



Bad Opinion

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Description: The new guy, Xantos, was hot but thought too highly of himself. Sally tried to stay away, and even though her opinion of him was bad, she kept getting drawn in.

Xantos wanted Sally but he knew that her bad opinion of him kept her running away. When Tyne opened a new security office and they were placed in charge of it, he hoped she wouldn't be able to avoid him anymore.

Will they end up together or will they keep fighting fate?

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Prologue

It was hard to believe that they were in charge together. Why had Tyne decided on that? Xantos seemed happy enough, but she just wanted to get away. Moe had asked her first, and she hadn't known who would be partnered with her when she'd said yes. It would look weird if she'd changed her mind now, and she had hoped for a career working in security. The worst thing would be if they realized why she didn't want to do this. They might even think she had a thing for him and couldn't be close without being nervous. That simply wasn't true, but she wouldn't want anyone to believe that.

Sally could have liked him had he not been so arrogant and full of himself. Perhaps that overconfident behavior worked for him, as he had just arrived in Alaska and was already in charge of a new office. Not that she thought that was a reward. The reason it paid so much was because it was such a hard job, especially since it was a new office. Startups often faced problems and were frequently targeted by malicious individuals. These people hated paranormals, even though she would not be surprised if most of them did not have a pinch of the paranormal in them somewhere due to the centuries of breeding back and forth that had occurred.

While she couldn't shift herself, she had some wolf in her. How much? She wasn't sure. Her mother was human, but her great grandpa had been a wolf. He had no luck having children with anyone but humans, or at least those with at least part human ancestry. He'd finally been able to have a son with a half-breed, but he'd been a little bit crazy. The crazy had continued down that bloodline until now. That pack was stuck with an alpha so nuts that she felt sorry for them. She was glad that her great-grandmother had moved away and left behind all that craziness.

Her family might be poor, but they had their sanity and their self-respect. They also had a knowledge of the paranormal world that they never shared with anyone outside the family. Sally was the first one, since her great-grandmother, who couldn't shift. Her mother had told her if she married a shifter, she would probably be able to shift. That was unlikely to happen since everything she had been told made her feel like it was too scary to even attempt sex with a shifter or any other paranormal, for that matter. She didn't hold anything against them. She simply didn't want to be like them.

Sally suspected that Xantos was a wolf. There was just something about him that made her feel that way. Wolves were usually tall and well-built. They had an air about them, and it was hard to determine their age. Some were confident, but others were like him, which was arrogant. He strutted around like the cock of the walk and, like any female, would just fall helplessly in love with him. Not this female and not under these circumstances. It was true that she was drawn to him for some reason that she didn't understand, but she didn't have to act on it, and she wasn't going to.

Chapter 1

Nowhere

Xantos had now been given that supervisory position that Tyne had discussed with him a year ago or more. He'd been given every kind of training that he could imagine and then some. It had surprised him that he had a partner to manage this small base out in the middle of nowhere. Most bases were near a town, but they were positioned between three small towns and surprisingly getting more business than they could handle. Sally was pretty and a little shy, and he could tell that she greatly lacked confidence and resented him because he didn't.

She did a good enough job, but she didn't do anything outstanding, and he wondered if that was because she didn't want to draw attention to herself. He wasn't one to ask questions because he didn't want anyone to ask questions about him. All he needed

was a good job, a place to live, and to be left alone. Xantos was the son of a pack alpha from Nevada, and the guy was a sorry son of a bitch. It was amazing that, as the only son, he had not been treated better by his father. He'd not, and now they were both gone. His mother had gone to the goddess, and he'd gone on the run, avoiding anything that tracked back to his father.

He couldn't say that he would kill anyone on purpose, but he was sadistic and liked to mistreat people. Rumor had it that he was related to some of the alphas from up north who had been displaced and that the bloodline was tainted. Xantos could testify that his father's blood was bad, but he didn't know if there was a relationship between him and those up north or not, and he didn't really care. All he wanted was to be separate from any member who might be traced back to that family. Tyne had told him about the pack, and his father had then given him some information whenever he received it. He really didn't know how he'd known that he was the secret son, only that he'd known.

It wasn't as if he'd ever admitted it or probably never would. His boss just had a way of knowing things, and that was what made him such a good security officer. He'd known about his mother too and how they had escaped that horrible wolf. She'd waited until he was old enough to take care of himself, and then she swam out into the ocean so far that there was no way she could make it back. She had drowned. Xantos blamed himself because he'd not been with her. He'd been at work and unable to save her. He knew deep inside that she would have continued to try until she succeeded. Even though they'd left that horrible wolf, a small, dark, evil part of him had taken root inside her. She would have never gotten rid of it.

While he blamed himself, he also blamed the council who had supported that horrible wolf and allowed him to continue to abuse those in his pack and had never taken any kind of action against him. It was unlikely that they ever would. Perhaps if he had been stronger and tougher, he would have confronted him, accused him of what he had done, and taken him down. It was a dream that came to him sometimes, but he

was sure he would never do it. For now, he checked the equipment on his truck and then went into the office to get his list. She'd left it lying on the desk while she went back to work in the equipment room, making sure that everything was in order as needed. Sally avoided him, and he wasn't entirely sure why. If that was the game she wanted to play, he would let her.

Four new people would be joining them, and Sally would have to help train them. They were making no appointments at the office and only setting things up through phone calls, so she would just have to take the phone with her. They were so isolated that Tyne had temporarily set up a grocery drop until they figured things out. It was true that the three towns were near them if fifty miles away was 'nearby.' So close and yet so far when it came to getting small items that you needed daily. Everyone was in charge of their own food, but Sally cooked occasionally, and she wasn't half bad. She was good to share, and since Tyne was paying for the food for a little while, at least she wasn't out of pocket on it.

Xantos could cook a little bit, but he was impatient and often took shortcuts that could affect the quality of his meals. Sally tended to do the job right, and she had a few meals she cooked that were delicious. In this region, being a good cook could draw in a mate. She could also hunt and fish, which was unusual for a female, even in this area, unless she was native, which she wasn't. He wished he could get the female off his mind, but that wasn't happening. Even in his dreams, she came to visit him, and he didn't understand it because that had never happened to him before. As he loaded some equipment out of the equipment room, he caught her scent, which only made things worse.

Checking out his list, he saw the usual five locations. Sally had done a good job of clustering them together so he could go in one direction, and they wouldn't be too far apart. She also made a note at the bottom that she was catching two locations today. That was set up so that she would be back in the afternoon when the first new person appeared. It would be her job to provide them with the necessary information and

assign them a room. The house the office had been relocated to was huge, and initially, everyone working out of the office would have a room there. There were even a couple set up like mini apartments, and he and Sally shared one of those. The other one would go to anyone with children or a couple that both worked here.

It was an easy day, which told him the Pure Blooders probably hadn't caught up to the fact that they had a new office open or they didn't want to work in such an isolated area. Xantos hadn't dealt with those people much because they hadn't been active in southern Missouri, where he'd been working before. Tyne had cautioned him that they were active in this area and that he would need to be careful. Every day without trouble was a blessing from the goddess, and as he pulled into the base, he was pleased with his day's work. If Sally got her two jobs done, covered the office, met up with the new person, and got them settled in, he would be happy with what she got done, too. He locked up his truck and headed into the office.

That someone else was there was immediately evident because Sally and him were talking. He seemed to be a friendly guy, and he hoped that he was good at his job. Xantos had learned from watching other managers that when you had someone who wasn't good at their job, you ended up having to do a whole lot of work until they improved, or you had to let them go, and then everything fell on you. He didn't mind doing his share, but he liked to take a day off occasionally, and that wouldn't happen until he had a full crew, and they were all up to speed.

"Hey, Xantos, This is Terri. Xantos is the field supervisor, and you will be working with him tomorrow," Sally explained.

Terri was not a guy, but her voice was husky. That's why he made the mistake. She was a cute blonde with blue eyes and about five feet tall. There was a look in her eyes as she looked at him, but he wasn't going to touch that, not at work. Besides, he hadn't had any interest in any females since he'd met Sally. He wouldn't let her know that, but it had really put a cramp in his style because male wolves needed regular sex, and

he wasn't getting it. Nothing he could do about it until Sally decided that she was interested in satisfying his needs. It was time to put his attention elsewhere because he was starting to get hard, and that would be noticeable since Terri was a wolf.

The only reason she probably hadn't noticed right away was because of the smell of cooking food. Xantos went to check out the crock pots that Sally had going and filled a bowl of food. He felt like just wolfing up the food, but he needed to use his manners.

"Thank you for the food, Sally. You are a great cook." He praised.

"You're welcome. I'm glad you like it. Currently, Tyne is providing supplies until we have everything sorted out so we can arrange for our own food to be delivered. I've been cooking something every day, so anyone here will have food until we figure out how to get our own food brought in. Tyne has connections that we don't have, and he dropped a monthly supply when we opened this office. If we can't find anything else, Tyne will do a monthly delivery, and each person can pay for their own food."

"Sounds like a nice bonus to start with." Terri approved.

"Terri has gone through the training course and worked for Tyne for a few months before transferring here. I think it won't be long before you're able to turn her loose. Xantos usually likes to work alone." Sally explained.

He remembered that they'd had a discussion, and he'd told her that he'd train people, if necessary, but once they were ready, they'd be let loose because he preferred to work alone. Xantos wasn't the only one who liked to do that because other field managers worked alone as much as possible. It wasn't that he was antisocial. It was that he could hit his stride and work through a setup in less time alone than he could when he was working with someone.

“That's alright. I like to work alone myself. That way, if something goes wrong, I know I made a mistake, and it's easier to track back and find it. Usually, nothing goes wrong, and then I get all the glory for doing a wonderful job,” Terri admitted.

Sally laughed, but it didn't sound like she was too sure that it was a joke. He wasn't sure either. Was she explaining to them how she felt about the job and about having a partner?

“Partners aren't required unless you are training someone, or we begin to have trouble with the Pure Blooders. I'm sure Tyne has explained to you how they've been known to attack our people, but they don't seem to be in this area yet. You should still take all possible precautions,” Xantos explained.

“Tyne did explain, cautioned me, and gave me a Taser because he said that had been the best weapon so far that females should use. He even gave me some training for it, and I believe I do a pretty good job. Those bad guys won't know what hit them.”

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He gave her a hard look because she sounded overly confident. She needed to be vigilant for danger. It was best not to underestimate it. He was a damned good fighter, but he was aware that it was possible that he could be beaten. Females especially needed to be careful because beaten and killed were not the limits to what could be done to them. Those bastards were sick and needed to be taken out whenever possible. Tyne had shown him some pictures of females that had been attacked, and it had sickened him. Males should protect females and not abuse them in that way or any other way, for that matter. It reminded him of his father and the way he had treated his mother, which was not a pleasant thing to recall.

It was late and time for them all to turn in and get some sleep. In the morning, he would begin training Terri. From what Sally had said, she was already well trained and just needed to learn about any differences between the way things were done in Missouri and the way things were done here. They shouldn't need to work together for more than a few hours. He might keep her for a whole day just to show her a little bit about the location and any possible places to eat, which were few, and discuss with her the dangers that this area had. She seemed likable enough, so it shouldn't be too hard a task for him. He headed to his room, took his shower, then went to bed.

First thing in the morning, he grabbed breakfast, got his list from Sally, and headed out the door to check the truck. He found that Terri had already checked the equipment, but he rechecked it anyway. It was good to see that it was fine. They headed out, and he took them to the first place. Usually, he would go to the furthest location first, but this time, he went to the closest one. That was just in case he decided to cut her loose early. There wasn't anything to worry about at this first location, so they set up their equipment and got to work. He was glad to see that she was doing a good job and seemed to know what she was doing. Mostly, what she

needed to do was adjust to the location and understand the dangers that were present.

Something about the second place seemed off to him, so he left Terri in the truck and went to the house alone to investigate. That may not have been the best thing because the door was open, and he headed in. There didn't seem to be anyone in the house, but when he got to the bathroom, he found the homeowner tied up in the bathtub. He quickly untied her and had her call the police. Xantos told her to lock all the doors, and he headed back to the truck to see if they had attacked his partner. They had, but she had surprised them with her Taser, and she had laid three of them out, and the fourth had run away. Apparently, the lessons on how to use the Taser were very effective. He restrained the three attackers who were lying on the ground, and he and his partner went in and began to work on their job. It was too important to get these things done to just slack off and wait for the cops because there was no telling how long it would take them to arrive.

It was good that they had gone ahead and got on with their job because they were done before the police arrived. They didn't take long to load the three criminals into the back of the police car and instruct them to submit their statements to headquarters. The police here were very understanding and helpful. They also knew about these people and considered them terrorists. Things would not go well for those who were captured, and yet they seem to find more to sign up all the time. It was hard to understand how they could see so many crazy people when they knew what would happen if they were caught. They moved on to their next job and had three more to complete before the end of the day. Because of the issues with this job, he would keep her for the rest of the day and hope that they will have no more problems. Xantos hated to leave someone alone when there were issues like this, and that made him worry about Sally, who was left to cover the office alone.

He couldn't say for sure that she wasn't working out in the field for a few jobs as well. The demand here was surprising, and the list was long. Their business was flourishing, and they needed all the help they could get. Tyne was a remarkable

businessman, and he realized that the company that had previously been in business was going out of business, leaving a hole that needed to be filled. It was a shame that they were short on help with so much business. A new person would be arriving tomorrow, and with Terri on her own, he would be set to train them. She had said she didn't like to work with a partner, but if the trouble got to be too much, at least there was a partner that they could put with her.

They finished up their work and headed back to the office. He immediately knew something was wrong because a window was broken out. When they entered the office, it was evident that there had been an attack, but Sally seemed to be fine.

“What happened here?” He asked.

“I was attacked by four of them. It was fortunate that I had two Tasers, and I was able to subdue them and restrain them. I called the police, and they came swiftly. They were taken away and charged as terrorists, so we shouldn't see them again. I called Moe and let her know. I believe Harry will be here in the morning. She will be strengthening the security, so maybe this won't happen again.”

Xantos said nothing, but he did notice that Sally seemed to have a little more knowledge of exactly what Harry was. Maybe she just knew about witches and didn't realize that other kinds were also supernatural. Terri listened but said nothing. Most paranormal knew not to say anything that gave their kind away. It was a problem that, in these offices, with all the danger around, it was often given away anyway. It would be good to know exactly what Sally knew, but he was sure that she wasn't going to tell him. All they could do for now was eat supper and get ready for bed. They would worry about what would happen tomorrow with all of them on their own, except he would have a trainee who probably knew nothing and might not even be able to fight well.

The next morning, their new person arrived, and this time, it was a guy. Xantos was

unhappy because it was a very good-looking and charming male. This one wasn't a wolf, but he was some kind of supernatural, and he was sure that he would figure out precisely what he was in time. Sally seemed to like him well enough, but that was no surprise. The guy also seemed to like Sally well enough, and again, no surprise. He was happy when he was able to take the guy out to the truck and get ready for what might be a hard day.

“I wanted to warn you that Terri and I were attacked yesterday. Those crazy terrorists have made it to our area, and I cannot assure you that we will be safe. If I clear you to work on your own tomorrow, you may be partnered with Terri to ensure that both of you are safe.”

“What of you? Are you some kind of Lone Ranger that needs no assistance?” Randy asked.

“I am more experienced than most, and I have worked alone even when these crazy terrorists were attacking us. Protecting a female is an important job.” Xantos observed.

“I understand that, but I am just trying to get a feel for what you think. You might be surprised at how experienced I am. That was one of the reasons that Tyne talked me into taking this job for six months. That doesn't matter because I will do what you suggest.”

He noticed that the man had said 'suggest' rather than 'direct' or 'order.' It didn't really matter as long as he was willing to do as he was told. Terri probably wouldn't be happy either because she had already told him that she liked to work alone as well. Having too many lone wolves was not beneficial because when they were attacked regularly, it was advantageous to have a partner. Someone else would be arriving tomorrow, possibly two people. They may be easier to deal with and not want to work alone. He should have asked Sally more about the people who were arriving

because he hadn't bothered, and now he knew nothing about them. This guy talked like he was very experienced and wouldn't need the training that he was getting today. That was alright because if he saw that he was already well-trained, he would cut him loose and have him work with Terri.

Xantos certainly hoped it was the case because he would have someone to train tomorrow, and Sally might as well. Generally, only one person was trained by a manager at a time.

Chapter 2

Terrorists

Sally got up in the morning and fixed breakfast for everyone. Then she loaded the crockpots that she had so they would have something for lunch and supper. She made up the list, checked it twice, and pulled down a couple locations for herself as well since they were supposed to get two people today. It was smart to be prepared for anything, as there was no telling what would happen on any given day. Xantos made it downstairs and headed to the food. He fixed himself a plate and then thanked her before he tore into the food. Terri came in next and did the same to make Sally suspect she might be a wolf.

There was a knock on the door, and then it opened, and a couple came in. She'd not expected that, but they hadn't been getting much information on their new people until they arrived. That was unfortunate, but they could work with it. The couple would be split up for their training. She would go with the lady, while Xantos would take on the guy. Terri would be working with Randy due to the increased terrorist activity. The crew would be safer working in pairs. That was something that had been proven true in the past.

The new couple accepted the offer of breakfast, and after they had eaten, everyone

headed out, including her. She locked up the office even though it was unlikely anyone would come out this far. Once they headed to the truck, she was glad to see that Dolores, the new female, helped make sure that the truck was loaded correctly. They hurried down the road, and she had taken two locations that were neither close nor far. That would give them a little time together for her to learn more about their new girl and show her more about the area. Since her nose was not sensitive enough, she had no idea if Dolores was paranormal and, if so, what kind.

"Some criminals are working in the area, so we need to take appropriate precautions," Sally explained.

Dolores didn't look worried or surprised. They may have already been filled in before they had headed this way.

"Here is our first location, and I will go in to check it out and come back for you if it is safe," Sally explained.

It turned out to be safe. She went back to get Dolores, and then they grabbed the necessary equipment and quickly finished the job. Her new worker seemed to know what she was doing, and she would be working on her own after the next job, provided nothing went wrong. Those were famous last words, and as soon as they got close to the location, she knew something was wrong. Not because it was isolated but because the road had obviously not been driven down for a long time until recently. It was evident with the tall weeds that had been crushed by the passage of a vehicle. Additionally, the house did not appear to be livable. The roof was holey and probably leaked like a sieve.

"I'll go first, so keep the radio close by because I believe there's going to be trouble here," Sally admitted.

Dolores nodded and watched her as she walked away. Once she got close to the

house, she tried to peek through the windows, but whoever was inside had covered them well. She could hear hushed talking, but she couldn't make out a word. There was little choice but to knock on the door and see what was going on. That was what she did, and in seconds, someone answered. This guy both looked and smelled bad. He was bald on top but had grown the rest of his hair long. It was greasy, with chunks of something in it. It was not a good look for anyone, and it was probably part of the reason he smelled so bad. His shirt was dirty and unbuttoned down to his navel, revealing that he was in poor physical shape. The man had a rounded belly that made him look as if he were expecting, even though it was apparent he was a male.

He grinned at her as he opened the door. "Come on in. We've been expecting you."

She could see that there were other guys also waiting, and she wondered how much damage she could do with two Tasers. Sally knew she was about to find out. There was no point in waiting for them to attack first, and she immediately began firing at them. Four were down with two to go, but she thought she was out of power now. Sally kicked one in the balls, and he fell to the ground, writhing and moaning. That left one guy who had moved closer to her as if he were considering trying to take her down but was afraid to try.

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“Boo!” Sally said as she acted as if she were going to run at him, and he turned and fled.

Maybe she should have tried to run him down and take him out, but she felt exhausted from what she had already gone through and was willing just to let him run. She figured he would be in village history, making it sound like he had been attacked by a group or even a witch like Harry. Sally headed back out to the truck where Dolores waited for her.

“No trouble?” She asked.

“Nothing but trouble. Five are down, and one escaped. We need to call the State Patrol so they can get these guys. We probably should restrain them, or they will escape too.”

Dolores agreed, and they headed inside, where one of the guys had already disappeared. They restrained the rest of them and made the phone call, and they were told that a car was nearby due to another complaint and would arrive in half an hour if they could just wait. It ended up being more like an hour, and once they were done, they headed back to the office. This had not been a good day, and she suspected their days were going to get worse. At least they were at the office where they could rest and recuperate. As she had suspected, Dolores and Mike were mated and usually worked together as partners. Sally took Dolores to the other suite so she could settle in. It was now lunchtime, and when Dolores came back from settling in, they sat down and ate lunch together while Sally explained how things worked at the office to her.

