

Desired

TRUE ALPHA 1

ALISA WOODS

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Hot Shifters, Sexy Witches



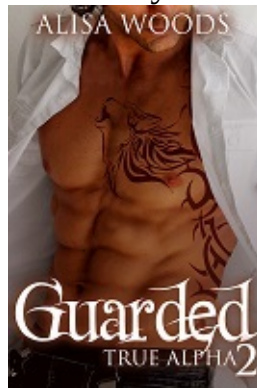
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Desired (True Alpha 1) - New Adult Paranormal Romance

Shifters live in the shadows of Seattle, just under the skin of the alpha male, dot-com entrepreneurs who are building a new Silicon Valley in the Emerald City.

Mia is just a college girl trying to earn her business degree and dig out of the poverty she was born into—being a shifter is something she hides, hoping her secret doesn't sabotage her dreams.

Lucas is a broken alpha, a wolf who lost his mate, his pack, and almost himself—he wasn't looking to rescue a girl or start a pack war. But now he has to keep her safe or it won't just be her life, but his whole family at risk... only his inner wolf can't seem to keep its paws off a girl who has secrets of her own.

Desired (True Alpha 1) is 80 pages or 20,000 words. It's the first of six episodes in the *True Alpha* serial.



Chapter 1

Lucas leaned his elbows back on the bar and pulled in a full draught of the human pheromones and perfumes swirling in the air. Musky fragrances mixed with sweet sweat, underscored by a tangy taste of arousal. And that was just the women. The males were overly scented as well, at least the human ones, as if they didn't understand the power of their own natural scent. The blue-neon sign outside the nightclub called it *The Deviation*. Inside, lithe human bodies pulsed to a techno rock beat coming from the live band on the stage. It was a ripe hunting ground for shifters and humans alike. *Prey*, his inner dark wolf panted, but Lucas backhanded that thought into the recesses of his mind. He may be hunting for a pleasurable companion for the evening, a temporary relief from the ghosts that haunted him, but he wasn't *that* kind of predator.

Not that there weren't plenty of those in the room.

This was neutral territory. He was rogue now, but even if he had a pack, he wouldn't make trouble in a closed environment filled with humans like *The Deviation*. The throng pushed right up to the bar where he stood, leaving not much distinction between those dancing and those watching. Cutout panels behind the band let in beams of purplish light that stabbed through the tight crowd and washed everyone in a deep otherworldly glow. The shifters were indistinguishable from the humans, everyone dressed in the same tailored silk shirts and curve-hugging black dresses that comprised the nighttime uniform of web entrepreneurs and their groupies.

Indistinguishable for most. But Lucas recognized a few.

Three shifters from the SocialHacks pack were in the thick of the dancing, hands running free over their female companions. His father's pack allied with the SocialHacks early on, their social media startup pairing well with his father's internet business development firm. Nearby was a trio from Red Wolf, another company that cultivated the dot-com businesses of Seattle and helped match them with investors. They were his father's bitter rivals—not only did they skate close to that invisible line shifters didn't cross, the one that kept the normal human citizenry of Seattle unaware of the wolves in their midst, but they were as ruthless in pack matters as they were in business. Lucas had seen more than one omega from the Red pack end up in a dingy alley missing a few vital organs. Tonight, the Red pack was hanging at the fringes of the crowd, watching. Like Lucas.

But that was all they had in common.

“How are you doing here, sir?” The soft voice behind him belonged to the female bartender. He could tell by her scent before he turned around: slightly musky with the dampness of the nightclub, but with a light woodsy taste. It wasn't a perfume, which Lucas had an instant appreciation for.

He turned and gave her a smile. “I'd like another, please. Vodka, neat.” She wasn't one of the celebrity bartenders who drew patrons to *The Deviation*, but he wasn't the type to drink the latest fad cocktail, either. In fact, he rarely was in a club long enough to finish a drink before a companion for the night found him. And having full command of his faculties, especially with a human, was key to leaving her satisfied, not sliced to ribbons.

The bartender gave him a fleeting smile, then dropped her brilliant blue-eyed gaze, brushed her long black hair out of her way, and reached under the bar for a bottle. He hadn't been to *The Deviation* in a while, but he guessed she was new—to the club, maybe to bartending as well. Her all-black uniform—slim dress pants and collared shirt—had turned purple with the hazy light from the stage, but it fit her feminine curves in an understated way. He appreciated that, too, but bartenders weren't good prospects, not least because they might remember him the next time he came hunting.

She poured his drink, and he noticed her hand quiver. The liquid sloshed but not enough to escape the shot glass. He frowned and looked up, but she was already moving on, down the bar, to another customer. She gave that guy the same fleeting smile, but Lucas could see something wrong in it now. Something off. Her lips were slightly parted, her breaths shallow. She was panting, and not in a good way. The girl rushed through a bourbon-and-seven for her customer, then shuffled to the end of the bar, where her fellow bartender, a male, stood

flirting with one of the female patrons. The girl had a quick, whispered exchange that Lucas couldn't hear over the pounding music, and then she slipped around the end of the counter and into the crowd.

Lucas straightened, looking for her over the sea of bobbing heads and waving hands. She was a tiny black-haired rabbit weaving through the weeds, tall enough to poke above them when she wasn't ducking under drinks held high or flailing arms. He wasn't sure why, but he couldn't stop tracking her.

He left his drink, untouched, and slid along the bar, keeping her in his sights. She broke free of the crowd near the back wall, where blue neon signs bulged with the letters of the club and the outlines of spilt electric drinks.

It was the same wall where the three Red pack members lounged.

The girl threw open a door which had been invisible a moment before, probably because it fit seamlessly into the black matte of the wall. Then she was gone, the door slowly easing closed behind her.

The Reds had watched her all the way out.

Lucas froze at the edge of the crowd, his unblinking stare trained on their bent heads and moving lips. *Not my territory*, he told his snarling inner wolf. *Not my pack*.

But he didn't look away.



Mia sucked in the cool night air of the alleyway outside *The Deviation* and nearly moaned with the relief. Jesus, the *smells* in that place. She'd been on since ten o'clock, and usually she could make it through to the end of her shift at two: she just had to breathe through her mouth and take frequent bathroom breaks for fresh air. But tonight... it was as if all the college girls had decided to flash mob the club with a synchronized perfume attack. And the dot-com wannabe-billionaire guys either came straight from the gym and overcompensated with Axe spray or somehow that was their *normal* smell. Add in the usual background *eau de Deviation*, and the alcoholic whiffs from the drinks she was serving just weren't enough to ward it off. She had to get fresh air, or she was going to lose her dorm dinner of meatloaf and mashed potatoes—and it wasn't that good the first time around. Her sensitive sense of smell loathed closed spaces and aromatic people, and *The Deviation* had more than its share of both tonight.

Sometimes being a shifter well and truly sucked.

Who was she kidding? It sucked *all* the time. Mia had yet to find the hidden benefits of being able to transform into a wolf on a whim. Sure she could smell the anxiety of her roommate while she studied for an econ test. Or the lecherous

arousal of her English prof when he tried to “help” her during office hours. But she didn’t count those as *benefits*. And an acrid stench of fear would constantly surround her if anyone found out her secret—not to mention no real company would ever hire a shifter.

She could tolerate a few more smelly shifts at *The Deviation*, if that’s what it took. Other than the stench, it was decent. Not too many slobbering drunks. Plus she was twenty-one now, so she could serve, which meant better tips. She needed to keep this stinky job so eventually she could get a *real* one. One that paid well enough to get her mom out of that rat-hole apartment on Jackson Street and into something better. Somewhere Mia wouldn’t have to worry about the crackheads shooting up the place and where the gangs hadn’t ousted the police as the major power players in the neighborhood.

There were shifters in the crack gangs of Seattle, she knew that. Everyone did, though no one talked about it. And if anyone knew she was a shifter... well, that was all that would be left for her, too. Which was why she worked her tail off in community college and transferred to the University of Washington as a junior, as soon as she could wrangle a scholarship. But even the crappy dorm food cost money, so she had to keep her job at *The Deviation* if she wanted to graduate and get her mom out of the hellhole that was 12th and Jackson.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Her stomach settled a little. Mia leaned back against the cool brick of the alley. The moon was nearly full, which didn’t mean jack for her as a shifter. Werewolves that went all wolfy with full moon were just fairy tales. She could shift whenever she wanted to—which was primarily *never*—and occasionally even when she didn’t. But that hadn’t happened for years, not since Bobby Johnson scared the shit out of her with one of his stupid Halloween pranks. It was a good thing she had been dressed as a ghost that year—she had only been ten, and the yellowed sheet had reached all the way to the ground. Covered her up pretty good, and Bobby never figured it out.

Didn’t stop her from using some very wolfy-sharp claws to trash his mailbox the next night, though. Just on principle.

She closed her eyes and focused on calming the last heaves of her stomach. The music beat through the brick wall behind her, buzzing the back of her head. Just as she was thinking it might be safe to head back inside, the door next to her creaked open, letting out a throb of music that covered the footsteps of whoever was coming out. She popped open her eyes, blinking a couple of times to clear them, just in case it was patrons wanting to sneak a quick make out session in the alley.

By the time she pushed away from the wall, she realized it wasn’t a couple

looking for privacy. It was three guys... and they were *big*.

The moonlight glinted off their black silk shirts. Mischief danced in their eyes. They stepped toward her, casually, as if they were about to ask her the time. One in the lead, two behind, probably mid-twenties. The lead one was pretty, the way boys sometimes are, without being the least bit feminine. In fact, there was entirely too much muscle beneath his tailored shirt. The other two were more conventionally handsome, but just as hulking, with beefy frames that spoke of hours in the gym or possibly some kind of professional sports. Their scent reminded her of cut steel, like they were fashioned from coldness and evil.

She could turn and run, but as soon as that thought blossomed in her head, two of the thugs fanned out, filling the alley with their smooth-moving presence. She wasn't quite surrounded, but she wouldn't escape either. Not without shifting, which she really, *really* didn't want to do. These guys were dot-commers. She could tell by the glint of their custom-made shoes and the close tailoring of their collared shirts. She was strong—being a shifter was good for that, at least—but even so, there were three of them. She would have to shift to have a chance. And if she did, they would talk. The police would listen. She'd be outed for sure.

The door slowly swung closed, muting the music to a dull thud.

Shit.

"It's pretty crowded in there." Mia hooked a thumb toward the door, pretty freaking impressed with herself at the steadiness of her voice. "I'm sure someone will be along any minute, looking for fresh air, just like you boys."

The lead one smirked then tipped his head to his evil partner in crime. He slunk back toward the door. Could he lock it from the outside?

Dammit.

"Come on, now," Mia said, her voice way steadier than her ramping up heart would believe. "There are a *ton* of girls in there, *much* hotter than I am, who would love to go home with you three."

"Who said anything about taking you home?" The lead one leered like this was a game, and only he knew the rules. "Maybe you should run."

The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. Okay, that was not good. At all. These guys wanted to *hurt* her. She was *prey*... of the very worst sort.

Her inner wolf snarled. Some of it must have escaped her, but that only made him lick his lips like she'd just given him a delicious present. Mia curled her fists and took a step back to widen her stance. Maybe this was it. Maybe she'd finally lose her secret and everything else that went with it. But she wasn't letting them do whatever sick things they had planned without a fight. If they were lucky, she'd stop short of actually killing them.

Her wolf surged against her skin, battering her from the inside, wanting out. She wanted to claw their faces and sink her teeth into their necks. Mia held her wolf back, trying to think it through. She hadn't shifted in so long. She would get tangled in her clothes, probably fall on her face before even getting out a growl. And who knew what else the creeps might have... weapons... she swallowed, wondering if taking off her shirt might distract them long enough to get through the transformation...

The lead guy's nostrils flared. Even a human could probably smell the stink of fear on her. The guy by the door leaned a beefy hand against it, holding it closed, while the other one edged around her, cutting off her one route of escape down the alley.

