



His Undercover Wolf

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Description: Otsana Brooks had always lived a double life. By day, she was a senior police detective, second in command of the corporate fraud squad, handling complex cases and navigating the intricate web of white-collar crime. Her sharp mind and relentless determination had earned her a reputation as a force to be reckoned with in the world of law enforcement.

Xavier Bennett was the enigmatic owner and Chief Executive Officer of Worlds Apart, an international electronics company. But beneath the shiny surface, rumors swirled. Whispers of corporate espionage, insider trading, and unethical practices hung in the air like a thick fog.

In a high-stakes game where corporate intrigue meets the supernatural, Otsana would have to rely on every skill she possessed, both as a detective and as a werewolf, to untangle the web of deception she had stumbled upon.

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Chapter One

Otsana

It had been a long ass day,tying up loose ends on a housing scheme fraud case that me and my team had spent months investigating. As was usual, we'd uncovered despicable, unethical practices with four scumbags caring nothing about defrauding the innocent public. The victims were people that had worked hard for years and saved every dime they could to buy their dream home, only to have that dream shattered into tiny pieces by someone who cared nothing for them and only for their money. Every penny they had stolen had been squandered on the thieves lavish lifestyles.

Over the past year we had painstakingly pieced evidence together, dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' to ensure we built a solid case for the prosecution that even the best lawyers in the country would not be able to successfully defend. The criminals were all currently being held on no bail, and I expected the three men, and one woman would be spending a very long time in prison. If by some miracle they were released back onto the streets, our pack, known by those in our inner circle as The Revengers, would be waiting. One way or another they would answer for the lives they had crushed and would never defraud anyone else.

I punched in the final details and sent the email off to the Department of Public Prosecution who had scheduled the four court cases. All would be dealt with separately which I had been disappointed to hear. From experience, the jury was always more affected when a group of criminals were held up before them. Still, I had to trust the department knew what they were doing. Now the case was done, I

looked forward to some down time before the next one crossed my desk.

My boss—Captain Landon Sajan, a twenty-six-year veteran of the Langer Falls City Police Force, with most of it in the corporate fraud squad, dropped a thick folder onto my desk, startling me from my thoughts of a few days to myself. The folder landed with a soft thud and sent dust motes dancing in the air. I turned away from the computer screen and gazed up into his face.

Landon had been happily married for twenty years and they had three teenage sons. The eldest had recently joined the force and was doing well at the academy, or so Landon insisted proudly. Landon had been hopeful his son would follow in his footsteps, but Zucan had chosen to commence on the path toward being a part of the drug squad.

Landon was a good boss, a details man who could see inconsistencies others missed and he contributed a great deal to our team even though his days were spent behind a desk while I was in charge of the rest of the team who were boots on the streets. Or backsides on seats studying computer information.

Landon sat in a chair on the other side of my desk, and I pulled the folder closer, flipping it open.

“Team!” Landon called and everyone immediately hustled from their desks to where we sat.

Our group, an undercover plain clothes team, consisted of Detective Investigators Hunter Pryor and Elouise Harm, who had been on the force for two decades as I had. Detective Investigators Ophelia Gibbs, Ishaan Kane, and Declan Jones had been with us for fourteen, eleven, and seven years, respectively. They were well trained, astute, and could be trusted without doubt. They all looked at Landon expectantly.

Landon tapped the open folder. “Worlds Apart, an electronics company based here in the city, has been flagged by authorities and handed over to this team for investigation. Xavier Bennett formed the business, now an international corporation, straight out of school twenty years ago. He had come up with the idea to develop some kind of electronic gizmo to help blind people feel their surroundings through their hands or something I don’t understand since I’m not a tech guru. Demand sent the business into the stratosphere and made him a very wealthy man.”

Landon paused to rake his eyes over everyone who appeared fascinated with what he was saying.

“Inside the folder is over fifteen years of corporate history which shows some suspicious activity. The latest is happening at the moment and is what caused them to be flagged. For the record, I do not believe Bennett, or his partner, Groves, are in anyway involved but I’ll leave it for you to decide. Detective Inspector Brooks will fill you in on details of the case. This one will involve mainly computer research, hacking into spaces where you shouldn’t be, so it goes without saying, if you suspect at any time that you have been made, get out. In the past two years, two men and one woman from the corporation have disappeared unexpectedly and be found dead from gunshot wounds. I want someone on the inside who can handle themselves but not a team member, Otsana. Use one of your contacts.”

I nodded in agreement. I had one of our pack in mind, who I’d brought in before, and she would be perfect for this job. But until I knew more, I wouldn’t know for certain.

“I’ll go over the file and make a decision on who would be best suited, but I have someone in mind.”

“Sort this out, it’s gone on long enough and Keith over at securities wants answers.” Landon slapped the desk, got to his feet, and returned to his office.

“Gather round,” I instructed, and the others pulled chairs up to my desk and sat. They would be interested to find out what was in the file as was I.

Once they were settled, I turned my attention to the open folder. I took a photo from the top and placed it on the desk where everyone could see it clearly.

The image was of a man, showing him from the waist up. Royal blue eyes fixed a piercing stare at the camera and the scowl on his face had me thinking he regarded it as his worst enemy. He wore a gray suit, white shirt, and maroon tie. His dark hair, slightly gray at the temples, didn’t dare to lie out of place. Frown lines creased his forehead and the corners of both eyes. Instinct told me they weren’t lines caused by laughter, he was much too serious. There was an enigmatic air about him, and the image seemed to draw me in as if it were alive. Warmth pooled in my groin, and I reared back slightly in shock.

“You okay, Boss?” Elouise asked with concern.

I shook my head. “I think the captain is right...Xavier Bennett isn’t involved and I’m sure he has no idea what is going on beneath his nose.”

“Instinct?” Declan asked.

I nodded. None of the team were aware of my unique abilities and I intended keeping it that way.

“Right, let’s get back to business.” I shuffled papers around and read them over quickly before speaking again.

“As the captain said, Bennett started his business straight from school with money left to him by his grandfather for the most part. He had an idea for an electronic device to be fitted to the cane of blind people. Indigo enabled them to ‘feel’ through

their fingertips.”

“Pretty cool,” Hunter grinned.

“At first there was only Bennett and his best friend, who he appointed general manager—Cillian Groves. Bennett is the gadget brains while Groves takes care of marketing and does the leg work. The device generated a lot of interest, and they sold like hotcakes. Both men became instant multi-millionaires. Bennett gave Groves forty percent of the business when they first started. They both attended Cromer Grammar School in Baringa.”

Baringa was an outlying suburb of Langer Falls.

Ishaan let out a low whistle. “You need serious brains and money to be accepted there. What did their parents do for a living? I can tell you, they couldn’t afford that school for their kids on a cop’s pay.”

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We all laughed although Ishaan spoke the truth.

“Bennett’s father was a politician, Senator Owen Bennett. He and his wife, Krylee, retired to Florida two years ago. Bennett was an only child.”

“Wait...Is Xavier the grandson of Wilfred Bennett, a past vice president?” Ophelia asked.

I nodded. “One and the same. Apparently Bennett has a brilliant mind for electronics with no interest in following the family legacy and entering politicians. Their thinking is ‘worlds apart’ which is where the company name came from. He always had an interest in electronics and wanted to develop gadgets to help those who were disabled. According to an article in The Langer Falls Herald, who ran an article on him being one of the youngest and most successful business owners in the United States, he was determined to make his own success.”

“What about Groves?” Declan inquired.

“He’s interesting...Groves initially grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. At the age of twelve, he found himself in the system after his father murdered his mother and two sisters. The father went to prison for life and died in a prison fight three years ago. The family Groves went to live with recognized he was highly intelligent and although they were comfortably off, they weren’t able to afford somewhere like Cromer, but they were determined to give the boy a chance in life after having suffered so much and applied to have him tested by the Cromer entrance committee. He passed all subjects with an average of ninety-eight percent and was offered a full scholarship. That scholarship included uniforms, books, excursions, everything for

the remaining six years of his education. According to initial investigations, the boys struck up a friendship almost immediately and it has endured to this day.”

The team scribbled a few things I’d said in their small notebooks but so far I hadn’t said anything referring to a crime.

“Neither man is married.” Knowing that piece of information about Bennett gave me a great deal of satisfaction but I was puzzled about the reason why, set it aside to consider later, and moved things along.

“Groves is known to have spent time with Maria Aladrotti during the past week...interesting.”

The Aladrotti family were a mafia crime gang and to date, the serious crime squad hadn’t been able to gather enough evidence to put them away. The fact a number of witnesses had disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again, hadn’t made their job easy.

“Why would Groves associate with the daughter of a mafia family knowing it could have serious ramifications for his best friend’s company?” I mused.

“If there is crime connected with the company, Groves is beginning to look like a prime suspect,” Ophelia stated.

“I agree,” Hunter nodded.

I wasn’t convinced and trusted Landon when he said Groves wasn’t involved. “Moving on...According to this outline, a device women can clip on their clothing that emits a siren type sound, and immediately connects with 911 when the end is tugged on, was released almost ten years ago and is when things started to change as far as the company was concerned.”

“The Matilda Personal Alarm,” Elouise informed.

“That’s right. The interest of officials was snagged when the company’s stock shot up by six percent, thirty days before the product was due to hit the market. One week after Matilda’s release, the stock was sold off and those involved made a fortune.”

“That’s not unusual,” Ishaan argued. “When companies announce something new and in this case, innovative, their stocks always rise and then fall after release when there is sell off. It’s what speculators do; they are constantly watching the market.”

“You’re right but in this case, it was five days after the stock spiked before the company put out a formal release date for Matilda.”

“Insider trading. My money’s on Groves, especially knowing his connection with the mafia family,” Declan said pointedly.

I shook my head. “Why? What reason could he have to betray his best friend and jeopardize his position at the company? It doesn’t make sense, but then, it’s not the first time something in a case doesn’t add up and it won’t be the last. It doesn’t matter how many years’ experience I have in this job, or how many cases I work, there is always a curve ball.”

We spent the next hour discussing some of the idiosyncrasies of executive staff at the company until the late hour demanded we call it a day.

Ophelia and Declan ran off copies of everything in the file for each member to study before we met again the following morning and they left to head home.

After the team left, I did one final check of my email before turning off the computer, and grabbing my folder, purse, and car keys. I crossed the squad room and poked my head into Landon’s office. He was seated at his desk, a deep frown on his face, his

eyes fixed on the computer screen. When he sensed I was there, he waved me inside.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“I hope not, but not sure yet.”

Landon’s cryptic answer had me frowning. “Okay. I’m heading home, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Have a good night. Thanks for your hard work on the Fitcher case.”

I nodded and left the station, climbed into my car, and started on the ten-minute drive home. My skin was crawling with anxiety and when I peered up at the sky, it was to see the expected full moon.

Chapter Two

Xavier

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I stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the third floor. The light of day hadn't yet broken but staying in bed had not been an option. I'd done enough tossing and turning over the past few days to last me a damn lifetime. Even working out in my home gym until I was barely able to stand hadn't helped me to sleep.

My corporation—Worlds Apart, that was headquartered in Langer Falls and had offices in Europe, Asia, The Pacific, and Africa, was under siege by a traitor. Cillian, my best friend who had a forty percent ownership, and I, were no closer to finding him or her than we had been during our previous three releases of new and innovative products. Over the past fifteen years, someone in our midst was guilty of insider trading and we were stunned the authorities hadn't been able to track down the perpetrator.

I'd been informed the previous evening, via a call to my cell, that the Corporate Fraud undercover police team was going to take over the investigation...not before time...and I could expect to hear from their lead investigator, Detective Inspector Otsana Brooks in the next day or so. The name was unusual, and I had no idea if my contact was a man or woman. I hadn't dared ask for fear of being accused of discrimination.

Being honest, I was an asshole when it came to business and much preferred dealing with men. I blamed my father and grandfather for my attitude...wrongly, since I had been well aware of my bias for many years, and it was within my power to think and behave differently. The two men who'd had the most influence over my life were the pin-up men for chauvinism. My attitude was improving with age, and over the past decade, I'd signed off on employment for whoever was the best fit for the position advertised instead of on gender.

The bell on the elevator dinged, the doors slid open, and I stepped into the dimly lit, carpeted foyer.

Directly in front of me was a large reception desk where Pamela Astin spent her working days. She took control of any arrivals who had arranged to meet with me or Cillian. Only those who had made previous arrangements were given access to the elevator that led to the top floor of the corporation building.

The floor was carpeted in red with small gold fleur-de-lis peppered throughout. A large chandelier, currently dormant, hung from the ceiling in the center of the foyer. Six downlights, embedded in the ceiling were turned down low, providing security lighting. The desk was beautifully crafted from polished oak, and the counter was red glass surrounded by a thin strip of gold painted wood. The area was understated opulence that spoke of quality.

Aside from monitoring visitors, Pamela was tasked with signing off on all shipping. On the ground floor of the building were three men and five women who liaised with several shipping companies and kept Pamela informed of everything in the pipelines. Pammie, as Cillian insisted on calling the middle-aged woman who didn't seem to mind, had been with us for sixteen years and knew the position like the back of her hand.

I dreaded the day she made the decision to retire. I wondered if there was some law that would prevent her from doing so before she reached ninety. Kidding of course, she would retire with both my grateful thanks and my blessing.

I strode past the desk on the left and along a walkway that led to where my personal assistant sat outside my office suite. I groaned, knowing Betty would be gone soon as she and her husband were relocating to Florida. I wondered why everyone seemed to move to the southern state when they retired. Did they really move for the weather as mother had claimed when her and father did the same?

I needed to pull my finger out and set about hiring someone...something I should have done weeks ago but hadn't found time for, or being honest, it was something I'd been avoiding.

Betty was becoming desperate to leave and had offered to take care of hiring someone, but it was important I made the choice being it was me who would have to work with them. I made a mental note to call the employment agency later and ask them to send over a few candidates.

Cillian's office suite was identical to mine on the other side of the building. The entire floor was ours, and although it was close enough to keep my finger on the pulse of what was happening downstairs, the space satisfied my need for isolation.

I hated been the focus of attention and it took all my willpower to agree to an annual interview with radio, print, or television media. Reluctantly doing so helped keep media and the public on my side.

Cillian was the limelight whore. He thrived on attention and every interview he gave was professional to a fault while singing the praises of the corporation. For that reason, when inquiries from media hit my desk, they were quickly dispatched in his direction. Or rather to his personal assistant, Molly, a woman who had been his right hand for the past fourteen years.

Aged thirty-two, seven years our junior, Molly was married with two young children and strictly off limits to Cillian who had a reputation for being a playboy. To my skeptical surprise, Cillian had acknowledged her married status and always treated her with the utmost respect.