They got along well. Sally thought that, given time, they could be friends. There were a few calls, but the office was slow. A few hours later, Xantos and Mike returned with their list completed. At least someone had a fruitful day and took the time to explain the problems they had encountered. It had slowed their progress, but there was nothing to do about it, and Mike and Dolores would go out tomorrow to work as a team. Xantos had decided that Mike was an excellent worker, and since Dolores had been tested at one location, there was no reason not to put them together and let them work as trained security specialists.

There would be another arrival either tomorrow or the next day, and they were beginning to build a team that at least might have a chance of catching up on their list. They had no information on who the next new person would be or when they would arrive after this one. Sally had to admit it was a little frustrating to have so little information when she and Xantos were supposed to be in charge. Perhaps this was a test of some sort, although she couldn't imagine why they would be tested in this manner. It is to ensure that they can do the job they were given. Honestly, Sally wasn't sure that they could, but her partner seemed confident, so maybe he had enough confidence for both of them.

Everyone ate supper, and then they headed to their rooms. The rooms all had TVs, and Tyne had satellite TV because it was necessary for communication in any office setting. She preferred to read, but she knew that Xantos watched TV and often until late at night. Sally figured he had trouble sleeping, and that wasn't unusual. She had to admit there were times that she had bad dreams and couldn't get back to sleep when she woke up. Sometimes, she remembered the dreams, but other times, she didn't. When she remembered them, they were the things of nightmares, and she wished she couldn't remember them. Sally dreamed of an abusive alpha wolf and the pleasure that he got when he took out his anger on females. She was just an observer, and there was nothing she could do, but she wished she could take a gun and shoot the SOB.

These terrorists were similar to him, only they weren't as bad, and they didn't have the kind of control that he did. Why was she having these dreams? Maybe so she would know where the bodies were buried if she ever came face to face with the evil one. Sally didn't really understand, and she figured it must be one of those talents she had because she was a wolf, even though she didn't have enough blood to shift. Her gifts included improved senses but not as well as paranormals had, and slightly enhanced speed and strength, but again not as good as paranormals had. Since she couldn't shift, she didn't really understand why she still had some qualities, even if in lesser amounts, than a wolf would.

Breakfast was ready, and she had made a little more than what was required for those who were there. No one had come out yet, but Sally's eyes turned to the door. There was a knock just moments later, and then someone came in. She tried not to show any emotions, but damn, the guy was gorgeous. His hair was black as coal, and his eyes were too. His complexion was swarthy, and the male was tall, almost seven feet tall, and well built.

"I think I'm at the right place. My name is Renard. Who might you be?"

"My name is Sally, and I am the office manager."

He held out his hand, so she gave him hers, and he turned it over and kissed it. It was hard to deny that she almost melted into a puddle on the floor.

"I catch a hint of other but not enough to determine what it is. I am a wolf. Tyne said I might have to train, even though it's not necessary. Maybe I can train with you?" Renard suggested.

"I don't think so. I am the field manager, and I make those determinations," Xantos clarified.

“I am Renard, and you are?”

“I am Xantos. You will be training with me.”

“That's fine. There is a marvelous aroma here. Is the food available to everyone?” He asked.

“It is.”

Sally rushed around to fix his plate and hand it to him. She fixed her own and then sat down by him. Things may be looking up here now. She felt drawn to him, but not in the same way she was drawn to Xantos. This guy would be fun to talk to, flirt with, and hang out with. It was amusing that he and Xantos didn't get along, but perhaps that was just two alpha wolves competing for dominance. She was sure that Xantos would let Renard know that he was in charge in many small ways. It was just another reason to stay away from Xantos. He was too controlling and too alpha.

Maybe having Renard here would help put him in his place. It might or it might not. She needed to stop worrying about Xantos and concentrate on her job. All the crew were gone, and she needed to check supplies. She checked them daily and ordered them as required. Some linen and a few small items would be needed soon, especially since more crew members were on their way. Tomorrow, the next one would arrive. This one was newly trained and may need to work with Xantos for a while. That wouldn't make him happy. Sally started to hide her smile, but no one was there, so she let it show.

She could hear the door open, but she wasn't expecting anyone right now. Sally made sure both zappers, as she called them, were ready, then headed to the front desk. The girl standing there was pretty but looked shy.

“May I help you?”

"I'm early. My name is Cindy Lou, and Tyne sent me. I thought it would be better to come now and settle in than in the morning just in time to start work."

"That sounds logical. Let me take you to your room so you can put your stuff away." Sally offered.

Cindy Lou turned to her as she moved through the door. "Thank you. I'll come down after I get settled in."

The girl had good manners, and that impressed Sally. Not everyone she worked with had manners. It was good to have her new person here and not have to worry about it. It was always a worry whether they would arrive or if something happened to them before they got here. As much as working with the girl would annoy Xantos, her being pretty might make up for that. Sally wouldn't worry about it because she had plenty to do. Even if they didn't make appointments in the office, they were still available to take them on the phone and online. Tyne considered canceling any appointments in the offices due to the risk they presented and the extra time they required. Most people said they preferred making their appointments from home.

Sally had to admit that she preferred not having people constantly coming in and out of the office. It was difficult enough to deal with specific customers on the phone where at least you could move the phone away from your ears, so they didn't blast it. Sometimes, their complaints were ridiculous, and she really didn't know what to tell them except by giving them the number to the headquarters. Moe was good at dealing with these things, and she certainly was getting enough practice since everyone sent their troublemakers to her. Poor Moe, but she had a great mate that would make her feel better at the end of the day so Sally wouldn't feel sorry for her.

Cindy Lou came into the room around lunchtime. "Why don't you come in and sit down? I will get you something to eat," Sally offered. "Tyne sent some free food until everyone got settled. I've been fixing some."

“If it's not too much trouble, I would appreciate it. Traveling makes me hungry.”

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“It's no trouble at all. The crew doesn't usually arrive here until supper time. They come in one at a time or sometimes two. We can go over some of the rules and some of the information while you eat.” Sally should have said while we ate because she got herself a plate, too.

“Often when you go to a new field office, they will have a booklet for you telling you about the places to eat and other things that you need to know, but this one is too new, and we haven't gotten that yet. You'll work with Xantos, and he'll tell you what he knows, and eventually, everyone will figure it out. I've started gathering some of the information, but it's not enough to be of any use to you. That's another reason that we've been provided food for about a month. I'm sure you're aware that I am the office manager, and Xantos is the field manager.”

“I am, but I don't know much about either of you,” Cindy Lou mentioned.

“You'll just have to make up your mind for yourself as you get to know us and the others at the office. Most of them are new. I can't tell you much. I've not even known Xantos for very long.”

“That must be hard working with another manager that you don't know. Or maybe you're one of those people who just enjoys getting out there in a new crowd and getting to know everyone? I'm a little too shy to do much of that, and once I'm cleared, I'll only have a partner to work with, and I'll get to know the rest of you a little at a time.”

“That's the best way to get to know people. I do need to warn you that some terrorists are working in this area, and you need to worry about safety above all else,” Sally

explained.

“Moe filled me in on most of that, and I've had some training in self-defense and even in fighting, but with a partner, someone will have my back, and I'll have theirs. I also have a panic button, and Moe said everyone in the field will be getting one. They may even hand them out to the people in the office since often you guys are in the office alone.”

Sally had to admit that that sounded like a good idea. There were times when people had been attacked, and they had found them when they hadn't come back, which could give those bad people time to cause a lot of damage. She did wonder why they hadn't told her that themselves and had left it to Cindy Lou to inform her. It was true that they were busy at headquarters, just like they were busy here. There was no point in worrying about it, so she wouldn't. Moe and Tyne had their own way of dealing with things. They also had super-secret plans in place all the time, and even when a person was part of the plan, they didn't always know about it until the end.

She had to admit that it was nice to have someone to talk to, at least until the others started arriving and it got loud, and everyone was questioning who the new girl was. Sally just let Cindy Lou handle it as she quietly finished her breakfast. Most of the other people got their own plates, and she didn't have much to do until they all began to leave. Then she cleaned up the mess, and she and Cindy Lou talked. After that, the phone started to ring, and half the calls made no sense at all. Perhaps they were just trying to ensure she was there. If that was true, an attack was imminent. She was as prepared as she could be. She would have extra help, and her new friend had a panic button. Why that would make her feel better, she wasn't sure, but it did.

The calls had been almost nonstop until lunchtime, and she took the phone off the hook so she could sit down and eat lunch with Cindy Lou. That was when there was a knock at the door. Cindy Lou gave her a nod as she went to answer it with her hand on her Taser.

“Hello there. I'm new to this area, and I heard that food was available here.”

“You've been misinformed. We only cook for ourselves, and the boss does not allow us to sell to the public.” Sally informed.

“It's cold out here, so could I come in and warm up?”

“We don't know you, and this office is not open to the public.”

“Aren't you being harsh for a business?” The guy asked.

“I'm just following the rules. I didn't make them. Letting strangers in could make me lose my job, so I'm sure you understand that I'm not going to do that.”

At this point, he had given up being nice and tried to force his way in. She tasered him. When he fell, it was evident that he was not alone. She tasered the next guy, too. At this point, Cindy Lou had moved her way up to the door and tasered the third and fourth guy. It seemed they had enough because the rest of them ran away, leaving their fallen buddies behind. Not much loyalty in that group. One of them began restraining the guys who had tried to force their way into the building while the other one was on alert with their Tasers. They were a good form of protection, and the enemy had not yet found a way around them. Sally knew that they couldn't rely on them entirely and needed to be prepared for the possibility of fighting by hand or some other form of protection if they did find a way around the Tasers.

As they usually did, they called the state police, and with the guys who had fallen restrained and left where they lay, they locked the door in case anyone came back and sat down to have a glass of wine. Moe had known what she was doing when she had included this wine. It helped them relax, and it tasted like dessert, which was the kind of wine that she and apparently Cindy Lou liked. It was an hour before the police arrived, and they took their statements and dragged off the four miscreants. The

police searched their pockets and handed the money over to the business, which had been disrupted because of the attack.

Since nothing had really been damaged, Tyne should be pleased. These attacks were still disruptive and sometimes caused people to quit because they were afraid that the enemy would win and because they didn't know what these guys would try next. So far, they have been losing every time, but that could change. By the time the others arrived, they were very relaxed. Everyone got their own supper because Sally didn't offer to get a plate for anyone. Cindy Lou got to explain about the attack. She had a little bit of a storytelling gene. She made it sound very exciting, as if life hung in the balance. That could have been true, but it hadn't been because at no time had the enemy had the upper hand.

Everyone got excited and applauded when she got to the part where they won and later when the police came and dragged them away. That was always her favorite part because then the enemy was gone, and she didn't have to deal with them anymore. She wasn't sure if they went to the state police prison or the paranormal one. It would serve them right to be in a paranormal prison surrounded by the worst of what the paranormal world had to offer. Sally wasn't sure if they could survive there, but she didn't really care because they were trying to kill her and the others who worked with her. Paranormals weren't affected by alcohol, but she wasn't a true paranormal, and she had a good buzz going. Maybe that had been a mistake, but if she made it upstairs and fell into her bed, she would sleep until the morning and stay out of trouble.

She almost made it to her room, and she was even in the suite that she shared with Xantos when he appeared out of nowhere and stepped in her way. "I feel bad that you were in danger again, but at least this time, you had someone here to help you."

"I was fine and would have been fine even without Cindy Lou there. It was good to have her there because she made it sound like an exciting adventure, and I can't do that. Thank you for your concern, but I am exhausted and really need to get to sleep,"

Sally admitted.

“Just one more thing,” Xanto said, and then he pulled her in his arms and gave her a sweet kiss that made her imagine things that she didn't need to.

He let her loose for a moment. She pushed away and hurried to her room. It seemed her buzz had worked itself out now, and she was completely sober and needy. It made it hard for her to fall asleep well, as she often found herself dropping into bed and sleeping instantly before she knew it. It was all his fault. She didn't understand why he'd done it. There was no way to figure out Xantos, and she was sure that he liked it that way. When she finally fell asleep, she was plagued with dreams of an evil man doing evil deeds. She hoped never to see him or be involved in anything that he was involved in. It worried her because there was something familiar about him, and she had a feeling that she would meet him someday. That wasn't something that she looked forward to.

It was morning, and she dragged her butt out of bed, getting ready and then hurrying to the kitchen to get breakfast going. She wasn't sure why she had taken on that job, but it seemed to make things easier for everyone she worked with, and that wasn't a bad thing. She knew she needed to make extra because they were expecting company. Sally had no sooner thought it than Harry appeared before her, and she almost jumped out of her skin.

“I love seeing you, but I wish I was more prepared for when you suddenly appear. Let me fix you a big plate of food for breakfast, and then we will discuss whatever it is you're here for.”

“I'm sorry that I startled you. You know that you are one of my favorite people ever, right?”

Sally knew that she was Harry's favorite whenever she was cooking food and feeding

her. That was all right because she also knew it was essential to feed Harry so that she could do the important work that fell on her shoulders.

“It's alright. If things weren't happening around here, I probably wouldn't startle so easily. Here's your plate, and I'll fix mine, and then we can eat together.”

Harry squealed. “Biscuits and sausage gravy! I love this, and you gave me eggs and hash Browns, too. It must be hard to find this food out here. The only place I've gotten that before in Alaska is at Joey's, and she's rich.”

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“Tyne provided the food, and I just cooked it. I'm glad I fixed your favorites because I wasn't sure what they were for breakfast. It's usually lunchtime when I see you. I'd forgotten why, but now I remember that you were going to strengthen the security. Anything I can do to help?”

“Since you offered, I might need some of your strength. The meal is an excellent start, but if the security needs to be strengthened a lot, I might need energy from you and anyone else who has some to offer.” Harry said with great seriousness. “I'm worried about you guys because they seem to be attacking more than they usually do, and you are so isolated. You still have your artifact, right?”

“Of course I do. It's so beautiful that it is no hardship to wear. At first, I thought it was a white wolf, but I realized now that it was silver. Even though those don't exist, it's still pretty. I'm guessing they're an alpha pair since he is black.”

“Exactly.” Harry winked at her.

What did that mean? Did it mean she was right, and silver did not exist, or did it mean that she didn't know what existed? While she knew something about the paranormal world, especially wolf shifters, she was sure there was a lot she didn't know and maybe didn't even want to know. She knew the evil guy she dreamed about was a wolf shifter because he shifted in her dream, and he was a shaggy and ugly-looking wolf, but he was black. His wolf eyes were dull, and she felt that was because the wolf didn't like the way the human side behaved, but the human side was in control. Wolves generally weren't evil unless they had been abused or tortured, and that was not the case here. It was the man who was cruel, and he took control of his wolf, forcing it along with him.

“I lost you there for a moment. Where did you go?”

“I've had some bad dreams since I've been here, and I'm trying to figure them out,” Sally explained.

“It's a shame they aren't hot dreams because I would want to hear about those.” Harry giggled, and Sally had to laugh right along with her.

It was too bad that they weren't hot, sexy dreams, but maybe she didn't need those either because she knew who those would be about. He just made it worse by kissing her. Sally turned her attention to her breakfast and managed to finish it at the same time Harry did. That was only because she didn't eat half the food that Harry did, but she couldn't do magic with her food, so that was only fair. It was nice to have the little witch here, and she had to admit that sometimes when she was here all day alone, she got a little lonely.

Chapter 3

Sally

He'd lost his mind, and that was the only explanation for what had just happened. Xantos licked his lips, and her taste was still on them, and it was good. Why had he done that? That was something he would have to figure out because he'd decided not to do anything unless she showed that she was interested. Sally hadn't shown the slightest interest until he had kissed her, and that didn't really count because she had been half drunk. That could give her a little bit to think about, and that was the way he needed to look at it. If that didn't prompt her to consider being together, nothing would. He'd get a good night's sleep, but he knew he was going to dream about her. It was his own fault, really.

It was morning now, and he headed downstairs to grab a bite of breakfast. He

wondered what she'd cooked, and he was surprised to see what looked like steak and eggs. That had to be Caribou. Either she'd been hunting, or she'd bought some from someone who had. The food smelled delicious, and he really didn't care where she got it from. Sally had a way of finding local food at a reasonable price, or she'd be charging them something. Perhaps the boss was paying. It was hard to say because she didn't talk about it. He grabbed some food, said thanks, and sat down and ate like a wolf. He'd be training Cindy Lou, the new girl, today. He hoped things would go well so he could let her go the next day. They would be getting someone new almost every day until they were filled up.

Once that happened, he'd be doing more supervising, but he could handle it. He was sure Sally wouldn't have any problems either. With a full crew, she wouldn't have to go out in the field or do any training. That would give her time to do the office work. Xantos watched Sally out of the corner of his eye while he continued to eat. He did that often, and he was sure she'd never noticed, and he was glad because if she did, she would probably have something to say about it. She was a beautiful girl with soft curves despite being short. Most of the ladies who worked out of this office were of short stature. On that rare occasion that she smiled, it lit up her face and made you want to smile at her. Her eyes were green, which complemented her hair well, as it had a tendency to appear red in the light.

The others had arrived about the time he finished his food. They all grabbed a plate and filled their own. When he was done, he went out and checked the trucks to ensure they were fully supplied. Cindy Lou either didn't eat much, or she ate quickly because she joined him in no time.

“I would have helped with the truck had you not started early.”

“That's all right. Maybe next time you'll get there early and get it done.”

“I did well with my training, and you will probably cut me loose after today, so that's

unlikely to happen," Cindy Lou observed.

Xantos hoped she was right and that he would be able to cut her loose after that. He simply enjoyed working alone, and he had no need for company. If he got lonely, it was after work was over because he was busy while working, and there was no time to miss the company. He liked to get things done quickly, stay on schedule, and earn the bonuses that he usually qualified for. Since he worked alone, he didn't have to share the bonus, and he received the entire amount. It wasn't that he was greedy. It was that he was building towards his future because he wanted a lovely home someday. When he'd been little, the pack house had been nice enough, although it had its oddities. Once they had left, they never had a nice place to live again. That had not been his mother's fault because they had been on the run, often leaving a place about the time that it started to feel like home.

"You sure think a lot."

"Thinking is often underrated. How can you do anything well if you don't think about it?" He asked.

He'd given her something to think about, and now maybe she would leave him alone. They arrived at their first job. He sensed no danger, so they both went in and completed the task. It was a small job. It had been easy, and she had contributed what was expected of her. Once they started working, he appreciated that she didn't talk and concentrated on her job. She enjoyed talking so much that he had worried that she would pay attention to what she was doing. Hopefully, the rest of the day will go the same. They packed up and headed to the next place. It also went easily, as did the next. The fourth place triggered his inner alarm. Not because the house looked abandoned but because it didn't. Xantos couldn't say precisely why, but something seemed wrong here.

"Do you feel it, too?" Cindy Lou asked.

“Yes, something is wrong here. We need to make sure, so I will go in, and if anything happens, call for backup.”

She held up her hand. “See, I have a panic button. I will press it first and then make the call.”

He just nodded and headed to the door with a couple items that he could use against whoever was there. Maybe he was wrong because a lady answered the door, and she didn't look stressed or worried. She invited him in so he could do his work.

“I'm glad you got here because we've really been wanting the security system. I've heard there's a lot of trouble going on around here, and I don't need any of it. Are you working alone today?”

Why did that sound strange to me? It was almost like she knew that I worked alone most of the time. Were they working with women now?

“Where did you want me to start?” He asked, ignoring her question.

“I'll show you.”

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As soon as he entered the back room, he saw that there were several guys in it waiting for him. The Taser he brought with him was immediately put to good work, and he pushed his back up against the wall so no one could get behind him. It was a shame he didn't have a panic button because he could certainly use one. His hammer had taken out one guy, and he glanced over at the woman, seeing that she was excited to watch the fight. What the hell was wrong with her that she would like something like that?

Xantos had taken almost all the males out, but he hadn't watched her close enough, and she hit him with the Taser. Even a paranormal could be taken down with one of those, and he was. As he started to fall, all he could do was hope that Cindy Lou had pushed that damn panic button. He woke, and someone had taken his shirt off and unbuttoned his pants.