The lead creep flexed his hands and stepped toward her—

With a scrape and a thud, the door flew open. The thug who had been holding it stumbled backward and tumbled to the moon-brightened pavement. Another figure stomped out and quickly scanned the alley. His gaze fell on Mia and raked across the length of her body. Even across the span of the twenty feet between them, she felt it, like a hot paintbrush across her flesh. His face was familiar, but her fear-addled brain couldn't quite place it. The man turned his glare to the creeps in the alley and used one hand to close the door behind him without looking.

Everyone had been frozen during all of this.

Then all hell broke loose.

The thug on the ground lunged up with frightening speed. He grabbed the man at the door, wrestling him away from it. The lead thug started taking off his clothes.

What?

He ripped off his shirt in one smooth motion, and before Mia could track its fall to the pavement, he had transformed into a snarling, bristle-haired red wolf the size of a bear. Mia jerked back, skittering to the side of the alley and flattening herself against the brick. The red wolf lunged at the man, while his sidekick tore off his own shirt and morphed into another wolf, this one so dark red, his fur was almost black. They led with their fangs, but somehow the man had slipped away, leaving them with nothing but a mouthful of shirt. The third thug, the one who hadn't transformed, was jerked backward, arms flailing out as he fell to the ground again. The two wolves snarled but held their place, pawing the ground. Their guttural sounds echoed off the hard walk. Her heart in her throat, Mia was frozen against the wall. She edged forward, enough to see what had stopped them.

A brown wolf, fur glistening white in the moonlight, had the door-holding

man's neck in his jaws. The man made gurgling noises, like he was already drowning in his own blood. The brown wolf snarled and must have clamped harder because the man flailed against his hold even though that could only have made things worse. Mia flinched, holding the wall and her breath, the iron scent of blood assaulting her nose. The two red wolves pawed the ground, yipped, and returned the snarl, standing stiff-legged and tall. But after a moment, they both took a step back. Then slowly, slowly, they lowered their muzzles to the ground, arching their backs slightly to do so. Even slower, their red-bristled tails sunk to brush the pavement, then tucked between their legs.

Submission.

Her wolf recognized it right away, even though Mia had never seen another wolf in her life. But their actions flushed something through her—the shock of a cool shower on a hot day, both bracing and filled with relief. They had *submitted*. In their wolf form, the red wolves could no more attack the brown than they could fly—at least not now, not while their submission was still fresh, the authority of the alpha wolf still strong in their minds. Maybe later. Certainly once they were in human form again, and the alpha had less influence on their inner wolves. Mia knew what that felt like, an impulse that was stronger than her free human will, just from the few times she had let her wolf run free—mostly in the Olympic Mountains, where no one would see or wonder. But even in those few times, her thoughts, her actions, her very being seemed ruled by the instincts of her wolf.

The brown wolf released the man. Dark red smeared his throat, but he must not have been seriously injured, because there wasn't blood spurting everywhere, and he managed to scramble away, still breathing. He ran past Mia, not even a glance back as he escaped down the moonlit alleyway, his imported shoes clacking on the pavement. The two red wolves still had their tails tucked, but now they were backing away, too. They snarled as they went, gaining volume as the distance between them and the brown wolf increased, until they yipped, tossed their heads, and turned to trot down the alley after their fellow thug.

The brown wolf stood straight, legs stiff, tail curled back... staring at her.

She stared back.

The only sounds were the thump of music from the club and the jerky breath heaving in and out of her, but the air was rich with the fight: the scent of blood, a tang of sweat, and the fading whiff of fear. There was a sweet under scent, familiar but something she couldn't identify. The brown wolf was watching her with eyes deep as night and glittering with the moon. Then, as he held her gaze, he started to shift. Mia had never seen it in another person before. Only in

herself, and when it happened, she wasn't exactly looking in the mirror.

His gaze stayed fixed on her as the skin and bones of his body morphed, rearranging in some magic Mia didn't understand even when it was her own body. He was a shadow lengthening, a form growing smoother and taller, trading fur for muscle, muzzle for square jaw, paws for long-fingered hands, until finally he stood tall and naked in all his... *glory*. There was really no other word for it. His shoulders were broad. Muscles rippled down his arms, catching the moonlight, kissing it, and sending it bouncing back to the night. The planes of his chest and stomach were silver-glazed marble, and farther down... Mia's face ran hot as she realized the under scent was arousal. *His* arousal. And his erection was as glorious as the rest of him, tall and firm, the moonlight bathing it with a shimmering glow.

She jerked her gaze back up to meet his.

He slowly stepped toward her, each footfall measured and cautious, like she was a skittish deer he might be frightening off. A fluttery panic rose up in her chest as he approached, making her want to run just like one—not because she feared him, but because he radiated such raw power. Even in his human form, he was stealing her breath, holding her paralyzed against the wall in awe. She couldn't imagine what he could compel her to do in his wolf form.

Anything.

Her inner wolf whimpered.

He bent to pick something off the pavement. Only after he stopped approaching her and fussed with the thing he picked up, did she realize it was his pants. She looked away while he dressed, although that seemed silly, so she looked back again. By then, he was almost upon her, and she startled, hugging the wall once more.

When he was far away and naked, he was something like a Greek god. Up close and shirtless, he was less divine and more humanly, heart-stoppingly gorgeous. His dark brown eyes peered at her, studying her again. He was maybe mid-twenties, with a chiseled face that had lost all boyishness. His chest was raked with four lines of red, where a claw must have found him in the fight, but his wounds were already starting to heal. As she watched, the lines slowly disappeared, just as she'd seen with her own skin many times. His chest was now bare of any marks except for his sprawling, black tattoo: a howling wolf in the middle with inky fur that bled into a thorny tribal design curling down his side. Her fingers ached to touch the silky black lines. He was close enough that his scent was nearly overpowering her—and not because it was strong. It reminded her of the fresh pines of the forest, mixed with a musky earth scent that was subtle and yet inescapable. It screamed *I am male* so loud that her knees

went weak with it.

He lifted her chin with one finger. She held her breath while he inspected her. Then he released her from the finger touch, and her wolf wanted to nip after it.

“You’re not afraid,” he said softly.

“Should I be?” Her heart was pounding hard, and she was drenched in dampness, from the slick sweat of residual panic to the heat between her legs. He was *wolf*. He had to smell *that*. It made more heat rush to her face.

A smile lifted one side of his pinched-serious lips. “Most humans are after a wolf fight.”

She let out a breath. He thought she was human. It almost bubbled up a laugh, but she held it in.

His smile drifted away, replaced by seriousness.

“I’ve seen wolves before,” she said. Which, actually, was a lie. At least, she hadn’t seen any *other* wolves before tonight.

He nodded, slowly. She couldn’t decide if he believed her or not.

Then she realized... “But I won’t tell. Anyone. I promise.”

One eyebrow lifted. “Really? And why not?”

In that moment, she recognized him: he was her customer at the bar. One of the last ones before she shuffled out, ready to gag on the cocktail of pheromones in the club.

She gave him a tiny smile. “Because you tip well.”

He smiled, and it was like the moon had brightened.

She stood in awe of it for a moment. Then she added, “And, you know, for saving my life.”

He put a hand on the wall behind her and leaned in close. He drew in a breath, and his eyes half-lidded, then closed. Her pulse kicked up to *approaching heart attack* speed. Was he going to kiss her? Should she let him? Was there any possibility of her *not*?

Then she realized he was just... breathing her in. His eyes opened and peered into hers. He was close enough now that she could easily reach out and touch him. Kiss him. Her wolf whined a complaint, but she couldn’t do either of those things. She was paralyzed by his nearness.

“Did they hurt you in any way?” he asked, his voice a whisper. “Tell me the truth.”

She shook her head in tiny movements.

“You’re sure you’re all right?” His voice sounded strained.

She nodded with equally frantic small movements. Then, feeling like an idiot for not being able to form words, she forced out, “I’m okay. Really.”

He drew in another breath—more of her scent, she was sure of it—and bit his

lip. It ran a quiver through her. Then just when she thought she might not be able to stand it anymore, that she might have to bridge the gap between them and just *touch* him... he eased back from the wall and dropped his hand. Then he simply turned away, leaving her hunched up against the bricks. She relaxed and tried to regain some composure, but her wolf spun rings of frustration inside her. She watched as he picked through the discarded shirts, shoes, and pants littering the now-empty alley. He found his shirt, slipped it on, swiped up two shoes and socks, then returned to her.

“Tell me where you live.” It was a command.

“McMahon Hall. At the University.” It didn’t occur to her until *after* the words were out of her mouth that telling a complete stranger in a moonlit alley where she lived probably wasn’t the best choice. But she wasn’t afraid of him in any way. He wasn’t capable of hurting her, not intentionally, she was sure of it.

He nodded like he had expected her compliance without question, then glanced at the door to *The Deviation*. “It’s not safe for you to come back here.” He swung back to look at her with those intense, dark eyes. “They’ll return. And they’ll be looking for you.”

That ran a shiver through her. What would she do now? She *needed* this job. But she didn’t want to say anything. He’d just saved her life: she didn’t want to argue. And he was right. Next time he wouldn’t be there to save her. The pit of her stomach hollowed out.

Instead of saying any of that, she asked, “Do you have a name?”

“Yes.” The corner of his mouth quirked.

That tiny not-smile did a thing to her insides. “I see. A funny guy as well as an action hero. You know, if you don’t tell me, I’ll just make something up.”

His face lost its humor. “My name is Lucas.” He gestured down the alley away from the club. “Come on. I’ll take you home.”

She looked back to the door. “I should tell them I’m leaving.” At Lucas’s dark look, she hastily added, “I’ll say I’m sick. Not telling anyone anything, remember?”

He hesitated, stared hard at the door, then nodded his permission. She shuffled toward the club. A glance back showed Lucas waiting for her, still barefoot and shirtless in the moonlight-drenched alleyway. *Holy hell*, he was hot. Or maybe his hotness came from the fact that he just possibly saved her life. Definitely saved her secret. Either way, she would make quick work of telling her boss she was done for the day and get back to the alley.

She was afraid he might disappear into the night if she didn’t.



Chapter 2

Lucas dropped Mia off at her residence hall with hardly a word. He had hailed a cab, so she didn't even get a chance to peek in his car. Her attempts at small talk on the way back were met with stony silence. It was as if he wanted to forget the night had happened as quickly as possible. She wasn't sure why he even bothered taking her back to her dorm. She could have taken the bus, just like she did to get to *The Deviation* in the first place. But there she stood, outside the door of her hall at one o'clock in the morning, still wearing her work clothes and watching Lucas slip away into the night via an anonymous yellow cab.

Her wolf clawed at Mia's stomach. "Well, what was I supposed to do?" Mia grumbled to her inner beast. "Hit on him after he saved me?" *Wow, thanks for saving me from the big nasty wolves, hot shifter guy. Wanna get some coffee?*

Mia shook her head. Seriously pathetic.

A thumping sound that was more reverberation than music came from the upper floors of McMahon Hall. Someone was up late, throwing a party, and suddenly her room on the 11th floor was the last place she wanted to be. The tree lined street outside the dorm obscured her view of the Olympic National Park in the far distance, but the leafy arms of the branches overhead still gave her a sense of park's darkened forest. It was the only place she could run free, shifting at will under the cover of the wild. Only she *never* did that... or at least very rarely.

The events in the alley—the danger, the fight, Lucas's breathing her in—all

of it had awoken her inner wolf in a way it never had been before. Every nerve ending seemed on fire, and yet there was some ill-defined hollowness inside her. It was an unfamiliar longing: to shift, to let her wolf free, to follow some instinct that was driving her. A long, low howl echoed around inside her head, making the hollowness ring even more empty. Like a whispered promise that could never be fulfilled. Only she didn't know what the promise was or what she wanted to fill the emptiness with.

Mia gritted her teeth and kept the howl locked inside. Letting it out in front of her University of Washington dorm wouldn't exactly be smart. And Mia *had* to be smart. She had to work hard, finish out her business degree at UDub, and land a job so she could take care of her mom. Her dad had never been in the picture, and Mia was an only child, so her mom was the sum total of her family. And if there was one thing her mom had taught her, it was that there wasn't anyone or anything more important than family.