I entered my office, closed the door, and flipped the switch, flooding the space with bright light. Crossing to the beverage station, I turned on the coffee maker, and while waiting for coffee to brew, I walked over to my large oak desk where I spent the

majority of my hours in each day. I unbuttoned and removed the gray suit jacket I'd worn and hung it on a coat tree beside the desk.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, and after starting up my computer, I went back to the coffee station and poured a large mug full of the brew—black, as I preferred. After sitting back at my desk, I took a long sip of the liquid black gold and sighed.

When my office door was suddenly pushed open, I wasn't surprised to see who it was.

"Thought I smelled coffee."

Cillian poured a coffee for himself and dropped into the chair on the opposite side of my desk. I glanced at the watch on my wrist.

"Why are you here at 4.30 am?"

"Same reason you are...couldn't sleep. Trying to figure out this insider trading fuck up is driving me crazy. I spent last night with Maria but she's a dead end. If she does know something, she's not saying. I told her things weren't working out and it would be better if we didn't see each other again. She didn't seem to care. It was frustrating that nothing came of being with the woman because her family has tentacles everywhere and I really thought, being so fucking naïve, she would let something she might have heard slip." Cillian sipped his coffee.

"Yeah, the lady is gorgeous, but the elevator doesn't go all the way to the top and I can imagine she was frustrating."

"What do we do now?"

“Wait...I guess. Evan Carmichael called me at home last night and said he has handed all their documentation over to the Corporate Fraud Squad. Someone will be contacting us in the next day or so. He didn't sound too happy about it, but I think the order came from above.”

Cillian carded his fingers through his longish hair. Unlike mine, which was always combed neatly into place, Cillian's hair always looked like he'd been sitting in front of a fan for a few hours, and it stuck up in all directions. To be fair, he always tidied it before meeting with a client, so I never passed comment.

He dragged a foolscap notebook in front of him and plucked a pen from the pocket of his suit jacket.

“Let's start over and include everyone. Maybe putting it on paper, and not leaving anyone out, will flag something we've been missing on the computer.”

I shrugged. “Guess we have nothing to lose.”

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“Okay...this bullshit started five days before the Matilda release date was announced around fifteen years ago.” Cillian wrote down ‘15 years—Matilda.’ “That was the first time our stocks spiked, and when we first alerted the authorities.”

“List who started with the company a little before that time,” I instructed.

Cillian shook his head. “We have been focusing on those hired a year or so before Matilda, and I think we’re wrong. We need to include everyone we hired in establishing the company up until Matilda was released. The only thing we can be somewhat sure of is...it probably isn’t someone employed after Matilda.”

“I hate that it could be someone who has been with us since the beginning.”

“I agree which is why I’ve supported your decision to leave their names out of investigations, but the time has come that we have to include everyone.”

“I know you’re right, but it hurts to think it could be one of our long-standing, trusted employees.”

“I feel the same but it’s time we started suspecting everyone...Except us of course.”

I laughed. “You’re an idiot to even think we could suspect each other. It’s not likely we would sabotage our own company and risk going to jail.”

“Hey, little less of the idiot, thanks. There are plenty of executives in this country who are caught taking part in sabotage of the companies they own, or work for, and participating in unethical practices.”

“This is true. Okay...names.”

We listed the names of all the executive staff we’d employed from the beginning.

As I’d confessed to my best friend, it hurt to think it may be one of the men, or women, in whom Cillian and I had placed our trust.

Chapter Three

Otsana

I reached to press the button on the remote control that operated the garage door but decided against doing so. The full moon was high overhead causing my skin to prickle and setting every nerve ending on edge. My anxiety was high, and I needed a run. Often, after a long stressful day, I needed down time and a run through the state park nearby to bring me back into balance, so I was able to get a few hours’ sleep. Contrary to myth and belief, the wolf in me didn’t need a full moon to come out to play.

The pack I was part of—Les Vengeurs, originating in France, and wasled by my brother—Aodhan. He was Alpha now my father had stepped back due to severe arthritis. Our pack had originated in the eleventh century when a curse had been placed on one of our female ancestors after she refused to acquiesce to the advances of a warlock. In a fit of rage, he had cast a spell, turning her into a wolf/human hybrid.

Over the years, some had chosen to mate and reproduce while some, not wanting to subject others to their same fate, had remained single and in rare cases even remained celibate.

Although our pack wasn’t the largest in the vicinity of Langer Falls, we were by far

the strongest. Our power had come about several centuries earlier when hybrids had mated with other hybrids instead of pure humans which weakened their bloodlines.

My brother had married another hybrid as was expected, a lovely young woman called Calliope. She was a cop he'd met in the course of his job. She had moved to Langer Falls from the Midwest years earlier. Calliope was the product of two hybrids making her bloodlines desirable for mating, but it had been Aodhan who had captured her heart. Any children birthed by the pair would have strong wolf dominant blood in their veins and ensure the pack remained strong into the future.

I sat in the car, the motor still running while I was daydreaming...or maybe more aptly nightdreaming since darkness had fallen, about the family I loved with all my heart. The hierarchy of the pack were all young, most in their late twenties or early thirties, with me being one of the oldest at age thirty-six. Only Peadar who had been sweet on me for years, but for whom I felt no attraction was older at forty-three. He was Beta to my brother like his father before him had been for my father.

Over the past couple of years the older pack members had moved on to take life a little easier when their ageing joints had started to protest. Some had moved to warmer climates, others, like my parents had stayed in the area, ready and willing to offer advice when needed. Many young teenagers, on learning who they were, had set off in search of a mate and in the case of males, to start their own packs. We all managed to stay in touch via technology, and if any encountered trouble, our pack didn't hesitate to rush to their aid. The unusual youth of our pack was also a reason for our strength.

Apart from Peadar, the active senior males and the men my brother depended on the most were Faolan, Kaden, Owen, Sawyer, and Atlas. Active senior females who supported the men without question were me as Alpha, Calliope as Beta, Ireland, Undine, Zarina, Xanthia, and Quintessa. The rest of the pack, dominated by males because that's how the chips fell, numbered one hundred and ninety-three in total and

ranged in age from two-years-old to mid-fifties. It was a cohesive pack, and squabbles were rare.

Taking the phone from my purse, I hit speed dial for Zarina, my closest friend.

“Otsana, calling for a run?”

“Are you busy working?”

“No, I just finished my shift at the hospital and was about to call you. My anxiety is off the charts, and I’ve had a shit evening which is why I was so late finishing. We were battling to save the life of a young boy who ran out in front of a car. The hospital is fucking crazy; we always have more accidents when there is a full moon. I swear to fuck being wolves in this insane world is the least of our problems.”

I laughed. Zarina had always been one for theatrical dramatics.

“Vincent’s Peak?” she asked.

“My thinking exactly. We can run up to the falls and take a swim in the waterfall pool. It’s warm out so the cooling water will be welcome after some exercise.”

“I’ll meet you in the parking lot in ten minutes.”

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I disconnected the call, shifted the car into reverse, and started toward the state park, fifteen minutes away from my home.

I pulled in alongside Zarina's car and switched off the engine and lights. Slivers of moonlight threaded their way through the tall trees overhanging the car spaces, partially hiding our vehicles.

Zarina sat on the hood of her small car, feet hooked into the bumper bar, and she looked up from the cell phone in her hand as I locked the car, shoved the remote into a pocket of my pants, and started toward her. She slid to the ground, and we hugged in greeting.

"It feels like I haven't seen you in months," my best friend complained.

"It's been two days and I told you we were busy closing out a case." I laughed and shook my head. "You really are a drama queen."

"So everyone keeps telling me. Maybe that's why I can't keep a mate."

I patted her shoulder. "One day you'll find a mate who will overlook your faults. If Aodhan can find someone to put up with him, there's hope for us yet."

Zarina nodded. "I'm not in a hurry. Come on, let's go."

We both stripped naked and stashed everything in the trunk of Zarina's car. After

locking the vehicle which set the alarm, she put the remote into a small magnetic box and attached it beneath the wheel well out of sight.

Moving into the cover of the trees, we both proceeded to shift to wolves. Standing on my rear legs, and with Zarina by my side, we turned our heads skyward and howled at the moon. The orb shone brightly, sending tentacles of light across the clear night sky.

I spun around and set off running in the direction of the falls, yelping when Zarina pounced onto my back, sending me spread-eagled on the leaf covered, rocky ground. The air was knocked from my lungs for only a moment and after sucking in a deep breath, I pushed Zarina off, sprang to all fours, and ran like the wind, being careful not to trip on raised roots or the fallen branches of trees.

I heard Zarina closing in and ducked and weaved through the trees to avoid her catching me again. My actions were all in vain and I groaned when she sent me flying, belly-first, back onto the ground. Twigs and stones pressed into my skin, and I knew there'd be bruises that would last for a few days when I shifted back to human.

This time Zarina was ready for me to throw her off and she pinned me down by sitting on my back with her legs on each side of my body. I felt a sharp sting on my ear when she bit down and reacted by bucking my hips sharply, causing us to roll over and over each other down an embankment. Zarina played with me like a ragdoll, I was no match for her strength.

The woman was a good four inches taller than my five feet nine and she was built like a wrestler, thanks to her obsession with working out at the hospital gym. My strength was no match for hers so I played along, biting, and nipping wherever I could reach.

When Zarina had finally had enough, she leaped to her feet and ran ahead with me in

hot pursuit. The night was warm and heat caused the skin beneath my fur to pool with sweat. I looked forward to a swim. As we neared the falls, the thundering sound of water cascading over rocks and crashing into the small pool below became louder and louder.

Zarina leaped into the water, and I didn't hesitate to join her. The cool water on my overheated body had me sighing with pleasure. I wondered, not for the first time, if wolves sighed. It felt and sounded like one to me. Zarina and I dog paddled back and forth across the body of water, diving beneath the falling water which splashed around us.

We wrestled, pushing each other under until breathless, and exhausted, climbed back onto the bank and shook the water free that had been trapped in our fur.

I gave a short, sharp bark, and Zarina, knowing what it meant, fell in beside me as we made our way back to the parking lot at an easy pace.

The anxiety in me was gone and I felt at peace with myself once again. When we reached Zarina's car, we howled at the moon before shifting back to our human form. She grabbed the box from the wheel well and removed the remote. Lights flashed and chirps filled the air as the car unlocked. We each removed a towel from the trunk and dried off before dressing.

"Feeling better?" Zarina asked.

"Much... You?"

"I'm good, so it's home for me, a glass of wine and a long soak in a hot bath."

"Half your luck. A bath would put me to sleep, and I have a new case file to study before morning. A wine will definitely be involved."

Zarina laughed before we hugged, climbed into our cars and set off to our homes. With my mind now cleared, I'd be able to absorb the details of the case I needed to study.

As usual, I was the first to arrive in the squad room at a little after 7.30 am. I hit the switches, flooding the space with light, dumped the file, my purse, and keys on my desk, and crossed to the coffee station. After preparing the two coffee makers, I started them brewing. While they gurgled away, I went back to my desk, sat and switched on the computer. It purred as it came to life and while waiting, I flipped open the file I'd spent hours reading the previous night. A page of handwritten notes was on the top and ready for when my team arrived.

I heard laughing and the door to the squad room opened. Turning in my chair I watched as Hunter and Ophelia approached.

"Morning, Boss," they sang in unison before continuing straight over to the coffee machines where they poured themselves a mug.

"Not sure if the coffee will be ready, I haven't been in long." I didn't drink a lot of coffee because as a wolf it wasn't something I should indulge in, but thanks to my father, I'd developed a taste for the potent brew from a very young age, and I did like one first thing in a morning.

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“They have switched over to warm so they’re both ready,” Hunter informed.

“I’ll have one while you’re there.”

Minutes later a mug of steaming hot coffee was placed in front of me. Ophelia and Hunter set their mugs on my desk, grabbed their files, pulled chairs closer, and sat.

I nodded toward the yellow folders. “What do you think?”

“This has been one fucked up case from the onset,” Hunter grumbled. “Almost fifteen years and the fuckwits at security haven’t got a clue who’s involved.”

“Any suspect?” I questioned, keen to establish Hunter’s direction of thought.

Hunter exchanged a glance with Ophelia. “No doubt...We both reckon it’s Groves.”

“We?”

I’d suspected they had started seeing each other, but neither had said anything and I was waiting for them to come to me with the revelation. It was amazing they hadn’t started something years earlier. The pair had been dancing around each other, and their feelings that would have been obvious to a blind man, because Hunter had been married. The marriage had been a disaster from the start, and even though destined to fail, Ophelia had confided to me that she would not be the cause.

Another glance was exchanged, and Ophelia shrugged. “We’ve started seeing each other now Hunter’s divorce is final. We went over the file together last night.”

“I don’t give a fuck if you are seeing each other outside of work, I’ve been expecting it for some time, but don’t let your relationship affect our cases.”

“Won’t happen, Boss,” Hunter assured which was good enough for me. I trusted every one of my team with my life and never questioned their word.

The rest of the team arrived in quick succession, and I grinned when they each wished me a good morning and made straight for the coffee before joining me at my desk. Once everyone was settled, I got straight down to business.

“You all took a look at the file?”

Each of them gave me their opinion in turn on who they suspected. Groves was the overwhelming favorite with only Ishaan disagreeing with his colleagues. He was convinced it was someone else but wasn’t sure who at that point. I agreed with him.

“Why don’t you think it could be Groves, Otsana?” Elouise asked.

“Bennett and Groves have been as close as brothers for more than two decades. They have done everything together. The initial investigators made a point of saying they both brought the information and their suspicions of insider trading to them on every occasion it occurred.”

“Groves could be cooperating to throw suspicion off his tail,” Hunter argued.

“Possibly, but I honestly don’t believe it’s either of the men. My instincts tell me it’s someone who has been overlooked because they would be the last one we would think could be guilty.”

“Who’ll be our plant?” Ishaan asked.

“Calliope. I’ll speak with her this afternoon. Bennett’s personal assistant—Betty Lowe has resigned. She and her husband have decided to retire and move to Florida. Taking her position will be the ideal cover for Calli.”

My sister-in-law was a beat cop over in Rotoma, north of the city, and suited this case perfectly.

“She’s done some undercover for one of the drug squads...Not Aodhan’s team because it would be a conflict of interest, and she also has a black belt in jiu jitsu. I spoke with the captain about her last evening, and he checked with Chief Ramsey who had no objection despite our being related. Calli is calm under pressure and extremely observant thanks to her work on the streets.”

I didn’t mention my sister-in-law had extremely acute wolf instincts.

After further discussion, the team split off to hit the streets and speak with their informants, and I called Worlds Apart to request a meeting with Xavier Bennett. After a short wait, I assumed while the request went up the food chain, it was granted for 2 pm. While I waited for the time to pass, I made notes on points I wanted to discuss.

Chapter Four

Xavier

A knock sounded at the door to my office, turning my attention away from the computer, and I called out, “enter.”

Betty pushed through the door carrying a small brown sack in one hand and her ever-present notebook in the other. I knew without asking the sack contained an almond bear claw sprinkled with extra sugar frosting. It was my absolute favorite pastry. I

restricted myself to two each week and added an extra half an hour to my workout those days to make up for having indulged.