“Glad to see you're waking. Paranormals certainly have a big package. Maybe I'll put it to good use before we take you out.” She observed.

She was about to put her hand in his pants when the doorbell rang. “Who the hell is that? I thought he was alone. Maybe it's someone you guys can have fun with?”

One of the guys went to answer the door, but he didn't come back, so she sent the other guy. He didn't come back either, so she had to go herself. Since he was tied up, he began to work on the ropes that had been tied around him. He heard a scream, and he hoped like hell it was the female and not Cindy Lou. It was a few minutes, and Cindy Lou entered the room. She quickly cut him loose.

“The police are on their way, and I tied that stupid bitch up as well as the two guys.

I'd heard they only used guys, but apparently, they found a girl as sick as they were.”

Xantos had to admit that had he been alone, he'd have been in a world of hurt. He'd never expected a female to be in on this kind of crazy stuff. That had been a mistake and one he wouldn't make again. If nothing else, Xantos had learned a valuable lesson, Cindy Lou could take care of herself. He wouldn't let her work on her own the next day. There was too much danger. She would need to work with someone. There was a knock on the door. The troopers had arrived.

“We have job security because of you. How many this time?” Carl asked.

He was the trooper that showed up the most often in this area. The guy was a polar bear, seven feet tall, with blonde, almost white hair that was shaved in a buzz cut. His eyes were pale blue, and his skin a light color. Cindy Lou was giving him an eye, and Xantos had a feeling the male had no trouble with the opposite sex.

“We’ve got 6 males and a female. She was the ringleader, and I couldn't tell that she was involved in it until it was too late. This one is a sadistic bitch.”

“I would have never expected it either. These guys don't even like women except so they can abuse them.”

“She's as bad as any of them, and maybe she's related to one of the bosses, I don't know,” Xantos admitted.

“She won't like it where she's going.”

“Maybe she will if she is in a position to take advantage of others. I heard a lot of that happened in that place.”

Stories about the council prison were pretty bad, and the women were often

mistreated, but someone like her would probably be at the top of the heap doing a lot of the mistreatment. Couldn't help but hope that she would be on the receiving end of a little bit of it for what she had done to him.

“I've got your statement, and my partner will load these people up. We'll have to squeeze them in the back, but that'll be all right.”

Xantos waved as they drove away. It was time to move on to the next job, and I hoped it would be easier. Cindy Lou didn't seem like she was going to quit. After what they had been through, many of the new ones who didn't know what was going on would. She was a wolf, but that didn't guarantee you that she would put up with this kind of stuff. Apparently, she was going to, and she had been well-trained in case she ran into any of it. He was glad that she'd been well-trained because she'd saved him from indignity and possibly worse. It was something he wanted to forget and would not talk about.

They moved on to the next place, and for the rest of the day, they had no problems. He knew that didn't mean anything because tomorrow was a new day. It was clear that nothing would stop these people unless they were all eliminated. Tyne had made a deal with them at one point, and they claimed this was a renegade, but how many renegades were there? They had too much support and too much money, and they had cleaned out their pockets before turning them over to the state police. There had been at least \$10,000 between them. The support they had and the money available to them was just too much for a group that had broken off from the rest.

Xantos wondered if Harry would still be at the office or if she had already completed her task and left. He liked Harry and wouldn't mind if she was still there. Sally liked Harry as well, and they usually had a good time when they got together. The extra magical protection would be a good thing for anyone in the office, especially if they were alone. It would be nice to know that they were safe when they were sleeping, too. They were almost back, and he wondered what Cindy Lou would think of Harry.

Since she had been at the main office, she probably already knew her. Everyone that was around Harry usually knew her. That little witch stood out.

They pulled into the back of the office, and he was surprised to see that they were the first to arrive, even though they had had a great deal of trouble. The two of them went into the office, and Harry was having a snack with Sally. Both loaded a plate and sat down with Harry, and they all began to talk while they ate.

“You guys have the best food here,” Harry observed.

“Sally is a great cook, and Tyne buys the best,” Xantos pointed out.

Cindy Lou didn't say anything, but she listened intently.

“How are you liking it here, Cindy Lou?” Harry asked.

“There's a lot of action because we were just attacked in the middle of our day, and there was a pile of them.”

“Sometimes, it's great to have a little action and sharpen your fighting skills.”

“There was a girl in charge, and she was a vicious bitch. She deserves to have a tough time when she gets to prison.” Cindy Lou observed.

“She must be bad since you're usually kindhearted.” Harry declared.

“That only goes so far, and I believe that one is not redeemable.”

Xantos had to admit that he was glad that she wasn't offering up any details. He also had to agree with everything that she said. He also hoped that the female got what she deserved.

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“They go to the council prison, so I'm sure she won't be having much fun,” Harry admitted.

“That depends on what she considers fun because she is a bad one,” Cindy Lou offered.

“Sally and I got a lot of work done. I'm hoping it'll keep you all safe when you're at the office. You still have your artifact?”

“I do, and I appreciate you making it for me. Does Xantos have one, too?” She asked.

“I don't have one yet, but Harry said as soon as she has a chance, she'll get me one.”

“I've got you on the calendar for this weekend. Marissa is going to help me, and I really need the help, so it'll be powerful enough to do you some good.” Harry assured.

He had to admit that after what had happened today, he would be thrilled to have an artifact. He wished he had one strong enough to rebuff a physical attack, but he knew that it was unlikely. Those that could do that usually had to be made by a circle of witches or the council. It was hard to get the council to do anything like that, and while Harry might have access to a circle of witches, she probably had limited favors and wasn't going to use one for him. She wouldn't know how significant his risk was because she wouldn't know what that female had done, and he wasn't going to tell anyone. From what he'd seen, Cindy Lou wasn't going to tell that either because she knew it embarrassed him.

“How are the other new people doing?” Harry asked.

“Everyone seems to be doing alright," Xantos admitted.

“Too bad. If you were having problems, Tyne would have probably let me come and work for a little while since you are having the terrorist difficulties.”

“It is a shame because I would really like you to come and work for a while," Xantos admitted.

“Aw, you love me.”

“Everyone loves you, Harry, except the bad guys, and even some of them seem to love you, and at the very least, they respect you," Sally offered.

“That's because I'm famous.”

“It's true. You are famous," Cindy Lou agreed.

“Do you think Tyne might let you come anyway just to give us a boost?” Sally asked hopefully.

“You never know what he might do. The problem is that I'm behind on the cases I get for my business. I do indeed have an assistant handling lost cats, dogs, and minor lost items, but the more challenging cases are the ones I must attend to, and I have five of them right now. I've been fitting trips like this one in every time I close the case," Harry admitted.

“I wish I could help you, but I've got no magic," Sally explained.

Harry gave her a hard and close look. “I wouldn't say you have no magic; you just

don't have witchy magic.”

What the hell does that mean? Xantos hoped that Sally would ask, but apparently, no one was going to touch that statement. It killed the conversation for a bit until Cindy Lou started it back up with girly stuff. That was when he headed to his room to watch television. He had no interest in the kind of stuff they were talking about now. He scrolled through the different shows that were offered and settled on something manly to take away the bad taste of all that girly talk.

Eventually, Xantos got ready for bed, and it was not hard to fall asleep. When he woke, it was time to tackle a new day. He would be on his own since he had cut Cindy Lou loose, and he hoped that neither of them would run into any trouble. After he got ready and had breakfast, he hurried out to the truck, making sure he had all his supplies before checking his phone for the list and heading out. His list always had five locations. Sometimes, she would add a couple of possibilities in case something didn't work out or he was having a fine day.

It would be nice to have a fine day and not have to worry about being attacked, just working through his jobs, getting them done, and moving on. The first job was one of those easy ones because it already had a security system in place, and all the wires were already in place. He had to remove the old box and put in a new one, but that was not difficult. The old company had done a good job, and that was not why they had gone out of business. The owner had stolen them blind and left for unknown parts. As far as he knew, the guy hadn't been found yet. He'd caused a lot of hardship for his employees and customers, so he hoped he'd get caught and be brought to justice.

The hole that had been left behind presented Tyne with numerous opportunities but filling that hole had given them all considerable responsibility. This second job had never had security because it was a new building, but it wasn't difficult either. Every job he completed without issue was a blessing from the goddess. This may be a good

day. Xantos was afraid to hope, and yet it was hard to help when things were going so smoothly, and the third job also went fine. It was time for lunch, and he was almost afraid to stop because sometimes that changed his luck. He'd made a habit of packing lunch because there just weren't places around here to eat. Sandwiches and chips with a piece of fruit or salad on the side or what he usually packed and today was no exception.

He also took a big container of coffee and a small container of tea, which was mainly to wash his food down at lunch. There was little traffic in this area, and it wasn't hard to find a place to pull over and enjoy his meal. With lunch behind him, he headed on to the fourth place. He felt a little more secure since Harry had given him and Sally a panic button. He'd never really thought about having one before, but recent events had changed his mind, and he was happy to have it.

Done with his break, he was ready to go to his fourth location. He had gone close to it before he had pulled over for his break, and now, he was there in just moments. It was a big house, and some might call it a mansion. Xantos couldn't say why, but he felt a little nervous going up to the door. When he knocked, a man answered who didn't look like he belonged in a house like this. It was obvious that there was going to be trouble here.

"About time you got here," the guy said. "Why are you looking at me like that? My sister married money, and she gave me a job. The husband doesn't like me much, but I don't care because he likes her, and he won't piss her off by firing me."

While that made sense, a guy like this wouldn't be explaining things to anyone. He kept his hands on his Taser as the guy led him into the house. It didn't take long for the other guys to make an appearance, and he immediately began to Taser them with both hands. Six guys had all gone down with the Taser, and that showed him that Tyne only had about the best equipment. He began to restrain them, and once he had them all restrained, he pushed his panic button and then put in a call. Now, he needed

to go through the house and determine if the owners were present and alive. He found the male terrified and tied up in a bathtub. Quickly, he untied him.

“Where is my wife?” The man asked.

Xantos had been afraid of that. They didn't do much to the men until the end when they killed them, but they terrorized and sometimes raped the females.

“We need to look for her because I haven't found her yet.”

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When they found her, she was tied up naked on the bed, but it didn't look like they'd had a chance to do anything yet. That was probably why they had wanted him to arrive quickly and be done with him so they could get to her. She was hysterical, and her husband tried to calm her, but it seemed to have no effect. He was sure it would be a long time before she was anywhere near back to normal. He left them in the bedroom, and he went to search for the bad guys, finding a lot of money and a few pieces of paper that he pocketed so they might find out what the rest of them were up to. The State Patrol arrived more quickly than usual and immediately began hauling the suspects out of the house and squeezing them all into the back of a car.

He didn't know either of these troopers. They returned, took his statement, and released him. Xanto started to leave when the husband stopped him.

“We need our security system more than ever, so please go ahead and put it in.”

He just nodded and went out to get his equipment, then began to put it in as quickly as possible. The husband was right, and they did need security. Once it was in place, these people were less likely to bother them because they were looking for someone who needed security. The whole point of all this had been to lure the security specialists in. Xantos was glad to get the job done and get out of there. He wished them well, but he was happy to go. Heading to his next job, he wondered what he would find there. It would be the last job of the day, and it could be easy. He could only hope so.

This place looked like a small business, and he could smell food cooking. Could it be a small restaurant that served the local area? The aroma of food coming from it was really good, and he hoped that was the case because he would certainly buy

something if it was. The sign on the door said 'Open,' so he went in. A lady stood behind a counter wearing an apron and a welcoming smile.

“What will it be today?” She asked.

“I'm actually here to put in your security system, but before I leave, I wouldn't mind taking some food with me.” He admitted.

“You look like you have a sweet tooth, and I have a lot of baked goods because I backed up a bunch today. Where do I need to take you, so you know where to set up my security? All these terrorist attacks have really worried me. Several people live here with me, but most of them work outside at other jobs and are gone either part of the day or part of the night.”

“I can understand why you'd be nervous, and I can get this done in an hour or two, depending on how large the place is and how many windows and doors there are.”

“Just follow me.” She instructed him as she led him to the back of the house and gave him a tour of all the windows, doors, and every place he needed to see.

He headed outside, retrieved his equipment, and then came back in to get to work. The lady must have been a fantastic cook because the smell of the food drove him crazy the whole time he was working, and it made him work harder. When he was done, he was also ready to eat. The baked goods hadn't been in the glass-fronted container before, but they were now. There was a pie, and he couldn't tell exactly what kind it was, but he was going to buy the whole damn thing. That's what he ordered 1st, and then he bought some fried chicken because he hadn't had that in a long time. She packed that up for him, and he hurried out, hoping he might still be the first one back.

Xantos was thrilled when he made it back first, even with the problems he'd had and

stopping to get food. He parked in the back and took his big bag of food inside. This was his treat, and he had enough to share with someone if someone was nice to him. As he entered, Sally looked his way, and he saw that she was curious about what was in the bag, but she wasn't going to ask.

“I found a small restaurant out by the place where I worked last. The food smelled so good that I bought some and brought it back with me.”

“Could you give me the address and a little information about the place? I'm trying to put together a list of places for the others because all the places I've worked at before have a little booklet like that.” Sally explained.

“I didn't know you were doing that.”

“It wouldn't do you any good since you're already out and about. You and some of the others will be the ones discovering these places.”

“That's true, but you've not asked me about any of the places I've discovered.” He mentioned.

“Have you discovered any other places?”

“No, but there's no way you would know that.”

“Not true. Look how excited you are about discovering a place, and you haven't even tasted the food yet.” Sally observed.

He had to admit that she was right. There was no way he could keep something like this to himself, and he hadn't.

“Want to try a piece of chicken?”

“I'd like the drumsticks. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.”

“I also got a pie, but I'm not sure what kind it is," Xantos admitted.

“You bought it without knowing what kind it is? What if you don't like it?”

“I don't know of any kind of pie that I don't like, but if I found one, I'm sure one of the others would like it.”

“I love the chicken. I have not had fried chicken in so long.” Sally admitted.

He took a bite from his piece and had to admit that it was excellent. They both finished their piece of chicken and then he pulled out the pie and cut it into pieces. He gave her a piece, and when she took a bite, it was evident that she liked it a great deal.

“Maybe the cook is the witch. This is gooseberry. That is so hard to find anywhere, even back home.”

“Yes, I don't believe I've ever had this pie before, but I love it," Xantos admitted.

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“I will give this place a good review. It will be the first one that is only in the book. There's really not much that we have been able to put down except places where you can get gas, but most of those have no food.”

He had to admit that it was exciting sharing this found food with Sally. They bonded over their love of food and the special treat he had bought. While he knew that Sally cooked food for them, he wasn't sure if she even liked doing it. Once the food Tyne had bought ran out, he wasn't sure if Sally would continue to cook.

Chapter 4

Something New

She knew that Xantos wasn't sure if she liked to cook or not, and really, she did when she had the time and everything she needed was available. Their relationship was changing, and she wasn't sure if she wanted it to. It had been sweet of him to share his food with her, and she had appreciated it. Sally knew it was still essential to maintain a little distance because she didn't want to fall for him. There was no way to say what he wanted, and he certainly wasn't going to tell her. That's why it was best not to get too close. The biggest thing was that she thought he was paranormal, and she was not and didn't want to be. There was no good reason she didn't want to be, as half her family was paranormal, and she had a hint of it in her. There was nothing that she had against paranormals, at least not most of them.

Perhaps the problem was that when a paranormal entity was malevolent, it had the power and strength to be so. She still remembered the stories she'd heard about her great-great-grandfather, and there were more like him out there. No one had been

able to take the power away from him until he died, and then his son was even worse, and that continued down the line. Evil humans were easier to remove, but even they could sometimes hold their power for many years. She didn't think she was a racist because she worked with many paranormals, and she liked most of them. Her most significant issue with Xantos might be that she wasn't ready to settle down, and she was afraid that he would get to her.

Xantos had shared his pie with the rest of the group, which was very generous, considering it was a good pie and probably cost him a significant amount. The fried chicken he'd not shared, and he had finished it off after giving her one piece. She wasn't sure that most of the others would have been as generous. They had all gushed over the pie, and then it was as if they realized that she had been doing much of the cooking. They had said that her cooking was good, too, but there was something special about the pie. What could she say? She agreed that it was a delicious pie and fruit that was very rare. She'd always loved gooseberries, and her grandma grew them in her garden, but she was far away.

Sally loved her grandma, and she suggested that Sally become a paranormal so she would live a long life because she did not want her granddaughter to die before she did. That was something she had not even considered because she did not want to be paranormal. She had to admit that she did wonder what it would be like to be with Xantos. He would be exciting in bed. She was sure of that, but she wasn't sure he would be the kind of guy that would mate anyone, much less her. Many paranormals had a thing about humans, as many humans had a thing about paranormals.

They were so different, and yet they shared the same world. She knew humans who had become paranormals and were perfectly happy, like Moe and Ariel. It was just something she didn't think she could do because they were both special, being white wolves, and she wasn't special at all. What if she mated one and then found she still couldn't shift? That would be terrible and hard not only on her mate but her children. It probably wouldn't affect them, but it might impact their children or, at the very

least, their grandchildren. Sally wondered, was that her real problem? What could be more unpleasant than entering the paranormal world and still not belonging? Did she fear not being paranormal enough to fit in with that life if she chose it? It was true she had been told all her life that she had enough to turn, but how could they be sure of that?

She cleaned up the dishes and the kitchen area, and now she was ready for bed. In Missouri, she had not been so lonely as she was here, even though she was surrounded by people part of the time. At the other office, she'd had her family close by and friends that she thought a lot of. It wasn't that there weren't any nice people here, but she didn't know them well, and she had held them at a distance. Taking this job was part of her plan to eventually be an office manager somewhere much closer to home. For the first time, she was beginning to wonder if that plan would ever come to fruition. What if she did this for nothing and was never offered a job closer to home? Her life might become a complete mess, and she might have to go home and go back to a field job like she'd had before.

Would that be so bad? Perhaps not on a day-to-day basis, but in terms of building something, she wouldn't be able to do so based on what she did as a field worker. Some of the others managed to save money to get a house and even a farm, but they worked all the time, and that was all they did. She wanted a little time for herself and to have a family someday. There were other offices close enough to where she lived that being a manager there would leave her enough time to do those things. Many people in the field did not want an office manager's job because of the responsibility. That didn't bother her as long as she had the possibility of getting home. Home had always meant everything to her, and it meant more to her than her job, but why couldn't she have both?

It was time to get ready for bed, and as long as she was here, she knew she wouldn't have a lot of time to do anything else. It was just one more reason to hope that she would eventually get home. She showered and then went to bed. Hopefully, she will

fall asleep quickly, as she felt very restless today and wasn't sure why. Sleep must have done her some good because she woke up and felt better. Things didn't look so bad in the morning. She got up, got ready, and headed downstairs to start the food. It was just one more thing she did to be a better manager. Honestly, to have something to do because there wasn't much to do here. It was all about work and doing the best job she could. The food was ready by the time Xantos came down. He was usually first. Others drifted down one at a time, and most of them fixed their own plate and sat at the table to eat.

“That pie sure was good. You think you would have any luck finding those gooseberries?” Cindy Lou wondered.

“I've had the same luck you would. Find some, and I'll make you a pie.” Sally said.

“I'll give it a shot, and I'll let you know if I find some.” She replied.

Sally hoped that Cindy Lou would find something, but she wouldn't expect it to be anything in particular. She had to admit that there was something odd about Cindy Lou. She was skillful and far too good to be a field officer, but that wasn't unusual, as many field officers who had been on the job for years were capable and simply didn't want to be managers. Renard was another example of someone far too capable of the job, but they would take them and be glad to have them. She was sure that Tyne had made some kind of arrangement with them and that they would only be there for a limited time.

Hopefully, that would be enough time for them to get the office running well when she would take whatever she could get in terms of experienced assistance. Sally would discuss that with Xantos, but she wasn't trying to get a close relationship. Her plan was to maintain a distance between them so that they wouldn't become involved. If they became involved, she was not sure that her heart would ever recover. She shook her head and tried to banish the depressing thoughts that were plaguing her.

Everyone was gone now, and she was there by herself. Her only distraction was her work, and right now, that was tedious paperwork. There was a knock on the door, and that always worried her. So, she got her two Tasers and placed them where they would be easily accessible. She went to the door and opened it, immediately knowing there was going to be a problem.