If Mia couldn't go back to *The Deviation*, she would have to find another job to get her through school. She whirled away from the faux forest in front of her and marched into McMahon Hall, taking the elevator to the 11th floor and trying to ignore the stale dorm odors along the way. When the elevator doors opened, it was clear that her floor was once again party central for the building. Who knew the *Business and Arts* dorm would be rocking it so hard so often. Didn't these people ever study?

Unfortunately, her room was in the wing where the party action usually happened. Given the slightly bigger rooms, the open floor plan, the balcony, and not least the stairwell for students pairing off or sneaking down to lower floors, it made sense. It was just highly inconvenient. And periodically turned her home into an over-crowded, over-smelly nightmare.

People jammed the hall as she worked her way in. On a good day, the dorms were a hotbed of nasty—a decade of moldy feet, the residual crumbs of a thousand midnight snacks—but tonight, there was the added sickly stench of bootlegged party drinks. In the corner of the living room, between the silk plant and a five-century-old orange floral couch, sat a metal tub. Students crowded around it with their red plastic cups, waiting for their dip of whatever toxic brew they'd managed to cobble together. She was guessing Tom Collins was somewhere in the mix by the overly-sweet lemon scent perfuming the room. How they got away with throwing these parties, she could never figure. They must be paying off the Resident Assistants in sexual favors.

Mia sighed when she found the door to her room was flung wide open with a dozen people she didn't know inside. She wasn't worried—she didn't have anything worth stealing—but she *was* hoping to get some kind of sleep tonight.

Maybe forget about the harrowing events of the alley, and the fact that she was newly out of a job.

Her roommate, Jupiter, was flirting in the doorway to their room with some guy—probably her crush-of-the-week, a Southern guy named Jackson from her drama club. Jupiter was from Kansas with all that country-girl wide-eyed innocence on tap plus a heavy helping of roll-in-the-hay eagerness when it came to boys. When she saw Mia, she grinned and waved with far too much exuberance. Mia trudged over, debating whether she could throw everyone out without explanation. It was past one in the morning after all.

Her roommate had the world's coolest name and the world's most ridiculous wardrobe. Jupiter's outfit tonight was par for the course: purple leggings, an orange tulle skirt, and a bunched up UDub sweatshirt that was far too big. Probably belonged to Jackson.

"You know," Mia shouted to be heard over the low-thumping music, "being a drama major is really no excuse for that outfit."

"You're just jealous." Jupiter's smile was too wide, the kind Mia was used to seeing on her customers at *The Deviation*.

"Yeah." Mia smirked. "Jealous of the color blind."

Jupiter made a snort of disgust then frowned. "You've missed half the party!"

"Only half?" Mia threw a questioning look to Jackson, who was watching them with high amusement.

He just shrugged.

"Where have you *been*?" Jupiter asked with the outrage of the half-drunk for slights real and imagined.

"I had to work tonight, remember?"

"Oh yeah." Jupiter's freckled face scrunched up. "Wait, weren't you supposed to be at *The Deviation* until two?"

"Yeah, I, um... got off early."

Mia was saved from explaining by a guy barreling out of her room. All three of them made way for him as he headed for the bathroom and took a quick turn into the girls'. Their floor was coed—either he was confused or he didn't think he would make it to the boys' bathroom.

Jupiter threw an unmistakable *ew* look after the bathroom perpetrator, then propped one hand on her hip. The other held a small blue-feathered purse that looked like a boa constrictor had thrown up a peacock. She took that thing everywhere, like a pet.

Then she focused on Mia again. "I thought you had gotten that awesome internship at... at..." She snapped her fingers, fast.

"SparkTech Partners," Mia supplied. "I'm starting on Monday."

Jupiter flailed her hand without the blue-feathered thing. “Which is why you need to celebrate!”

“It’s been a long night.” Mia gave a sad look to her bed inside their room. It currently held three senior boys each with a red cup balanced precariously on their knee. “What I really need is some sleep.”

“But you just got here!” Jupiter exclaimed. Then something over Mia’s shoulder caught her eye, and her roommate bit her lip, looking guilty. “I might have told a certain hot senior from drama club that you would be here by the end of the party.”

“*Jeeter.*” Neither Mia’s warning tone, nor the nickname Jupiter hated, slowed her down one bit.

“Oh, come on!” Her roommate gave her a disgusted look, but dropped her voice. “Cade is perfect for you. Tall, dark, and overly serious. He’s just your type.”

“I don’t have a type.” Which was a lie. She very much had a type. It was tall, muscular, and naked in the moonlight. *My name is Lucas.* Even the memory of him leaning close to her made the room feel warm. Mia closed her eyes and shook that thought from her head. There were so many ways that wasn’t even close to happening again.

Jupiter bunched up the feathered purse and made begging hands and eyes. She mouthed, *Forgive me.* Then her roommate dropped the drama like a change in costume and beamed over Mia’s shoulder. “Hi, Cade!”

Mia rolled her eyes before putting on a tight smile and turning to greet Jupiter’s drama club friend. Cade arrived just as she turned, a red plastic cup in each hand. His white t-shirt hung on his broad shoulders like it enjoyed the ride, and his smooth, muscular grace made her think of a tiger: all restrained power and limber movement. Mia was tall, but she still had to look up into those crystalline blue eyes.

“Hey, Jeeter.” He smirked at her roommate, then gave Mia a softer look. “Hey, Mia. Didn’t expect you until later.” His tone, plus a smile he was working to restrain, made it clear he was happy to see her.

Truth was, if she had a type before tonight, Cade would have been exactly it. Commanding presence, killer grin, and gorgeous blue eyes that didn’t hurt to look at but sliced right into her heart... and that was exactly the problem. She couldn’t afford the distraction of boys. And her previous attempts at boyfriends had been near disasters. Whenever they got too close, too *intimate*, her control slipped. That’s when her wolf came out to play, and that had never ended well. Which pretty well explained why she had only slept with two guys before, both of whom had been so freaked by their first time that it was also their last.

Sex was problematic for her, to say the least.

Only with human boys, her wolf whined.

Don't even go there, she thought in return.

As much as any human could be, Cade was definitely her type.

He smiled and handed her a cup. "It's tremendously sweet," he warned. There was a small lift on one side of his smile.

"Thanks for the heads up." She inhaled a small whiff of the vapors coming off the cup. Vodka, one of the cheap brands, plus whiskey sour mix and a leftover dash from a cherry that must still be swimming in the tub. She held the cup close, warding off the stench of the room with her own personal alcohol vaporizer—which she appreciated much more than the drink.

She pretended to take a sip, just to be polite. "So are you guys ready for your show?" She didn't keep track of Jupiter's stage plays, but the spring quarter was coming to a close, so they must have something going.

His smile brightened. "Yeah. You should come. It's called *Silent Death*, and it's a period piece set around Paris in World War II. We'll be in the Penthouse Theatre tomorrow night."

"Sounds like a barrel of laughs."

He frowned. "It's really not that bad."

She bit her lip. Damn, she was tired. Losing her manners, as well as her patience. "I'm sure it is. I'm sorry, I'm just..." She waved her drink. "It's the vapors talking." She inhaled another whiff and shrunk away from some passing partiers swinging their cups as they talked. Another glance at her room must have given away her desire to be anywhere else.

Cade leaned forward, then he edged even closer, dipping his head to bring his lips near her ear. "You want to get out of here?" His hand touched her hair, brushing it back. He was so close that his cologne and whiskey-sour breath suddenly overpowered the rest of the dorm scents. "My roommate's gone for the weekend." His voice was low, husky. He probably thought it was sexy, but Mia thought he was mostly just drunk.

Her wolf growled. The last thing she needed was to be propositioned by a half-drunk college boy. Suddenly, it was all too much, too close, and she needed out. In fact, she needed *everyone* out. Now.

She nudged Cade back, hand flat on his chest. "Look, I'm done for the night."

Disappointment shadowed his face, but she had no time for that.

She turned to her room, pushing past Jupiter and Jackson. "Okay, everyone, party's over. Time to go! Find your own beds."

A round of grumbles, a pause as all eyes turned to see if she was serious, then

another set of mumbling and complaints as they slowly rose from the bed, the floor, even her desk. As the crowd filed out, a couple spilled out of the closet, still tangled in each other, and bringing half of Jupiter's crazy wardrobe with them, including a long, green scarf that wound around their feet and made them go down.

Mia just shook her head. Jupiter waved goodbye from the door and disappeared with the partiers, Jackson's arm around her waist. Mia was just as glad to see them go, too, and as soon as the last of them was gone, she locked the door.

First thing, she tore off the top cover of the twin bed that belonged to her, vowing to run it through the laundry before she used it again. Even with that bunched up and stuffed under her bed, only ten percent of her dorm room felt like it belonged to her. The other ninety percent was taken up by her frenetic roommate's endless leggings, half-used doodle pads, and extensive shoe collection. Mia had a picture of her mom on the shelf, about a backpack's worth of clothes in the closet, a stack of books, and her laptop on the desk... and that was it.

It was almost like she had never really moved in. The room belonged to the partiers as much as her—they were all temporary occupants until they moved on to the next thing. Mia eased down into the bed, lying on top of the sheets, not bothering to remove her clothes. A complete and utter weariness sunk her into the mattress, and she looped her arm over her eyes, blocking out the overhead lights.

Her room was a cage—a tiny concrete and glass cage, with a bed too short for her long legs, and nothing of value to lose in a fire. She didn't belong here, not in any real way. It was a way station on the path to the things she actually needed, that was all. The emptiness made itself known again, a deep hollow in her chest, and her wolf whined, curling its tail down in defeat.

The lights still blared overhead, but Mia turned on her side and dropped off to sleep like she was falling off a cliff.



Chapter 3

It had been two days, and Lucas couldn't get her out of his mind.

His fingers drummed the edge of his tablet, and he tried again to pore over the numbers for the latest internet startup his brother, Lev, had found for SparkTech to consider for investment. After another five minutes of circling back over the same data again and again, he shoved the tablet away and rose from his desk. He just was too distracted. He flattened his palms against the floor-to-ceiling corner office window and hung his head between his arms. Back when he was a managing partner in his father's tech-focused investment firm, Lucas's status had commanded this office. Now he was just a principal, but his father had still allowed him to keep his luxurious view of the Olympic Mountains. The rain had swept through earlier, leaving a shine on the Emerald City in the early morning sun. He squinted against it and let his gaze roam over the high rises, flicking occasionally to the mountains beyond.

His wolf surged a bit each time he did.

He'd tried going for a hunt over the weekend, but it didn't help. He kept thinking about the girl, the one he'd stopped the Reds from playing with, like the other field mice they liked to torment. Lucas should have asked her name. He should have gone back to the club to make sure she quit on the spot. He should have moved her to a different dorm. *Something*. There were a hundred things he could have done, but instead he rushed her home, thinking if he simply got her safely out of his arms reach that would solve everything, including the strange

pull she had on him.

That part he understood least of all.

He paced the length of his office, but his gaze kept wandering back to the forest of glittering steel-and-glass high rises of downtown Seattle and to the distant trees beyond. A year ago, when he lost his mate, he lost a part of himself as well. He hadn't been fit to be alpha for anyone anymore, so he'd left his pack and gone rogue. He even left SparkTech and lived in the wild until he'd almost forgotten what it was to be human. He'd thought he *had* forgotten, until Lev came looking for him and pulled him out of the dark hole of despair he'd fallen into. There was no fixing what had broken inside him, but Lev convinced him he could still contribute to the family business, even if he wasn't part of any pack. It was just enough to keep him human, and after a while, he'd begun to believe he could keep the longings at bay with a shit-ton of work, his brothers nearby, and a steady supply of female companionship to ease the pain. Slowly, his wolf quieted. The mournful howling every night, crying his need for a pack of his own, eventually stopped. Lucas thought he'd finally found a way to carry on.

And then... *this girl*.