Betty crossed to the coffee station, plated the delicacy, and made me a mug of coffee before setting both on my desk. She then sat in the chair opposite me, positioning her notebook and pen in front of her.

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It was our routine to meet at 10 am every day to update each other on my schedule.

I bit into the buttery goodness of the bear claw and smothered a groan. Betty handed me a napkin and I wiped the powdered sugar from my mouth.

“I have no idea how I’m going to manage without you, Betty. Are you sure Harvey can’t move to Florida on his own?”

Betty laughed. “No, he cannot and if you don’t contact the employment agency, or give me permission to do so, you’re going to be left without a personal assistant. If you leave it much longer, he or she will not have the benefit of a handover and directions on what you like and dislike.”

I took another bite of the bear claw, set it on the plate, wiped my fingers clean, and sat back in the chair.

“Seven working days, Xavier. Our removalist and flights to Florida are booked and confirmed. I’m leaving and there will not be another extension. You have had more than enough time to hire someone to take my place.”

Betty was becoming a little irate and she had every right to be after the way I’d disrupted her plans. I’d already talked her into staying two weeks longer than planned which had resulted in having a very annoyed Harvey on the other end of the line. I’d given him my word that there would no further fuck ups to their plans.

“I know. I promise I’ll speak with the agency today and have them send over a few suitable candidates tomorrow for interview.”

“Thank you. Now...” Betty picked up her notepad and flipped through a couple of pages. “Detective Inspector Otsana Brooks called the company half an hour ago. Downstairs paged me and I spoke with her about meeting with you. It’s scheduled for 2 pm so I’ve postponed your two thirty with Marlo from the wire supplier to tomorrow afternoon.”

The mystery was solved...Otsana was female. I reminded my misogynistic self, her gender made no difference. All that mattered was she was up to the job because I was tired of the bullshit and wanted the issue solved once and for all.

I made a note on my own notepad. “Will you set up afternoon tea, please? Maybe grab some of those cherry macarons from the bakery. Has Cillian been informed, he’ll need to be present?”

“No, I haven’t had a chance to advise him. He’s been with Dominic from accounting all morning. When I finish here, I’ll ask Molly to let him know. She may need to rearrange his schedule also. I’ll send one of the staff from downstairs out to the bakery.”

“Thank you.” I picked up the pastry and took another large bite. It was every bit as good as the first. Betty waited patiently while I finished chewing and swallowed. “I’m moving back the announcement of Panda’s release but only Cillian, you, and I are aware of the change at this point in time. I’ll get you to schedule a meeting with Ralph in advertising so I can have him push everything back by two weeks. I want him to handle everything personally and not advise any staff until it’s absolutely necessary. The release will go ahead after two weeks regardless of the results of the investigation.”

“Do you have any idea at all who it might be?”

“Not a fucking...sorry...Not a clue, and Cillian and I made the decision this morning

that from this point on, everyone..." I paused and stared into Betty's eyes, so she knew what I was saying included her. "...everyonewill be investigated by the police corporate fraud squad. I'm sorry, Betty. There is no doubt in our minds that you aren't involved, but we can't continue to feed selective information to investigators."

To her credit, Betty didn't bat an eyelid and the look in her eyes showed only honesty and confidence.

"So Evan is no longer handling the case?"

"No, it's been handed to the police who have more resources and fresh eyes."

She reached across the desk and placed her wrinkled hand, dotted with age spots, over mine. "I'm happy to provide anything they need and answer as many questions as necessary. Hopefully, it may help them to find whoever is betraying you."

"How did I get so lucky to have you? Neither Cillian nor I doubt your loyalty and integrity for even a millisecond, but over the past fifteen years, since this began before the release of Matilda, we feel we have been hobbling investigations by refusing to allow them full access to everyone. We felt by doing so we were protecting our longest serving and most loyal employees, but had we been honest, the insider most likely would have been exposed long before now. It just hurts to think it may be someone who has been around a for a long time and who we have trusted."

"I understand, sweetheart. You didn't want to point the finger at men and women who have supported you from the beginning, but yes, you have hampered those working the case. It's time for a new start with this new team that's coming on board."

"I agree and so does Cillian."

“Do you want me to take care of the mail outs for Panda? Are you sure it’s a good idea to delay the announcement of the release date and move the actual release back?”

“Cillian and I will task Pamela to call clients and advise them early orders have been postponed. And yes, we believe pushing it back is for the best at this time. Hopefully, the police will find who is involved before release and minimise the share price spikes.”

“Very well. Your day is clear, and apart from a couple of correspondence items, I’m free to help wherever you need.”

I nodded my thanks. Turning my hand over, I squeezed hers. She smiled, stood, and left me to the quiet of the office on my own.

The first thing I took care of after she closed the door was to place a call to the employment agency. It was something that should have been dealt with weeks earlier. I considered myself an astute CEO, but I’d been negligent in finding a replacement for Betty because I’d buried my head in the sand and was in deep denial about her imminent departure.

“I’ll ask my personalassistant to schedule appointment times for the five possible replacements we have discussed, and she will call you tomorrow. Thanks for returning my call from this morning and I look forward to meeting with those you have suggested.”

I disconnected the call at the same time Betty knocked and poked her head around the side of the door.

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“Xavier, Detective Brooks is here for your meeting.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall, it showed three minutes to two. My respect for the detective rose, it was rare anyone arrived at meetings on time these days and they always seemed to have some pathetic excuse for their tardiness.

When had I become an arrogant bastard who picked fault with everything and everyone? Maybe after Panda was released, I'd take a holiday. I could go somewhere there was no internet, like a state park in maybe Alaska, where I could trek through the bush and reclaim my peace of mind.

“Bring her in please, Betty.”

While Betty was gone, I shrugged on the gray jacket of my suit, and rounded the desk to greet Otsana.

The woman who accompanied Betty knocked the breath from my lungs. I encountered beautiful women almost every day and on the rare occasions I accepted an invitation to a benefit—always alone or with Cillian, and they held no interest for me. My lack of dating, or a woman on my arm, had rumors circling that I was gay. The assumption, although false didn't bother me, I'd been called worse.

The woman crossing my office with a smile on her face and one hand outstretched gave a whole new meaning to the saying—She was drop-dead gorgeous.

Otsana was tall, standing just a few inches shorter than my six feet three inches. She wore white pants that fit like a glove, black shirt, white jacket, and black pumps on

her feet. Her unusual black hair, peppered with silvery-white threads was swept back from her face and I couldn't see if it was in a bun, ponytail, or some kind of twist. Although her hair was unusual, it was her eyes that caught and held my attention. One was a bright shade of blue, the other...a rich chocolate brown.

“Mr. Bennett?”

Otsana stood, waiting for me to take her hand. When I did, a powerful jolt of...I had no fucking idea what it was, shot through my body with the same force a shooting star used to cross the sky.

We both jumped, snatched our hands from each other, and stepped back. Our eyes remained locked together, and the confusion I felt was mirrored in her orbs.

“Detective Inspector Brooks,” I answered when I located my voice that had temporarily fled like a criminal from a crime scene.

Cillian strode in and offered his hand to Otsana in greeting. He glanced my way with one eyebrow raised which was his way of telling me he was interested in the lady. I frowned but bit back the “hell no” that almost crossed my lips. I filed the jealous feelings aside to analyze later when I was alone.

“Otsana is fine, thank you, especially as we'll be working closely together over the coming weeks.”

“Tea, coffee, juice...Detective?” Betty asked.

“I'll have water if it's not too much trouble please.”

Betty placed a mug of coffee in front of me, one for Cillian, and a glass of iced water for Otsana. A plate of macarons was set in the center of the table and lifting it, I

offered the delicacies to Otsana. After she accepted one, Cillian helped himself, and I declined after having had a bear claw earlier in the day.

Otsana withdrew a small notebook, and sheet of paper which she unfolded and put on the table, along with a pen from the pocket of her jacket. I noted her name engraved along the length of the gold pen.

“Do you mind if I tell you what I know to this point?”

Why was I fixated on her plump, rosebud lips and the whiteness of her teeth?

I gave myself a mental slap upside the head to get my focus back on the reason for our meeting.

“No...Go ahead.”

"According to information provided to us by Evan Carmichael from the securities commission, the share price of public stock has spiked dramatically over the past fifteen years. It appears it does so between five and twelve days before the date of release for a new product is announced. Is it correct that a major innovative product is only released every five years?"

“It takes that long for Xavier’s ideas to be researched for viability, and then given to our developers to work up a model. Thorough testing needs to then take place before a release date is chosen and marketing is put in place,” Cillian, who managed all our ‘stuff’ explained.

Otsana took numerous notes as Cillian spoke before asking, “Why is your company on the exchange with only three and a half percent of stock available to the public for purchase?”]

I answered her question. “We’re a multi-billion-dollar company that I built from the ground up with Cillian’s guidance and help. I won’t allow any board of directors to overrule our decisions about the direction in which we take the company. I hold fifty-five percent of the stock, Cillian holds forty percent, and the public has three and a half percent as you said.”

Otsana frowned. “What about the other one and half percent?”

“My personal assistant, Betty, Cillian’s, Molly, and Pamela our movements coordinator and senior manager of shipping all hold half of one percent. The ladies were our first hires, and it is part of their employment package. They will retain their shares after they retire, and when they pass, they will revert to me. The public shareholders are invited to vote on anything to do with the company as long as it isn’t anything confidential where the information could be abused.”

“So in essence, their votes count for nothing, and they aren’t aware of any of the internal workings?”

“Exactly. They are sent a financial statement each year as required by law and dividends are paid in a timely manner.”

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“So despite having only a small percentage held by the public, they still have the power to make share prices catapult into the stratosphere by buying or selling in certain ways.”

“That’s correct.”

“How, I don’t fully understand?”

“Didn’t Evan include a breakdown in your file?”

Otsana shook her head.

“The company has six million, two hundred thousand shares in total that are registered on the exchange.”

“That makes three and a half percent around two hundred thousand?”

“Two hundred and seventeen thousand to be precise,” I informed.

“What would the value of a share be when a product is released if there were no insider trading?”

“It is difficult to know how they would price because the insider trading has taken place for every release except the first. We had no staff at that time. Cillian and I incorporated the business and listed shares on the exchange to make up the shortfall after using the money my grandfather had left me to fund the development of our first product, Indigo.”

“The file information showed it wasn’t until Matilda that the insider trading was flagged.” Otsana scribbled some notes on the sheet of paper and some in her notebook.

“That is correct. About five days before the release date was announced we saw the stocks behaving unusually and contacted the securities commission.”

“You made millions with Indigo, why didn’t you do a share buyback?” Otsana’s question was valid and fair.

“We considered doing so, but there’s a huge amount of red tape and paperwork involved, as you would be aware. Cillian and I are making enough money to support a small country, so we decided to leave things as they are and allow others to share in our good fortune.”

“I understand.” Otsana glanced at the sheet of paper. “After Matilda there was Byron, Krista, and now Panda. Is that correct?”

“Yes. Cillian and I discussed Panda this morning and we’ve decided to push back the announcement of a release date by two weeks and release Panda onto the market two weeks later than planned. We’re hoping to get this mess sorted once and for all.”

“The shares have exchanged hands now and we won’t be able to stop any sell offs, but hopefully you can track down who is doing this, and it will be the last time it happens,” Cillian continued.

“I’ve been at this job for a long time and there is always something new and unexpected we need to understand, but I give you both my word, we will do our best to find the perpetrator. Talk me through how the share prices have changed over time. Evan has documented it, but I’d like to hear it from you.”

I exchanged a glance with Cillian, this was more his part of our company ship and after a subtle nod, he explained, “The shares before we released Indigo held steady at around eleven dollars each. After a successful release, people were keen to acquire stock in a new, innovative, and exciting company they believed would do great things in the future. Stock exchanged hands at record pace and the price of shares jumped to thirty-seven dollars each.”

Otsana whistled. Why did a woman emitting a long, low whistle cause my dick to twitch?

“Not a bad increase. Those selling did well.”

“Indeed,” Cillian continued. “The price hovered between thirty-five and forty dollars over the next years and there was a lot of anticipation about what we had in the pipeline. While we developed Matilda, Cillian started building the electronics side of the company. We invested in successful products such as inverters, sound and video, security and surveillance equipment...which we made good use of in studying company computers for hints to the insider with no results, IT and communications, cables and connectors.” I paused to take a breath and finish the last of my coffee.

“You had plenty happening to keep share prices steady and investors happy while they waited for the release of your next breakthrough,” Otsana commented.

“They were getting decent annual returns because the company was exploding with growth,” Cillian informed

“What happened with Matilda?” Otsana asked curiously

Six days before the release date was due to be announced the single share price shot up to one-hundred-and-eight dollars.”

“Wow! I have never known a jump to be so high in all our previous investigations on insider trading,” Otsana admitted.

“You can understand why we were concerned. We took it straight to authorities. Evan found out through contacts that word on the streets was that we were going to be releasing a never-before-seen product that would set records in sales. Some of the shareholders jumped at the opportunity to sell, thinking the price had peaked. They weren’t prepared to gamble on them flatlining if the product failed to live up to expectations.”

“Did it...?” Otsana asked.

“Did it what?” I asked back.

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“Did Matilda fail to live up to expectations?”

Cillian laughed before saying, “Matilda blew records away and we battled to keep up with demand. By the time sales settled, we’d made over a billion dollars and shares were at two-hundred-and-ninety dollars each. When things settled a little, people scrambled to get their hands on stock, again expecting the company to continue growing. Evan had no luck in finding who the insider was and we let it go hoping it was a one off. But then it happened again eight days before the release date announcement of Byron. Evan started looking closer but there was still nothing. Eleven days before Krista’s release date was made public, he came to me and said he was putting an extra five computer experts on our case. There hasn’t been one valid piece of information that has led anywhere. Two days ago, which was nine days from announcing Panda’s release date, it started over, and Evan said he was handing it to a team that had better knowledge of, and resources for, this kind of crime.”

“How long before the release date for each product is it announced?”

“Four weeks,” I answered.

“What’s the current value of the shares?”

I deferred to Cillian, our number’s man, even though I was well aware of the value.
“Four-hundred-and-sixty-seven dollars each.”

“Jesus! They’ll hit more than five hundred dollars when you release. I should have invested! Even many of the blue-chip stocks aren’t bringing prices that high. I’m impressed.”

“We would be too if it had been achieved honestly,” Cillian said, every bit as annoyed with the situation as I was.

“Hopefully, my team will get to the bottom of what’s happening. From previous experience, we find the perpetrator is usually a long-time employee in a senior position who is the last person you would suspect. Junior employees don’t normally have access to sensitive information to be effective.”

“I don’t...”

Otsana held up one hand and I clamped my mouth shut. What can I say? The woman had a commanding presence.