The guy looked like a bum. She knew that sometimes drawing conclusions could be a mistake, but he looked like the kind of guy who had been attacking them regularly, both in the field and at the office.

"I heard there was food here to buy, and I'm sure hungry," he said, but he couldn't come in because she was blocking the door.

"Sorry, this isn't a restaurant. The boss says only employees are allowed in here."

"This is a chance for you to make a little extra money. No one will know."

"I don't know how, but the boss has a way of finding out things. You'll have to find another restaurant or go out and hunt."

He tried to push his way in, and she tasered him, closed the door, and locked it. All the other doors should be locked, but she hurried to the back to check anyway since she wasn't the last one to have used it. That's when she caught several guys coming in the back. She felt like The Lone Ranger as she pulled both her Tasers and began to attack. They ran out of power, so she ran to the door that separated the back from the office and locked it. Sally immediately pressed her panic button and then put in a call to the state police, followed by a call to Moe. They were pounding on the back door, but it was a heavy metal door in a heavy metal frame and intended to hold off most people, especially humans. They were determined. She saw signs that the door was going to open. So, she did what any sane person would do and called for Harry.

“Harry, Harry, Harry.” And the little witch appeared.

“You guys have to find another way to deal with your emergencies. I had a suspect, and they were about to give in, and now I'll have to start all over. Boy, something smells good. Maybe it's not such a hardship to come here. Who is making all that noise? Is that the problem you're dealing with?” Harry asked.

At that time, the door flew open, and four men fell inside. “Lookie, lookie, lookie what we have here. Two girls that we can share. I only thought we would get one to play with.” The ugly old guy laughed like a loon. He wouldn't be laughing for long.

“You like to play, do you? I like to play too. Why don't we get this game going?”

Harry waved her hand, and the man turned into a frog. “Oh my God! Run! It's the frog Princess!” One of the other men screamed.

“It's cool being famous. Now that they're gone, why don't we eat something since it's about lunchtime anyway,” Harry suggested.

Sally just wanted to laugh. Harry was wonderful, and she had taken care of the problem even if a whole bunch of the guys had escaped. They could spread the word, and the others wouldn't be so anxious to come to the office or mess with the field personnel.

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“What do you have cooking?” Harry wondered.

“I've got chicken and dumplings, stew, chili, and ham and beans. I also baked a little bit yesterday and had some leftovers because Xantos bought a pie and shared it with everyone. I have blueberry muffins and pecan pie.”

“I'm so excited. Pecan pie is one of my favorites, and I also love blueberry muffins. As for the others, I'll take a little bit of everything because I love them all. I especially love chicken and dumplings because I don't get them very often. So, a little more of that would be nice. I just have to ask, where did you get the pecans?”

” They were in the food that Tyne sent for us. He gets the best things," Sally admitted.

“He does, especially when Moe is the one ordering it.”

They shared a laugh, and Sally filled up a big plate for Harry and a smaller plate for herself. She was sure that Harry would probably have another plate of the food and then a plate for dessert. Harry was worth her weight in gold, so she wasn't going to quibble over anything. If everything got eaten, she would just make more.

“You have no idea how much I appreciate you saving me. They would have torn up the office, too, once they took me out.”

“Those are some bad guys. I don't know where they keep finding them, but they're dumb guys, too, because no one should want to go to jail as a terrorist," Harry observed.

That was true, and she had no idea where they kept finding these guys, either. You would think that they'd work through all the unemployed bums that were lying around looking for an easy way to make money. Apparently, they kept finding more and more of them. Eventually, you'd think that they'd run out of them, but so far, that hasn't happened. When these guys went down, which they always did, all they were out of was money, and apparently, they had an unlimited amount of that, too. The office and their field workers had been vastly outnumbered but still managed to hold their own. One problem was that many humans were upset, and some even had a breakdown over these attacks. That was why it was so challenging for them to recruit the necessary workers for a new office like this one.

Sally was sure that they would always be shorthanded, but if they could just get to a certain level, they could get close to catching up. The way they managed the offices, with appointments only being made online or by phone, helped free her up so that she occasionally had the time to go out in the field and either train someone or work in a few locations. That wasn't a bad thing because it kept her speed up where it needed to be in case of an emergency when she had to work in the field.

"Lunch was great. Thank you. It's time for me to return to work. I hope the rest of your day is better than it's been so far," Harry observed, and she was gone in a flash.

Sally had to admit that her first half of the day had gone quickly, but now she had to get back on the tedious paperwork and put in any necessary orders. Even though being attacked made the day pass more quickly, she hoped she wouldn't have any more of those attacks to deal with. It would be nice if they could get rid of the terrorists altogether, and she wasn't sure why they couldn't. She got to work and plowed through her paperwork even though it was so dull that she worried she might fall asleep. She'd had a decent night's sleep, so she wasn't sure why she would be so tired.

Maybe it was just that the attack had wrung her out, and the excitement had been too

much for her. Sally checked the clock and saw that it wouldn't be long before some of the fieldpersonnel began to hit the door. She was surprised that Xantos was not already there. Now the predicament was, should she call him or just assume that he was okay since he usually was? The problem was that she had noticed the time and began to worry about him. Was it appropriate to do a welfare check when she had no real reason to suspect that he was in danger? Her problem was that she just couldn't get him out of her mind, and there was nothing she could do except give him a call.

Sally could hear the phone ringing, and he didn't answer. It didn't mean he was safe. He might have been busy and in no position to respond. If she was Harry, she could just flash away and check on him, but that was not the case. If she knew his location, she could call the customer and ensure that he was all right. She knew she couldn't bother Harry again unless she was sure there was a problem. The only choice she had was to call the closest location because he usually started at the furthest location and worked his way back. Dialing the number, she heard someone answer the phone.

“Hello?”

“This is Wolf Security. I was checking to make sure that our field personnel had gotten to you and was able to install your system,” Sally explained.

“Yes, he took care of our system right after lunch.”

“Thank you. I hope you enjoy the security of knowing that you have your system installed.”

She wasn't sure what to do now because he hadn't yet installed the system. If he had, he'd have come straight back. At least, she thought he would have. She prioritized his list and began making calls. Apparently, he had done his list in reverse order. It was when she called the last place that she heard somebackground noise and realized that he had been taken. That was when she summoned Harry.

"Xantos has been taken at this location," Sally said.

Harry grabbed her hand, and they flew away. When they arrived, they saw him immediately, and he was severely beaten and bloody. For some reason, the males decided to wait to kill him. The little witch flashed him away, and whatever was in the pockets of the bad guys piled on the floor. As soon as that was done, they all turned into frogs.

Harry flashed away the money, changed one of the frogs back, and let him run away. Then she flashed the frogs with them as they headed back to base. Sally had to admit that she was upset after seeing him in such terrible shape. She was worried and knew that he was in pain, but Harry had said that he would be alright, so she believed her. Harry flashed her into his room while she dealt with the frogs. Sally immediately got a wet cloth and began to wipe him down. She touched him and wished for healing, and she thought he might have improved a little, but she wasn't sure. He groaned, and she knew that he felt terrible, and there was little she could do about it.

They had beaten him badly, but he was strong, and he would work through this. Being a wolf would help him recover. This was a terrible place to be, and it wouldn't improve anytime soon. Thank the goddess for Harry and her magical powers. Harry joined her once she had finished what she was doing, which was changing the frogs back and calling the State Patrol. They would come get those bad guys and put them in jail. Things were getting crazy here, and it didn't look like they were going to get any better anytime soon. They would be taken to the council jail and thrown in with a bunch of paranormals, which was just what they deserved. Harry put a mild healing spell on him, and then she disappeared. She was one busy witch.

Harry had been wonderful, and she didn't know what she would have done without her. All she could do now was clean him up and hope he would recover quickly. Xantos was unconscious, and she leaned in to wipe the blood off. Even with the healing that Harry had done, he looked to be in bad shape. The little witch had said

that he would recover, but that recovery wouldn't be easy, and he needed to shift, but who could shift when they were unconscious? Sally wiped off some of the blood, and suddenly, he grabbed her.

"I want you so much," he said, pulling her in and giving her a passionate kiss.

This was something that didn't need to happen. There was chemistry between them, and she couldn't deny it, but not only was he not in his right mind, but she feared what would happen between them if she allowed it. She managed to pull away, and he went out again. Sally finished cleaning him up, and then she left him lying there, unsure what to do. She tried touching him and wanting him to get better, but she wasn't sure if that helped or not. Some said that touch healed regardless of who was doing the touching. She wasn't sure if that was true or not.

Sally headed downstairs and made sure that food was ready, and some of the other people began to arrive. They seemed to notice that Xantos had arrived, but no one seemed to know that he had been attacked. Once he shifted to his wolf, there would be no sign of it, so it was better that they didn't know. All she could do was hope that after supper, he would wake and shift. Sally touched her lips, and they felt numb from the passion that he used on her. She knew it could be so good, but she needed to steer clear of it. This was something they needed to avoid, and yet it kept happening. The chemistry was so strong, but they needed to fight it, and he hadn't been in any condition to fight it.

The others began to fill their plates, so she filled hers and a plate for Xantos and carried them both upstairs, where she sat and watched him, unsure of what to do for him. She tried to will him awake so that he could eat some food, which she thought would help. Sally was startled when Harry appeared.

"I'm just here to check on you and make sure he's going to be alright. He needs to wake so he can shift and eat a good meal and then sleep will help him more than

anything.” Harry said.

“How can we do that?” Sally asked.

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"I suggest you stand close to him. He'll be aware, and maybe he'll wake." Harry suggested.

"It's worth a try." Sally moved closer, and he reached for her.

Xantos moaned. His eyes began to open. Harry stepped forward, and he looked at her.

"I need you to shift," she said.

His eyes moved to her, and he shook his head.

"She already knows. So just shift."

He did, and his wolf was beautiful. It was a deep and glossy black, tall for a wolf, and looked strong and capable of putting up a good fight.

"You'll feel better now. You really needed this." Harry explained.

Sally didn't say a word. She just watched. He'd been willing to put up with the pain just to hide the fact that he was a wolf from her. What a stubborn male. Hopefully, he would recover, and no one would know what had happened. That was best. This group of terrorists didn't seem to want to stop, and they didn't care that they could be turned into frogs or turned over as terrorists to the local law. She wasn't sure what they could do or if there was anything that they could do to stop them. All she could do was hope that Tyne would send somebody to help them. A witch would be the best. Sally saw how terrified they were of Harry. Would they be afraid of another witch once they discovered that she could also turn them into frogs?

She glanced over at Xantos and saw that he was tearing into his food. Sally hurried downstairs, got another bowl of food, and carried it up to him. A bowl for a paranormal was not the same as a bowl for a human. His bowl was at least twice as large as hers, and he dug into it, too. When he finished the second bowl, he seemed much more satisfied and ready to go to sleep. She'd always heard that you healed the best when you slept, and as he fell asleep, she was sure that he would be better when he woke up.

"I've got to go now, but I think he'll be fine. Knowing alphas, he'll probably be ready to go to work in the morning." Harry explained.

Sally thought about sitting with him, but he was sleeping so deeply she didn't think he'd even know she was there. It was time for her to go to bed, and she hoped she would sleep well. She knew when she fell asleep, she would have sweet dreams of Xantos. The next morning, she remembered having sensual dreams all night long. When she arrived in the kitchen, she found Xantos sitting at the table, drinking coffee.

"How do you feel today?" Sally asked.

"Much better than yesterday. I heard Harry helped me."

"Without her, you wouldn't have been freed," Sally admitted.

"I'll have to find a way to thank her."

"Food is what she loves best."

"I know you're right, and I have an idea," Xantos offered.

Sally had an idea of what he intended. Harry would love gooseberry pie. Who

wouldn't? It was a good idea. If he went to his usual locations, he would be near there. She fixed him a plate of food for breakfast and handed it to him. He ate with a good appetite, which was a good sign that he was healing properly. That was all she wanted, and that was to make sure that he recovered from that awful experience. She fixed her own plate, sat down with him, and ate. The others slowly came out one by one, got their plates, and ate breakfast. It was time for her to compile the list, and she began to hand it out. Once they were all gone, it was time for her to get to work on the other tasks she had.

She hoped she wouldn't get attacked today, as she had had enough of it the day before. That old saying, wish in one hand. Yeah, that was the way things would be. So, she would be careful and make sure that she didn't leave anything to chance. The paperwork was tedious, and all she could think about was Xantos and the chemistry between them, as well as how much she would like to sleep with him. Sally needed to get her mind off of that because it was driving her crazy. There was no hope for a relationship between the two of them, and she just needed to remember that.

It wasn't long before she was alone in the office, back to the paperwork. She tried to work things out in her mind, but the situation between her and Xantos only confused her. Why was she so drawn to the male? Sure, he was gorgeous, but so were other males. He was also intelligent and capable, but she'd known others who were as well. What she felt around him was completely different from what she felt around anyone else, or she had in any of her previous relationships. She'd not even slept with him, and she felt more for him than she had for others that she'd had a strong relationship with. It was driving her crazy, and she wanted him far too much. It was so bad that she considered leaving so she wouldn't have to be around him anymore.

How would he feel if she were to leave? Would he even miss her? It was obvious that he felt something, too, but was it as strong as what she felt? Sally doubted that. If he did, he rarely showed it. This was something she would have to deal with, but she didn't know how. The only time he showed any feelings was when he was sick or half

asleep. She wasn't sure what that meant, but she was sure that that showed the feelings weren't strong enough, and he was able to fight them most of the time. Sally finally decided that she would stay as long as possible, and if things got worse, she would have to leave.

Chapter 5

All Things Change

He'd recovered from the attack and was as good as new. While Harry had been the one who had pulled him out, it was the fact that Sally kept a close eye on him that had led to him being saved. Had she not noticed that he had not come back to the office at his usual time, she wouldn't have called Harry, and Harry would never have helped him. Was he grateful? Damn straight, but he didn't know how to show her. Their relationship was weird, and he didn't understand it any more than she did. His feelings were hard to understand, and he knew that he wanted her in his life, but he wasn't sure how. She fought any feelings that she might have for him, and he had to admit that he did the same.

Under the circumstances, it would be hard to be ready when morning came. He got out of bed and stretched, and he could still feel a slight achiness even though his wolf had healed most of it. Xantos knew that had he been left with those brutes much longer, he might not have been able to recover. He was glad that Harry had been there to handle them because a little stint as a frog might make them appreciate the danger that they were in when they messed with paranormals. A stay in a paranormal prison was something they might not survive. It was hard enough on paranormals, but a human, few had lived through it, and he didn't feel bad about that. It wasn't just that they had tried to kill him, but the bastards were sadistic, and they had tried to put him through as much torture as they could before he died. That had turned out to be the only reason that he had survived.

He headed downstairs, and as soon as she saw him, Sally brought him something to eat. None of the others knew what had happened, or they would have already been asking questions and overwhelming him. It was best that they didn't know, and there was nothing they could do about it. The danger they faced was no greater than it had been before, and it was something they needed to be cautious about. Since they already knew what could happen, he didn't feel bad about not telling them that it had happened to him and he had almost died. Xantos had a feeling that Sally didn't track any of the others as carefully as she had him. He thought it odd that they had attacked him rather than one of the less experienced and weaker field personnel. That had been their tactic in the past, but they were changing their approach. Even though they'd not had any success with the weaker people on the team, they wanted to go against one of the strongest? Those terrorists made no sense.

By calling himself one of the strongest, he wasn't being arrogant; instead, he was being honest. It was just a fact. He wasn't sure what was going on with those people, but it was evident that no one in his group was safe. They rarely attacked the strong males, preferring instead to target the females, hoping that one of them might be weak enough to take her down and have their way with her. They had tried that more than once. He wasn't sure what had caused this change in their behavior, only that it was apparent they had undergone a change. If he had the opportunity, he intended to take them down and subdue them. Was he angry? Hell, yes, and he would show them just how angry he was if he got the opportunity.

They were all done with breakfast, and everyone hurried out to their trucks so they could start their jobs. They hopped in to complete their work and have a chance to be at the top of the list. He felt uneasy about going out after what had happened the day before, but he would get over it. He would stay at the top of the list and get those bonuses. Xantos wasn't going to let anyone beat him in anything. It was bad enough that he had been caught and abused and needed someone else to free him and heal him. That was something that he hoped would never happen again.

Checking to ensure that his truck was fully stocked, once he was sure it was, he hopped into the driver's seat and took off. He had five locations and two spares in case she got done early. Everything should be routine today because the whole group of those terrorists had been taken out, and surely that would make the others think twice about attacking him or anyone else. Sometimes, it was as though they didn't have a brain between them. If he was constantly being taken down and taken out to the point that no one knew what had happened to him or they told a wild story about being turned into frogs, he would stop and find another job. Why they didn't was beyond him.

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His first location looked innocent enough, but after yesterday, he would be checking things out much more carefully. When he knocked on the door, a young boy answered and invited him in. The kid took him on a tour through the house so he would see what he needed to do, and it was clear that there was no one else there. He had to appreciate his wolf senses because they would not let him down. Returning to the truck, he quickly gathered what he needed and got to work. The job was done quickly, and he marked it off the list, preparing to go to the next one.

Today was a better day as he worked his way through his list and got all the way to the last one. No, he hadn't taken a lunch break because he was too focused on completing his tasks for the day. He was to number five on the list, and if it went as well as the others, he might even manage an extra. As he arrived at the job, he felt nervous because the house looked like a complete dump and seemed like it would fall down if given a good kick. That would make anyone anxious, wouldn't it? His hand was on a Taser as he knocked on the door. An elderly gentleman answered, but he looked clean and reasonably well-dressed. This wasn't the way the others looked at all.

“My children have been bothering me about getting some kind of security because I live alone, and none of them are nearby.”

That made sense, and he wasn't the first one who had got security because they were older and had no one close by. The older man toured him through the house, showing him everything he needed to see, and then went back out to retrieve his equipment. The house wasn't too big, and he thought he could get it done quickly. When he was finished with the job, he told the man what he needed to do and headed out to his truck. That was when the trouble began because he was attacked. He was able to

knock several out with one Taser, and then he grabbed the other one and knocked the rest of them out. He looked around to see if there was anyone else that he needed to take out, but there wasn't. Xantos restrained them and contacted the state police.

He reported it, and then he left, going back to his office because he'd had enough for the day. Remembering that he needed to clean out their pockets, he did so before leaving. Admittedly, he was tired of dealing with these people, and he wished there was something he could do to remove them from the game. They seemed to think this was a giant game and that harassing and aggravating the security personnel was a form of entertainment. If he could figure out a way to cause them enough grief, they would stop. Then again, if being turned into a frog wasn't enough to make you quit, what the hell would? Xantos couldn't think of anything worse than being turned into a frog. He'd heard others speak of it who had been through it, and they said that it was a nasty taste in your mouth that didn't want to go away.

Back early, he headed into the office where food was cooking and fixed himself a large plate. Dealing with evil assholes seemed to build his appetite, and he fixed himself a large bowl.

"Any problems?" Sally asked.

"I was attacked again, and I restrained them and left them for the state police. Here's the money they had on them." He piled it on the table for Sally to get.

"They seem to be focused on you and the office," Sally observed.

He wondered why it was true. They were changing the way they did things. Going after the strong even though they had to know they would lose. Was that what they had been directed to do? Xantos heard noises at the door and saw that the other field personnel were coming in one by one. They fixed their plates and sat down with him and ate. When they were all finally there, he realized that none of them had been

attacked, and he was glad because they didn't need that on top of everything else. It was clear that none of them had any idea of the attack that he had gone through. He thought about telling them so they would be aware and cautious, but he realized that they should be careful anyway, and being nervous at work wouldn't help them.

Did any of them know something? No, because none of them said anything or looked at him differently. The phone rang, and Sally answered it. She looked up at him and held the phone out in a way that he realized the call was for him. He hurried to the office, where he picked up that phone, and he saw her put it down.

"I heard things were happening," Tyne mentioned.

"They've been coming after me and Sally. We don't know why, and we are not the best choices since both of us are a little stronger than some of the other ones."

"I wonder if they know something that I would not expect them to know. Something's going to be happening soon, and you're going to get a choice that you've not had before, both of you. I don't really know anyway that this group of people would have any idea what's happening. There must be another reason that they're focusing on the two of you. All of you need to be careful, as there are no attacks anywhere else. They are focusing strictly on your office."