Human girls were a distraction, a temporary pleasure to sate his longings. They lasted a night, maybe two. Never more. And he'd found plenty who enjoyed what he had to give. They responded to his inner alpha even if they couldn't see how broken he really was. Which suited him just fine, until... this strange girl who needed his help. He didn't understand what pulled him to track her. Or why he went into that alleyway to stop the Reds. She was nothing to his pack, just another human in the half million or so in the Bay area.

His wolf growled at that thought, and it came out as a throaty sound that echoed around his office. The door was closed, so he didn't even try to rein it in. He knew a lie when he heard one, even when he told it to himself. He might be broken, but no alpha could have stood by and let those sick bastards in the Red pack toy with someone the way they did. Much less a human girl, unprotected, unwary... although it turned out she knew more than he thought. She'd seen shifters before. And yet kept her silence about them.

That was intriguing, but it wasn't what haunted him. What kept him pacing through the weekend were two simple things: first, her scent had pulled him in, and he'd been tempted to claim her right there in the alley, something that didn't even make sense. Humans were for pleasure, not mating. But second, and more important, he had inflamed the tensions between his father's pack and the Reds... and he'd brought the girl deep into the heart of it. The Reds would go after her, track her, hunt her down, now that they knew she was important to him.

And after a weekend of pacing and hunting and shredding the sheets in tumultuous dreams where he fulfilled that wish to claim her in the alleyway, he had finally admitted to himself and his wolf that she was, indeed, important to him.

Thing was, he had no idea why.

A knock at the door dredged his attention out of the depths.

Lev poked his head in the door. “Hey, man, just giving you a heads up.”

Lucas sighed. “Let me guess. My extracurricular activities this weekend found their way to our father’s attention.”

He held his hands up. “Wasn’t me, bro. Dad found out on his own. I just heard the howling.” Lev was his youngest brother and part of his pack, back when he was a true alpha. But even when Lucas went rogue, Lev never really stopped being his beta. Officially, his brother had rejoined their father’s pack. Unofficially, he still had Lucas’s back, in family matters as well as business. There was a reason Lev had been the one to pull him out of the forest again. And why Lucas carried on, staying at SparkTech, making it work for Lev’s sake, even if every day it shoved a hot poker into old wounds.

“I’ll take care of it, Lev,” he said, taking one last glance at the mountains. “Thanks for the warning.”

Lev gave a short nod and disappeared back out the door.

Lucas took a breath, glanced at his neglected work on the tablet, and decided it was better to clear the air with his father than to wait for him to come Lucas’s way. He locked the screen on his tablet, tucked it in his desk, and headed for his father’s office.

SparkTech took up a good fraction of the 32nd floor of the Russell Investments Center in downtown Seattle. His father grew it from a pack-only business, just him and his brothers, to one of the most successful business development companies for technology startups in the Bay area. He liked to say Seattle was on its way to competing with Silicon Valley as a premier ecosystem for tech startups. And the investment opportunities *were* getting better, with startups these days being spearheaded by people from Google or Amazon as often as not. The industry was maturing, and his father had the vision to take it to the next level. He was the kind of alpha who could see the possibilities and seize them—the kind Lucas had wanted to be—but success breeds competition, and Red Wolf had been nipping at SparkTech’s heels more and more in the last year. The competition was fierce to scoop up the next billion-dollar tech startup. For Lucas to have waded into that mess and possibly mucked it up even further with this business with the girl...

He took a deep breath and steeled himself as he pushed open the door to his

father's office.

As befit the alpha of a company, his father had the finest office, a corner with a view of Mount Rainier, luxurious wood furniture, and glass-and-chrome bookshelves to hold the many trophies and accolades their investments had won. His father waited until Lucas had fully entered his expansive office, and the door had swung shut behind him. Even then, he fussed with something on his tablet.

He was making Lucas wait. Not a good sign.

When his father finally put down the tablet, his expression was cool. "Have you had a chance to look at the numbers for LoopSource?"

"I... um..." Lucas was thrown. He had expected to account for the girl, not the project Lev had tossed to him last week. "Still assessing. Their new platform is interesting, and it seems to be gaining traction, but I'm still checking out the CEO and their execution team. And I'm not sure the market is ready for them."

His father's dark eyes drilled into him. "Red Wolf seems to think they're ready."

Shit. "They're making a move to offer?"

His father let out a sigh, then came around his giant glass-and-chrome desk. Framed logos of their previous acquisitions, the ones that made his father millions and put him on Seattle's *50 Most Influential People* list, covered the surface like a small forest of Plexiglas-encased-money. And power. His father stopped in front of the desk, leaning back against it and folding his arms.

He stared at Lucas for a moment longer, then said, "Tell me about the girl." It was a command, and that tone would have made all of Lucas's fur stand on end if he was in wolf form. But he wasn't. And he wouldn't submit to his father ever again—not to be in his pack, or in any pack, for that matter. He had too much alpha left in him to allow it.

Still, Lucas dropped his head and winced, searching for an explanation that made any sense at all. When he looked up, his father was still waiting. "You know how the Reds are. They would have torn her apart."

His father's eyes narrowed. "You know her."

"No." Lucas swallowed. "Not really."

His father's face was stony, but Lucas could see the confusion flicker across it. His father had mated with his mother early on, before they were even out of college. His mother was a strong wolf from an allied pack, but more than that—they were in love even before they mated for life. Lucas knew his casual sex habits completely baffled his father.

"You're not in my pack, Lucas." His father lifted an eyebrow. "That offer still stands, any time you change your mind, son." Then all tolerance fled his face. "If you *were* in my pack, we'd be having an entirely different conversation. As it

stands, I really don't care what you do outside this office. Unless it affects the company, and then I care a tremendous amount."

Lucas flinched. He couldn't bring himself to say it was a mistake to interfere, but his father was right. He had to fix this. "What is Red Wolf saying?"

"I had a very interesting phone conversation this morning with Crittenden," he said, his voice rough with an unspoken growl.

Crittenden was the alpha of the Red pack and CEO of Red Wolf. Alpha to alpha. *Shit*. That had escalated fast. Lucas's gaze dropped to the floor, trying to get ahead of this.

His father continued, "He says he's willing to leave your girlfriend alone in exchange for us dropping pursuit of LoopSource."

"What?" Lucas's gaze snapped back up to his father's. "That's absurd. They can't possibly expect—"

His father's steely look silenced the words as they came out of his mouth. "I told them I had no intention of dropping LoopSource. And if they hurt the girl, Crittenden would personally be held responsible by my pack."

Lucas's mouth dropped open. *Pack protection*. For a girl whose name he didn't even know. His father had gone way, way out on a limb for him, his wayward would-be alpha son. And if the Reds decided to push it, they could have a pack war on their hands.

Lucas shut his gaping mouth and stood straighter. "What can I do to help?"

His father cocked his head in approval of Lucas's understanding of the situation. "I would find a way to keep your girlfriend safe. I don't want her tempting some young pup in the Red pack into doing something stupid to make a name for himself."

"Understood." Lucas turned away, a calm filling him along with a peculiar shame. Protecting the girl is what he should have done from the start. It's what his father, a true alpha, would have done, if fate had tossed him into the same circumstance. Before he reached the door of his father's office, Lucas turned back to face him. "Just so you know, she's not my girlfriend. She's just a girl who needed someone's help."

His father's face betrayed no surprise, if he had any. "That doesn't matter now."

"I know." Lucas stared at the carpet by the door. "Just wanted to set the record straight."

As he headed toward his own office, the heat in his face grew stronger with each step. He'd put a lot in jeopardy to save a girl he didn't even know. However, he knew the failure wasn't in that act, but in the ones that followed. When he failed to find permanent protection for her. A way to keep her safe from

the wolves hidden just under the skin of Seattle's most ruthless businessmen, now that she'd crossed onto their radar.

That was a mistake he was going to fix.



Chapter 4

Mia was dressed and ready to leave for the first day of her internship, but first she had to pass the Supreme Gatekeeper of Fashion, otherwise known as her roommate, Jupiter.

“Absolutely not.” Jupiter tsk tsked her plain black slacks and white collared shirt. It was perfectly respectable business attire—Mia had looked it up online—plus it had the benefit of pulling double duty on the black pants she would no longer be wearing for *The Deviation*.

“Jupiter, please.” Mia was already jittery enough, she didn’t need this. “I’m going to miss the bus.” The ride was only 23 minutes—she’d looked that up too—but if she didn’t leave in the next five minutes she would miss it and be late for sure.

“First day requires a higher dress code,” Jupiter admonished. “Then, if everyone else dresses like a bartender who just lost her job, then fine. Be that way.”

Mia had told her roommate she couldn’t go back to *The Deviation* because she would need help finding something new, but she’d been light on the details of why. She would keep her promise to Lucas, the hot shifter she spent half the weekend daydreaming about, but even without that promise, spilling to Jupiter about werewolves on the streets of Seattle was just a little too close to home for comfort. Mia had only had the weekend to look for a job, but so far no luck. If something didn’t turn up soon, she could still go back to *The Deviation*. She

hadn't technically quit, and her next shift wasn't until Wednesday.

Jupiter rummaged through the closet that housed both their clothes, but mostly hers. Articles of clothing started to sail across the room.

Mia watched as most missed the bed and landed on the floor. "Jeeter—"

"Hush!" Jupiter said, her voice muffled. "I'm finding you something decent." After a moment, she came out with a silky something in brilliant blue. She held it up to Mia. "Perfect! Matches your eyes exactly." She tossed that to Mia and returned to the closet.

Mia pulled in a breath. "Fine." She knew a losing fight when she saw it, and maybe if she hurried, she would still make the bus. She rushed through the buttons of her white collared shirt and threw on the blue silk one. It was sleeveless and made her arms feel naked. But it draped just right everywhere else and instantly made her feel more professional.

"Great! Jupiter, you're the best. I'll see you—"

Her roommate pulled back from the closet with a set of blue pumps in one hand and a black jacket in the other. "Oh, we are so not done."

"Jeeter, I've gotta go."

Jupiter thrust the clothes at her. "Change while I get the pearls."

Five minutes later, Mia passed inspection and somehow ran the whole way to the bus stop in her roommate's heels. Thankfully, they wore the same size. Or perhaps not: if Jupiter hadn't been an exact fit, maybe Mia wouldn't have to endure quite so many mandatory makeovers.

But she couldn't argue with the effect the clothes had on her confidence. She was dressing the part of the business entrepreneur, and while she would probably spend the afternoon fetching coffee and making copies, she hoped there would be more to it than that. She'd taken quite a few classes in her major already, and she'd done her research on the company: at least as much as could be found on their website. She was there to learn, to make a great impression, and eventually, to score a real job. One that paid.

Her arrival at the Russell Investments Center downtown, as well as the long, slow ride up to the 32nd floor, were enough to bring her nerves raging back. SparkTech's name and logo were etched into the frosted glass doors, and when she pushed them open, her jitters took another jump up the nervous scale. She had never been in an office that was so... *luxurious*. The off-white carpet felt like she was walking on a thick, padded cloud. The walls were illuminated along the ceiling and floor, giving the effect that they floated on a glowing cushion of light. The dark burnished wood of the receptionist's desk shone with such a high state of polish that it reflected her unsteady approach in her blue heels. There was no one behind the desk, and the frosted doors off to the side weren't

inviting. Neither were the glass tables and trim, off-white couches. A small fan whirred in the corner, an air purifier, then she realized the office had almost no scent—as if the small device had scrubbed all the normal human and office smells from the room. It was refreshing, comforting in a way she hadn't experienced since her last trip to the forest.

“Hello?” she called quietly. When no one answered, she teetered, uncertain. She almost turned around and headed back to the elevator, when the frosted doors swung open, and an impeccably-dressed mid-thirties woman strolled out, all smiles. She gave an approving glance over Mia's attire.

Mia kept her sigh of relief inside and silently thanked Jupiter for her wardrobe assist.

The woman shook her hand. “I'm Lena. Welcome to SparkTech. You must be our new intern, Mia Fiore.”

“I hope I'm not late.” Mia looked nervously for a clock, but there wasn't any.

