s another side effect of the mating bite — the healing properties of my saliva. It’s what allows shifters to mate with humans without accidentally killing them.

“Let me try something,” I rasp, my voice scratchy from the sheer amount of effort it’s taking to restrain my wolf. Seeing our mate hurt is driving him wild, and if I’m not careful, I might give her more than my healing saliva.

Bringing my face close to her wound, I allow the bitter venom to pool in my mouth. Gripping her forearm tightly between my fingers, I withdraw the glass in one smooth motion and place my whole mouth over the cut.

Ava gives a jolt, hissing in pain, but I hold her arm firmly in my grip.

The instant I taste her, my wolf tries to take over. He wants to give her my mark. The only thing that keeps me from sinking my fangs into her flesh is the knowledge that this is the woman I love, and she’s trusting me with her life.

Once every drop of my venom is spent, I pull back to look at the wound. Her arm is no longer bleeding, and tender pink flesh criss-crosses the wide gash in her arm. But that’s not what steals my breath away.

Ava's sweet vanilla scent has become entangled with my own. It's a known side effect of the mating bite, though for some reason, I hadn't expected it.

For the rest of her life, Ava will always carry my scent, even if she doesn't yet bear my mark. It's a shifter's way of telling the world that his mate is off-limits, and it fills me with pride to know that she'll always have a bit of me with her.

"What?" she asks, giving me a funny look.

I shake my head. Ava just survived an attempt on her life and learned the secrets of my world. I don't need to tell her now.

In the distance, I hear the wail of sirens. Someone must have seen the accident and called nine-one-one.

Behind me, Robert's pale corpse is plainly visible in the early-morning light. He's returned to his human form — something that happens when we die.

Once I'm sure that Ava's all right, I get up to retrieve my clothes. It's going to take some serious alpha command to make these humans believe there's a plausible explanation for how Robert ended up this way, and I'm more convincing when I'm wearing pants.

The medics take their sweet-ass time examining Ava and loading her onto a stretcher. The police want to take her statement, but I'm anxious to get her to the hospital so a real doctor can check her out.

The deputy in question is kind of a dick, and it takes every ounce of my alpha charm to persuade him to get his statement later. The night's events have my wolf on edge, but one look at Ava perched on the edge of the stretcher blankets me in a sense of calm.

My mate.

My pup.

Mine.

They're both safe — at least for now. I'm still practically vibrating with that manic sense of protectiveness, but I no longer want to rip the deputy's head off.

For the first time in my life, I have this sense that everything's going to be all right.