Tyne had dropped that information bomb, and he was gone. Xantos couldn't imagine anything that was going to happen that would affect the terrorists. He also found it hard to understand how they could know something about paranormals that many paranormals themselves didn't know. How could they be aware of the inner workings of a world that they were not part of and wanted to destroy? They must have had inside information if they knew about something like that. What paranormal would be feeding them information like that? Or was it an outsider who had gotten some information that they shouldn't have?

This was difficult enough without adding more people and more information. These terrorists needed to be taken out. He wasn't sure why Tyne didn't just send them enough help to clear out these guys. Maybe he really didn't have that much help because he always seemed to be shorthanded somewhere. It was also possible that he was afraid of getting in trouble with the human police. It would look too much like a war, and they couldn't afford that kind of attention. Hell, there were a lot of reasons, so he guessed he could understand. Xantos also didn't understand what the big secret event was that was coming up and why Tyne kept hinting about it but wouldn't tell him.

He wasn't sure this was something he would be interested in, and he wasn't sure who else would be involved, as Tyne had also been hinting about that. Apparently, it was a life-changing event, and he would be in the middle of it. Maybe he didn't want to be in the middle of something like that. Xantos had heard Tyne had been involved in several activities concerning alphas. Hopefully, that wasn't what this was about. Xantos didn't know what he would say if that was what he was presented with. Yes, he'd love to fight the son of a bitch, maybe even kill him, but he didn't know how he felt about taking over a pack. No one in the pack had ever been strong, and they had given his mother and him no support whatsoever.

Why should he care about what happened to them? Their lack of care and concern was one of the reasons his mother was dead. He couldn't even remember any of the people in the pack because he had been isolated from them and so had his mother. Maybe that was partly so no one would care about them, and no one did. Reflecting on the past gave him a headache, and he tried not to dwell on it too much. Why was he thinking about it now? This might have nothing to do with what time I was thinking about. It could be a better job, one in management over multiple office fields. Yeah, right. He wasn't even sure the time had those kinds of positions available.

Xantos tried to push things out of his mind. It needed to be clear so he could get some

sleep since it was bedtime. That was not the best time for his thoughts to be racing, and as he took his shower, he tried to clear his mind of negative thoughts. Sally came to mind, and he was hard as a rock. His hand moved to his cock, and he began to stroke it. He closed his eyes, and Sally filled his mind as his hand closed firmly around his rod, and he stroked faster and faster. His orgasm was coming, and suddenly, his seed hit the wall of the shower and ran down to the drain. Her name was on his lips as he collapsed against the wall. What was this woman to him, and why couldn't he get her off his mind?

His sleep was surprisingly good, and he got up in the morning ready for whatever the day would throw at him. He was the first one downstairs, arriving even before Sally did. Since he wanted to eat what she cooked for breakfast, he went and prepared his truck first and then came back in. Sally was there now and in the middle of cooking food for everyone. It was hard to deny that she was a good person, one who would do that for everyone, even when she got nothing out of it. As soon as she saw him, she fixed his plate and then her own, and they sat there quietly eating.

Even without talking, they felt a sense of camaraderie, and he enjoyed sitting with her for breakfast. Other people began to arrive, and they fixed their own plates and sat down to eat as well. Some of them spoke, but most remained quiet. It was business as usual, and everyone quickly got their lists and headed out once their food was eaten. Xantos could only hope that he and Sally and he supposed the rest of the field crew would have a good day. The enemy had been more active than usual, and there was no reason to expect them to stop. All they could do was be careful and hope that they would survive until the enemy's interest was elsewhere or they ran out of money. They didn't seem to care about any of these people, and he labeled them cannon fodder.

He went to the farthest place to begin, and nothing stood out there. Each place after that had no problems, and he finished his five places early enough to add the sixth. He could only hope that losing so many people had slowed them down.

Xantosheaded back to the office and was the first one to arrive, giving him the choice of food that was cooked for supper. It felt good to be here alone with Sally, but it wouldn't be long before the others arrived. He had to admit that he wanted her badly, and the only thing holding him back was the fact that she didn't seem as interested in him as he was in her. That was hard on the ego and something he had never dealt with before.

Almost as if on cue, the first of the field crew arrived, followed by the rest. As soon as he finished supper, he went up to his room. He watched a little TV, but he also listened so he would know when Sally came to the room. It took a while, but when he heard her open the door, he went into the shared living space.

“I've thought about us a lot, and I'm not sure how you feel, but I can't get you off my mind.”

Sally blushed, and that told him that she had been thinking about him a lot as well.

“I thought of you, but I don't want to get involved with a paranormal. How would that work when I couldn't shift?”

He wasn't sure how to answer that, so he didn't say anything at all, and he went back to his room, where he lay in his bed and thought about her more. At least he had tried to sort out their relationship, even though it hadn't helped him at all. Sleep found him eventually, but he dreamed of her, and he remembered that in the morning. Xantos wasn't sure why he wanted that woman so bad, only that he did. His wolf was unhappy because he had expected to claim her or, at the very least, to have her for the night. That was a part of him that was not used to not getting what he wanted.

In the morning, he hurried to get ready and get down for breakfast. His wolf would have to be happy with a good meal and the company of the rest of their crew. In his head, he heard agrowl. Maybe his wolf was a little spoiled because where females

were concerned, he was used to getting whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. That wasn't going to work where Sally was concerned. He hurried downstairs and saw that Sally had made it before him. Breakfast was cooked, and as soon as she saw him, she got his plate ready and set it on the table. It wasn't long before the rest of their crew arrived.

Xantos went and checked out his truck and then came back in and grabbed his list. She seemed happy that he had taken an extra place the day before. Doing so would disrupt them, but it might help them catch up. He knew the Tyne hoped that they would catch up soon, but it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Tyne had discussed sending extra people in to do the catchup work. One of them might be Harry, and he knew that Sally would love that. She would go out into the field with her.

There was no doubt that some customers were becoming frustrated with the length of time it was taking to set up their security, especially given the recent increase in crime in the area. No one could blame them, but they were overwhelmed and handling everything as quickly as possible. If Tyne sent extras, he was sure it would be next week. It was not unusual for him to do that in a new office like this one once things were up and running. Those sent were from other offices that would work on a short-term basis until their personnel were returned. Tyne had many at the home office who were willing to work overtime and wanted to do so.

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That was because those people were settled where they were and often bought or paid for new houses, remodeled, and needed the money. Some had small families and needed money for their children. He'd never thought about it before, but now he could see it, being like they were settled with a small family. If that was the way his life was, this would not be the right place to be because it was too dangerous. Was it Sally that was making him think those kinds of thoughts? If it were, then it would have been a waste of his time because she did not want him or any part of his paranormal life. It didn't matter because breakfast was over, his truck was ready, and it was time to go. It would be nice if he had another day without any issues.

As soon as he reached the first house, a shiver ran down his back. Everything just seemed wrong, and maybe it was his imagination because he'd had a couple easy days, and now, he just knew something was going to happen. He got a panic button and made sure it was with him, as well as both Tasers. He headed to the door and knocked. A woman as nervous as she could possibly be tried to talk to him, but it made little sense. Someone was in there, and they were forcing her to answer the door. Xantos pressed his panic button and then pushed her aside, entering a room filled with bad guys. He immediately began to taser the guys, but the energy ran out, and then he began to take them out with one punch after another.

His shoulder burned, and he realized that he had been shot. He pulled his knife and saw the guy with the gun. The knife landed right in the middle of his throat, and he began to gurgle as he fell. That freaked out the other guys, and some of them tried to run. They didn't even make it to the door before the other three were knocked out and lying on the floor. It made him wonder what the rest of the day would be like. This had certainly not started out to be a good day. He went through their pockets as Tyne had instructed them to and gathered a large pile of cash that he had put in his own

pocket for now. That would be turned over to Sally at the end of the day. Perhaps they would all receive a bonus for hazard pay.

Xantos squeezed the shoulder until the bullet popped out. He made a call to Sally and then to the state police. It was necessary to restrain those who were knocked out, as they would eventually come to. Now, he needed to deal with the owner and see if she wanted the security system installed or not.

“Are you kidding? I've never wanted it more.” The lady of the house said.

He decided to begin installing the system. His shoulder ached a little bit, but he worked through it and got the job done just before the state police arrived. The lady was lovely and grateful, so she made him a sandwich and some chips for lunch. It was a bit early, but the shifter rarely turned down food.

“I believe you're a trouble magnet.” The trooper said.

He was a new one that Xantos hadn't met before. The guy had probably heard the stories from the other troopers, which is why he realized what the situation was. He took a statement while his partner loaded up the bad guys, piling them on top of each other in a truck. They hadn't had a truck before, but it was far more suitable than the cars that he'd seen them driving. The troopers headed away in one direction, and he went to the next place on his list in another direction. All he could do was hope that the excitement he had already had would be all that he would have to deal with. Since he'd already had lunch, he would work through the rest of the day.

It was finally time to head back to base since he'd completed his last job. He'd visited six locations despite all the craziness. That must be because of the adrenaline that had coursed through his veins all day long. It was likely that after he returned to the office, he would experience a drop in energy and crash. Xantos was grateful that he had made it through the whole day, completed all his work, and was almost back at

the office. He wondered if Sally would be glad to see him back and safe. She wasn't the one he should be thinking about, and yet he couldn't help himself. With all that had happened today, he was still the first one back.

"You didn't call me." She accused. The look she shot at him was not a sweet one, indicating she was happy he had made it back, but rather one that conveyed her blame for not being informed about what was going on.

"I went through a lot, but I wanted to get my work done, so I didn't have time to think of anything except getting through my day."

"I heard you were wounded. You should have come back to the office. It's one of the things that's wrong with alphas. They don't know when it's time to look out for themselves."

"Not true. I'd say right now is time for me to look after myself." Xantos offered.

Sally ran over to him and threw her arms around him. "I was so scared."

He held her close and breathed her scent in deeply. Damn! He wanted her, and he wanted her now. Xantos knew he shouldn't, but he stepped back just a little bit and put his hand under her chin, lifting it. That's when he kissed her with all the longing he'd felt since he met her. It was clear that she felt the same. So, he lifted her into his arms and carried her upstairs. Lying her on his bed, he began to strip.

"Get those clothes off fast!" He demanded.

Sally began to comply, and he knew his eyes were glowing with his wolf. It was a good thing that her eyes were on his cock. There was no denying he felt good that she loved his cock. She was naked, too, now, and her body was lovely. Xantos suspected she wasn't experienced, so he intended to make things good for her. He lay on top of

her, resting his weight on his arms, then kissed his way down her body until his face was between her legs at the crux of her thighs. The aroma of her arousal filled his nose as he lowered his head to find her clit. Sally squirmed, but she clearly enjoyed it. Xantos moved one hand to her channel and slid a finger inside. She was so slick it went in easily.

Another finger slid in as he worked to stretch her because his cock was large. His tongue continued to work her clit, but now he finger-fucked her moving faster and faster. He knew she would hold out long before she blew. Her body tensed, and she screamed his name low. Her body arched, and he felt a rush of liquid making her even slicker. While she screamed and thrashed as her orgasm rolled over her body, Xantos slid up her body and pushed his hard cock into her core. Goddess, she was tight but so slick he was able to enter.

He started slowly, but she urged him to move faster, so he did. Making love to Sally was amazing, and he could feel his climax coming closer and knew hers was nearing as well. It felt so good. He wanted it to last forever, but she screamed as hers hit, and that's when he lost it. His gums receded, and his fangs popped out. His tongue licked her neck just before he struck. Her blood was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted. There was a pinch, and he knew she'd bitten him. That would tie them together even more. They were mated, and now he would have to seek her forgiveness. At least his wolf would be satisfied now.

You got that right. His wolf agreed. You finally got your act together. We will have a good life with our mate.

Xantos hoped so because she would be mad at him, not his wolf. She didn't think she would turn, and he knew that would upset her. There was nothing he could do about that. He would accept her as she was and hope their relationship would grow despite her being human and him being a wolf. Others had similar relationships, and some were successful while others were not. He knew they were fated mates, so he hoped

that it would make a difference.

Chapter 6

Mated

Sally felt like she'd been hit by a truck, and then it backed up and ran over her one more time. Yeah, that bad.

"Hey, Girlfriend," a sweet voice said.

"Harry, can you help me?"

"All you have to do is ask." Harry did something, and she felt better.

She still felt bad, but at least she could think now.

"What happened to me?" Sally asked.

"You and Xantos mated, and now you're changing. I suspect you'll have a rough week, then be just fine."

“I'm changing? Are you sure?”

“There's no doubt. You knew you had a wolf in your family, didn't you?” Harry observed.

That wasn't a question. Somehow, Harry knew. She thought about asking, but suddenly, her stomach rumbled, and she knew that she was starved half to death.

Harry giggled. “I came bearing food because we knew you would need it. We were beginning to wonder if you and Xantos would ever join. There's no way to deny your fated mate and even trying can be painful. It's best that you get it over with. He's running the office while you go through your change. Moe is sending food, but I won't be able to stay much longer. I will check on you tomorrow, though. Toodle-oo!” Sally hated to see Harry go, but she was gone in a flash.

She still felt bad, and she couldn't say how much time had passed when Xantos returned with food. Harry had mentioned food, but she had never given her any. The tray was full, and Xanto set up the food so that she would get most of it and he would just get a little bit. He sat in a chair across from her, and she sat up on the bed, beginning to eat like a wolf. She had never eaten so much or so quickly in her life, and she was starting to believe that, yes, the change was upon her. What would she be? Her grandmother was a silvery gray color, and she had never seen that in a wolf before. She wondered if that was what she would be as well. She'd heard silver wolves didn't exist, so she was sure it was more gray, and she wondered if there was something unique about them. One thing was obvious, and that was that they felt pain the same way all the others did, or maybe even more so.

“You seem to be completely into your change.”

“Yes, Mr. Obvious. A surprise to both of us since I didn't think I had enough wolf in me to make this change, and I'm still not sure exactly what kind of change it will be.” Sally admitted.

“I say that you are a wolf, and that should be good enough. Any wolf will be able to change and take the reins and be part of our world, and that was what you worried about.”

“Apparently, my concerns were not yours. You couldn't have known, so you just didn't care.”

“We are fated mates, and if you know anything about paranormal beings, you know that we cannot turn our back on our fated mates. You wanted me, and you found it hard to resist me, and I felt the same way. Now, we are tied together forever. Tyne and Moe already knew, and they were expecting this. They have some kind of plan for us, and we will not be staying here. We will have some say, but it may have something to do with my father, who is a pack alpha in Nevada. He is an evil bastard, and I think they want me to take him out. I'm not positive, but I am trying to prepare you in case,” Xantos admitted.

Sally wondered what the hell that meant. Was it one of those crazy plans that Damon and Tyne had been carrying out up north? If that were the case, why didn't they move to California to begin doing what needed to be done? Everyone was aware of the dire situation in California and its underlying causes. That should be their first effort. She saw some bad stuff coming down on them. They'd mated, and she was now stuck with all his baggage. If she'd known about it, she might have run. It was too late to go now. The need that she knew would strike her suddenly hit, and she attacked Xantos. He let her lead the way, which showed that he wasn't as bad as some alphas were. She pushed him back, pulled his pants low so she could release his cock, and climbed on

board. This mating was hard and rough, and she rode him like a rented mule. That need rolled over her, and she could not deny it. Her orgasm hit, and he came right after her. One time wasn't enough, and she did it again. The third time wasn't as rough, but she was still needy.

The sex and the change made her tired, and she rolled off him and was asleep immediately. She woke up hours later, and there was an ache between her thighs. Her nose smelled the scent of food, and she pulled the tray up to the bed and began to wolf down everything on it. A need for sex came to mind, but he was nowhere near, and the need wasn't nearly as strong as it had been before, so she lay down and went to sleep again. The next time she woke, it was because she felt a warm body lying next to her. Her need was undeniable, but this time, he rolled on top of her and began to take care of her. She let him continue, and when he was done, she thought he would roll off and go to sleep, but he did it again.

“Do you need something to eat because I brought food?” Xantos offered.

She did not realize she was hungry until he said that, and then her stomach rumbled. She turned to her side of the bed and pulled the tray up to her.

“It's all for you because I've already eaten.”

Sally said nothing because she was tearing into her food and eating more than she could ever have imagined eating before. It was even more than she had known wolves had eaten, and she thought that was a lot.

“The change must be fed. Your appetite will decrease once it's over with.”

That was good to know, but she was tired now, and the second her head hit her pillow, she was asleep. It was two full weeks before she got through her change and her heat. She never thought she could say that she had a man who was tired of sex,

but he was. Maybe it wasn't just the sex but the fact that he had had to take over and do the office and tried to do what he could in the field. Sally was tired of being in bed all the time and was eager to return to her job as well. It probably wouldn't be long before Tyne would call them out on whatever project he was working on. Of course, they would say yes; everyone else had, so they must be very persuasive.

It gave her the feeling that she might not be going back home to live. That had been all she wanted, but now she was mated, and every decision she made would affect him as well as her. The older members of her family would probably be happy because now that she had changed, she would have a long life like they did. They had mated with humans, but only the last generation of humans in her family was alive. To lose a mate was hard. Some said that losing a child was even harder. She was particularly close to her grandmother, and she had urged her to try to find a paranormal to mate, but Sally had never thought that she would.

She felt better now, but it was late at night, and she would wait until the morning to get up and start managing the office again. She could feel Xantos lying next to her sleeping. He would be as pleased as she was that the change was finally over. He probably suspected since there had been signs that things were easing. Harry had been there yesterday, and she had told her it wouldn't be long now. Why would a witch know so much about wolves, and yet she did. That little witch was one smart cookie. She hoped whatever adventure Tyne wanted them to go on, that Harry would be there for a little while to help them get started. Sally couldn't help but believe that it would make things easier for them.

Now that her change had been made, Xantos believed it wouldn't be long before they were told what they wanted of them and given a choice. Sally knew they had wanted her to change before they decided to throw them into the fire. That meant they wanted her to possess the strength and speed of a wolf, as she would need it for her new position. Her senses had already improved, but she didn't know about her strength and speed and wouldn't until she got out in the woods and made her transformation.

It was morning, and she headed downstairs before Xantos woke. She started breakfast, and she wondered what the crew had done while she'd been out of it; maybe they'd been sent food the way she had been. If they had, it would have stopped today. Xantos came out first and fixed his own plate, then sat down with her at the table, where she was already eating. Her appetite wasn't as bad as it had been, but her wolf still wanted to eat more often than before. She'd been told that this was something that she would have to live with and that food to a wolf was important. The others began to come out 1 by 1, and it was hard to say what they thought about how long she'd been gone and that she and Xantos had mated. Maybe they didn't care one way or the other.

As soon as she finished eating, she went to the front counter and began printing out the lists for each of her field people. Everyone got five locations except for Xantos, who had seven. He was only likely to get five done, but the extra two were just in case. She was sure that he would be thrilled to get back in the field now and not have to deal with office politics. The field personnel might be glad, too, because he would have been harder to deal with than she usually was. As far as Sally was concerned, she was thrilled to be out of that room because the walls had seemed to close in on her when she'd felt good enough to notice them.

Everyone had left now, so when she realized someone was standing next to her, she just about jumped out of her skin. "Oh, Harry! Where did you come from? Never mind. It's always nice to see you."

"I wonder if you have anything to eat?"

"For you, I can always find something," Sally said.

She immediately dug out all the breakfast leftovers and piled the plate high. The food was still warm, so she gave Harry the plate.

Harry squealed. "I love bacon!"

It was obvious that she did by the rate at which it disappeared from the plate. Once it was gone, she began on the rest. Finally, she sat back and patted her belly. "Thank you. That was good!"

"What happens now?" Sally asked.

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“I'm just here to make sure that you're through with your change and take you somewhere so you can change through your wolf. I'm surprised your mate hasn't already done so. Tyne just needs some confirmation of a couple things, and then I'll bring you back. It will be a week or two before he brings you to a new location and has someone else in charge here. It'll be alright, especially if Xantos can fight as well as I remember.”

“Are you telling me he's going to have to challenge someone like the others did?”

“You've been paying attention. We have ways to make sure the fight is fair, and he's an excellent fighter, so try not to worry.” Harry suggested.

“Now that we are mated, I consider him mine, and I don't want to lose him, especially not to a fight like that.”

“They wouldn't have chosen him if they thought there was any chance that he would lose. Having you as a mate will add to his strength. You may not understand that now, but you will in time.”