“No, dear, you're right on time.” Lena ushered her toward the door. She had a light citrusy smell that Mia was almost certain wasn't perfume... just her natural, clean-scrubbed scent. Oddly, it helped her relax even more.

Lena steered her down the hallway. The wide-open floor plan left plenty of space in the middle for groups to meet, while the offices ringed the perimeter.

“Most of the Managing Partners are out for the day,” Lena said, “but the Principals are all in, including the one you'll be assisting for the term. You're just with us for the summer, right?”

“Both summer terms, actually,” Mia said. “If that's still all right?”

“I'm sure that it is.”

They stopped in front of an office at one corner with a name etched on the frosted glass. All the offices must have windows, or powerful internal lighting, because the same frosted glass that comprised both walls and doors seem to glow with an effervescent light from within.

Lena knocked.

A gruff male voice called, “Come in.”

Lena opened the door, and Mia put on what she hoped was a professional smile as she trailed behind Lena into the office. Mia kept the smile plastered to her face even as her eyes went wide at the incredible view out the windows. The city lay at her feet, with the Olympic Mountains in the distance. The noontime sun filled the lushly appointed office with natural light.

Belatedly, she pulled her gaze back to the man sitting at the desk.

Then the smile on her face died.

Lucas.

She struggled for something to say, confused, shaken, but it was nothing

compared to the fire in Lucas's eyes. He lurched to his feet but stalled out there, still standing behind his desk.

"Mr. Sparks," Lena said, her voice wavering a little. "I'm sorry to disturb you. This is Mia Fiore. You said you wanted our new intern brought right to you as soon as she arrived."

He knew? Mia's eyebrows hiked up, but the pure shock on Lucas's face said *no*, he was just as surprised as she was.

He was still frozen behind his desk. Finally, he said, "Right. Yes. Thank you, Lena. That will be all." His gaze was locked on Mia, looking her up and down, like he expected to find something else, anything else, besides *her* standing before him in a suit and heels.

Lena seemed to sense the live-wire tension as well, but confusion ruled her face. *Of course*. Why would Lucas tell his office assistant that he had saved a college girl from two snarling wolves over the weekend? In fact, the freaked look on Lucas's face had to be more than just shock at seeing her show up in his office. He had to be worried she was going to spill his secret—at his fancy investment job, no less. Mia force a brighter smile and tried to send him reassuring looks, but the intensity on his face just burned them away.

"Well," Lena said, her voice strained. "I guess... just let me know if you need anything." Surprisingly, she was saying this to Mia, as if she was hesitant to leave her alone with Lucas. But that was exactly what needed to happen.

Mia gave her a broad smile. "Thanks so much for your help!" The cheery enthusiasm was probably a bit too much. But it worked in nudging Lena to the door and eventually through it.

As soon as the door closed, Lucas tore around the desk toward her.

Mia threw her hands up, not so much to stop him, but to buy a second to get her apology out.

He still beat her to it. "What are you doing here?" His voice had growl in it, even more than she expected, and it sent a shiver through her. "How did you find me?"

That short-circuited her brain. "Find you? I wasn't stalking you! I've had this internship lined up for months." She snuck a look back to the door. Through the frosted glass, she could see his name etched there, in reverse: *L. Sparks, Managing Partner*. Her research came rushing back: Lucas Sparks was one of the founder's sons in this family-owned business. Of course, she hadn't thought twice that he might be *her* Lucas. Which made her frown even more: he wasn't *hers* in any conceivable way. Except perhaps in her hot dreams about him over the weekend.

He was looming over her, emotions warring across his face, but he was

holding something back. She jumped in with the apology, suddenly worried her internship might vanish in a puff of smoke, just like her job at *The Deviation*.

“I swear I didn’t know you were here,” she said in a rush. “I promise I won’t say anything to anyone. Please, don’t...” She swallowed as his frown just grew deeper. “Please don’t fire me. I need this internship on my resume. I promise I won’t be any trouble.”

At that, the expression on his face broke. It wrenched something inside her, but she wasn’t sure what, because he took a step closer and ran two fingers along her cheek, which completely stopped any thoughts in her head.

“Hey,” he said softly. “No one’s going to fire you. Stop worrying about that right now.”

His touch was a line of heat across her cheek, but his words worked through her, relaxing the tension that had hiked up her shoulders. That, and the nearness of him, was like a balm that washed away her concerns. His scent finally reached her over the near scentlessness of his office: a freshly-cut wood smell with a musky hint of baked-in-the-afternoon-sun. Her body was likewise warming to the richly masculine quality of it, completely without her permission. When she peered up into his dark eyes, they were hooded, and she could tell he was breathing her in again, like before, when they almost kissed in the alleyway. It wasn’t just her imagination. She was affecting him, too. Only now, he was her boss.

This couldn’t end well.

Before she could think of what to say, he looked over her with a gaze that almost felt like a touch. “Mia.” His voice was husky, and her name on his lips felt like a caress. “I’m really glad to see you’re okay.” He blinked, like he was coming out of a daze, then frowned. “I think perhaps we were destined to cross paths.”

“Or just luck, I suppose.” *Bad luck*, her mind was saying, but her wolf was whimpering again. Her inner beast didn’t seem think it was in any way bad.

Lucas frowned and pulled back. “It’s better to have you working here, I guess, than at *The Deviation*. You *have* told them you quit, right?”

She bit her lip. “Well, no.” When his eyes went wide with disbelief, she rushed the rest out. “I’m trying to find another job, but it’s only been a couple days! I’m sure I’ll find something soon.”

He shook his head. “But you have *this* job now. Why do you need two?”

Why did she need two? Anger boiled up in her. Because she wasn’t some freaking billionaire perched high in the sky, a son-of-the-boss hottie who made enough money to wear a tailored Italian suit like he was born into it. “Why? Because I don’t have a corner office, Lucas! I’m a college student. And I need to

eat on occasion, and maybe buy books, and *hello*, even the bus fare to come down here cost money! I can't afford to do an internship like this without *some* way to make enough money to live on." With the last of it, her anger boiled over. Sure he probably saved her life, but he obviously didn't know anything about her.

His face had settled into a scowl. "Whatever we're paying you, I'll double it. Will that be enough to let you quit *The Deviation*?"

"Last I checked, double of nothing was still a big fat zero."

The scowl went two shades darker. "You're an unpaid intern."

"You're a genius." She pouted, regretting those words as soon as they were out of her mouth. She regretted it even more as he spun around and stalked back to his desk to pick up the phone. *Shit*, he was going to fire her. *Way to open up your big mouth, Mia, and—*

"Lena," he said into the phone, but he was staring straight at Mia with those intense, dark eyes. "I want to change Mia's pay class from unpaid to associate." There was a slightly pause on the phone. "Yes, she's quite exceptional. Please get the paperwork started. Thank you."

He hung up the phone, and Mia's mouth hung open. Had he... did he just get her a *job*? A real, paid one? Lucas slowly came around the desk again, taking each step carefully, like he was walking a tightrope, until he stood before her again.

Mia shut her mouth, which was still hanging open, and just stared up at him. *Why? Why* was he doing this for her?

"Do you have a cell phone?" he asked quietly.

"Um... yes." Her head was spinning, but she fumbled to fish it out of her jacket pocket.

"Call *The Deviation*. Right now. Tell them you're quitting."

He waited patiently while she texted her boss at the club. A kind of light-headed feeling took over as she pressed the *send* button. She really didn't have to go back to that stink-hole. She had a for-real job at a prestigious business development firm in downtown Seattle that smelled a little bit like heaven. With a boss who was the hottest guy she'd ever known.

And a shifter, whose secret she had sworn to keep.

She slid the phone back in her pocket and stared up into his eyes. His neatly tailored blue dress shirt tucked into his smoothly draped designer pants, which hung perfectly on him. All of it hid the muscles she knew lay underneath. The ones she had seen on grand display in the moonlight—an image she still couldn't get out of her mind.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked softly. Maybe he wanted sexual favors.

Maybe this was some kind of *quid pro quo* that would land her in more trouble than she could handle. As he leaned closer, she had a hard time worrying about that. Everything about him radiated *safeness*. She knew he was a powerful wolf when he shifted. Even in her wolf form, she would be no match for him. Her wolf whimpered in agreement, but not in a bad way. In a way that made her mouth water a little with the idea of him *wanting* things from her.

Maybe this was just the kind of trouble she would like to handle.

“I want make sure you’re safe.” His eyes blazed, raking over her and heating up her face again. His hand raised, as if he was going to touch her, and her insides literally ached with anticipation. But at the last second he held back. He leaned away, then took a half step back, as if she had suddenly turned into something dangerous he needed distance from. “Your safety is the most important thing, Mia. You don’t have any idea what those wolves would do to you, if they found you. I want to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

The sudden coolness of his voice confused her. She didn’t know what to say.

He dropped his gaze then turned and headed back to his desk. Without looking at her, he picked up his phone and dialed.

“I need your help on something,” he said into it, then, “Thanks.” He hung up.

When he looked up at her, his eyes were cool again, not blazing with the heat from before. “My brother, Lev, will show you around and get you settled.”

“Thank you,” she said, but awkwardness filled the air. She hadn’t just imagined the attraction, had she? Was he just looking out for her, like a big brother might? She certainly didn’t feel that way, but maybe for him...

A moment later, the door to his office swung open. A younger version of Lucas leaned in, his face boyish and open.

“Take care of her for me, will you, Lev?” Lucas’s voice was all business again. “I’ve got some numbers I need to run for LoopSource.”

Lev beamed, and he looked even younger. But friendly. “You got it, boss!”

Lucas frowned, like somehow Lev’s words irritated him, but then he picked up his tablet and focused on that.

Mia was still awkwardly standing in the middle of his office. Lev waved her out into the hallway with him.

Once they were alone, he grinned even wider. “So you’re the girl, huh?”

“The... what?” she asked, suddenly nervous.

He faltered. “I mean... you’re the *new* girl.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “Was there an *old* girl?”

Lev winced, bit his lip, and did a whole facial gymnastics session that Mia could only watch in amazement. They were strolling down the hall, and he seemed to involuntarily glance at a darkened office, the only one that wasn’t

beaming light through the frosted glass. Having seen Lucas's office, the only way that could be was if the blinds were drawn tight, draped over, and all the lights were off. Etched on the doorway was the name *T. Sparks*.

Lev jerked his gaze away from the door and stared straight down the hall. "No, no, I was just saying..." He looked back to her. "I'm glad you've joined us. I'm Lev by the way." He held out a hand to shake. It was warm and friendly, just like the puppy-dog brown eyes and open smile. "What's your name, new girl?"

Her unease finally washed away. "Mia," she said. "Mia Fiore."

"Well, Mia Fiore, anything you need, just ask, but for starters, how's this for an office?" He stopped at one of the brightly-lit offices half way down the hall, only four doors down from Lucas's office, and swung open the door. It was a miniature version of Lucas's—not so richly appointed, but still the same luxurious furniture the rest of the company had. An air purifier hummed quietly in the corner.

"It's... amazing." She strode in and stared at the view out the window.

"Great!" Lev strode over to pick up a tablet off the desk—which, she guessed, was now *her* desk. "Let's get to work."



Chapter 5

Lucas had managed to largely avoid the girl—*Mia*—for most of the week. Even thinking her name rumbled his wolf into some kind of frenzy. And when she'd been in his office that first day... he'd damn near kissed her. It was as if her nearness was an intoxication for his inner beast. It had taken all his control to simply step back from her. Which really made no sense at all. His wolf had never had that kind of reaction to the other girls he'd bedded, or any female for that matter, not since... but if he couldn't think about Mia's name without rousing his wolf, he certainly wasn't going to conjure up Tila's...

He dropped his head into his hands, elbows propped on his desk, and closed his eyes.

Tila had been *everything* to him. Smart, funny, sexy, a natural in the business, as much as anyone in his father's pack. She *belonged* with him. But more than that... she fit into his soul. She was a piece of him, completed him. And when that was gone...