“Usually,” Otsana emphasized knowing I was about to defend those who had been with our company the longest. “It doesn’t mean it won’t be someone else, but another reason I would like to begin with investigating senior staff is because it appears you have previously refused to allow access to them which has hindered Evan and his team.”

Cillian and I exchanged a glance. I suspected the guilty expression on my best friend’s face was the same as I was wearing.

“We didn’t give them full access because they are men and women who have been loyal to us for years and they are like family.”

Otsana tilted her head and pierced me with her oddly mismatched eyes. “As far as you know,” she argued. “You may consider them family, but from my experience, those who do not share our blood will never be as loyal and trustworthy as those who do.”

Otsana spoke with a deal of animosity, and I wondered what had happened in her

past. Someone had let her down, or maybe hurt her, badly.

“I respectfully disagree.” I inclined my head at Cillian. “Cillian has been more loyal and trustworthy, and a better friend than anyone I share blood with.”

“I thought you were an only child?” Otsana would have read the file and known that to be true, but she appeared to assume I was speaking about a sibling.

“I am an only child. I was referencing a couple of cousins I grew up with, and who after a couple of unsavoury incidents, I would not trust as far as I could throw them. We have not spoken for years, and I do not accept invitations to family gatherings, although few and far between now my parents have moved to Florida, they are invited to attend. I prefer our current estrangement to stay that way...Permanently.”

“It appears we have both been burned in the past. Maybe those of us on the bottom rungs of society’s ladder aren’t alienated from our family by squabbles over wealth as I suspect you may have been.”

“Ouch! Otsana picked it in one, Xavier.” Cillian spoke the words I’d been thinking.

Considering my wealth it wasn’t rocket science to work out my recalcitrant cousins had come calling to request a handout. One they did not get.

Otsana’s face pinked and her entire body tensed. She must have come to the conclusion she’d crossed a line by passing judgement when she really knew nothing about mine or Cillian’s private lives.

“I apologize...”

This time it was me who held up a hand forcing the apology to die on her lips. “No need for an apology or to explain.”

She nodded and relaxed. “Getting back to what we were discussing...Can you advise me of the names of all those holding executive positions? The file indicated there has been only minimal investigation, and when Evan demanded more access, he landed in court where a judge agreed with you. He ruled there was no need to delve into the lives of trusted, long-time employees who have been with you for over seventeen years as it was more likely to be someone employed closer to the time of Matilda’s release.”

“That was mine and Cillian’s belief which is why we fought against having their lives turned upside down.”

“What’s changed that has made you more willing to cooperate?”

“This investigation has been going on for fifteen years and nothing suspicious has been found despite the fact our other employees have had their lives turned inside out. It hurts to think it may be someone we have trusted beyond doubt, but the time has come that we take a close look at everyone.”

“Including yourselves?”

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It took me a moment to regain my tongue after the shock of being accused and Cillian responded.

“Why on earth would we damage a company and its reputation when it has made us billions? You may delve all you fucking like, but I assure you, neither of us would do anything to endanger what we have worked so fucking hard to build.”

Not the language I would have used but Cillian got his point across on behalf of us both. Otsana grinned like she was testing us for a reaction.

“Well played, detective. As Cillian said, you may investigate us all you like...Evan has already looked thoroughly at us both as I'm sure your file shows. But if you feel he may have missed something, by all means do whatever you need.”

Otsana tilted her head to the side again, it appeared to be a habit when she was studying someone closely.

“I don't believe it is either of you and I will not be disrupting your lives. Honestly, though, your other executives should have been investigated from the beginning and I am a little surprised none of them offered their cooperation willingly. Had they done so in one way or another, or either one of you as CEO and General Manager had forced the issue instead of fighting against it, this matter may have very well been resolved not long after Matilda.”

“You are probably right, detective.” Why was her attitude, accusing us of being tardy, setting me on edge? “We most likely should have, but if we continue sitting here arguing about a past that cannot be changed, we'll get no closer to the criminal.”

Otsana's cheeks pinked at my rebuke. "Again I apologize if my comments were out of line. It was not my intention to be rude, but I become frustrated with people who insist on making our job so much harder than it should be. Cases that should be wrapped up in months end up taking years when information is not disclosed in a timely manner. I understand why Evan was unable to settle this case. I shall attempt to keep my frustration in check and my opinions to myself."

"I also apologize for my tone. Shall we continue without making further accusations?"

Otsana slipped the notepad open and held her pen poised over the blank page.

I turned my attention to the sheet of paper where Cillian and I had made notes earlier in the day.

"These people are senior executives, most in charge of a small team of people between two and fifteen employees excepting the research and development department which has thirty employees. Ralph Kenny is second in charge of sales and marketing as assistant to Cillian. Demetri Elatri is in charge of the accounting team of three including himself. Betty Lowe, who you have met is my current personal assistant and Molly Carne is Cillian's assistant. Pamela Vault, whom you also would have met, looks after welcoming visitors to this floor, product movement and she also heads our shipping department of fifteen employees which are housed on the ground floor. Glenn Ferris is Human Resources, Elizabeth Watts assists Cillian in procurement of product and components, and Wilson Manx is one of our engineers who is head of research and development."

I paused for a moment to give Otsana time to finish writing down everything I'd said. When she was done, I continued.

"Most have offices on the ground floor except Wilson who is on the second floor

with his team.”

Otsana added the extra information. “You have offices overseas...Have those people been investigated?”

“They are more shop fronts. Each has a manager and two employees. They are situated to coordinate shipping of our new, major product which is their main purpose. They also take inquiries and keep a limited stock of electronics equipment and components for sale. For example...It is easier for our office in Melbourne, Australia, to arrange shipping of our products, which attract high demand, for their region. They haven’t been in place very long, but we anticipate they will take pressure off this head office particularly during new product releases.”

“That makes sense. When are they advised of the details of new products?”

“Around one month before release we will ship product to the regions to ensure it arrives on time, but it won’t be released by the port until our announcement goes live. Panda has gone out, and they have been advised of the delayed release as have the ports.”

“Not very trusting,” Otsana mused. “Have they been investigated? I don’t recall having seen anything in the file.”

I shook my head. “Evan agreed it wasn’t necessary. Our first office in Ontario didn’t open until six years ago and Melbourne came into effect eighteen months ago. Evan ruled them out along with employees who have been with the company for less than ten years since the insider trading was an issue before they were employed.”

“I agree, it’s highly unlikely to be one of them but if nothing is found, we’ll add them into the investigation.” Otsana locked her eyes on mine. “Who do you believe is responsible even though you can’t prove it yet?”

I leaned forward, rested my elbows on the desk, and tented my fingers before glancing at Cillian for a moment. “That, detective, is the ten-million-dollar question. Being honest...Cillian and I have gone through the company servers with a forensic computer specialist. We have watched the movements of employees and tapped phones.”

I held up a hand when Otsana narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to speak.

“We know phone tapping is illegal, but we were desperate and had a judge sign off on it after we explained what was happening. He agreed to give us fourteen days and said anything found outside the time frame would be deemed illegal and inadmissible in court.”

Otsana smiled. “I’m pleased to hear you followed correct procedures.”

“Xavier and I hired private detectives to watch a couple of people we suspected, but again nothing was found,” Cillian explained.

“Yes, I read their reports that were in the file. The final thing we need to discuss is putting a plant inside the company. She will be able to study the workings of employees and pick up on anything that’s out of place that you may have missed. Fresh eyes so to speak.”

“She?”

Again, Otsana tilted her head and studied my face before she answered. “I have information that Betty, your personal assistant has been attempting to retire.” She grinned and raised an eyebrow.

“I have been reluctant to let her go,” I admitted.

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“I’d like to put one of our trusted contacts into the position.”

I glanced at Cillian who shrugged. “It would save me the trouble of interviewing candidates tomorrow and Betty could start training her in company systems immediately.”

“Tell us a little about her,” Cillian requested.

“Her name is Aurora Ulrich. She’s in her late thirties, married, and is a beat cop over in Rotoma. She works assignments undercover when needed.”

“She’s taken other assignments similar to this one?” I asked.

“Several times but not for my team. She has also worked several stints with the drug squad. She’s an excellent analytical cop who the drug squad and crime divisions would love to have permanently but she prefers the beat. It’s been signed off by my superiors so only needs you and Cillian to approve.”

“I have no issue with her being here...Cillian?”

“All good with me. She’ll be your personal assistant and I just want this to end.”

“I’ll bring her over tomorrow...11 am?”

“Perfect. I’ll let Betty know she’s finally going to be free.”

“You cannot tell anyone that Aurora is temporary, or her cover will be blown. You

need everyone to believe that she has taken Betty's position permanently."

Cillian and I agreed to Otsana's request before we all stood and started toward the door. I took Otsana by the arm, holding her back as Cillian opened the door and left.

"Are you free tonight?"

Otsana's eyes searched mine before she nodded.

"Will you have dinner with me at Zorollos?"

She nodded again. "7 pm? I'll meet you there."

"Perfect." I smiled and escorted Otsana to the elevator, waiting until she was ensconced inside and heading toward the ground floor, before starting back to Betty's desk to give her the news that she'd be heading for Florida before long. I'd also ask her to call the restaurant to advise them I would be dining there in a couple of hours.

Chapter Five

Otsana

I muttered beneath my breath the entire walk back to my car which was parked two blocks away. Who in their right mind had their office in the middle of the city? It seemed to me that Xavier's office could have been anywhere. Parking was a fucking nightmare, and God forbid you wanted a coffee or something to eat. Apart from the crush of people on the sidewalk, all single-mindedly heading to where they needed to be with no regard for others, once you managed to reach the café, it required you joining the queue that extended through the door and along the already crowded sidewalk. If you're lucky, you reach the counter and place the order in time to rush back to the office and devour the fare at your desk so fast that indigestion is a given.

Every time I came into the city, usually a summons to headquarters that I couldn't avoid, I was reminded of how fortunate I was to work in an obscure building out in the suburbs a mere ten minutes' drive from my home.

Back to the other reason for my muttering...Why the fuck had I accepted Xavier's invitation to dinner? Clearly my brain had vacated the building otherwise known as my head for a few seconds.

From the moment I laid eyes on the man wearing a pale gray suit that hugged his body like a glove, it was all I could do not to drool. Xavier was a walking poster for fitness companies. Thick thighs were hugged by his pants, and with his suit jacket left open, the white shirt did nothing to hide the muscles of his wide chest. He was a good six inches taller than me, and his immaculately groomed black hair showed threads of gray at his temples confirming the fact he was fast approaching forty years of age. Yes, it...No, it wasn't in the file. I was interested and googled his background...So sue me for being curious.

The images online did not do him justice, and certainly didn't prepare me for the effect of his electric blue eyes focusing on mine. His skin had a healthy, golden glow which had me suspecting the majority of his athletic build was accomplished through running outdoors. Apart from a few shallow frown lines across his forehead and spreading from the corners of his eyes, his skin was clear and unblemished. Being honest, the man was by far the most handsome I'd ever encountered and deserved to be on the cover of a fashion magazine.

The jolt of...whatever it was when we shook hands almost knocked me off my feet and I swear to fuck I almost experienced an orgasm on the spot.

I climbed behind the wheel of my car, pulled the seatbelt around me and clipped it into place, turned the key and started the motor.

Attempting to exit the parking lot, I waited for half the vehicles in Langer Falls, or so it seemed, to pass, before finally being able to ease onto the road. It was almost 5 pm and I was smack bang in the middle of peak hour traffic. Although in fairness, peak hour lasted pretty much from sunrise to sundown. The traffic moved slow enough for even a snail to slide past.

My thoughts ricocheted back and forth, before zeroing back in on dinner. Zorollos was about a five-minute drive from where I lived in Casantra, and I wondered if Xavier lived in one of the stately mansions high on the hill that had views over the state park where the pack and I often played. The homes were huge, and my small period home would have probably fitted into the living room of one. Most were painted white and perched on the hilltop, they seemed to lord it over us mere peasants below. If it was where Xavier called home, why did he want to slum it by having dinner with me? He would be well aware that my lowly annual police salary was only as much as his company earned every hour of every day. Maybe he had some strange fetish and mixed with us commoners to remind himself how much more successful he was, although I didn't think he was that kind of man.

I indicated and turned onto the highway leading out of the city toward home and settled into the heavy, but steady moving traffic.

"Dial Zarina," I commanded my voice activated phone.

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“Hey, Boss, on your way from the city?”

“I’m not your boss, as I keep telling you, and I have no fucking clue what I should do.”

“Uh oh, explain.” Zarina sounded curious.

“I met with Xavier and Cillian as you know and gained a lot of information they’d denied the previous team.”

“Not seeing a problem.”

“Those pictures I told you to take a look at this morning...”

Zarina had freakish instincts and could pick things that were out of place from the tiniest hint in an image.

“Still not seeing a problem. Xavier and his bestie are fucking hot, I’d lift my tail to either one of them. Hell, I’d lift it to them both at the same time. By the way, they’re not involved in the insider trading.”

“Zarina, focus!”

“Sorry...but I’m not seeing your problem.”

“Bennett is even hotter than his pictures and Cillian is not bad either. When Xavier and I shook hands, I was almost thrown off my feet by a powerful jolt that passed

between us. He felt it too and gave me a strange look, and there was no doubt he was as confused as me.”

“Energy exchange, he’s your soul mate. So we’re back to me not seeing the problem...Lift your tail, rub all over him...Hell, jump his bones.”

“Zarina, he’s not my soulmate and get your mind out of the fucking gutter.”

“Yeah, yeah. Heard it before...Princess Prim doesn’t believe in soulmates and doesn’t fuck humans. What the hell do you want from me?”

I sighed, beginning to wonder why I’d called my best friend...My veryunstablebest friend who I loved like a sister regardless of her faults. God knew, I had plenty of my own.

“I’ll behave. Tell me what’s bothering you. You called me so you obviously think I can fix it for you.”

I indicated and guided the car down the off ramp leading into Casantra and followed Villax Road toward my home.

“Xavier asked me to dinner at Zorollos tonight.”

“No fuck? What did you say? Please tell me you said yes. How the fuck did he get a booking? I know from experience you can wait months to get a table there and then they’ll only consider your request if you’re from the right side of town.”

“Zarina, think about it...”

“Oh...”

“Exactly. When you’re a billionaire people fall all over themselves to have you in their establishment. He probably has a permanent reservation and table set aside for him.”

“True. So...Did you say yes?”

“I did and now I’m panicking. What the fuck am I going to wear to such a fancy place? I was hoping you could loan me something.”

“What about the red number I wore to that music awards ceremony?”

Zarina’s father was a wealthy politician, and as his only child, she benefited from the trappings of money. She only worked because she loved taking care of people.

“No! That dress left nothing to the imagination. I don’t know how you had the guts to wear it in public.”

Zarina laughed. “It did turn heads and I was handed a lot of cards with phone numbers throughout the night. How about the emerald?”