“I wish I understood more because I don't understand any of this,” Sally admitted.

“When you leave here, everything will be explained to you in detail, and then you will understand it all. Let's go and find a forest that you can run in.”

Harry flashed them away somewhere, and it was beautiful. There was a mountain above and a river below and a perfect path to run on. “You'll need to try to change, and I'm not going to kiss you. That's what mates usually do to help you relax so you

can change.”

“How will I shift?”

“It's been enough time that I think your wolf will help you.” Harry offered. "Close your eyes and visualize your wolf. Tell her she can come out." Harry looked happy when Sally shifted. "You are a silver wolf. That's good. Your wolf is so pretty. She needs a run. Go, and I'll keep a magical eye on her."

Sally's wolf yipped, then took off running. She could feel that magical eye with her every step of the way. There was a snowshoe hare in front of her, and she needed the hunt. Her wolf took off running after it. It ran fast, but in the open area they were in, there was no way it could outrun her. When she got close, she leaped at it, taking it down. She had just eaten, and she didn't really feel hungry, so she let it go. That wasn't the way her prey would always be treated, but this one had been lucky.

It was time to head back to Harry because they had been gone from the office long enough. When she got back, Harry seemed happy to see her. It was probably because Harry needed to get back to her office, too. Sally changed back into her human form, and they vanished in a flash. She went to the refrigerator, where she pulled out some leftovers and made sure Harry would have enough energy to get back without being drained. Anyone who knew Harry and was around her for a long time would understand how important it is that she has the energy to deal with the kind of situations she did. As much as she enjoyed seeing Harry, it was a relief when she left, and Sally was able to sit down and think about the upcoming issues and offers.

She had been lost in her thoughts because it wasn't long before Xantos arrived. Sally had thrown some food together, so he immediately ate his supper. The others trailed in one at a time or in pairs until they were all there. Since she now possessed paranormal senses, she was able to discern who was a wolf and who was another paranormal being. Her senses were excellent because she could smell other

paranormals and she could see a far distance. Sally couldn't wait to test her strength and her speed now that she was an entirely changed wolf. Since it was already done, there was no point in fighting against it. Maybe she had never thought that this was what she would be, but she was, and there was no way to change it. Sally had to admit the sex was amazing. There was also the feeling of belonging in a way that she had never felt before. Being part of her family had always been wonderful, but this was different. This was like being half of a whole.

Sally could remember her parents and grandparents and how close she had always felt to them; now she understood. She and Xantos might even be closer than they had been because she wasn't sure that they were fated mates, but she knew that she and her mate were. It was also clear that Tyne had known and expected this. How could anyone know? When they all gathered to find out what this all meant, would he tell them? She had a feeling that he would leave out a lot of the information, and they would never know everything. There was also this feeling she had that this had been something they had been planning for years. Not just for her and Xantos but for all the couples that they had set plans into motion for. There were probably more couples for whom they had plans.

It was something that the future would reveal. Their future would be filled with change and risk. The main risk would be squarely on Xantos' shoulders if he had to fight for his life. She knew he was strong and a good fighter, but what if he lost? What would she do if that happened? It was hard to imagine life without him, even though they'd been together for such a short time. Sally noticed most people had finished eating, and Xantos was washing the dishes. That was not something she would expect a typical alpha to do. Once he was done, he came to her and took her hand to lead her to their room.

It was amazing how much her opinion of him had changed. That had gone from an arrogant alpha who thought too much of himself to a sexy lover who was willing to help her even with what most would consider female work. She was falling in love

with him, and there was no way to deny it. At the rate things were going, by the time they moved to the next step in their future, she would be so in love with him that losing him would destroy her. They were in their bedroom, and they began to undress. His body was remarkable, with broad shoulders, a strong chest, and narrow hips. Usually, she would jump on him, but they had had so much sex recently that all she wanted to do was be held in his arms and go to sleep. He seemed to feel the same way as they settled into bed, his arms around her, her back pressed against his chest, and they fell asleep.

When she woke up, she felt much better, having had a good night's sleep behind her. She still felt him holding her, so she slowly wiggled her way out of his arms and got off the bed, dressing and slipping down the stairs to fix breakfast for everyone. It was no surprise that he was the first one down the stairs, and he fixed his own plate and sat at the table. Sally finished breakfast and fixed her own plate before sitting down with him. Others joined them until everyone was there, and half of them had already eaten their breakfast. Xantos picked up his list first and headed out. The others followed suit. Now, she was in the office by herself.

The office had not been attacked the whole time that Xantos had been managing it. Sally was sure that it was because they saw a man was there, and they didn't want to take on a man in an office where there were probably weapons spread throughout. The knock on the door told her that someone was visiting and that there was a chance that this was an attack. She retrieved both of her Tasers and moved to the door, looking out to see who it was. Sally knew it wouldn't be anyone that she knew because they would just come on in. The person looked innocent enough, but she had learned through challenging experience that that didn't mean anything.

“Did you need something?” Sally called out.

“I wanted to make an appointment to install a security system,” the older gentleman said.

“We only make appointments online or over the phone. No one is allowed in the office that doesn't work here.”

“That's too bad and probably loses you some customers.” The old man turned and walked away.

For some reason, Sally didn't think that was the end of it. She moved back to the counter and resumed her work. When she took her break, she got some food cooking for supper and sat down to finish her break with a cup of coffee. Because of what had happened this morning and because it was just a smart idea, she kept the Tasers within easy reach. It was fortunate because the front door blew open. Two guys rushed in, and she nailed them, but she heard the back door blow as well.

“Harry, Harry, Harry!” Sally yelled.

Harry arrived looking flustered just as the inside door coming in from the back exploded. “Whoa!” She immediately began to change the four guys coming in from the back into frogs. “Wait a minute.” She cautioned Sally.

Moments later, a horde of haters came rushing in, and Harry got them all. Now, the office smelled fishy because there were so many frogs hopping around. Most of them were hopping around in circles, but a couple of them were trying to escape. Harry moved her hands, and a cage appeared; then, all the frogs ended up in it. It was a tight fit but no more than they deserved. Setting off explosions like that could have killed someone, maybe even several people. The terrorists had just stepped up their game. The protections usually would stop anyone from physically hurting the building, but the explosion was too much for the magic to neutralize.

“What the hell happened here? They weren't doing anything that serious before. They are out to get you guys.” Harry observed.

“Tell me about it. I just got back to work, and suddenly, it's World War III. They tried to get easily, and when that didn't work, they waited a little while so I would let my guard down, and then they blew open the door. I was able to take care of the two guys that came in, but then I could hear the back door exploding. That's when I decided I had to call you. I thought you would like a little excitement anyway.”

“A little, but that was a whole lot and very unexpected. Now, we will have to take extra measures to safeguard this office. It takes a lot of magic to cancel out a bomb. I'm starving now. Do you have any food?”

“I can always find food for you, Harry. Why don't you sit down, and I'll get you a plate.” Sally offered.

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Some of the food was prepared more quickly and was served first, and she filled Harry's plate with that. After she had the food in front of Harry, then she went ahead and filled up a plate for herself and got them drinks. Sally had to admit that all this action had taken it out of her, and she needed to eat something, too.

“I'll have to get back soon, but if you can get me more food, I'll try to set up a little bit of security and magically fix the doors. The bosses will be so upset when they hear about this because they thought the terrorists were finally backing off a little bit. How can they get so many guys when everyone hears what happens to them? This is such a mess.” Harry lamented.

“You're telling me. I'm going to be stuck in the middle of this.”

Harry shot a sad look at her. She began to wave her hands around, and the doors came back together, and everything was cleaned up in no time. Sally began to fix plates because Harry would need at least two full plates to take back that kind of energy. She knew that as soon as Harry was done eating, she would flash away. It was hard to blame her because she was one busy witch. With the plates in front of her, Harry began to eat, and Sally imagined she could just see the energy flowing back into her. It wasn't long before Harry waved at her and disappeared. She took the frogs with her, and Sally was glad about it because it would take a while for the bad smell to disappear.

Sally needed to get back to work, set up some appointments, and prepare the lists so that they would be easy to print out tomorrow. The number of locations that required security installation was overwhelming because they had received another wave of new customers. There was no way to catch up when they continued to receive more

and more customers yet still had the same number of people setting them up. It was frustrating and overwhelming, but what could they say? They simply had to work hard and try to accomplish everything.

She was in the middle of her paperwork when Xantos returned. Sally quickly explained what had happened because they weren't planning to tell the others. Just as she finished, some of the others arrived.

“Doesn’t look like you have as much as usual. You two got hungry today?” Renard asked.

"I'm not adjusted to being a wolf yet," Sally said with a smile.

You're making me sound like a pig. Her wolf protested.

"If I didn't know better, I would think Harry had come by," he chuckled.

That made her wonder if he knew. She thought that he was close to Tyne, and that might mean he was getting information about what was happening there. Since she wasn't sure, she just shrugged her shoulders and didn't answer the question at all. Others came in, distracting them, and he overlooked the fact that she hadn't said a thing. It was hard, walking this tightrope between what was going on and what she could tell others about it. Why did everything have to be so complicated? As bad as it was now, she had a feeling that it was only going to get worse.

Everyone had made it in, and at least none of the others had been attacked. The office had been the only target for the day. All of them ate their supper and then headed to the rooms. Even though they had gotten to know each other somewhat, they didn't tend to hang out in the evenings, and that was true at most of the offices that Wolf Security ran in Alaska. Many of those who were here were hiding something, and that meant they didn't want to get too close to their coworkers. They all turned in for the

night, and it wasn't until the morning that she would see any of the others except her mate.

“Maybe the bosses should tell our coworkers that the danger has escalated,” Sally observed.

“It's not our decision to make. I'm not sure if anyone who's not at the office will be in the same kind of danger. That is probably what Tyne believes to be true.”

“What if he's wrong?”

“Let's hope he's not wrong. Don't you want to get some sleep?” Xantos asked.

They once again skipped the sex and cuddled in bed and fell asleep and were lucky enough to sleep deeply all night long. In the morning, all the worries and concerns of the day before hitting them again. They rushed to get ready, and Sally wished she had woken up just a little bit earlier so she could have had his breakfast prepared before they went downstairs. She knew she would feel rushed all day long, and that was on top of feeling worried that someone would attack her. She prepared his breakfast as quickly as possible and placed his plate in front of him, then turned to her own and the rest of their crew. The basic bacon and egg breakfast with hash browns was quick, and she got it done before everyone else made it downstairs. By the time they came downstairs, she was sitting across from her mate, and they were eating breakfast together even though he was almost done.

As usual, he was the first one out the door to get his truck ready, and he came back in and got his list. The others trailed behind but were also gone in no time. Sally wondered if she would be better off being out in the field than here in the office waiting to be attacked. That was probably something she shouldn't worry about since they were going to be gone within a couple weeks. They would have different things to worry about, and who knew what they would have to deal with. She could only

hope that it would be something that they could handle.

Sally was in the middle of paperwork when Harry appeared. She almost jumped in the air until she realized who it was.

“I’m here to give you some information. Tyne is moving things up. Something smells good. Is it the chicken and dumplings?” Harry asked.

“Yes, and I can fix a big bowl for you while you tell me whatever Tyne wants me to know.”

“I already told you what Tyne wants you to know. That was the whole message.”

Sally hurried up and fixed a large bowl for Harry and, since it was nearly lunchtime, a smaller bowl for herself. She wished that Tyne and Moe were less secretive, but she decided they must have a good reason to keep those secrets. This must have been something they were concerned about others finding out.

Chapter 7

Moving On

Tomorrow, everything in his life and his mate's will change. Tyne and Moe would explain to them precisely what the plan was and what part they played in it. Xantos wasn't an idiot, and he had a good idea that it involved his father, who was a pack alpha in northern Nevada. He also knew that he would be risking his life and possibly hers if he decided to follow through on this. This was something he'd always wanted to do but had never thought he'd have the opportunity or the courage to follow through on. Some would call it justice, and others might call it revenge, but whatever you called it, he needed it and had needed it since his mother had died. The bastard had cost him the one person that he had loved more than anyone until he had mated.

That male was pure evil, and he could understand why they would want him taken out and why they wanted it done before they tried to do anything in California. They would need the support of all the surrounding alphas before they made a move on such a powerful one. There was also the possibility that, once everything was settled in California, those in the state would fall into line and do what was expected of them. Waiting was the most challenging part, but they wouldn't have to wait for long.

It was finally the day, and they were coming. The aroma of some great breakfast foods had awoken him from his sleep. It was either pancakes or waffles, and he could scent the sausage that she was cooking with it. There were other smells mixed in, so it was impossible to know what she was cooking. He could also smell the coffee, which he had become addicted to, even though they said that didn't happen to paranormals. What did they know anyway? All he knew was that he felt the need to have it every morning, and even though they said it made no difference, he felt like it woke him up and gave him energy. Isn't that what most humans said, too?

Once he was ready, he headed down the stairs to get this most critical day started. No one else was here yet, and that was alright because he preferred to eat before the others arrived. The field personnel's day would begin late, but everyone except Xantos would eventually get out into the field and start setting up security systems. They would be joined by a group, a specialist that Tyne would bring with him. A large enough group, with the hope that they would catch up on all the backlogs.

Sally had piles of pancakes set on the table and a plate full of sausage patties. He wondered if she would have enough food for the large group. That was why she'd started cooking early. The others who were already assigned to the office began to appear. They filled their plates and began to eat, but none of them were finished before the guests started arriving. Tyne and Moe arrived with Harry and a couple of others that they did not know. Harry would have to eat a large meal before she could go back and get the rest. They sat at the counter after filling their plates and began eating immediately.

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His mate just kept cooking because she knew that more would arrive. Since he had finished his food, he went over to her and took over the cooking so that she would have time to eat herself. She shot him a grateful look before filling a plate, sitting down, and beginning to eat. He was not always the best cook, but she had everything ready, and it just needed to be fried, and he could do that. Since everyone who worked in the field office had finished eating, Tyne took them to the meeting room and provided them with the necessary information. It was obvious once they were done because everyone came out, got up, and headed out in the trucks.

It was odd knowing that they would soon be gone. Harry had said they would leave as soon as they agreed to whatever Tyne proposed. Xantos was sure that they would. He thought he had a good idea of what would happen. They were just waiting to get more information and make things official.

"It's time," Harry said.

She led the way to the meeting room. Only Harry, Tyne, and Moe were in there. All of them sat down. It was finally time to finish this.

"I think you know what this is about," Tyne observed. Xantos nodded. "Your father is the pack alpha of northern Nevada. The old wolf council allowed many pack alphas to continue doing dark and horrible things. Changes in the air, and it is time that we bring justice and decency to all areas of North America. We couldn't do it all at once, and we started in Washington. Now we have arrived at your father's pack. You are in a unique position to challenge him because of what he did to your mother and you. What we need is for you and Sally to agree to follow through on this. It's true that he's been challenged many times over the years and that his challengers have often been

killed the moment they stepped into the circle. We can assure you that that will not happen this time because the witches will take control of the circle, and cheating will not be allowed. What do you say?"

He looked at his mate, who nodded, then he looked back at Tyne, and he nodded.

"I need to hear you say it."

"I will challenge my father." Xantos declared.

Everyone looked happy, except for him and his mate, because a major undertaking like this would scare anyone with a brain in their head. There was so much that could go wrong, and even though those in the past had managed to do this, that was no assurance that things would go well for them. Sally had no experience as a pack bitch, and managing an office was a long way from running a pack. His knowledge was when he was young, and it hadn't been a good experience because his father had made it difficult for him every step of the way. It was true that he had picked up life skills along the way that he would need, such as fighting and working with the business. Right now, the fighting was what he needed the most, and once that was done, provided he was successful, it would then be necessary to utilize the other skills.

"Harry will help you prepare and take you there," Moe explained.

"I hope you don't have too many bags to carry," Harry observed.

"I'm not sure most of what I have is worth taking," Sally mentioned.

"I've got one bag, but it's a big one," Xantos admitted.

"I'm going to need a whole lot of food." Harry declared.

“Why don't we start with some of the bags, and you can finish up all the breakfast leftovers?” Sally suggested.”

“That's a smart plan.” Harry agreed.

Two hours later, all their stuff was moved, and Harry was well-fed and ready to take the trip with both of them. Tyne and Moe plan to stay until after everyone returns from the field, and then Harry will fly them all to where they need to go. Meanwhile, they would be meeting with Damon and Marissa near the pack that Xantos' father ran. He would be working and talking with Damon while Marissa would take Sally to get her hair done and get dressed appropriately for a pack bitch. When he won, his mate would have to be appropriately dressed and ready to step into the position. He wondered what she would look like since he'd never seen her dressed up like that. The thought excited him, and he thought that she would look fabulous.

Sally seemed to be handling things well, and that made him feel better. He only hoped he could handle things that well. Marissa took Sally away as he sat down across from Damon.

"This was a long time coming," Damon observed.

“I never thought I'd see this day.”

“I'm sure you thought about it often enough.”

"I did, especially after my mom died," Xantos admitted.

“Use that anger. It will serve you well.”

“You know, if this turns out the way that you want it to, neither I nor my mate knows anything about running a pack.”

“Most of the other ones knew little, but they learned quickly. You two will do the same.” Damon offered.

“I've heard that this was done successfully in the past, but eventually, you're going to have a circumstance that will not work out.”

“That's possible, but it won't be you.”

“What do we need to do for now?” Xantos asked.

“The first thing we are doing is we are calling and challenging him. This fight will be tomorrow, so he does not have any time to prepare and make plans.”

“I will not have time to make plans either.”

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"You will have everything you need. His plan is to cheat, and that will not happen," Damon explained. "My assistant will take you to your room, where your mate will join you when the girls are done. All of us will meet for supper, and we will go through the plan and anything else of importance."

Xantos thought about taking a nap, but he wasn't sure if he could calm his crazy mind. Rest should help, shouldn't it? It was the only thing that he could think of that might. If he could sleep, maybe his mate would be there to wake him when she arrived. This whole plan seemed crazy, but the justice that he had wanted to be had been with him for a long time, and if he could manage to beat his father, he would certainly feel better, and his heart wouldn't be so heavy every time he thought of his mother. His mother wasn't the only one who had been mistreated, but he had not been the same as some of the other alphas who had gone through women quickly. His father had enjoyed keeping them long enough to completely break their spirit and turn them into mindless puppets. Xantos had been the only child as far as he knew. At least it saved some children from a painful experience at the hands of a cruel man.

The assistant left him in the room that turned out to be a luxury suite. This was nice, and both rooms in the suite were the same, so it didn't matter which one he took. He stripped out of his clothing and went to the bathroom to clean up a bit, then lay down with his mind racing, hoping to find a way to get some sleep. When he woke, it was because his mate was lying down next to him and whispered his name. He pulled her into his arms and went back to sleep with her back against his chest. Xantos figured that sleep was also what she needed more than anything.

A phone call woke them up, and he realized that it was probably time to get ready for supper. It was immediately evident that her hair had been fixed, she was wearing

makeup, and her clothing was completely different than anything she'd had before. Her confidence was greater, and she smiled more. That would make it easier for her to make it through what was coming. It was unfortunate that there wasn't anything like that to make things easier for him. Seeing his father would be hard on him and bring back all the sad memories of the difficulties his mother had gone through. Xantos wondered if his father even remembered his mother or him at all.

When he and Damon had made the challenge, the old man hadn't seemed to realize that he even had a son. Damon had assured him that he did, and his comment was, 'I thought he was long gone.' That hadn't hurt the way that he had expected it to because there had been no relationship, and he'd not expected any acknowledgment. Alpha Elias might be his biological father, but as far as Xantos was concerned, he was nothing to him. Tyne passed him a picture, and all he saw was a sad old man in poor shape. It was hard for a wolf to get in that kind of shape, but somehow, he had managed. He had heard of it happening to some of the alphas in the past, like the one who led the James' pack.

That might give him an edge, but the fact that his father was unstable would cancel out that edge. There was nothing worse than a crazy, cornered wolf that didn't want to die and didn't care what it had to do to live. The only positive thing was that Damon and Tyne both assured him that there would be no way for the old man to cheat. It was late at night by the time they headed back to their room, and somehow, they managed to fall asleep again. He thought it was because his mate was in his arms, and she calmed him. That alarm was grating, but he knew that he had to wake up. They both got up and dressed, hurrying to the kitchen so they could get a good meal and hopefully gain some strength.