He huffed out his frustration and rose suddenly from his desk. He couldn't let that black void capture him again. He had responsibilities—to Lev, to the company, and now even to this girl, Mia. Keeping her safe was the only truly worthwhile thing he was doing now. Lucas strode to the window to look out over the city, only to be surprised to find the sun had set and the evening lights had begun to wink on. When had that happened?

He sighed. Avoiding Mia would only last so long. She was here for the

duration, at the very least until he could be sure the Red pack had lost interest in her. Which could take longer than the summer term for her internship. Lev had set her up to analyze the LoopSource fundamentals, damn him. Lucas had a feeling Lev knew exactly how much he was tempted by her brilliant blue eyes and pale, silky skin. When he'd touched her face, he'd found it as soft as he had imagined all those times in his bed... his inner wolf whined its frustration.

It was tired of waiting.

Office romances weren't forbidden at SparkTech—his father's pack was filled with such pairings—but this was different. She was an intern, and a human one. Those other pairings had been long-term shifter employees and had his father's approval... he would *not* approve of this, not least because the girl was under pack protection until the Reds grew tired of her. Or moved on to some other distraction.

Lucas had a fleeting thought of simply bedding her. Once. Get this insanity out of his system. The other girls had only ever lasted that long, the initial attraction quickly wearing off once his physical needs were sated. Perhaps that was it—he was overdue for a physical release, and once he had it, he could put this whole business behind him.

His wolf snarled and pushed against him from the inside. His hands curled, nearly forming claws as he resisted the strength of the impulse to shift. He shook his head, forcing his hands to relax and his wolf to settle. He was fooling himself with that kind of talk. Mia was far from a one-night deal *already*. He needed a more permanent way to ensure she was safe, yet safely removed from him and not a constant, daily temptation. Even a trace of her scent lingering in the common area could bring out longings that needed to stay deeply buried.

That was it: he needed to wind up the LoopSource deal. *Now*. Or as quickly as possible. He would bury himself in work, and that would get him through. Although it would also require that he worked with *her*, just on the off chance that she noticed something in the financials that he had missed. His wolf panted at that idea, and he knew he was lying to himself again. Yet as soon as the idea had been set loose, he couldn't rein it back in.

He glanced at the gray-black sky—it was void of stars due to the light pollution of downtown, and as dark as the night would get. The hour was late, but his father was likely still working. Lucas would update him on the progress on the LoopSource deal, leave a note on Mia's desk to see him in the morning, and then go home to hopefully sleep off this growing frustration. Maybe a few shots of vodka would ease his way into dreamland tonight.

He scooped up this tablet, gathered a few scattered printouts, and headed toward his father's office at the far end of the space owned by SparkTech. Sure

enough, his father's office still glowed with the fluorescent lights within, but Lucas stumbled as he passed Mia's office. The lights were still on there as well. Was she really working this late? How was she planning on getting home? The bus sure as hell wasn't safe out of downtown at this time of night...

He kept walking, but made a note to hurry back to check on her.

He knocked on his father's door and quickly entered on his command. His father looked up from a thick report he was wading through. Pages were spread across the desk, intermingled with several others.

Lucas eyed them. "Are you working LoopSource as well?" Sometimes his father would have multiple partners and principals studying all angles of a company.

"No, this is a separate matter." His father sighed and leaned back in his chair, threading his fingers together and examining Lucas. "Speaking of which, how is our new intern working out?"

"Fine." He tried hard not to look thrown by the sudden change in topic.

"She's quite capable, from what I've seen so far."

His father was studying his reaction, so he kept it cool. "Is that right?" Lucas could tell he wasn't fooled by the dodge when his father raised a single eyebrow.

But he seemed willing to let it go. "More to the point, I haven't heard from Crittenden recently."

Lucas frowned. "That's a good sign, right? Maybe they're losing interest."

His father gestured to the documents in Lucas's hands. "What are you seeing? Is LoopSource worth funding?"

"It's looking good, but I still need more time. They're dropping some reports off in the morning. I'll need to wade through those. Or possibly get Mia to help with it." He cringed internally that he let that slip out, but pressed on. "Either way, I'll be working through the weekend to get some final numbers for you by Monday. But I'd be surprised if Red Wolf's already turned them down. The Reds will want to analyze those reports as well."

"Agreed," his father said with a sigh. "I'm afraid it's too early to hope they've given up—on LoopSource or your young intern. And even if they lose interest in that startup, they'll likely reserve threats against Ms. Fiore for a future one. Have you moved her to a new residence yet?"

Lucas winced for real this time. "No, not yet." He knew he needed to discuss that with Mia, but he'd been so busy avoiding contact with her all week that he'd never found the right time to bring it up.

His father shook his head. "Lucas, the University dorm system may be relatively safe, but once they find out where she lives..."

"I know," he said quickly. "I'll handle it."

“Please see that you do.” His father gave him a nod that Lucas knew was a dismissal.

He stood straighter and retreated from his father’s office.

Thankfully, the lights were still on in Mia’s. He swung into her office, words on his lips to chastise her for working so late, but he stopped short. She had earbuds in and obviously didn’t notice him barreling into her office. She had one hand worked up into her long, deep-black hair, mussing it substantially as she hunched over her tablet. He blinked, imagining his own hand in her hair like that and feeling the surge of his wolf heartily agreeing with that image. He slowly approached her, trying to catch her eye without startling her, but she didn’t notice, just moved slightly in her chair, spilling open her jacket further to reveal more of her silky white blouse underneath. It was demure, but it still made his mouth water.

Finally, he was close enough for her to catch sight of him. She let out a shriek and jerked so hard, her chair slid on its wheels and went out from under her. In a flash, he dropped his stuff to the carpet and sped around the desk, where he hooked his arms under hers and scooped her off the floor. Her iPod was tossed to the floor, and the chair had slid away, but there she was, breathing hard and grasping onto his arms to stay upright, a wild look in her eyes along with that still-mussed hair...

Damn. He was in such trouble here.

“Oh my god!” she said, breathless. “You scared the shit out of me!”

Then she blushed, color rushing to her cheeks and making her pale skin blossom into something even more appealing. He was holding her far longer than necessary, but her scent was closing in on him—the normal light musk and crisp meadow flowers blended with a hint of sour panic that had him closing his arms tighter around her, his instinctual need to keep her safe pulling her closer when he should be letting her go.

“Are you all right?” It came out as a whisper. *Mine*, his inner wolf growled. Lucas’s heart stuttered. He shouldn’t feel this way about her. It made no sense...

“I’m... I’m okay.” She wasn’t pulling back, but she did move slightly in his arms. She was tall, but he was taller, and she had to look up into his eyes. Which she was doing right now. Her lips were slightly parted. Her chest was still heaving, pressing lightly against him with each labored breath.

He should turn away.

He should let her go.

Mine, his wolf insisted.

It wasn’t true.

He didn’t care.

He crashed his lips to hers, devouring them in a kiss so hungry it made his inner beast roar. He swept his tongue across her lips, tasting her, and she opened her mouth to him. He plunged in, claiming the sweet taste of her until she bent back with the force of it. Her taste was uniquely *her*, and he drank it in. His arms tightened around her body, molding it to his chest as his hands sought ways to bring her closer. His all-consuming kiss turned into many smaller ones, still hungry for her, but softer. Then he was nipping at her lips, taking them gently between his teeth and teasing them with promises of the sweet torments he wanted to lavish upon them.

The thud of a door closing jerked him out of the lust-filled haze that clouded his senses. He dashed a look to her door, but it had slowly swung shut, and they were only exposed to the nighttime skyline of Seattle, for any who wished to see the show they were putting on in the lighted office on the 32nd floor.

Lucas remained still, holding his breath, Mia safely caged in his arms as his father's shadow passed by the frosted glass of her office. He waited, silent as prey hidden in the brush, until the outer door to SparkTech's reception area clicked shut. When he finally looked to her, Mia's face was flushed, her beautiful eyes wide, her lips swollen from his assault on them.

He drew in a breath, regret stabbing him, then released her and took a step back.

She teetered, and he almost came back to steady her, but he didn't trust himself to touch her again.

"I'll take you home," he said, his voice thick.

Her shoulders drooped. She was disappointed. Her kisses in return had been no less eager than his. Her arousal perfumed the air and felt like a physical force pulling him back. His wolf raged against his skin, wanting out. Wanting *her*.

She was far too dangerously addictive for him. There was no way he could just have a taste. No way he could touch her again and have any hope of holding himself back.

It took a moment, but she recovered. "I... I can take the bus."

"No!" His wolf surged, and he lurched forward with the force of it. He stopped himself just short of grabbing hold of her again. Slowly, with extreme gentleness, he placed a hand on her shoulder. Then he bore his stare into her eyes to impress upon her: this was not up for negotiation. "I will drive you home."

She quivered under his hand, so he released her. But her jerky nod was all the assent he needed. He scooped her iPod off the floor, righted her chair, and busied himself with gathering her things off the desk and his off the floor.

He would get her safely home as quickly as possible. Then he would figure out some way to forget what had just happened.

And never let it happen again.



Chapter 6

The scorching hot kiss and the long, silent ride home had Mia twisted in knots. She had apparently replayed some of it in her dreams that night, if her roommate Jupiter's knowing looks and Mia's tangled sheets were any indication. She was just relieved there were no rips in her bedding from any accidental night-shifting. That hadn't happened in ages, but then she'd never had a kiss be so powerful that it possessed her: mind, body, and soul.

Lucas had insisted she no longer take the bus to work. He said he would send a car and driver, and sure enough, the next morning, a stretch limousine showed up at her dorm room bright and early, ready to pick her up. She was quickly exhausting Jupiter's wardrobe, trying to find something appropriate to wear each day to SparkTech, but she took care to dress extra professionally that morning: a trim, black skirt, a muted-yellow light-weight sweater, and her long hair pulled back in a clip. Jupiter had laden her with a few gold bangles and pronounced her "perfect." Mia couldn't help hoping that would be Lucas's evaluation as well. She certainly caught a few stares from her fellow McMahan dorm students as she stepped out Friday morning in her yellow-gold pumps and business-smart outfit. The high-class limo with the door held open by a black-tie driver in a *Driving Miss Daisy* cap only added to the effect.

On the drive in to downtown Seattle, the urban canyon streets were still gray, shadowed by the early morning sun. Mia couldn't decide what exactly had happened the night before. Lucas kissed her—had *thoroughly* kissed her—and

his rock-hard erection against her body said he wanted to do much more than press his lips to hers. It wasn't just a kiss, either: more like a volcano of passion erupting. But then he had just... *stopped*. Was he afraid they would be caught by his father, the Senior Mr. Sparks, CEO of SparkTech? She had snooped a little online and found Lucas had graduated from the University of Washington four years ago, which made him at least twenty-six. Wasn't that a little old to be worried about what his parents thought? Or was it because she worked for Lucas? She decided that had to be it—he was afraid she might cry sexual harassment or some such thing.

As if anything sexual involving Lucas could be termed harassment of any kind.

And then there was the whole shifter aspect. To be honest, that was the part that excited her the most. He was *wolf*. And after what she had seen in the alleyway, he was an extremely powerful wolf, in both his human and shifted forms. She had always been drawn to powerful men—at least the kind who wore their power in their broad shoulders and in the muscles underneath their t-shirts. But Lucas was the kind of man she was truly meant to be with: strong, overwhelmingly sexy, and able to handle her in the event her inner wolf became unleashed. The thought of that alone made her squeeze her thighs together and hope the driver wasn't a shifter, wondering why his passenger was getting aroused by herself in the back of his limo.

The whole thing caught her completely off guard. She was trying to get her degree, get a job, help her mom... she had never imagined she would meet another shifter along the way, much less one who would be so profoundly protective of her. So insistent in ensuring her safety. And who lit her on fire like no boy ever had. But Lucas was no *boy*... he was most definitely *all man*. And when he held her in his arms last night... it wasn't just the passion of his kiss that entranced her. It was the feeling of being utterly safe. Completely, passionately wanted. Of *belonging* in a way she had never felt with anyone else before.

Lucas seemed such a perfect match for her. It must have been fate—or something equally powerful, perhaps destiny—that had drawn them together. Only he seemed to want to resist it. *Why?* And why was he so driven to care for her in the first place?