“Hmm, that or the royal blue covered in sequins.”

“That dress was a pain in the ass. I gave it to Goodwill after the sequins kept grabbing onto everything I walked near, including the mayor whose wife was not impressed.”

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“Shame, it was elegant and demure for you.”

“I have a new pale pink dress I think would be perfect for you.”

“Have you worn it yet?”

“No. I decided it wasn’t my color when I got it home. If you like it, it’s yours. I’ll bring the emerald and pink over and be there in half an hour.

“Thanks, Zarina. You’re a life saver.”

I disconnected the call as I turned into my driveway and pushed the button on the remote control to raise the garage door. After driving inside, I hit the remote a second time and it lowered.

I sat for a few moments, thinking about what Zarina had said about Xavier being my soulmate and the consequences of becoming involved with him. He was a...client. I guessed it was one word for who Xavier was at the moment.

“Get real, Otsana. You are turning into Zarina with all your thinking about soulmates. Xavier is taking you for one dinner, not proposing marriage.”

I grabbed the Worlds Apart file from the passenger seat, my purse, and cell phone, and pulled the keys from the ignition before climbing from the car and entering the house through a door leading from the garage into the kitchen.

I dropped everything on the nearest counter and glanced at the clock on the wall. It

showed 5:27pm, I had a little less than an hour and a half before I'd need to leave to drive to the restaurant. I jogged upstairs to shower while I waited for Zarina to arrive with the dresses. She had a key to my place and could let herself inside if necessary.

“Your savior has arrived!” Zarina shouted from downstairs, presumably as she entered the house since seconds later the front door slammed shut causing me to raise my shoulders as I cringed. I swear the woman had no clue how to close a door without causing the windows to rattle.

“Upstairs...Bedroom!” I shouted back while packing away the makeup I'd been using.

My hair was tied up in a knot on top of my head, necessary so it didn't become wet in the shower. I'd deal with the thick, curly mass after I decided on a dress.

I walked out of the bathroom adjoining my bedroom at the same time Zarina breezed through the door with a plastic suit bag draped over one arm.

“Lose the bra,” she commanded after checking out the matching white lacy panties and bra I wore.

“Excuse me? I'm not going anywhere without a bra.”

Zarina laid the bag flat on my bed and faced me with both hands jammed on his hips. Leaning forward a little, as she was taller than me, she pinned me with her stare.

“Honey, your boobs are no bigger than swollen bee stings and the pink dress is strapless and doesn't allow for a bra which is why it will be better on you than me.”

Zarina straightened and made a sweeping motion over her chest. “These babies were too heavy and kept escaping out of the top which, apart from not liking the color on me, is why I decided against wearing it anywhere.”

The lady was very well endowed, and I swear four of my breasts would have equaled one of hers. I allowed my thoughts to drift back to when we were only young girls.

We’d begun to mature around the age of eleven for Zarina, and twelve for me. I’d been jealous as hell of her shapely body and developing boobs. When I reached thirteen, and still had fuck all growing out of my chest, I’d talked my mother into taking me to the store for padded training bras and had proudly paraded around in low cut tops that showed off my newly found cleavage.

Things hadn’t changed much as Zarina had alluded to and men I’d been with in the past suggested I consider implants if I wanted a long-term relationship. Needless to say, the men had been shown the door, and a year and a half earlier, I’d given up on finding a man who would want me for who I was...both of me, and I’d quit dating. It hadn’t been a difficult decision since the dating pool was shit. I was happy on my own...Wasn’t I? Although I wasn’t really on my own, Zarina was always there when I needed and we’d stalked movie theaters for all the latest releases, went out for dinners, hung out at the beach, and had even spent a week cruising the Bahamas. Not to mention the hours we spent playing in the state forest as wolves.

Zarina was a man magnet, and always had been. She was a beautiful, confident woman who played men like a musical instrument and soon had them falling at her feet and worshipping the ground she walked on.

Like me, Zarina had been hurt by a man she loved, but where I’d since avoided men...until Xavier, Zarina lured them to her and played with them like a cat plays with a mouse. Once they gave their heart, she tossed them aside, leaving a lot of broken hearts in her wake. I didn’t agree with her actions, but nobody, including me,

meddled in my friend's life and remained her friend.

Zarina unzipped the bag and pulled out a pink satin-blend dress, holding it up for me to examine. The strapless corset-like bodice was made from fine lace with strategically placed pads underneath to cover the nipples. A wide band of fabric circling the waist held the skirts in place. The left side hugged my curves, draping to just below the knee while the right side fell in waterfall folds. A deep split reaching the top of the thigh allowed the one to walk, dance, or sit without hindrance. Beneath the light of my bedroom, the fabric shimmered with an opalescent glow. The dress was gorgeous but daring and not like anything I would have considered buying.

“Come on, Otsana. Just for once in your life let me show you what a beautiful woman you are. You'll have Xavier's tongue hanging out of his mouth from the moment he lays eyes on you.”

Is that what I wanted? There had certainly been an unusual and unique connection between me and Xavier when we'd met. Did I want to explore what the connection was and where it could lead? Was I ready to take a leap of faith and plunge back into a life which included dating a man?

“Stop thinking so hard, Otsana. Nick was an asshole. He always was and always will be. I'm sorry he abused your friendship and relationship but it's time to give someone else a chance. You can't hold a grudge against all men forever.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Um...Pot, this is kettle.”

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“I know but out situations are different.”

“Yeah, you didn’t arrive home to find the man you thought you were going to marry in bed with another she-wolf,” I retorted.

Zarina laughed and I glared at her as she argued, “You have to admit it was pretty funny that they were knotted together and couldn’t get apart for a good ten minutes.”

I laughed. It had been pretty funny at the time. Nearly two years had passed since Nick’s betrayal, and I still blamed all men for his failings.

“I’ll never forget standing there while they thrashed around attempting to get apart. By the time Nick did get free, his dick was fire engine red, and a layer of skin had been rubbed away. I hope he was in agony for at least a couple of days.”

“Couldn’t have happened to a more worthy dickhead,” Zarina laughed before becoming serious. “Honestly, Otsana, you need to stop allowing Nick to live in your head rent free and give Xavier a fair chance without comparing him to Nick. From what you said earlier, I believe he could be your life mate. Wear the dress for me? The emerald one is gorgeous, but this is you.”

“Why for you?”

“Because I want to watch my best friend walk out of the house looking like a princess who is going to meet her Prince Charming.”

I smiled, wondering what I would do without Zarina’s wise words and support. “Help

me dress and then do something with my hair.”

Zarina mock bowed with one arm sweeping before her. “Your wish is my command.

Half an hour later, I studied the woman in the mirror. It was difficult to believe the beautiful lady looking back was me. Zarina placed her hands on my bare shoulders and looked over my shoulder, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

“You look even more beautiful than I envisaged.” It surprised me to see her eyes welling with tears.

I covered one of her hands with mine. “Thank you for everything.”

“Go and knock the chainmail off your knight. I’ll be waiting to hear all about your date.”

We linked arms and headed downstairs.

“Let me give you a lift, I’m sure Xavier won’t mind bringing you home.”

“Why not, but I won’t be doing anything stupid like inviting him in and jumping his bones.”

Zarina laughed and I locked the door to the house after we left before we climbed into herPorsche that was parked in the driveway.

Nerves fluttered in my stomach as Zarina drove the short distance to the restaurant—Nerves of excitement tinged with just a hair’s breadth of nerves.

Chapter Six

Xavier

I arrived at Zorolosten minutes early and went inside to speak with the owners of the prestigious, award-winning restaurant—Jarod and Penny, who were good friends from school. The place was located in Casantra, a few minutes' drive from my home in Fritton, a suburb on the other side of the mountain.

Home was a three-bedroom period cottage that had been built in 1860. I'd bought it as a neglected, dilapidated ruin but it was on a large plot of land and what remained of the building had good bones.

I searched the internet and eventually found a company who prided themselves on period rebuilds using authentic materials and there hadn't been a bad review amongst the hundreds published. It had taken six months to meticulously reconstruct Butternut Cottage, a name it had been given when the original owners had painted it a yellowy orange color. The final results had been outstanding and worth every penny. The company had also taken care of furnishing and decorating the interior, taking direction from me on every detail of the property. I'd been conscious of the potential to be overdemanding and our relationship had been an amenable one.

"Xavier," Jared greeted me with an outstretched hand, and we shook as soon as I stepped inside, while he peered over my shoulder. "Not your usual evening to dine here. Penny said you were bringing someone, that it wasn't Cillian, and to set a table for two. I must say the information shocked me and I thought Penny must have misheard your request."

"Penny heard correctly. I will have a lady joining me in a few minutes, but I'm early so came in to say hi."

"Xavier!" Penny rushed forward and crushed me in a hug before pressing a kiss to my cheek and taking a step back. She glanced around, none too subtle and no doubt

looking for my plus one. “I thought you said you were bringing someone?”

“I am, she should be here in a few minutes. I just wanted to say hi before I go back outside to wait for her to arrive.”

“What’s her name?” Penny asked, always the curious one of our group and not hesitant in inquiring about what she wanted to know. I often said she would never die wondering about something or someone.

“Otsana, and she’s a lady I met earlier this afternoon.”

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Penny and Jarod's eyebrows shot up in unison and I barked out a laugh. "I wish you two could see the looks on your faces."

"You met today?" Jared asked, somewhat confused.

The couple knew me as a standoffish man who had been unwilling to 'put myself out there' and take a risk where women were concerned. For twenty years I'd been happily single, but Otsana had me questioning whether or not I'd stay that way now I'd met her.

"Yep. We had a meeting at 2 pm this afternoon." I shrugged. "What can I say? I spent around three hours with the lady, and she attracted me like no one before."

"I cannot wait to meet this woman who appears to have cast some kind of magical spell over you. I've never seen you so content and relaxed. Is she a witch? Someone from an alien world?" Penny grinned.

I shook my head at Penny's ridiculous comment. "Behave yourselves and don't embarrass me or her over dinner."

The pair snapped their heels together and saluted, causing me to laugh.

"I'm going outside to meet her when she arrives."

I headed back outside and waited on the driveway where two old gas lanterns on posts, that had been converted to electric, illuminated the entry steps.

The restaurant was a dark stone building with a medieval feel. Highly polished walnut wood framed the windows, and the entry door was also a thick slab of walnut with black iron decoration. Tables and chairs were made from the same timber and the legs were intricately carved. Four chandeliers, suspended from the ceiling with thick black chains, were turned low to create a romantic atmosphere which was further enhanced by large candles in the center of each table that flickered as the flames danced. Red tablecloths matched the color of the velvet on the seats and backs of the chairs. White napkins were a stark contrast to the dark colors as were the finest quality silverware and glassware.

The circular driveway led to a parking lot for diners, and it was where one of my few indulgences—a 1960 redChevrolet Impalaconvertible was currently parked. Like my house, it had been carefully restored. The exterior was red with splashes of white and a white top and white-wall tires complimented the large expanse of red. The interior boasted houndstooth red and white upholstery, a red dashboard, and carpet.

The car had been a wreck, and Cillian had insisted there were much better buys, but I'd insisted on a three-speed manual transmission because I liked to 'drive the car' and the rumbling V8 motor was what dreams were made of as far as I was concerned. My other indulgence was a vintageHarley-Davidsonmotorcycle and on bright, sunny days there was nothing better than taking her out on the highway, opening the throttle, and feeling the wind in my face.

I loved vintage vehicles I could work on myself rather than the computer-controlled cars of the day that were not only temperamental, but one needed an advanced computer science degree to fix anything on them. Just my opinion of course and something modern day cars did have in their favor was they were cleaner and kinder to the environment. It was the reason I owned a small Mercedes hybrid for getting to work and back every day.

The familiar rumble of a V8 engine, something not often heard these days, reached

my ears and I stepped forward and craned my neck in the direction of the sound, searching the inky blackness for the vehicle. Headlights shone in my direction when the driver turned into the restaurant driveway and a blackPorsche9282 Door came to a stop, just missing my toes.

A young woman stepped from behind the wheel, moved to stand at the bonnet of the car and grinned, probably at the expression of adoration on my face.

I unglued my eyes from the car to run them over the lady. She was tall, probably only a couple of inches shorter than me and in the tightly fitted white dress she wore, I could see she had a body similar to a female bodybuilder. Silvery white hair cascaded around her shoulders and her eyes were the palest blue I'd ever seen. I turned my attention back to the real object of my interest—ThePorsche, and an involuntary groan escaped my mouth when I noted it was the edition where the engine had been moved to the front.

“Are you going to stand there making sounds like you’re having an orgasm over my car or step back out of the way so your dinner date can get out?”

My eyes snapped to the passenger door that I stood blocking since the woman driving had almost run over my toes. I stepped back, reached for the handle, and opened the door, offering my hand to assist Otsana to climb out of the low-slung vehicle.

Once she was standing before me, I raked my eyes over her and was rendered mute. Otsana wore a pink number that fit her like a glove and showed every one of her delectable curves. Her hair was swept up on one side and held back with a jeweled comb that glittered beneath the lights. Her hair tumbled almost to her hips and I wanted to tangle my fingers in the gorgeous curls. Her friend was beautiful but didn't hold a candle to Otsana who was breathtakingly stunning.

Otsana tilted her head, and I noted her eyes twinkled with mischief. She must have

known how I'd be affected by her beauty. I unglued my tongue from the roof of my mouth and willed my over-interested dick to stand down.

"What did I tell you?" The nameless woman, who now stood beside me, asked Otsana.

She glanced down at my crotch, and I dropped a hand over the defiant package.

"If his dick's interest is any indication, he thinks you look as spectacular as I said you did."

I snapped my attention to the woman, who it appeared had a mouth with no filter, and offered my hand. "And you are?"

"This woman, with a brain totally divorced from her mouth, is my nowexbest friend, Zarina Templeton. Zarina, meet Xavier Bennett."

"Isaac Templeton's daughter?" I asked.

Isaac was a local senator who came from old family money and was extremely influential. Rumors swirled about him not being who he appeared but fuck if I knew what his detractors were alluding to and hadn't really given it any thought since I voted for his opposition.

"One and the same. You know him?"

"Not personally, only by name like most other people around here." I inclined my head back at the car. "1978?"

Zarina shook her head. "Close...1979. You know your cars, there is very little difference between the two."

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“Classic vehicles are my passion. Why not the more popular red?”

She shook her head almost violently and I grinned. “Black...Porsches should always be black.”

Die-hard fanatics that loved the 911 and 928 would only ever consider black.

“I agree with you.” I turned to Otsana who had been somewhat ignored as Zarina and I spoke. “Ready for dinner?”

“Lead the way.” Otsana pierced Zarina with a glare. “I’ll speak with you later, stay out of trouble tonight, and thank you for the ride.”

“Pleasure. Have a good evening. I’m sure Xavier will be happy to take you home, especially if he thinks there is a reward involved.”