There was a huge breakfast, and everyone was eating a large plate. Xantos made sure to eat a lot of meat and other protein sources so that he would have the energy he needed to win the fight. Once everyone had finished eating, they loaded into the large vehicles and headed down the road. They arrived early, which was always best for

situations like this. An alpha named Roger had been called in by Elias to judge the fight. Damon let him do the judging while he sat next to him, and he would also watch every move that was made. Harry and Marissa cast some spells that would prevent anyone from getting into the circle that didn't belong there.

They had perfected this spell over time and found every possible issue, correcting them. Harry was eating more than usual, and even Marissa had extra food on her plate. And that was compared to the others who were all eating more than usual because this was going to be a very trying day. They loaded into two vehicles after breakfast and headed out to the location at the pack. No one was at the circle yet, and the circle looked old and had probably been brought over from Ireland, where many of the pack had initially come from. It had started as a small pack, but it had grown.

It wasn't long before people began to gather because they had heard of the challenge, and they wanted to see someone die. Some had an opinion on who they wanted to die, and others just wanted to see someone die, and they didn't care who. There were even some who thought the outcome was already decided and didn't bother to show up because of that. Everyone knew that Elias cheated, and they expected the new challenger to die just as easily as the others had. The time finally came when Elias arrived with a group of his buddies. Time had not been kind to him, and he looked older than Xantos had ever seen a wolf, especially a pack alpha, appear. He would not be fooled into assuming that meant he couldn't fight with strength because he had the pack alpha's power on his side.

It was also true that, regardless of what Damon assured him, it was possible he could find a way to cheat, and he needed to be on the lookout for anything like that. Elias might look like hell, but he was sly, and if there was a way to cheat, he would find it. Another alpha appeared and explained to Damon that he had been told Elias wanted him to be the judge for the challenge. His name was Ronald, and Damon deferred to him. There was little that a judge could do, and none of it should have made a difference, except when there was no clear winner, and then it was up to them to

make a judgment call. Xantos knew that that call would always be in favor of the current pack alpha.

That wouldn't matter because this fight would be to the death. One of them would not be walking away from this. Or at least that was what he thought. He saw Damon talking on the phone but thought nothing of it until Damon approached him.

“The Council will consider it a large favor if you somehow manage to stop before you kill him. They want him for questioning because apparently there are some important people that he may have killed, and they want to know where the bodies are so they can be returned to the family.”

“Wouldn't those bodies be somewhere on the property?” Xantos asked.

“Probably not because a witch already searched the property without his knowledge, and there are bodies here, but not the ones they are concerned with the most.”

That was a sad commentary on the value of a person's life. Every life should have value.

“I'll do the best I can, but you know how hard it can be.”

"I do. Just do your best." Damon clapped him on the shoulder and then left to find his seat.

Xantos nodded and then took his place in the circle, facing Elias.

“I guess you're the one claiming to be my son. You don't look a thing like me," Elias claimed.

“Don't worry. They ran a check on DNA, so there is no doubt.”

“Now you want to kill me?”

“More than anything. I saw what you did to my mother. Only a monster could do something like that.”

He only caught the last of what the judge said, but he saw him slamming his fist into his palm. Xantos immediately punched Elias twice in the nose, and the blood flew. Elias immediately changed into his wolf, so Xantos did as well. The pack alpha's wolf looked terrible. Instead of the glossy black fur that he should have had, it looked shaggy and dull. The wolf was so rough it was hard to describe. It was slightly shorter than his and not yet filled out, and he still had a large stomach. There was no doubt that his horrible lifestyle had left its mark on his wolf.

Xantos felt sorry for the wolf, but there was no choice but to fight, so he went for the throat. At the last moment, the wolf pulled away and tried to jump on him, but it was unable to. They circled each other, looking for any sign of weakness they could use to bring the fight to a quick end. His wolf was feeling aggressive, and he had to reel him in and use logic for this battle. That's why they continue to circle because he didn't see a clear opportunity to take him down. Finally, the packed alpha seemed distracted for a second by something he saw in the crowd, and Xantos went for his throat. He managed to get his fangs around it just enough to draw blood, but then the other wolf pulled loose. Damn! This wasn't going the way he had planned.

His wolf quickly lunged again and caught the throat, and this time, he took the wolf down. The wolf struggling just made the bleeding worse and more serious. Xantos knew that he would have to gauge when the wolf was weak enough to stay down because there would be no tapping out. Everyone knew that life in the council prison was worse than hell. Elias continued to weaken until he just lay there in a pile, ready to die. When it became apparent that Xantos wasn't going to finish him off, he tried to struggle to a standing position but fell back down. Damon whispered something to the judge, who didn't appear to be going to call the fight but finally did. Had he not

done so and made Xantos kill Elias, the Council would have come after him, and he knew it.

Xantos looked at the pitiful wolf lying on the ground, barely alive, and he wondered how the alpha had gotten control of so many people for so long. Two wardens stepped forward, and Harry was asked to force the change back to human. Special handcuffs were put on him, and he was led away. He'd wanted to be killed rather than sent to the Council's prison, and Xantos couldn't blame him. Maybe this was a fairer punishment for all the pain he'd caused. Not that it mattered because the decision wasn't his to make.

Sally was waiting for him as he exited the circle. He took her into his arms and hugged her tight. Damon approached them.

"You've been declared the pack alpha. Now the real work begins." Damon declared.

Xantos had to admit he dreaded what would come next. It was a solid pack in many ways. The worst aspect was the emotional outlook of the pack members who had been bullied and abused by the pack alpha. At least he had allowed them to get an education if they could afford one on their own and to have good jobs outside of the pack. They've been allowed to mate as long as he approved the mating, and they could even own homes on pack lands or nearby. That made this pack better off than many of the others that had recently gotten new alphas.

There would still be things to deal with, but financially, the pack was comfortable. Emotionally, it was a wreck, and he had no idea where to begin. Females had been harassed, and possibly some of the males. There were bodies hidden all over the property, although Damon admitted it was not as bad as the previous property had been. He and Sally would be thrown into the fire and have to figure out what to do with this place. They would get little help even though they were inexperienced at leading a pack. Harry would stay two days to do what she could do, and a former

pack alpha would stay for a week. Someone who Sally knew would come with the former pack alpha and stay to assist her in any way that she could. It was the least help that any of the new pack alphas had gotten, and that was because the financial situation was stable, and it was only emotional and pack assistant programs that needed help.

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Sally needed the most help and would get the least. The other females were already giving her a look, trying to decide if it was worth challenging her, even though they had already been told that beating her would not earn them the pack alpha. He doubted that any of them knew that she was a good fighter because she had been trained by Tyne. The only one in a position to challenge would be the previous alpha bitch. That was, unless she passed on the opportunity, in which case it would go down through the ranks until someone took it or the last person decided against it. He feels sorry for any female who chose to fight her if it wasn't the fact that he'd resent the hell out of them.

He had no idea what Sally would be doing first, but he had to establish some kind of hierarchy.

"Do you know who the number two is in this pack?" He asked a teenager standing nearby.

"The top three ran off when you beat the alpha. Their positions were kept out of fighting," the boy said.

Xantos looked at Damon. "That's not unheard of if the positions require special education or training."

"Why would they run?"

"They were probably involved in the bad things that happened here. Without Elias to protect them, they are running scared." Damon observed. "Don't worry. Wardens are already searching for them."

“Who is next in the hierarchy?”

“Tom Hackett.” The boy said.

“Could you go get him?”

“He’s right over there.”

“Are you Tom Hackett?” Xantos asked the wolf.

“I am. What did you need?”

“You are now my number two. Are you familiar with the duties the top three did?”

“I’m not, but I know who would be. Do you want me to take charge?” Tom asked.

“Yes, and tomorrow, I’ll want you to walk me through the pack-owned businesses.”

“I can do that, Alpha.”

“What should I do now?” Xantos asked.

“That’s a good start. Let’s find Elias’s office and review some paperwork. You may need to hire a forensic accountant. Sally can help with that.”

He didn’t ask why Sally would be a big help with that. He just assumed that Damon probably knew more about her than he did. He would discuss that with her tonight after they went to bed. Damon and he headed to the house to try to figure out where the pack alpha’s office was.

It was an important room for any pack alpha, as it held the information necessary to

keep the pack running. A secretary and a personal assistant were needed. Whoever had been doing those jobs had probably run away with the other three.

Xantos wished the teenager was standing around somewhere so he could get more information out of him. Instead, he and Damon were on their own, and that would make it harder to get anything done. They started in different places and began reviewing the paperwork to see if they could find anything they needed. Damon enjoyed this a lot more than he did. All the information he was finding was about everyday bills and the secretary's name because Elias didn't seem to have a personal assistant. It was tough to keep up with the pack this size without a personal assistant to keep you on track.

"I found something," Damon declared. "This is a list of all the pack females that are trained in anything secretarial. Just having the secretary take phone calls and other tasks might be a helpful start. You'll need to get someone who is trained and experienced to be a personal assistant. I hate to suggest you go outside of your pack, but maybe Ariel could suggest someone. If someone in your pack is capable, she might even suggest them."

He'd heard plenty about Ariel, and he felt odd calling her when he really didn't know her well. Xantos had met her once, but he doubted she'd even remember him. Damon stopped what he was doing and turned to look at him.

It was time to call Ariel, so he dialed the number that Damon had sent him. "Is this you, Xantos? I have a personal assistant I can send you. I recommend that after she gets settled, you train someone to fill in for her when needed and possibly replace her if she decides not to stay. She'll be there in three days. Everyone else that you need is in your pack."

That was freaky the way that she had known who he was and what he wanted. Everyone knew that Ariel could be like that. He had never seen it in person before. It

was different that way than when you just heard about it. They continued searching through the paperwork, finding a few items that were important enough to set aside for later examination, but most of it made no sense to him. He would need some context to understand it.

“Something else we will have to do when Harry is through with whatever she is doing now is hunting for bodies,” Damon observed. “Two wardens are supposed to come to move the bodies once Harry reveals them.”

“I’m not sure how any of the other new pack alphas managed to make it. You’ve told me that my pack is in better shape than any of the others were, and it already seems overwhelming to me.” Xantos admitted.

“It will get easier day by day, and the retired pack alpha and his mate are coming in tomorrow morning. He is the perfect one to train you, and his mate will be helpful to Sally.”

“I’ll take any help I can get. Do you think that I should have a manager to help with the businesses?”

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“There are probably managers already in place with all the businesses, and if they weren't any good, they would probably be dead, or it's the least gone. You'll have an opportunity to meet with them and decide if they can do a good enough job for you.” Damon advised.

“Sounds like I'll be busy tomorrow.

Chapter 8

Alpha Bitch

Sally had never felt this overwhelmed. Thankfully, Harry was with her. The witch was not just a sweetheart, but she could do the work of half a dozen helpers with the wave of her hand. The first thing they did was get a bedroom ready for her and Xantos to sleep in. She felt weird taking the former pack alpha's suite. It had the best location, and the size was perfect for the two of them. Next, they went through and prepared four guest suites for whoever was going to stay with them. They might need more, but at least they had four to start with.

“What should we do next?” Sally asked.

“You need to find the alpha bitch's office and find the maid and the cook unless they ran away with some of the others.”

“Is there anyone around that might know where the others are?”

"They are all hiding out until they see which way the wind will blow," Harry

admitted.

They found the office, but it was more like a closet, and it contained only the most basic information. It was evident that Elias had not given the acting alpha bitch much authority, and therefore, they wouldn't be much help. She found some phone numbers that she had written down, and when she had the necessary numbers, she would begin making calls. That was the plan, and that's what she did. The backup accountant arrived in an hour, followed by a possible cook and then the housekeeper.

Harry cast a spell that allowed her to know if they were telling the truth or not. Sally hired all three to start in the morning. Now, she needed a secretary, a personal assistant, and a house manager. It seemed like a lot of help, but she would need it with such a large pack. Sally continued to work down the list and finally had everyone she required, provided they showed up and did a good job. Two of them were going to be moving into the house, and one of them had a child and would need two rooms. That was when she and Harry went up to the attic, and Harry was thrilled to get up there.

"I wonder what kind of exciting things are in the attic," Harry observed.

"We'll soon see. Hopefully, it will be enough to furnish the small apartment that we want to put in there. One problem will be the plumbing, and another will be the electricity."

"You worry too much. For all you know, there may already be an apartment up there."

In this case, Harry happened to be right, but it wasn't much of an apartment. It did deal with the plumbing and a tiny kitchenette. Most of the attic was used for storage, and even part of the small apartment had become a storage dump for those who knew what to look for. That was the task they started on the first day, and Harry was so excited that she shook as she went through the boxes. There were many small things

that some would call trinkets that excited Harry greatly.

“Get a box and start putting them in it, and as soon as we're sure that there's not anyone that owns them that wants them back, you can have them all,” Sally mentioned.

“Are you sure? Some of these are so beautiful they might be worth something.”

“Your assistance is worth something, and you should get something out of it.”

“Look at this one!” Harry declared. “I think it might be magical.”

“Then who better to have it than you?”

The globe was beautiful, but if it was magical, Sally didn't want it. She wanted someone magical like Harry to have it because she would be able to be sure that it wouldn't cause any harm. It seemed to like Harry, and it glowed beautifully for her. It wouldn't be nearly as beautiful for someone else.

“What do you think this place was used for?” Sally asked, unsure if she really wanted to know.

“To put someone that he didn't want anyone else to know about. The plumbing is old, and the appliances have been removed because they likely no longer work. A remodel is needed to make this a decent place for anyone to stay. But first, we must get rid of a lot of this extra stuff and see what we are left with.”

“Is there any way that you can track down who owned the stuff in the box? If you know who owned it, then you can find out if it's something that you can take away from here.”

Harry picked up an item, and it was apparent she was casting some kind of spell. She picked up a different item, which was nothing like the first one, and did the same.

“The owners of these two items are no longer alive. They are not buried here, and I am not sure where they are buried. That would require another spell that takes a lot more energy. I will flash the box away but leave it somewhere where it is available if someone turns up to claim it or any part of it.” Harry suggested, and Sally nodded.

The box was gone, but there were many other things to go through. Since it was lunchtime and she knew Harry would need some energy, they went downstairs to the kitchen, where Harry checked the food for safety. It was something she had always done since someone had poisoned the food at one of the alpha challenges. Sally was glad that she did it. When people run away, sometimes, they leave nasty surprises behind.

Sally was able to throw some sandwiches together, and there were boxes of chips and cookies that they could use to eat. She made extras because the guys would need something, and she wasn't sure where Marissa had gone. They were in the middle of their meal when everyone congregated and began to pull out the food she had fixed.

“You checked things out, didn't you?” Damon asked.

“Of course. We never know what can happen at one of these challenges. Where is Marissa?”

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“The Nanny was having trouble of the magical kind. She had to go back to help out.”

“Have all your children got magical talent?” Xantos asked.

“They all seem to, even the boys. That makes it harder to find a nanny. The one we have right now is a low-level witch, so she can handle the smaller things.”

“I can see how this might cause difficulties.”

“You may think so, but you will understand better in time,” Damon observed.

“Are you telling me that I or my mate are a witch?”

“Not exactly, but you don't have to be a witch to have problems. Has Sally changed yet?”

“She has, but I wasn't there. She's not a white or red wolf.”

“No, she's not.” Damon agreed with the smile.

“Are you telling me she's gold?”

“Not at all. Maybe the two of you should go for a run if you are concerned with what color she is.”

She could see that her mate was worried, and she wondered what that meant. She was just a silvery gray, and that didn't mean anything, did it?

“I'm nothing special. You can ask Harry who was there when I changed.” Sally offered.

Xantos immediately looked at Harry, waiting for her to reassure him that his mate was just an ordinary wolf, but all Harry did was smile at him. “What color is she, and what does it mean?”

“Go for a run someplace private, and then you'll know,” Damon assured.

Xantos took her by the hand and led her away, and they would find some private place to go for their run. No one had even commented on the color of her parents and grandparents' wolves when they'd run. Why was this suddenly so important? She was a silvery gray, prettier than the average gray but nothing special.

They went to a grove of trees, and no one seemed to be around, so they changed to wolves together. It felt so good to be with her mate and ready to run. She could see that he loved her color and the look of her wolf, and her wolf preened and admired his wolf. That was the way it should be, wasn't it? She took off on a hunt with him following. There was a small creature, possibly a muskrat, and that was not something she had ever eaten or hunted before. It was convenient, and her wolf needed the hunt because she was new and fresh, and everything was different.

It was amazing how quickly she caught it, and then she let it go. Her mate laughed, or as close to a laugh as a wolf could manage. They had much to do, and they needed to return to the group to decide how to proceed with these tasks.

They returned to the spot where they had started and flashed back to their wolves.

“You are a silver wolf. I believe you'll have some talents, but I'm not sure what they might be. It will make some hunt for you even though you are mated. Some will come after you. That is what Damon is talking about. We'll have to determine what

those talents are so we can utilize them effectively, as this is a large pack and will be challenging to manage. Elias used to control others, and that is not something I want to do. Initially, I believe they will think I am weak because of it. I'm sure I'll face many challenges, but eventually, they'll see that I'm strong and can overcome any of my adversaries. You need to be concerned about that, too, so we will need to train often to keep in good shape.”

Xantos pulled her in close to him and gave her a hot kiss. She could tell he wanted more, but under the circumstances, they needed to get back to the people waiting for them. They needed all the help so that they could get this pack under control before their help left.

The first one to notice that they were back was Damon. “You see what I mean.”

“I do, but I don't know what talents might be lurking inside her. I'm not sure that anyone does.”

“There are a few that know, and given time, unfortunately, there will be many that know.” He admitted. “There is no way to hide something like this for long. Especially when you are a pack bitch of one of the largest packs in this part of the country.”

She knew that was true, but she felt odd having them discuss her in such a fashion. They'd eaten lunch, and now it was time to get back to work, so she and Harry went up to the attic to see what other surprises might be there. Sally was happy to find that there was a large bed and a twin bed. The twin bed had storage underneath it, and they found a couple of dressers to match the large bed. There was also a table with two chairs, a loveseat, and two chairs of some type. That would be enough furniture to start with, or at least she hoped it would be. Other items up here could be picked up one at a time. That was except for a refrigerator, a stove, and some kind of microwave. In the kitchen cabinets, they found basic dishes, bowls, and pots and pans. The drawers held silverware and other similar items. It was one less worry to

begin with, and it would do for now. The house manager might be the one that dealt with the rest of this. She wasn't sure exactly what the house manager's responsibilities were.

“Why don't we get on one of our other jobs,” Harry asked.

“What job would that be?”

“We need to pull all the bones out of the yard and the area close to the house. Tyne will be sending them off to be identified, and I believe the wardens will be here tomorrow to collect them. They were staying over at a nearby hotel, probably gambling.”

“One of the good points about being close to Las Vegas, right?” Sally suggested.

“This won't be anything, and I will need a whole lot of food, so maybe we should order something before I go out and start dealing with it. I noticed several places posted on the side of the refrigerator that I assumed were for delivery. Why don't we check those out first, and we can put in an order before we start working.”

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“I understand what needs to be done, but I'm not sure what my part in that will be.”

“You'll have to give me some energy, and after that, we are both going to be really hungry,” Harry explained.

Sally had done that before, so she didn't worry about that. Being able to eat a big meal without worrying about gaining weight wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She would have to be careful so that she did not give Harry so much energy that she had none left. It was a shame that the guys were not hanging around nearby because it sounded like a massive undertaking, and Harry might need more energy than Sally had available to give. They checked out the menus on the side of the refrigerator first and ordered a huge amount of food. They decided to have both Chinese food and a pizza party, which was exceptional. There were a lot of drinks in the house, so she didn't worry about those, although she would have Harry check them out before they were drinking any. Being in this position had made her very nervous.

They finished eating, and it was time to get to work. Sally didn't look forward to it. Harry led the way to the backyard. "This is where most of the bodies are usually buried," Harry admitted.

Sally gave Harry her hand, and she could feel the energy moving from her to Harry as skeletons began to pile up. Harry took a break.

“I thought you said this one wasn't as bad as the last one,” Sally observed.

“It's not even close. Bodies were everywhere. This may look like a lot, but it's only five, and I don't believe there are many more. Let's take a break and eat a little food to

get our energy back up. We need to have this done by tomorrow when the wardens come. They understand it might not be done until the afternoon. The sad thing is some of these families have missed their loved ones for years, and we're not sure what happened to them.”