As her limo arrived at the Russell building, Mia realized the things she *didn't* know about Lucas Sparks far outnumbered the things she *did*.

She strolled into SparkTech, pleased she was one of the first to arrive, and immediately went to Lucas's office. If she could just get him alone for a little while, have a chance to talk, maybe she could reassure him that he had nothing

to worry about—he wasn't just her boss, he saved her life! She would never repay that by jeopardizing him or SparkTech in any way. And maybe, just maybe, he would see that he didn't have to hold back from her.

But as soon as she entered Lucas's office, he shoved a pile of reports into her arms and sent her away. She spent the day going over every line: they were already into Stage Two of their due diligence on LoopSource, and these reports were supposed to help SparkTech determine the market potential of LoopSource's new internet platform. It created apps that were super easy for casual internet users—basically it was a customization tool, but the tech part of this marketing report was thick with terms she didn't recognize and struggled to piece together. The report itself glowed with numbers that seemed to say LoopSource was the next big thing in mobile computing, but the *diligence* part of due diligence meant evaluating the report as much as the data within it. No matter what else happened with her and Lucas, she needed to prove she could be an asset to SparkTech—so Mia rolled up her sweater sleeves and dug in. Lunchtime flew by, and it was well into the afternoon before the grumbling in her stomach could no longer be ignored.

Just as she was ready to temporarily climb out of her analysis hole, Lev popped his head in her door.

“Hey, new girl!” he said cheerily. “You know, we're not actually operating a sweatshop here. You'll allowed to take breaks for lunch.”

Mia let out a small laugh and leaned back from her desk. “Just trying to make an impression, I guess.” She rubbed her weary eyes, unclipped her hair, and shoved her hands through it, stretching out the kinks.

“Oh, trust me, you're doing plenty of that.” Lev opened the door the rest of the way, letting himself in. He held up a white paper bag he was carrying, then set it on her desk. “Sustenance for the eager young intern.”

“You brought me lunch?” Mia blinked up at him, amazed. Was everyone at SparkTech determined to look out for her? It warmed something deep in her heart, something she hadn't felt with anyone other than her mom: a sense of family. Of *belonging*.

“Well, big brother Lucas told me to take care of you.” He perched on one corner of her expansive desk. “I take those kinds of orders very seriously.” But there was mirth in his eyes, and he gestured for her to look in the bag.

Inside was a chicken salad sandwich, fruit salad, and the most enormous, gorgeous-looking chocolate chip cookie she had ever seen in her life. It all looked gourmet. And very expensive.

“Wow, Lev, I...” She doubted she could repay him—she hadn't started getting checks from SparkTech yet—and she didn't want to insult him by

offering. So she just peered up at him as sincerely as she could. “Thank you so much.”

“Whoa! Hang on!” He chuckled and put up his hands as if to fend her off. “It’s just a sandwich. But if you’ve been giving Lucas half that big-blue-eyed treatment, I can understand why he’s smitten.”

Her hand froze half-way in the bag. “Smitten?” Suddenly the jitters in her stomach went into overdrive. “What do you mean?”

He looked at her like she was crazy, then lowered his chin. “I thought you two were...” Then his eyebrows hiked up. “Oh boy.” He laughed nervously. “You know, I really do have a big mouth. You need to just ignore whatever I say.”

Mia frowned. “Does everyone think...? I mean, does the whole office believe...?”

Lev held up a hand to stop her. “Nobody thinks anything, Mia. We’re all happy to have you here. Hey, if you and Lucas are just friends, all the better. Whatever your magic is, new girl, you just keep doing it. He hasn’t been this productive since...” His face morphed again into a stricken panic, like he wanted to pull the words back in.

“Since what?” Mia’s eyes went wide. There was something in Lucas’s past. Something everyone was tiptoeing around.

Lev slipped off the desk. “And... that’s my cue to go.”

“Lev!” she chastised him, rising from her seat. How could she get him to spill what he knew?

“Eat your lunch, new girl!” he called over his shoulder on his way out the door. “You need to keep up your energy!”

And then he was gone.

Mia slowly sat down, then carefully laid out the lunch Lev had so thoughtfully brought to her. Something had happened to Lucas. Something that his family—including Lev and probably his father, who she had yet to meet—all wanted to help him get over. Or maybe recover from? She didn’t know, but as she bit into her sandwich, she vowed to find out what it was and help Lucas in any way she could. If Lev was right—if she was having some positive effect on him—she wanted to do more of that. It was the least she could do for all he’d already done for her.

Her inner wolf yipped in agreement. Probably a little too enthusiastically. And she was likely just looking for a reason to spend more time with Lucas. But she had a hard time thinking there was anything wrong with that, either.



Chapter 7

Refueled by Lev's lunch, Mia dove back into the reports, and the rest of the day slipped past. Before she knew it, the cool white carpet of her office was turning a dusky orange from the setting sun. She had finished reading most of the reports and had some initial thoughts, but she hadn't really had time to process all of it yet. Just as she was wondering if she could take them home or if they were confidential to SparkTech, someone knocked on her door.

Lucas stepped inside without waiting for her answer and closed the door behind him.

Mia stared at him as he slowly approached her desk, cautious, like she might spring out at him at any second. "Hi," she said trying to break the awkward silence that had already fallen.

"Hey." He gestured to the reports, but remained on the other side of the desk from her. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," she said. "I think the market might be ready for LoopSource, but I'm not really sure. I need more time to fully digest the reports. Is it possible to take them home?"

He smiled and seemed to relax a little. "Sorry, they have to stay in the office. I've been looking them over, too, and I think your intuition is right. But I'll be working the weekend to make sure before I take my recommendation in on Monday."

She smiled. "Maybe I could come in this weekend and help?"

His smile faded away. “That’s not necessary.” He dropped his gaze to the reports, drumming his fingers on the desk, looking uncomfortable again. “Look, Mia, about last night—”

She rose up from her seat, effectively cutting him off, and then quickly came around her desk. She did *not* want him apologizing for their kiss... especially if no one else in the office cared if they were together or not. He looked startled by her coming closer.

She stared up into his eyes. “I don’t have a problem with last night.”

He frowned. “Mia, it’s not a good idea—”

“Why not?”

“You don’t understand—”

“No, I don’t understand.” She took a breath and tried to rein in her frustration. “Lucas, tell me.”

He stepped back, and she could tell she had pushed him too far. “Look, what’s most important is your safety. And I came here to talk to you about that.”

“Well, the driver thing is pretty cool. I think I can hang with that.”

He didn’t smile at her weak attempt to lighten things up. “You need to move out of your dorm.”

“*What?*” Her eyes went round, and it was her turn to take a step back. “Move out of my... I can’t just *move out*, Lucas!”

“Yes, you can.” He had that resolute look that she was beginning to recognize as the *no negotiations* look. But this was totally ridiculous.

“I’m locked into the dorm payments for the summer!” she said, stating the obvious. “And where would I go? All the good summer leases are gone by now.” The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced he had to be joking. She *hoped* he was joking.

“We’ll take care of all that,” he said, his voice uncompromising. “You don’t have to worry about the money. We’ll find a place for you. Starting this weekend. We can move you into a hotel tonight, then get you an apartment in the morning. You have to do this, Mia.”

“I... what in the world, Lucas!” She couldn’t believe he was serious, but her blood pressure was creeping up. He was *ordering* her to move out? And what if she didn’t? Would he *fire* her? This was getting more and more... *crazy*. There was no other word for it.

“I’m just trying to keep you safe,” he said, but his voice was more strained now.

She shook her head and crossed her arms. “You know what? You can work by yourself this weekend. I’m going home. *To my dorm.*”

She stomped around her desk, yanked open the drawer that held her purse,

pulled it out, then brushed past him, headed for the door. “We can discuss this on Monday!” she called back over her shoulder. She only hoped she actually *had* a job on Monday. But she was *not* letting him order her around and move her out of her dorm and just... *gah!* What was he thinking? The whole thing frustrated her beyond measure.

He was following right behind her. “Mia, stop.”

“No,” she said, without slowing down. “I am tired of this *keeping Mia safe* thing all the time.” She wasn’t really, but the idea that he wouldn’t even discuss what happened between them but felt like he could order her around... even her inner wolf was growling about that.

He kept tailing her all the way out to the front of the office. “Mia, I’m just trying to...” He dropped his voice as they reached the elevator. A bunch of other people were already waiting for their chance to flee the office for the weekend. “Mia, stop,” he said under his breath. “Listen to me.”

Luck was on her side, because the elevator dinged at just that moment. The other people filed in, and she followed right after. Mia glared at Lucas to keep him from following, and he stayed back, strung tight, watching as the elevator doors closed.

She left him behind on the 32nd floor.

The ride down was just a *little* awkward, but Mia ignored the stares.

At the parking garage level, she got off the elevator with everyone else, but as they dispersed to their cars, she remembered she hadn’t called the driver. He had left her with a card for when she was ready, but she had left in such a hurry, she’d forgotten about it. She briefly debated taking public transportation just to make Lucas angry, but decided that was childish. Instead, she fished out her phone and the card and started dialing. Before she could finish, a limo entered the far gate from the street level. It was the same one that had picked her up that morning—at least it had the same stretched length and tinted windows—and she wondered how they knew, but then a glance at the waning light outside reminded her it was already late. Most people were leaving for the weekend, and surely the limo company had other customers to pick up. They didn’t just sit around all day waiting for her call.

Only she didn’t see anyone else to be picked up—everyone had already disappeared into their cars. She put away her phone and flagged down the limo as it slowly rolled between the parked cars of the half-full parking garage. It came to a stop in front of her, but she couldn’t see if the driver was stopping for her or not. She edged forward, looking around to double check if there was anyone else waiting. She was alone, so she crossed the rest of the space and reached the passenger side just as the driver’s door swung open.

“You guys have great timing!” she said cheerily, returning the driver’s smile. Then a chill swept through her. She recognized him—but he wasn’t the driver she had this morning.

He was the red wolf from *The Deviation*.

She froze. He leered as he came around the front of the limo toward her, but just as she unlocked her legs, the passenger side door swung open, and a second man, another of the red wolves, scrambled out of the car after her. She didn’t get two steps before he was on her. Her wolf roared as he grabbed her roughly from behind. Her arms and legs flailed, trying to wrench loose from him, but his arm was locked around her waist, and she couldn’t get hold of anything. He was dragging her toward the car. In moments, they would have her. Her wolf raged underneath her skin, wanting loose so she could tear into him with her teeth and claws, but the first one grabbed her failing arms and held her fast.

Two against one. Both wolves. Both bigger than her.

She took a fast breath and started to scream, but a beefy hand clamped over her mouth, and her shriek died in the echoing chamber of the parking garage. She prayed someone would hear her one muted attempt at a cry for help before she was stuffed in the open door of the car.

Suddenly Lucas was there, his own roar reaching them just before his fists. He hadn’t shifted, but even in his human form, he was able to clock the guy holding her arms. He went down on the pavement in a heap, and she renewed her struggle against the man holding her, slamming her heels back, trying to catch a piece of him. He grunted, so she must have hit something. As his hold on her loosened, Lucas yanked her free. When Lucas released her to go after him, she stumbled, falling over the body of the first wolf, who was still in his human form. Why weren’t they shifting? She didn’t understand, but she scurried away from the fallen wolf, putting distance between them and her before looking back.

Lucas was beating the shit out of her second abductor, the one who was still conscious. He had fallen to the ground, and still Lucas was pounding on him. She smelled blood in the air, and there was more on the car... she rushed forward.

“Lucas!” she shrieked. “Stop! You’ll kill him!” She flailed for his arm as it pulled back for another strike, just barely catching hold of it. But her touch seemed to break through his rage. His chest heaved, and there was blood on his hand. She couldn’t be sure if it was his or not, but he took a step back. The man was down, moaning, cowering on the parking garage floor.

Lucas blinked several times, still looking at her attacker, then he turned to her. For a moment, his face was blank, but then he slipped his hand around her waist and hauled her away from the limo.