“Zarina!” Otsana shouted and I watched as pink tinged her cheeks.

Zarina waved a hand in the air, totally unperturbed by Otsana’s visible annoyance. “I’m leaving. Night Xavier, it was nice meeting you.”

“Night Zarina. Drive carefully.”

Zarina tossed a hand over her shoulder, dismissing my advice. I had a feeling the lady was a force to be reckoned with and did things her own way. Otsana and I waited while she climbed behind the wheel and brought the engine to life before rumbling out of the driveway and into the night.

“Sorry, Zarina can be rather outspoken,” Zarina apologized.

I gathered her hand, noting how soft the skin of her palm was against mine. “It’s rather refreshing to meet someone who isn’t afraid to speak their mind. Most people dance around me because of my wealth and the fact they usually want something.”

“Still, she could be a little more tactful.”

We talked while climbing the stairs to the entry door.

“I suspect it wouldn’t be Zarina if she was forced to consider what she was saying,” I mused.

I pulled open the door and Otsana stepped into the dim light of the restaurant. And yes, my eyes did drop to her very shapely ass.

Penny and Jared noticed the moment we stepped inside and headed straight over to where we stood. I introduced Otsana to them both and they shook hands.

“Wow, I can see why Xavier was taken with you and wants to get to know you much better,” Penny stated.

I looked down at Otsana who was blushing. “You’re not the only one with a friend whose mouth doesn’t have a filter.”

“I suggest they are introduced to each other. I can only imagine the conversations that would take place,” Otsana laughed.

“Ignore her,” Jared stated, earning him an elbow to the ribs.

We were shown to a table for two and I pulled out a chair for Otsana, waiting for her

to be seated before sitting opposite.

We placed our order and Otsana opted for a glass of white wine while I had my usual red. I took a sip and settled back to learn more about the intriguing woman.

“You look beautiful, Otsana. Thank you again for agreeing to join me for dinner.”

“Thank you. Do you come here often?” Otsana asked, glancing around at the interior.

“Penny and Jared, the owners, are close friends from school so I usually come every second Thursday and we catch up on each other’s news.”

“Do they always keep a table available?”

“Not outside my usual nights. Fortunately, they had a last-minute cancellation tonight, but Jared would have fitted an extra table in for us if necessary.”

“Do you often bring someone with you?”

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Ah...Otsana was fishing. "I have never invited anyone to join me until now. This place is special and until I met you earlier tonight, I had no desire to share it with a woman. Every few weeks Cillian dines with me but he's usually too busy chasing women. Most nights I cook for myself at home. I find it relaxes me after a long day."

"You cook for yourself?" Otsana was clearly surprised.

"I do almost everything for myself. I have no full-time staff in my home, but I do have a cleaning lady come in every week and she also does my laundry."

"That surprises me, I thought you would have quite a few staff. I'm flattered you chose me to be the first to share dinner here with you."

"My turn to ask questions. Are you seeing anyone?"

Otsana sipped her wine, placed the glass on the table and looked into my eyes. "No..."

When she didn't continue, I asked, "What happened?"

I waited while our server placed bowls of crab bisque in front of us and left to return to the kitchen before expecting an answer.

"I had been seeing someone until about two years ago. We had been together for a little over six years and I had been hoping he would ask me to marry him. I arrived home early from work after our case was wrapped up and found him in bed with a woman I'd thought was a friend."

“Ouch. So your comments at the office about not trusting anyone outside family now make sense. I’m very sorry you were hurt.”

“Best I discovered the deception before we married.”

“How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m thirty-six, thirty-seven in March next year. Now it’s my turn. How old are you, it wasn’t included in your profile?”

“Thirty-nine, forty in September. I have managed to keep my age and a few other personal details away from the vultures in the media.”

“Relationships?”

“Nothing long term. I’m usually far too busy and no one has caught my eye until now.” I looked deep into Otsana’s mismatched eyes and watched as her cheeks pinked.

“Why me?”

“Honestly?”

“It’s what I’d prefer,” Otsana answered before taking a mouthful of bisque and a bite of fresh, crusty bread.

“I have no idea, but when we first met, I felt an overwhelming attraction that I still cannot explain. Something in me insisted I reach out and grab the opportunity to know you better. A bit other worldly and strange, but...”

“I felt something also which is why I agreed to dinner.”

We ate in silence until the bread and bisque were finished. The server materialized and whisked the dishes away.

“How long has Cillian been seeing Maria Aladrotti?”

“I’ll answer this question but no more shop talk.”

“Sorry, we’ll discuss it tomorrow.”

“No, it’s fine. Cillian and I were frustrated with so many dead ends and decided to do some more investigations of our own. We thought Maria, being the daughter of a mafia boss who has his fingers on the pulse of everything happening everywhere, might spill on something her father might have said that could be relevant to our insider trading. Cillian drew the short straw on spending time with her and Evan said it was worth a try. After a week, Cillian realized she either knew nothing or wasn’t as dumb as we’d hoped, and last night, he called it quits.”

“When my team and I read the file we were wracking our brains, trying to figure out why Cillian would jeopardize the security of the company by seeing the daughter of a criminal mob boss.”

“Mystery solved. How did you come to be on the force and why corporate fraud?”

“The old story of always wanted to join the force to help people and when I made detective, I was seconded to the major crime squad, a coveted position. The corporate fraud squad had one of their detectives killed in a parachuting accident and I was asked to fill in on a case they were halfway through. I found I enjoyed delving into corporate business and had good instincts for weeding out fraud. After the case was solved, I requested a permanent transfer. The bosses were gob-smacked because major crime is a coveted squad and positions are easy to fill, while corporate is considered the lesser team and no one wants to be there. They agreed when I insisted,

and I've been there ever since...About eight years now."

Chapter Seven

Otsana

I was telling Xavier more about myself than I'd told anyone, including Nick. It was one of the things he'd constantly complained about—that he knew nothing about me or my work. He refused to understand that the names of corporations and people I was investigating were confidential and not for public knowledge.

I'd met Nick when his father's pack— Varulvstjärnor, which had its origins in Sweden, had invited some of the senior members of our pack for a relaxed barbeque. We had immediately hit it off and four months later, Nick had moved into my home. It was the biggest mistake I'd ever made.

I'd heard from Zarina, who was nosy as well as being a drama queen, that the wolf I'd caught him with had moved on after finding Nick kissing another member of their pack. It had been a narrow escape for both of us. The man didn't have a clue how to be faithful and I hoped one day he'd get his comeuppance.

Thinking back, Nick had always been disrespectful about everything I engaged in, but especially my job. He only seemed happy when he was the focus of attention. Even though a part of me had hoped for marriage, another part had been warning me things didn't feel quite right. I'd chosen to ignore the latter but I wouldn't make the same mistake again. When warning flags were raised about a man I was with following our split, I walked away.

“What encouraged you to form Worlds Apart?” I asked, returning to the present.

Xavier waited while the server placed Scandinavian steak with baby potatoes and

asparagus in front of him and chicken with marsala risotto before me.

I cut a small piece from the delicious smelling chicken and scooped up some of the risotto before popping it into my mouth. The white meat, so tender it melted in my mouth was complimented with a burst of marsala flavor that permeated the risotto and I moaned silently.

I swallowed and when my eyes met Xavier's, he had a grin on his face. If the moans are any indication, I gather you enjoyed that bite of food."

I slapped a hand across my mouth for a second before returning it to the table. My face heated with embarrassment. "Fuck. I thought that was in my head." I indicated the plate with my fork. "This is so good."

"Jared always was a good cook. We...Cillian and I, would use any excuse to hang out at his house. He'd always make us a meal and it was usually the best we ate until the next visit. His mother encouraged him, and his parents paid for culinary school. They also gave him the money to put a deposit on this place. He and Penny had been sweet on each other since the second grade and their bond, and love for each other, grew stronger over the years so it was pretty much a given that they would marry."

"Not many long-lasting relationships like that these days."

"No, there aren't. Penny is a wonderful pastry chef in her own right, so they work together very well. They now own sixteen restaurants throughout the state which they visit every couple of months. They have excellent managers who are paid twenty-five percent of all profits their places make over and above a generous salary."

"They have a vested interest in keeping the restaurants successful."

"Exactly. It's a rather unusual arrangement as most business owners like to make as

much profit as possible for themselves. Jared and Penny are millionaires many times over and their generosity has afforded them loyalty.”

Xavier’s voice became quiet and I suspected he was troubled to know someone he trusted and believed loyal, was actually betraying him.

Reaching out, I placed a hand over his where it rested on the table. “We’ll find who is causing your pain. I know firsthand how it hurts to be betrayed by someone you care about.”

Xavier nodded and I pulled my hand back. We both finished eating, me keeping the moans of delight firmly ensconced in my head.

“To answer your earlier question, Worlds Apart kind of happened by accident. My interest is in gadgets that make life a little easier for the disabled community. Indigo, our first product, was costing more to release than I envisaged, and I was determined not to ask my parents for help in the form of money. Mind you, they would have been more than willing to help, but I was determined to do things on my own. Cillian suggested we incorporate and encourage investment by offering a limited number of shares. Where I have the brain for gadgets, Cillian has an exceptional business brain. The investment we raised was enough to release Indigo which broke sales records all over the world. Cillian and I became instant billionaires, and the rest is history.”

“Are you able to tell me about Panda?”

Xavier inclined his head and studied me for a moment. When he smiled, a dimple punctuated his left cheek. “I think I can trust you. Panda is basically a cell phone with a raised keyboard. It has both etched numbers and braille on the keys to enable those who are blind, or with limited vision, to have the experience of making a phone call or to send a text message like the rest of us. They will still have voice activation but will give the blind options. We have almost three hundred and two million pre-

ordered worldwide.”

I pushed my empty plate aside. “Wow! What total sales are you expecting?”

“Most likely in the vicinity of seven or eight hundred million.”

“Fuck...I had no idea sales numbers like that even existed.”

“Our other new release products have sold in similar numbers and our electronics lines sell in the thousands every day.”

“I noted in the file that you give quite large amounts to charities but there is no record of you attending their galas.”

Xavier shook his head. “That’s Cillian’s job. I don’t like the attention.”

Well, Xavier was certainly the opposite of Nick would do anything to take center stage in the limelight. “What does a man who has everything, including a mansion, spend his money on?”

“Mansion? I don’t have a mansion. I have a cottage that was built in 1860 over in Fritton. It was barely standing when I bought it sixteen years ago but the location was ideal and the frame was solid. I hired a company to restore it to original and the interior and furnishings are true to the period. My only indulgences are my classicChevyand aHarleymotorcycle.”

“Ah, now the interest in Zarina’sPorschemakes sense and the comment earlier about you doing your own cooking.”

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“I would much rather help children and animals than indulge in ostentatious buildings and things I don’t need.”

“What about Cillian?”

“His place was built in the 1950s and is about two streets away from mine. Also like mine, it has three bedrooms, one bathroom, and a double garage with a home gym and lap pool in the basement. He’s not one for things but he does enjoy fine dining with friends, mainly women, and the past three years we have spent our three weeks of Christmas holidays in Saint John. Cillian spends his time there bedding women while I prefer lying by the pool with a book or swimming at the beach.”

I grinned. “You never bed women?”

“Of course, now and again. I’m certainly no saint. They are always one and done and the women understand that before I take them to bed. They sign a legal document stating they had sex willingly with no threat or coercion. I don’t give them money because I won’t have them feeling like whores, so I usually gift them a piece of jewelry. I keep a few pieces in my safe at home and usually slip one into my pocket if I intend casting my eye wide. I never take them to my home, and do not go to theirs. I have a room at The Leaf Hotel for such purposes.”

“Your actions seem almost robotic. I don’t blame you though for being cautious. Having the kind of money you do makes you a prime target for false accusations.”

Our desserts—sticky date pudding and handmade vanilla ice-cream with strawberries on the side were placed on the table. The simple sight, along with the delicious

aroma, had my mouth watering. I indulged in a bite and didn't feel any shame when I moaned.

Xavier laughed and I shrugged before taking another bite.

“What about you, Otsana? Are you up for a one and done?”

“I haven't been for the past year and a half. However, I could be persuaded to break my vow of celibacy for you. I believe we could work out this obvious attraction we have with a fuck.”

Xavier's eyes narrowed but I'd caught the lust in them before they did.

“You don't think there's a conflict of interest?” There was a definite note of hope in his voice that I would say no.

“Not at all. My captain, the team and I have dismissed both you and Cillian as suspects for several reasons. We have no idea at this stage who the perpetrator may be but we know for certain it's neither of you two. I wouldn't advertise the fact we've fucked and once won't hurt.”

Xavier nodded and seemed preoccupied as he finished his pudding, washing it down with the last of his red wine. I devoured every bite of mine but left the remainder of the wine so as to keep a clear head. The wolf in me was affected by even the smallest amount of alcohol.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” I asked while we waited for coffee. I pondered the fact I would need a run later tonight or early the following morning to work off the high of my over-indulgence.”

“I want you.”

“Well, that’s direct and to the point.”

“I believe honesty is best. People know where they stand and what is expected of them. I cannot abide lies and deceit.”

A cold chill danced down my spine. I was keeping the mother of all secrets from the man—lying by omission was still lying no matter which angle it was viewed from.

Still, Xavier had said himself, it would be a one and done so there was no need for him to know.

I slid into the passenger seat of Xavier’s car, he closed the door he’d held open, and I fastened my seatbelt while waiting for him to climb in behind the wheel.

Butterflies cavorted in my stomach, having a celebration party and I resisted the urge to allow my inner wolf to surface and growl in disgust at my weakness. Since when did the prospect of having sex with a man, and there was no doubt sex was what was on both our minds, cause me to react like a virtuous schoolgirl? I’d had a few...well, not a few, but a couple...okay...I’d only consented to one previous one-night stand with someone I’d only just met.

The realization hit me with the force of a freight train—I’d never been fucked by a human before! I’d been careful to ensure my instincts warned me of any man who wasn’t a wolf. How would my parents react if they found out I’d crossed that line and mixed outside the world of hybrids? More importantly, how would the pack react? I didn’t think they wouldn’t take it well, excepting for Zarina who couldn’t have cared less who she or anyone else fucked, even when the pack threatened to excommunicate her.

The secrets of our other worldly lives had been closely guarded for thousands of years and it was drummed into us from very young that humans were not to be allowed to penetrate our pack and weaken our gene pool like they had with other packs. Our previous pack leaders also felt that humans could not be trusted, and if our true selves were revealed, they would do everything in their power to exterminate every one of us. Yet no other pack in the world had banned humans from marrying or partnering with our species, and there had never been any incident that we'd heard about. Pure hybrid wolves remained a long way from extinction and were in fact thriving and growing in numbers as most preferred to stick with their own kind regardless of having approval to do otherwise.

I sighed as Xavier eased the car onto the road and peeled away from the restaurant parking lot.