“You're right. A little food might give me more energy, and I know without a doubt that it will do it for you. I wish we had a couple more people for you to pull energy from, but maybe the guys disappeared on purpose. This is not a job that anyone can feel happy about having to do.”

“That may be true, but someone has to do it, and I have the right abilities. As the new pack bitch, you get to help. We've got most of the bodies in the back so that part will be done soon. Then we'll go to the front and try to get any bodies that are on the other sides to the front,” Harry admitted.

They headed to the kitchen, where Sally went through everything and found some food she could heat up in the freezer. She suspected these readymade meals had been placed here for the alpha to prepare for himself when no one else was available. He liked his privacy, and she thought that was probably because of the dark deeds he had done, and he wanted no one to see them occurring.

“This is filling but not overly delicious. We need to get some things from town so that you can do some real cooking. I love your cooking.” Harry observed.

“I have to agree with you. This is good for someone who is hungry and has no other options, but it is not what I would call good food. There is something here for food deliveries, and we can place an order, which they will then send to us. Maybe we could go through one of these things while we are eating?”

“That's a big thing at home, and I use it often because I'm too lazy to get out there and buy groceries when I've had a hard day.”

“It's not something I've ever used before, but I am curious to try it while an expert is here to assist me.” Sally smiled, and Harry giggled.

Harry had already checked the food, so they knew it was safe to eat even if it wasn't all that good. It was a cheap brand of what could be called TV dinners, showing that the alpha Elias hadn't really cared what he'd eaten because his attention was elsewhere. Maybe that was why his wolf had looked mangy and underfed. Sally had thought it was the evil eating him up from the inside out. It could also be a combination of both, as he looked more than underfed. Much time would pass before she would be able to look at this place as anything other than his home. Every change that she made would take her closer to that point, and hopefully, it would bring the rest of the pack closer to it.

Those people with whom he had been most closely associated had all run. That left the council to deal with them, and she was glad of that because they had enough to deal with. She'd been told that all the others that had taken these alpha challenges had a harder time than what they were left with, but she couldn't imagine making it through much more than what was ahead of them. It was possible that she wasn't as strong as those other pack bitches. Time will tell if she could even handle this job at all.

“Stop thinking so hard. I can see the worry all over your face, and you're going to get fine lines.” Harry observed.

“Do wolves even get those?”

“Wolves can get anything, and you saw that when you saw Elias. The evil of his ways was stamped on his face.”

Sally couldn't deny it. She set up the iPad, and they began placing their order. Apparently, everything was set up to automatically bill the pack and send the food. It

would arrive this afternoon in time for her to cook a large meal for their guests coming for supper. She wasn't sure why Damon didn't just tell them who it was, but he wanted to surprise them. Whatever that meant. They finished their meal, and it had dealt with their appetite, and she could see that Harry was now recharged. It was time for them to get back to work. On the detective shows she had watched, it hadn't seemed quite so grisly, but maybe that was because she knew those weren't real bodies and real people. What they were dealing with now was that they were lives that had been ended before their time by an evil male who had no respect for life and didn't value it.

She stood next to Harry with less energy than she had woken up with. This might not take the energy the first time had since Harry said there were less left than they had pulled free. Harry did her magic, and two more bodies floated up to be added to the pile.

“This part is done. It was so much less than it could have been, but we still have the front and the two sides. Maybe we should rest and have a snack before we start on that?” Harry suggested.

“You know more about this, so we'll do it your way.”

They headed back into the house, and this time, they looked for dessert, finding a frozen pie. It was a cherry cheesecake and not terribly bad, so they ate it with coffee. No talking was needed, and they concentrated on their food.

“I wish we had time for a nap now.”

“You and me too, sister!” Sally declared.

“Let's get back to it because it is hanging over my head like a dark cloud. I think there will be less than there were in the back. It is rare to bury in the front lawn.”

“But not the sides?”

“The front is usually visible to other buildings of some sort. The sides are typically used only when the back is full. I know that something is there, but not what or how much.” Harry admitted.

Harry began to work again, and Sally felt a little bit lightheaded, and Harry let go of her. From the three sides, all she could find was 2 bodies.

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“I think this is all we are going to find, and I believe all of these are pack members. He killed those that disagreed with him, and after he did a few of those, no one else disagreed.” Harry explained. “These two meant something to him, and he buried them in special places. One went under a tree. It was probably a flowering tree that they liked. The other one went under a statue of Mary. I believe she was half human and followed human religion instead of wolf.”

“That might be enough information to figure out who she is.”

“That and she was far along with the child at the time that she died. I'm not even sure that it might not have been a natural death. The coroner will have to determine that.”

“It's possible that she died, then he buried her in a way that was personal to both him and her. Even those that are evil can love.” Sally observed.

“That's probably the case. It will be a while before we get answers. They are still investigating the last alpha who was challenged. The body count was high, and some bodies were destroyed. Those may never be identified, but they are trying.”

Sally was beginning to understand what they meant about a worse situation. This was horrible enough, but even morebodies? That would be horrific. With the bodies destroyed, that would leave a mark on the pack that would never be forgotten or dealt with. It didn't make what they were dealing with easier, but it did put it into perspective. It also told her this could be so much harder than it was. At least they had finished the body recovery, and now they would take a break. When they returned to the porch, they saw that the groceries had been delivered, and Harry ushered them into the kitchen.

“I'm so happy to see that. I'm not much of A cook, but if you need help, I'll try. I have been learning a little bit.” Harry admitted.

Sally had heard horror stories about Harry trying to cook. She still believed that anyone could learn to cook if they wanted to badly enough, and they were willing to give it 100% effort. It was time to test that principle and see if that was true. Getting out pots and pans, she made sure to wash them to ensure they were still clean. It was a mental thing more than anything. Everything in this house would have to be cleaned several times before she felt comfortable with it due to the evil Elias had perpetrated, which made everything feel dirty.

The next thing she did was fill the oven with food for supper, and then she began to prepare something they could eat right away. Thank the goddess that they had completed what she hoped would be the worst thing that they would have to do. It was hard to say since she had never had to deal with something like this before. She hadn't had the opportunity to meet the pack yet and see how they responded to her. Sally expected a challenge, but she wasn't sure who would give it to her. Maybe she will discover that tomorrow.

“Do you think we can take a short nap?” Harry asked.

“After we have a snack?”

“Yes, I wouldn't miss the snack.”

Sally was sure that it was true. Harry had used up a great deal of energy, and she needed to replenish it. Their snack consisted of tuna casserole, salad, and sourdough bread. There was enough of it to satisfy them both. They ate, and Sally could see Harry getting recharged right before her very eyes. They were done eating, so Sally sent Harry to claim her room and take a nap. Harry could do marvelous things as long as she kept her energy up. She would have liked to nap herself, but someone had to

watch the food being cooked, and there was no one else there. It was just as well that she hadn't taken a nap because someone was knocking on the door.

“Flo and Carlos!” she exclaimed when she opened the door.

She'd not expected these two when she'd been told help was on the way. They would be a good help with anything. Even though Flo hadn't been a pack bitch there was little the female couldn't do. Sally gave them each a hug and then led them to the kitchen table, where she got each a drink.

“You can't imagine how happy I am to see you. This morning, Harry and I magicked all the bodies out of the ground.”

“You have magic?” Carlos asked.

“No, I just gave her some of my energy, and I was there to watch the whole thing. That's why Harry is taking a nap right now, and I am not. I needed to stay up to keep an eye on everything cooking for supper. I haven't had the opportunity to meet anyone in the pack yet, although I've called some of the people who may work in the house, and they will start tomorrow. Harry is here for two more days to help, but she is not sure what we should do next. I was lucky to have her lead me through what I should do today.”

“Oh, you poor girl. Carlos will probably be tied up helping your mate, but I'm sure we will figure out what we have to do. The wardens will be picking up the bodies that were unearthed, and then you will be free to go out among the pack and find out what is going on. We were told that many of those locked into leadership positions took off for the hills.” Flo admitted. “If you need some rest, you can do it now, and I'll take over the cooking.”

Sally suddenly felt more tired than she'd ever felt before. “I couldn't leave you to take

care of everything.”

“We're here to help. A small nap will help you reset, and maybe you will see things more clearly and know exactly what you need to do. I think you've done most of the hard work as far as the meal goes. Go rest.” Flo made it sound like a demand, and Sally turned and hurried to her room.

It was 2 hours later when she made it back to the kitchen. Harry was up, entertaining the guests, while Flo worked on the food, and Carlos enjoyed trying some of it. Wolves were always hungry.

“You look much better. The others will arrive in an hour or two, depending on how long their tasks take. If Xantos gets ahead on his work, maybe Carlos will be able to help us. He rarely had a regular pack bitch, so he had to do some of the work himself.”

“It's true, the top female generally did the work, but often they had a hard time doing it. The other females often gave them trouble, and I had to intervene frequently to resolve issues. It made things difficult, and sometimes, I had a lot of anger toward one or two of the females because they thought that if they got into that position, they could lure me into a relationship. All they managed to do was make me mad at them.” Carlos admitted.

Since they would be here for two weeks, Sally was hopeful that Carlos would give her some time as well. Flo and she started to finish preparing the meal. That's when Harry asked for some food, and Sally fixed her plate. It wasn't long after that that the others began to arrive. At least the guys seemed to be in a good mood, and Damon felt like they had done a lot. Damon was also happy that all the bodies had been pulled out of the ground and were waiting for his wardens.

“They will be here in the morning, and all the bodies will be removed. I have a

feeling that most of them are pack and that their families have been waiting to hear what happened to them," Damon admitted.

Sally was pretty sure that Marissa had been assigned to assist her, but due to the emergency, she and Harry had been left on their own. That might have been part of the reason they hadn't accomplished the amount that Damon had expected. Everything may be better tomorrow.

Chapter 9

The Pack

Xantos was pleased with the financial condition of the pack. It was other areas that needed healing. Damon's assistant had been priceless, and he felt sure that he would be able to handle this; however, it was Sally that he was worried about because she had no experience with this kind of thing at all. The members of this pack had been so beaten down that he thought it was unlikely that any of the males would challenge him. Sally could fight, so if any of the females challenged her, they would regret it. He was already reordering the hierarchy, but he was considering freezing one position due to the extensive knowledge it required. Damon had even suggested he do that.

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If he did, that person would not be his second-in-command but rather oversee certain businesses. His second would be at the top of the fighting hierarchy, but that didn't mean they would possess the skills needed to perform many of the required jobs. The old system didn't always work well in modern times, where specific skills, such as computer proficiency, were required, and being able to fight didn't necessarily mean one could do so effectively. The problem was the change was hard, and most wolves were set in their ways. Elias had managed to remove all his buddies from the hierarchy system, placing them at the top without having to fight, which showed how ruthless he was.

Once they had done those things that they could do easily, they went back to the pack house. That was when he realized that they had skipped lunch, and he was starving. It was the aroma of all that fantastic food that made him realize how hungry he was. As he entered, he was greeted by Carlos and his mate Flo. Damon was right that he knew them and was pleased to see them. Harry was already there, snacking on his meal, and he saw his mate, which made his wolf excited.

Everyone sat down, and the ladies began to serve the meal. By the time they got to Harry, she was ready for more. Xantos was thrilled with the work the little witch had done today. It might have taken weeks for a backhoe to unearth those bodies, and they would have torn up the whole yard to do so. A wave of Harry's hand pulled them to the surface, and now the families would have closure. He would have done anything needed to deal with the evil his father had done. So far, it hadn't been as difficult as he'd imagined. Sally and he might get through this after all.

The food was delicious, and the mood was good, considering the circumstances. No one wanted to discuss anything complicated with bedtime looming. It was as if there

was an unspoken agreement to save the work and worry about it until tomorrow morning. A good night's sleep would aid them all in their work. They had a great meal, and then everyone helped clean up before they headed to their own rooms. Xantos was ready to rest in the comforting arms of his mate. Tomorrow will be another hard day.

He hated being right, but the morning started with the gruesome task. The wounds had arrived. Damon wanted everyone there to deal with them. Harry had brought in a red-headed witch who had somehow managed to come up with a picture of each of the victims. This was a red wolf, but she was also a witch and had been one first. Xantos didn't have much time to find out about the witch because now that they had pictures, they had to go out among the pack and discover names to go with them. Even though most of these people had been missing for years, it didn't stop heartbreak from showing as if it had just been yesterday. It didn't take long to identify all but one of the females. She had probably been introduced to the pack from outside and was never allowed to get close to many of the pack members.

The surprise was one of the supposed victims had been identified as his half-sister. That would have made her Xantos' aunt. She had been the pack bitch when Elias had first become pack alpha. Most of those in the pack liked her, and she tried to help them as much as she was able to. One day, she had simply been gone, and everyone had been afraid to ask Elias what had happened to her. She might have died from natural causes. The coroner would have to determine that. Many of the others had signs they had been murdered. These signs were of bullet wounds or cuts from knives or other sharp objects.

All but the one that no one seemed to know had been identified by lunchtime, so they took a break before tackling other tasks.

“That saved the wardens weeks of hard work trying to identify all those people. Now they only have one to concern themselves with, and I'm hopeful that was such a good

picture they will be able to find her.” Damon admitted.

“I hope they do because that's hard on a family looking for someone that's gone and not being able to find them anywhere.” Sally offered.

Everyone agreed because they were all familiar with situations like that and how difficult they could be for a person when a loved one was gone. And now the worst of the work as far as the pack was concerned was done. Only one person left to identify, and the rest of them would soon be buried in whatever manner their family determined. After that was done, the pack could move on.

No one had challenged yet, but there was one of the females that he thought might try. There was still time left for the challenge, and she had been flirting heavily and seemed angry that she hadn't been able to get his attention. If anything, the female annoyed him. Even if she somehow managed to beat Sally, he would have no romantic interest in that woman. Xantos wouldn't mind if she left because she didn't seem to do any work. Why Elias had allowed that, he couldn't say.

Now that lunch was done, it was time for everyone to go their separate ways. Damon had a list of businesses that they had to work through, and one of them was the casino. The pack was registered as an Indian tribe. That made it much easier for them to run a casino without having to give all the profits to the government. It was also a key factor in the pack's financial success. With all those benefits, they should have done much better than they had, and the profit should have been shared among the pack. Education should have been promoted among younger people, and businesses should have sprung up all over, sharing with pack members. None of that had happened, but it was about to.

Xantos was very disappointed with what he could see once he stepped away from the business portion of the pack. One of the original alphas had set things up in a way that had prevented those following him from stripping the pack bare and taking

finances away or selling any of the land. That was a good thing, or it would all be gone. From the information he had just viewed, the last five alphas had added nothing worthwhile to the benefit of the pack. That was wrong in so many ways since they had started from a good spot and basically gone nowhere. Elias had even managed to set them back a little bit, as much as the rules of the pack would allow.

After touring several businesses, they sat and began to discuss some of the issues that the pack had. Many of those managing the businesses were not pack members. That was unusual, and Xantos wondered why Elias had done things that way.

“I think he didn't want his pack members to be in a position where they were making good money and had a bit of freedom from under his thumb,” Damon observed. “Since those people are already in those positions, if they're doing a good job, you should leave them. That doesn't mean you shouldn't train pack members to fill those positions and promote them to an assistant position. That way, they will be prepared if something happens and the manager needs to leave for any reason. You also need to be sure that the people managing are doing a good job because if they're not, you have a reason to replace them.”

“I understand what you're saying, and I agree. We need to give our people the security of good positions if they can handle them. I also noticed that we have a lot of our people in lower positions in these businesses. It's possible it might not take much to train some of them to move up into higher positions if they are given that opportunity.” Xantos observed.

“I can see that you understand what we are hoping you will do here. This part of the country has not been as productive as it should have been. The council let pack alphas do as they wished at the cost of the pack members that they should have been taking care of. It is my hope that that will not happen anymore.”

“I hope you can work your way through all of them. But I must ask, what about

California and the cardigan pack specific.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask before. He’s no dummy, and he sees the way the wind is blowing. He has been leaving the other packs alone and even paying some lawsuits that have been brought against him. He has cut back on his illegal activities to the point that it is impossible to find any. We can’t go after him unless we can find recent activity that justifies it. If he keeps doing what he’s doing, the other California packs will heal, and that is all we really want.” Damon admitted.

“Maybe that will be enough. Most wolves just want peace and success for their families.”

“We are a simple race, at least most of us are. Just like any race, we have the good and the bad.”

Xantos was glad that Damon had shared the information with him. He would tell Sally because she really wanted to know, too. It made sense not to go after Cardigan when he wasn’t doing anything wrong at the moment. He was also sure that Damon would keep a good eye on him to ensure that that didn’t change. Would he continue to stay on the straight and narrow? After so many years of doing things his way and not caring who he hurt, it might be hard for him to do so. On the other hand, all the challenges around him might make him think twice about going back to his old ways.

“Is Sally going to be able to handle the pack bitch position?” Xantos asked. “I know she’s capable in many areas, but I’m really not sure if she has any knowledge in the areas she’s about to need.”

“I wouldn’t have moved forward with this plan if I didn’t think she was able to handle everything she needs to. The thing that most people don’t realize is that she doesn’t have to do everything herself. She needs to find capable people to handle those areas that are hard for her. Basically, a pack bitch is a manager, and she was a good office

manager for Tyne. Once she becomes more comfortable in the position, she won't have any problems that will be difficult to deal with."

He thought about what Damon had said, and it was true that Sally had been a good office manager. If managing was the most significant part of her job, that wouldn't be a problem. He also felt confident in her ability to fight, and he thought that that might happen soon.

"What do we do now?"

"We're going to start a few of the programs that the pack bitch normally does to help Sally because her burden will be greater than yours. The pack bitch is usually in charge of education, welfare, and any female-related activities. You and I are going to take a look at the education program or the lack thereof. We will just get things started so that she doesn't have to start from scratch. Another thing we need to do, and what we should probably do first, is look into the education provided for the young. While we are doing that, we can discuss with the teachers of the higher grades what students would like to move on to college or other kinds of secondary education."

"Have you done this before?" Xantos asked.

"Not personally, but I have discussed it with several pack bitches in the past when they were taking over the job. My sister-in-law started when there was no program at all. Various older pack members encouraged children to pursue further education, but there was no formal program in place for it. She set one up, and it made a difference."

"Let's go check out the education system we have set up."

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"We'll get on it right now," Damon agreed.

They had been told that there was a building that was designated for school. It was a large building because it covered children from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The preschool had its own building, which was a small one located next door. They would talk to the teachers, starting with the kindergartenteachers and working their way up to those preparing to graduate. Xanthos had always believed that education was the most important thing, and he personally held a bachelor's degree in business, which he hoped would help him run the pack.

He'd never really ask Sally if she'd had any education beyond high school or even if she had a high school diploma. Most packs encouraged students to continue their education, but at least they wanted them to have high school diplomas. No one wished for the students' education to be found lacking. Most packs homeschooled the children, and they came in only for testing. It was essential to maintain a separate existence from humans, especially when children were young and had limited control over their shifting. They considered it equally important that their children got the training and education that a human would get.

Xantos knew that even his father had arranged for their children's education through 12th grade, as most humans were expected to have. His failing had been not encouraging the children to pursue college and other secondary education. Not only did he not encourage them to do so, but he also discouraged them. That was just one of the things that made him a bad alpha.

Epilogue

All the potential new employees had shown up, and she had been able to put them to work. The house manager was upstairs with two children. That small apartment was barely livable, but she said it would be fine for a little while. The others all had rooms with bathrooms. They were all settled in, and some had started their jobs today. It was a relief to have that done.

She had to admit that Damon and Xantos getting the education issues nearly dealt with had been a big help. Harry had left yesterday, and that had been hard to watch her go. With Carlos and Flo there, she had begun to interact with the pack and work on the programs the pack needed. Damon had also left yesterday with Harry, but Xantos seemed to have everything under control.

No challenges had been made, and it didn't look like any would. None of these people wanted to be in charge. They just wanted to be treated fairly, and they saw that was going to happen. A week passed, and it was time to bid Carlos and Flo goodbye. She was sad to see them go, but they had helped her a lot, and she was ready to take on her new life, and so was Xantos. Speaking of new life, she was expecting one, and they were both thrilled. Her family was coming to visit soon, and they were happy for her. She had not seen such a rosy future. Life was better than she'd ever expected.