“My purse!” she said, tugging against him to stop so she could retrieve it from the floor. She didn’t want them having *anything* of hers. He bent quickly to scoop it up, then locked his hand around hers and towed her away. They ran down one ramp of the parking garage and then another, down to the next level. Her legs were unsteady with the adrenaline of the fight, and her heels clicked a jittery echo throughout the garage, but the sound was mostly drowned out by Lucas’s heavy, pounding heels. They reached his car—it was some kind of Audi, red and black and sleek, but she would have preferred something less like a race car and more like a tank. Lucas practically yanked off the door getting it open for her, and she dropped into the low passenger seat as fast as she could. He raced around to the driver’s side, and within moments, they were screeching out of the parking garage. She caught a final glimpse of the two kidnappers by their limo.

They were still human lumps on the ground. Only one was moving.



Chapter 8

It wasn't until Mia and Lucas were well away from the parking garage that he slowed to a speed that would keep them out of jail. Even then, neither of them spoke. Lucas's grip on the steering wheel was the same white-knuckled one she had on her purse. She clutched it to her chest as if that would somehow help. She didn't ask where they were going. She didn't care, as long as it was away from *them*. She could still feel their hands on her, grabbing her, hauling her away.

"Why didn't they shift?" was all she could manage to say. Her voice was strangely mechanical.

"They couldn't fight me in wolf form," he said, just as stiffly.

She supposed that made sense, given they had already submitted to him once before, although her brain still wasn't working well enough to put all the pieces together. They must have found out where she lived. They must have tracked the limo service that picked her up that morning. A chill seeped into her stomach, wondering what had happened to the original driver. Maybe they killed him. Maybe they stole the limo.

All so they could come after her.

She blinked and looked at Lucas. He had known she wouldn't be safe at the dorm. He knew more about this than he was telling her. But at that moment, all she could see was the blood that still covered his knuckles. The fury on his face.

He had saved her. Again.

They pulled into another parking garage, a high rise near the outskirts of

downtown. She wasn't sure exactly where they were going until they were inside the building, and a gray-uniformed doorman greeted Lucas with, "Good evening, Mr. Sparks." By the time she and Lucas reached the 15th floor, she figured he must be taking her to his apartment. He still hadn't spoken a word, just held her hand in an iron grip the entire way, not letting go for a single moment since they left the car.

His electronic key opened the door. He closed and locked it behind them.

She barely had a glimpse of his glass-and-black-leather décor, before he grabbed hold of her face and consumed her with a kiss. They stumbled two steps back until she was flush up against the front door, his body pressing her into it, hard in every possible way: his fingers pushing insistently into her hair, his tongue invading her mouth, his erection pressing into her side. She dropped her purse and grabbed at his shoulders, trying to bring him closer, even though he had already welded her body to the door with his.

His hands left her hair and slid down her sides, feeling every curve until he reached the hem of her sweater. He leaned back and pulled her slightly away from the door, enough to quickly lift her sweater over her head.

Her breath caught, suddenly half naked in front of him. He paused for a moment, looking at her, and she had that sensation again, like his gaze was a hot stroke over her exposed skin.

"I thought this wasn't a good idea," she said, breathless, hoping he wasn't suddenly changing his mind.

"I'm tired of trying to resist you."

His words were another sweep of heat across her, this one running straight down between her legs. He ripped off his jacket and lifted his shirt over his head in one fast swipe. Then he pinned her to the door again, this time his bare chest open to her hands. They roamed across it and ran up his shoulders. His mouth, hungry for her again, devoured her neck in small nips. His touch was electrifying her, every nerve sending hot races of pleasure to the parts that yearned for more contact with him.

He growled, tasting her more aggressively as he worked down to her chest. He gripped her bra with both hands, and she felt his claws come out and shred the fabric away from her body. The pieces of it dangled to her sides as her breasts fell free. Lucas dropped to one knee, and his face nuzzled in between them. One hand rolled her hardened nipple between his fingers, wringing shocks of pleasure from it, while the other cupped her breast to his mouth. He sucked and nipped all over her heated flesh, each small, circling bite causing more wetness to pool between her legs.

Her wolf whined with pleasure, and she dug her fingers into his hair while

she watched him feast upon her. Then he slid his hands down her body again, feeling every inch as he went. When he reached the bottom of her skirt, he slipped his hands underneath and shoved up the fabric. Her underwear was torn from her body before she could suck in a gasp. With her skirt up to her waist and her underwear gone, she was bared to him. Another growl rumbled in his chest, and he dropped further, lifting her knee over his shoulder and burying his face between her legs.

Her head fell back against the door as his tongue slipped into her folds. She called out his name and some other unintelligible word, as a haze of pleasure washed over her. The tip of his tongue worked her, and she held on as he brought her wave upon wave of pleasure. It built a pressure deep inside that felt like it might make her burst. Just as she thought she might come, he pulled away. She panted and clung to the door, weak with pleasure, watching as he kicked off his shoes and unzipped his pants. When he freed his erection, it was even larger than she remembered, shining in the moonlight, the embodiment of everything masculine. It made her even more weak in the knees.

He cradled her against the door. She had never seen such pure desire in a man's eyes before—such animal lust combined with an eagerness that was pure wolf. He claimed her mouth again, plunging inside and sharing the taste of her own flesh. He slid his hands down to her legs, behind her hips, then quickly lifted her from the floor. She held on tight to his broad shoulders, his muscles flexing under her hands, and quickly wrapped her legs around his back. She could feel his cock hard and ready against her and could hardly catch her breath. Hardly believe this was happening.

His hands gripped the flesh of her bottom, and he thrust into her. He was so large and ground so deep that what breath she had escaped her. The hard muscles of his chest pressed into the deep softness of hers and held there for a moment. Joined deeply, his face buried in her hair, he moaned, *Mine*, so softly, with so much growl, that she almost didn't hear it. Then he thrust again and again, each time rocking harder against her and sending waves of pleasure shooting through her. His grip on her tightened, and each thrust brought a noise of pleasure from him that pushed her closer and closer. As he took her, owned her body against the door, she could feel his claws coming out, grasping onto her, holding her tight to him. Her wolf whimpered in response, whining for more, and her own claws raked across his back, holding on for the ride.

As her claws dug into him, his breath hitched, and she was afraid for a split moment that she had hurt him. But his moans and thrusts just came harder and faster, finally pushing her to the edge. Her body pulsed, pleasure whitening out her vision, her sound, even her sense of smell, and there was nothing but him, filling

her, joined with her, bringing her a pleasure she didn't even know was possible. It possessed every sense in her body. He growled with his final thrust, and his body shook, as his climax seized hold of him. Aftershocks of pleasure kept rippling through her. He moved more slowly now, his thrusts gentling, his hold relaxing. Finally, after a long moment of stillness, he pulled out and eased her to the floor. But he still held her, tenderly pulling her from the wall and planting a hundred soft kisses on her face and neck.

As they came down together, he kissed her once more on the lips, then pulled slightly away. He had a slight frown and reached behind his shoulder to swipe at the marks her claws had no doubt left behind. He came away with blood on his hand, looked puzzled for a moment, then peered harder over his shoulder. Her claws had scored a dozen red lines on his back and upper arms. His eyes went wide, and he whipped his head back to her, a storm gathering on his face.

Oh no.

"You're a *shifter*," he said, his voice filled with betrayal.

"I didn't think... are you okay?" She scrunched up her face and tried to peer at his back, but she knew it wasn't the marks that bothered him. It was the *lie*.

He stepped back from her, standing naked, but with clenched fists and stiff shoulders. "What's your pack?" he demanded.

"Pack? I don't... I don't have..." Her heart was wrenching in two. The air was still rich with their lovemaking, but it had chilled ten degrees with the angry stare he was giving her. He reached out, but his touch was no longer gentle. He held up her arms, searching them, grabbing hold of her shoulders to spin her, checking her back for something.

She twisted her head toward him. "What are you doing, Lucas?" The fear in her voice must have reached him, because he turned her back to face him, but more gently this time.

He continued search her body with his eyes, his face still angry, but it had tempered a little. "You're not marked. Why aren't you marked?"

"I don't know what that means!" Tears were closing in on her.

He closed his eyes briefly and drew in a breath. When he opened them, he pointed to the tattoo on his chest. "Your pack mark. Where is it?"

"I don't have a pack," she said. "Or a mark. You're... you're the only one who knows."

Realization dawned on his face, and he took a step back. The anger settled further, but she could tell it still boiled under his skin. "You've been hiding it. All this time."

"Yes."

"From everyone. Your family?"

“I only have my mom,” she said, a defensive bit rising in her. “But yes. From everyone.”

“From me.”

“Until now.” She peered up into his eyes. Could he forgive her for that? He knew *now*. He was simply the only one she had ever felt safe telling. Couldn’t he see that?

But his expression was still cool. “You don’t have a mate or a pack,” he said again, as if triple confirming it wasn’t enough.

“I swear, Lucas.” She hesitated, then pressed on. “I want to be with *you*,” she said softly.

His dark brown eyes hardened to bitter coal. “You do *not* want to mate with me.” Then he turned away from her and stooped to pick up his pants from the floor. The anger was back, judging by the vicious way he pulled them on.

“But... I thought you...”

He glared at her again. “I *thought* you were human.”

It was a like a stab through her heart. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” she said, fighting tears. Her wolf was crying, a mournful whine that echoed through her head. “I would have. Eventually. I just didn’t know...” She gestured at the pile of clothes at their feet. “Things just moved so fast.”

“Wolves do not just have sex, Mia. Wolves *mate*,” he said, the anger flaming back. “If you had a pack, you would have understood this. But since you don’t, let me be very clear about it: you do *not* want to mate with me.”

She crossed her arms over her bare breasts, suddenly feeling naked. But the anger in her voice rose to match his. “Maybe I do! You don’t get to decide everything for me!”

He turned away from her, and his back stiffened. “My mate is dead.”

She sucked in a breath. This was the thing—the pain that his family wanted to help him heal. The darkened office at SparkTech flashed before her eyes: *T. Sparks*. His mate. She had died, and he was struck down by it. Devastated. She could see it in his stance, and in the fierce protection he had for her. How much more would he have had for the woman he loved? Had *mated* with? She wasn’t even sure what that meant, but it sounded... like family.

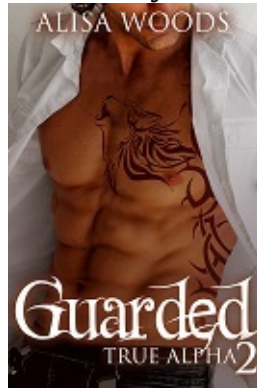
She edged closer to his turned back. “I’m sorry, Lucas.” What could she say that would ease his pain? “I don’t want to... take her place. I just want to be with you.”

He sighed, long and deep. “You don’t understand, Mia.” He paused, then slowly turned to look back over his shoulder to her. “I killed her.”



Lucas and Mia's greatest fears, and hopes, still lay ahead of them.

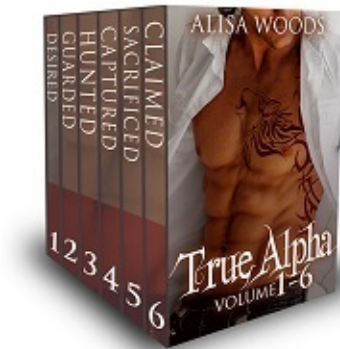
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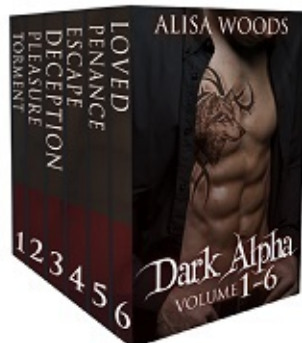
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About the Author

Alisa Woods lives in the Midwest with her husband and family, but her heart will always belong to the beaches and mountains where she grew up. She writes sexy paranormal romances about alpha men and the women who love them. She enjoys exploring the struggles we all have, where we resist—and succumb to—our most tempting vices as well as our greatest desires. She firmly believes that love triumphs over all.

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