“Second thoughts? I’m happy to take you home. I would never force you to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable,” Xavier offered.

I peered through the windscreen at the cloudless sky above, stars twinkled and winked, and I resisted the urge to howl at the almost full moon.

“Do you ever feel compelled to do something that is outside your comfort zone and to hell with the consequences?”

Xavier flipped on the indicator and turned into a street on his right. “Often, but isn’t taking risks, regardless of internal warning signals insisting you take the safe route, part of what keeps life from being routine and humdrum? Being safe in everything we do doesn’t guarantee a happy and fulfilling life. When I considered starting Worlds Apart with the money grandfather left me, my parents, and many of my friends warned it was a gamble and could result in me losing a lot of money if the product failed to generate interest.”

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Xavier paused while concentrating on turning a corner.

“I heard what they were saying, and respected they cared about me, but I had faith and belief in myself, and in Cillian who never once doubted my ability or failed to support me in my decisions. Most of all, Cillian believed in Indigo as I did. I suppose what I’m trying to say is hear the warnings and understand the consequences of ignoring them, but as the saying goes...What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“Very true,” I agreed while taking in my surroundings.

Xavier drove down a street with the state park on our right and homes on our left. It was well lit and had well-maintained homes worthy of a Hallmark movie.

“Where are we going?”

“To my place. You didn’t answer my question from earlier...Do you want me to take you home?”

“No, but I thought you said you don’t take women to your home? I was under the impression you would not want your inner sanctum violated.”

“For you I’m making an exception,” Xavier stated before turning into the driveway of a picture-perfect house with a beautifully manicured lawn and garden beds.

A streetlamp in front of the house allowed me to take in a few details while Xavier waited for the garage door to rise and give him access.

The period home boasted two storys with a wide veranda, bordered by a white painted railing, and typical of the era, ran the full width of the building. Three wooden steps led up to the entry door and to the right were two large windows with stained glass panels at the top. The upstairs had three similar windows. Apart from the moss green painted shutters and front door, the house was painted white making it easy to distinguish the features in the muted light. What surprised me the most was the lack of visual security considering Xavier was a billionaire and highly likely a target for jealous loonies. Still, I wasn't a security expert, and he could have had something high tech hidden from view.

Xavier drove theChevymonster into his double garage, switched off the motor, and rounded the car to the passenger door which I had already opened. He extended his hand to assist me from the vehicle.

I glimpsed a motorcycle and small modelMercedesthat was plugged into an electric outlet, before Xavier led me from the garage and to a side door of his home. The sound of the garage door was the only sound breaching the peace of the night.

Xavier unlocked the door, flipped a switch, bringing light to the space, and tapped in a code on a security panel, answering at least one question I'd had about his security. He stepped back and indicated for me to enter. The room was the laundry, and although the appliances were state of the art, the lighting fixtures, cabinets, and black and white checkered floor were in keeping with the home's era.

“Head through the door and turn to your right. Follow the hall to the end and you will come to the entry foyer where the staircase is located.”

He flipped another switch and as I headed through the door, light flooded a long, carpeted hallway. I walked slowly, briefly observing the gallery of photos taking up one wall. There were a number of Xavier and Cillian together and some of an elderly couple both with the boys and without.

At the end of the hallway, I entered a huge foyer with a large chandelier casting out soft light that was suspended from the towering ceiling above. On my left was a wide staircase and to my right, an archway led through to a farmhouse style kitchen which was also softly lit.

“I leave these lights on when I’m out at night so it appears someone is home. I’ll show you over the house another time. For now, we have much more pressing matters to take care of and my bedroom is upstairs.”

Xavier took my hand and led me onto a landing on the second floor. An open door was a short distance away and Xavier led me into the room. It was an immaculately tidy bedroom, and rather masculine which one would expect from a man living alone.

Xavier turned me and pointed back across the landing. “The closed door over there is the bathroom if you need to use it first.”

“No, I’m good for now.” I turned back and stood staring at the enormous king-sized bed in the center of the room, a slight lump forming in my throat now the reason for my being there was becoming more and more obvious.

Xavier placed his hands on both of my upper arms and spun me to face him. “You don’t have to do this, Otsana. I would never force you and I’ll be happy to take you home.”

I shook my head and searched within, bringing out the courage of my inner wolf. Taking a step closer, I lifted a hand to Xavier’s face and ran my fingertips over the short stubble.

“I want you...” I whispered. “I want this unless you are having doubts?”

Xavier shook his head before leaning forward and capturing my lips in the beginnings

of a bruising kiss. His tongue forced my lips to part and delved into my mouth. Our tongues danced, and teeth clicked as we explored each other's mouths for the first time. He tasted of coffee, wine, and the chocolate mint that had been served with the coffee. His cologne, with musky undertones was a little overpowering for my acute sense of wolf smell, but it wasn't unpleasant.

Xavier dropped his hands to the back of my dress and the garment loosened as he slid down the zipper. With no straps to hold it in place, it floated to the floor. I stepped forward, kicked the dress away, and stood clothed in only a skimpy pair of lace panties and silver-colored high heels.

Lust and want burned in Xavier's eyes as he ran them over my body, and when he licked his lips, it was downright erotic.

I pushed the jacket from his shoulders, and he shook his hands free, leaving it to drop to the ground. His tie followed and then I plucked open the buttons of his dress shirt. Xavier's belt, the clasp on his slacks, and zipper, took mere seconds to unfasten, before I pulled the shirt free and tossed it aside. The slacks, and his tight black boxer briefs, soon joined the pile once Xavier had kicked off his shoes.

It was my turn to check out his body, and as I'd observed earlier, the man was a wall of muscle. His impressive, thick dick stood erect and rested against his belly. I licked my lips, kicked off my shoes and dropped to my knees, steadying myself with both hands on his thighs before taking his dick to the back of my throat in one motion.

"Fuck, Otsana." Xavier's hips gave an involuntary thrust forward, but my she-wolf persona had risen to rest just below the surface, and having no gag reflex, when he pushed his dick deeper, I sucked harder.

Xavier used both hands to push my head away, and his dick pulled free with a soft pop. He slid his hands beneath my arms, pulled me to my feet, and the kiss we shared

was filled with need, want and passion from both of us.

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I squeaked when he swept me into his arms, threw back the covers of the bed, and dropped me onto the mattress where I landed with a bounce. The scrap of lace was ripped from my body, and seconds later, Xavier was on top of me, his lips crushing and punishing mine. Needing to breathe, because it's kind of necessary if one wants to keep living, I pushed at Xavier's chest. He released me and dropped his body onto mine, resting his head against my shoulder.

"Otsana, where the fuck have you been?"

I pushed at him, and getting the message I was being crushed, he lifted onto his arms, taking his weight from me so I could suck in a deep breath. Our eyes bored into each other.

"You have the most unusual eyes," Xavier mused before raking his eyes over my body. A frown creased his forehead as he ran fingertips over a couple of the bruises incurred when wrestling with Zarina. "How did this happen?"

"I fell when I was jogging in the state park and went ass over tit down an embankment. As for my eyes, they're hereditary, my brother has them also."

"You have a brother?"

"An older brother, Aodhan. He's a cop too."

Xavier nodded before peppering me with kisses from one shoulder, and across my chest to the other. I wriggled and squirmed, wanting him inside me but it seemed his mission for now was to place his lips over every inch of my body.

I protested loudly when he bypassed my needy pussy and worked his way down one leg from thigh to toes and then the other. Hope rose that my pussy would finally get the attention it desperately wanted but he ignored the area and instead licked, nipped and kissed from one hip to the other.

Did I mention my she-wolf was lurking just below the surface? She chose that moment for her patience to snap and I gave a deep, throaty growl.

Xavier's head shot up and he studied my face curiously. "That was a strange sound."

"Dry throat," I responded without hesitation, giving myself a mental pat on the back for coming up with something so quick.

I wasn't completely sure he believed me, but he slid back down the bed and zeroed in on my needy pussy...Thank fuck. It didn't take long before his tongue and two fingers reaching deep inside, had me experiencing an orgasm that almost had me howling with pleasure. I'd never felt such an overwhelming explosion of pleasure throughout my body.

Fucking hell...I'd had my first orgasm with a human and it was like nothing I'd ever come close to with Nick or any other of my own kind. At that moment, I didn't give a fuck what my parents, brother and pack thought, I wanted so much more of Xavier. Once was never going to be enough. I was in deep shit.

Chapter Eight

Xavier

Experiencing the sight of Otsana coming apart, hearing her growl from deep in her throat was surreal. My dick ached with want, I'd never needed a woman so badly before.

I crawled up the bed far enough to open the drawer of my side table and grabbed a condom. There was no need for lube since Otsana was drenched and the condom was pre-lubed. Sitting back on my haunches, with one leg on each side of the glowing, post orgasmic, beautiful lady, I tore open the foil packet, removed the rubber, threw the foil to the floor, and rolled the condom down my length.

Sliding back, I lifted Otsana's arms above her head, grasped her hands in mine, and with my eyes burning into hers, I pushed inside with a single thrust.

Otsana's hips lifted in reaction, and she met me thrust for thrust, her eyes remaining open and locked on my face. She was tight, her muscles contracting around me like a vice. My dick demanded relief, but I took things slow, wanting to watch Otsana come apart for me once more.

She wriggled her hands free, wrapped her legs around my waist, and I felt her heels digging into the muscles of my back as she used them to pull herself closer and my dick deeper.

Her nails dragged at my back, and moments later, her entire body quivered, and I felt the warmth of her release as she came apart beneath me with another growl. She relaxed, I kissed along her jaw, and when she bit down on my shoulder, the sting of pain had my balls drawing up close to my body, and I swear to fuck the explosion of cum was dragged up from my toes.

I held her tight while my dick pulsed and I shot my load, hoping the condom was up to the task of containing it all. Regardless, at that point in time, I didn't give a fuck if cum went everywhere.

Finally spent, I rolled off Otsana, carefully pulling the very full condom free, tying it off, and placing it on the floor.

Rolling to my side, I met Otsana's gaze and spoke the words I never expected would leave my lips, "Stay the night." I was in trouble. Otsana was never going to be a one and done after what I'd just experienced.

"Is it what you want? You kind of blurted out the question as if you hadn't thought it through."

"It's what I want," I confirmed, running my fingertips over her soft cheek.

"Then, yes, I will stay."

I shimmied closer, taking her in my arms and sipping at her lips until my dick rose to the occasion and demanded seconds. It was going to be a long but satisfying night.

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My eyes flashed open, something had caused me to wake. The room was dark, the sliver of light that peeked around my curtains was absent indicating daylight hadn't yet broken.

I snatched the cell phone from my side table, powered on the screen to check the time, and groaned on seeing it was 3.21 am. I'd been asleep for less than an hour after my sexual gymnastics with Otsana had left me exhausted.

Flopping back on the pillow, I reached for Otsana, patting the mattress and finding she was no longer in bed. Hearing a noise from downstairs and thinking she had gone down to the kitchen for a glass of water, I switched on the side table lamp and dragged myself from bed.

Crossing to my large chest of drawers, I pulled one open, and took out a pair of sweatpants that I pulled on. Clothes were strewn over the floor from the previous night, and I made a note to fold them when I came back upstairs.

I made my way down to the kitchen, and on hearing the soft click of the laundry door closing, I frowned. I wondered where the hell Otsana was going. Her clothes were on the floor of my bedroom with everything I'd worn to dinner, so unless she'd managed to find another of my shirts, the woman was stark naked.

In the laundry, I pulled on a pair of joggers I kept there and grabbed a previously worn t-shirt I'd thrown in the washing machine. Before leaving the house, I set the alarm, and didn't bother locking the door behind me.

Once outside, I checked the grounds, and although the light was dim, there was no

sign of Otsana. I stood in the front yard, peering up and down the street and trying to figure out where the hell she had gone. Surely she wouldn't have walked home, more than a mile away, while she was naked. Maybe she was sleepwalking?

A flash of silver across the road, about fifty yards away in the trees bordering the park caught my eye and I set off jogging in the direction. When I came to where I'd seen the flash, I worked my way through the trees.

Surrounded by tall trees, the almost full moon barely visible and unable to penetrate the growth with its beams, I was barely able to see a hand in front of my face. I stayed still, listening, and wishing I'd had the presence of mind to grab the torch off a hook by the laundry door.

I remained still, hearing rustling from every direction as creatures of the night were now on the move, headed back to the safety of a burrow beneath ground or the hollow of a log where they would spend their daylight hours sleeping. Maybe it was one of those I'd seen on the move, but if that was the case, it still didn't answer the question of where Otsana could have gone. My instincts insisted she was somewhere in the park, but where...and why?

I set one hand on my hip and carded the fingers of the other through my hair while deciding on what my next move should be. Knowing the chance of me finding something in the inky blackness was low, and the chance of me becoming lost was extremely high, I headed back to the house. Following another check around the property, just in case I'd missed something, but finding nothing, I dropped into a chair in a darkened corner of the veranda.

Staring off into the distance, I noticed the horizon beginning to lighten, but it would be another hour or so before dawn broke which was usually when I made my way into the office. Today I would be late.

While waiting, my thoughts drifted to Otsana. The woman had turned my life on its head in less than a day and I knew stuff all about her.

A silvery flash emerging from the edge of the tree line drew my attention and I watched in fascination as a beautiful wolf slinked into the light, wary of everything in its vicinity.

The animal was black with wide streaks of silver, reminding me of Otsana's hair. A chill danced down my spine on making the comparison. The beast stood on its back legs, stretching to full height, and raised its arms toward the moon. I waited for it to howl like I'd seen in sci-fi movies, but the wolf stilled, seeming to pay homage to the sparkling disc overhead. I wondered how long the animal had been roaming the park and why I'd never seen it before.

What happened next had me scooting to the edge of my chair and not only questioning my eyesight, but also my sanity. I watched as the beast transformed from a stunning wolf/dog...whatever it was, into Otsana!

As the naked woman crossed the road, I stood. When she saw me, she stopped short, frozen in place. I looked over her naked body, the one I'd fully explored a few hours earlier, but realized now I knew nothing about, before walking toward where she stood.

"Xavier," she whispered.

"Come inside," I snapped.

I took Otsana by the hand a little roughly, and when she called out in pain and attempted to pull it away, I eased my grip and apologized.

In the laundry I tore off my t-shirt and pulled it over Otsana's head, covering her

nakedness which was a major distraction, and we needed to have a serious conversation.

I tugged her through to the kitchen, where I flipped on the light, pulled out a chair, and asked her to sit. Although, the tone of my voice made it sound more like an order and I saw Otsana stiffen in defiance.

“I need to fetch my clothes and purse from upstairs. I’ll walk home.” Otsana started to the staircase, but I pulled her back, and pushed her down into a chair, admittedly a little roughly.

I felt like I’d entered an alternate universe and was not angry, but highly annoyed with Otsana’s deception. We’d barely met but her almost unbelievable ability to shift into a wolf was something I should have been told.

I sat in a chair at the end of the table close to Otsana. “You’re not leaving here until I get some answers.” I pointed toward the front of the house. “What the fuck did I just see out there?”

Otsana dropped her head into both hands for a few moments and when she looked back up, her eyes were clear and defiant. Fuck, she was gorgeous.

“I’ve just signed the death warrant for my pack.” Her voice was soft and had a tone of sadness.

“What? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“When you tell your friends about what you obviously saw, the authorities will come looking for me and they will round up all my close friends and family. When our blood is tested, they’ll note the wolf gene in us and we’ll be locked away to be studied as oddities. Once we are of no further use, we’ll be exterminated so we are

not a threat to society.”

“Back up...Are you saying you have never had your blood tested so this gene you talk about has never been witnessed?”

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“We are looked after at a hospital owned by our pack where staff are from various packs. Of course it is accessible to the public, but it is where we are protected from discovery...or were.”

“How many are in your pack?”

“Around two hundred and at the moment the hierarchy are all young. There is only one, our Beta male, who is a few years older than me. Our oldest pack member is fifty-five.”

“Where have the older members gone?”

“They usually retire when they reach their early sixties, and the pack goes through periods where everyone is relatively young.”

“You mentioned there are other packs in the area?”

Otsana nodded. “About twenty-five in this area.” She paused before continuing. “I thought you’d be on the phone to a friend in some government department by now and screaming at me for being a freak.”

I placed a hand on Otsana’s arm. “I was as annoyed as hell, maybe even angry that you’d deceived me by not saying something, but now I’m beginning to understand your fears. I give you my word, no one, and I mean no one, including Cillian will hear about your secret from me. I would never put you in danger, but sweetheart, you need to be much more careful about where you...what is it called when you turn into a wolf, or from one?”

“Shifting.”

“Yes, you need to be more careful because anyone could have seen you.”

“I know. It was a stupid thing to do and is something I’ve never done before. I was thinking about you, and it wasn’t until I shifted back to human form that I realized where I was and what I’d done. When I saw you, I knew I needed to warn the pack immediately. That’s why I wanted to go home.”

“There’s no need for that, I promise you’re safe. Do you mind if I ask some questions?”

Otsana shrugged. “Go ahead, you know my biggest secret so what could it hurt?”

“Do people like you usually have sex or relationships with people like me?”

“We are known as hybrids, two in ones, I suppose you’d call us, and no one...oh, wait...there is one who has had sexual encounters with humans, but never the same one twice, and they don’t know who she really is.”

She...I suspected Otsana was speaking of Zarina, but I wouldn’t ask her to confirm my suspicion.

“What about other packs, do their members have relationships with humans?”

“Yes, some are married to humans or have them as partners. It’s frowned upon in our pack and over the generations, the elders have always been adamant we do not become intimate with those who aren’t our kind. I think some of our younger members are beginning to resist the directive. I only hope they are careful.”

“Does it have to be a full moon or near full moon for you to shift?”

Otsana laughed and I was relieved she appeared to trust me enough to relax. “You’ve watched too many sci-fi movies. Although a full, or close to full moon brings about a quicker shift, we are able to do so at will.”

“What about children, do you birth pups?”

Otsana laughed again and shook her head. “No, we have human babies who learn how to shift when they are older. While they are young, the adults are careful not to change in their sight because they can’t be trusted not to say something. At around eleven years old, they begin puberty, and that’s when they develop the ability to shift. They undergo extensive education during this time so they fully understand how they are different and the dangers of being discovered.”

“Have you been with a human before?”

“No, you’re my first.”

“Was Nick a wolf?”

“Yes and the woman he betrayed me with was a she-wolf from another pack who I’d considered a friend. I still laugh at how they struggled to get apart when I walked in on them. They were knotted together, and by the time Nick managed to wrench his dick free, it was red raw and had spots of blood where the skin had been torn away.”

Otsana laughed and I chuckled at the funny story. “Serves him right.”

“It did.”

“Is he still with her?”

“No, they only lasted a couple of weeks and she dumped him. He wanted to come

back to me, but I told him in no uncertain terms to fuck off.”

“Good for you.”

“Any more questions?”

“Not at the moment. I’m not going to ask who some of the other pack members are because it’s not something I need to know.”

“Thank you.”

I pushed up from the table and held out one hand. “Come back to bed.”

“Otsana accepted my hand. “Are you sure?”

“I’m very sure.” I paused briefly. “Otsana?”

She looked me in the face, a smile on her gorgeous face. “Yes?”

“You know a great many of my secrets and I trust you to keep them so please trust me to keep yours.”

Otsana stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. “I trust you,” she whispered before we headed upstairs to the bedroom.

Chapter Nine

Otsana

I woke up to slivers of sunlight peeking around the sides of the curtains to warm my face and knew I should make a move to get to work. I needed to talk with Calliope about taking Betty's position and to check if my team had found anything of interest in their search of the Worlds Apart computer servers or been able to glean anything from their contacts on the streets.

I grabbed my cell phone from the nearest side table and powered it on to see it was 7.37 am. I was usually in the office before the clock struck seven and couldn't remember the last time I'd still been in bed at this hour. After sending a text to Elouise, telling her I'd be late, I placed the phone back, rolled over and snuggled into Xavier's side.

Xavier wrapped an arm around me, held me close, and kissed the top of my head. I'd been fortunate he hadn't overreacted earlier in the morning. How could I have allowed myself to become so distracted that I'd done something so irresponsible? I'd endangered all those I loved with my carelessness.

I should have remained in bed after Xavier had fallen asleep, but I had an urge to run and needed to burn off excess energy. My mind had been filled with thoughts of him the entire time. How had a man that I'd met only hours earlier taken control of my thoughts so completely?

Spending the night with Xavier had been the best decision I'd ever made, but I would have to give a great deal of consideration to repeating our sexual encounter no matter how perfect it had been.

Xavier kissed the top of my head again. "What are you thinking so hard about? I hope you are not worrying about my knowing about your inner wolf?"

"No. I believe I can trust you as you trusted me when you brought me here last night and took me into your bed."

“What do you mean?”

“You trusted me not to extort you by making a false claim about our fucking and didn’t ask me to sign a paper stating I came to you willingly.”

“I actually didn’t even think about asking you to do so.”

“Do you want me to sign something now?”

Xavier didn’t hesitate to answer. “No, I don’t.”

It made me feel good to know his request for me to sign something hadn’t been necessary.

“I have to get to work, usually I’m in the office by this time. I also need to speak with Aurora and bring her over to the office to meet you.”

Xavier sighed. “Can I take you for dinner again tonight?”

“No. Tonight, I’m having dinner with my parents, brother, and sister-in-law. We make a point of doing so once a month. We are all so busy, we’d never see each other if we didn’t. This morning before I bring Aurora to your office, I’ll speak with our pack Alpha and explain what has happened. I need to make him aware of my carelessness and reassure him of our safety. Once he knows, I can discuss it with my parents at dinner.”

“Why tell him? Does he have to know?”

“I won’t keep this from him, it would be wrong, and I believe in being honest. I’m sorry I was unable to afford you the courtesy of being honest about who I am.”

“I understand. You won’t be punished?”

I shook my head. “Oh, no. He’ll be angry and will have a few choice words to say about the matter, but no, it would take something much more serious for any punishment to be warranted. He will accept my judgement that the situation is safe.”

“I’m pleased to hear that, I’d hate for you to be punished in some way.” Xavier pushed up and sat on the side of the bed. “I’m going to have a quick shower. You’re welcome to have one before I take you home.”

“Thank you, but I’ll dress while you shower and have mine at home.”

“Breakfast?” Xavier asked and I got the impression he didn’t want our time together to be over.

I shook my head. “No thanks. I usually grab a coffee and breakfast sandwich at a café near the office but this morning I’ll grab a drive through on the way to meeting with the Alpha.”

“Damn, I was hoping to spend more time with you.”

It was as I’d suspected, and I laughed. “What happened to one and done?”

“I think you and I both know what we’ve had is not enough.”

“How about lunch after we settle Aurora in with Betty?”

“I’d like that very much.”

Xavier pressed a kiss to my lips, and I ogled the rise and fall of his bare ass as he left the room. He was certainly right, what we’d had to that point was nowhere near enough.

Calliope sipped her coffee and nodded as I outlined what her position would involve at Worlds Apart. She took notes as I spoke, asking questions when she wanted something clarified.

“Jasper said I’ll be using the name Aurora Ulrich, and this assignment should only take a couple of weeks, but I find that hard to believe after you telling me there has already been years of investigation and the perp. is still avoiding discovery.”

Jasper was Calliope’s beat captain and was always cooperate in allowing her to take part in helping out different teams in undercover operations.

She stood and asked, “More coffee?”

“No thank you, it hypes me up way too much and I do stupid things.”

She gave me a curious look before crossing to where the percolator sat on the counter, pouring herself another mug of the brew, and returning to sit at the table.

Calliope and Aodhan’s home was about forty minutes from mine, situated on the northern side of Langer Falls while my place was south, and the back garden led onto a small forest where a river meandered its way through the dense tree cover. The house itself was a pretty blue and white painted cottage with several beds of roses out front. Roses were Calliope’s favorite flowers and the mix of perfumes when they

were all in bloom was superb. I adored visiting, even if it wasn't often enough.

My brother walked into the kitchen, kissed his wife's cheek, then mine, before he helped himself to coffee and joined us at the table.

"I have about half an hour before I have to be back for a meeting. What's the problem, sis?"

"You are not going to like what I have to tell you," I confessed.

Aodhan narrowed his eyes and peered at me over the rim of his mug as he sipped the coffee. "Get on with it, I can't imagine what you have to tell me is the end of the world."

"It very nearly was for us but listen to what I have to say before you start shouting."

My brother was known to have a slight temper and could make his displeasure known by shouting or growling, although it was always short-lived.

"Sounds ominous," he grumbled.

I explained in detail what had taken place in the early hours of the morning, and to my brother's credit, although he looked ready to explode, he remained quiet until I'd finished speaking. Too quiet. I waited while he seemed to think over everything I'd said, and when he did speak, his voice was quiet and controlled. Almost resigned and the disappointment in his eyes cut me to the core.

"Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"I'm absolutely confident he won't say a word," I assured Aodhan.

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He nodded sharply. “Good enough for me then.”

Aodhan stood, placed his mug in the sink, and crossed back to stand near where I sat. “I don’t see any reason to inform the pack immediately, but we have a meeting of the elders tonight, and I will be telling them at that time.”

“I understand,” I confirmed.

“And Otsana...”

“Yes?”

“You need to be a hell of a lot more careful.”

“I assure you Aodhan, I will not be so careless again.”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Love you, sis. We all make mistakes and when I heard you were going to ask Calliope to aid in your investigation of Bennett and Groves, I made it a point to do some checking of my own. They appear to be good men but I’ll have the pack keep their ears to the ground just in case he slips up and mentions what he witnessed.”

“Thank you for being understanding.”

“I have a more urgent situation involving our pack on my hands at the moment which is the reason for tonight’s meeting. Your oversight is the least of my concerns.”

“What’s going on, Aodhan?” I asked.

“Go, Adi, I’ll tell Otsana about your problem.”

Aodhan nodded, kissed his wife and left. I turned to Calliope for answers.

“We have a few minutes, I told Xavier we’d meet him at 11 am. So, tell me what is going on that obviously has my brother worried?”

“He is dealing with a breach of Zarina’s, and it has become rather ugly. Zarina had a bit too much to drink and shifted in front of a human man in the parking lot of a club. Fortunately, it was in a darkened corner at the rear where the man had parked his car and no one else saw what happened. She switched back almost immediately but the man is attempting to extort Zarina.”

“Fuck. What a day for me to admit I fucked up too.”

“He has faith in your judgement of Bennett.”

“What is he going to do about this other man?”

Calliope shrugged. “I think he’ll try and resolve the situation without destroying the man. He’s being held at the moment and will probably be subjected to a mind cleansing.”

“I’m gathering Aodhan has spoken with Zarina.”

“Yes, she called him and Peader over to her place earlier today and it did not go well. According to Aodhan, there was a lot of shouting and Zarina’s loose behavior was the source of disagreement. She insisted there are so many weirdos in the world today, making all kinds of outlandish accusations that people would probably think he was a

lunatic and not believe what he had to say.”

“I guess the weirdos of today are making us seem less strange,” I laughed. “I’ll try and speak with her again about her behavior but she is so damn volatile and I don’t want to lose her friendship.”

“I know what you mean, she snaps at people sometimes without reason. She has really gone off the rails since her relationship with Toginah ended. Getting a letter to say he’d left with a she-wolf from another pack was devastating for her.”

“I tried to explain to my brother a few weeks ago that she was feeling hurt and betrayed, but he insists it’s not an excuse for her to try and bed every man in the city...married or otherwise.”

“Hopefully it might help if you speak with her.” Calliope pushed up from the table and disposed of her mug in the sink. “I’ll follow you over to Worlds Apart.”

“Are all your friends asgorgeous as Aurora and Zarina?” Xavier asked while enjoying his meal of salad and sandwiches.

Hearing him refer to my friend and sister-in-law in such a way had jealousy flaring in my inner wolf and I felt an overwhelming urge to growl but managed to settle my mind before doing so.

Xavier put his knife and fork down in a hurry and raised both hands, palms out, in front of him. “Whoa! I didn’t mean to offend with my question.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, slightly confused by his action and words.

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“The way you growled at me, I could almost visualize your fangs.”

I shook my head...Had I growled out loud? No, it wasn't possible. “You're delusional. I didn't growl and why would I mind your saying my friends are gorgeous?”

Xavier placed his hands on the table. “I don't know, you tell me. Do you maybe like me a little and it's your way of marking your territory? And, by the way, sweetheart, ...You most certainly did growl.”

Fuck...Why did I seem to lose all sense of self-preservation when I was around Xavier? “Maybe I like you a little. Is that a problem? And for the record, only males in our pack mark their territory.”

“It's not a problem for me. Is it for you?”

“I'm not looking for anything serious at the moment.”

“Neither am I at this point in time, but I think we'd enjoy each other's company, and well, you never know what might happen.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Take it slow?”

“Suits me. I meant to ask but didn't feel it was appropriate to do so in front of Aurora, did you speak with your pack leader earlier?”

“Yes, I saw him this morning after I left your place.”

“Does he want to hunt me down and tear the flesh from my bones?”

I laughed but in all seriousness it was fortunate the café was packed, and our quietly spoken words couldn't be heard over the din of everyone else talking. Although, in fairness, what Xavier had said was innuendo only someone with knowledge of who I was would understand.

“No, he doesn't, and he was unusually forgiving. I found out from his wife after he left that he was dealing with something much more serious and was probably a little too preoccupied to fully take stock of what I'd said to him.”

“I'm glad to hear it, for your sake. Aurora and Betty seemed to be getting on okay when we left.”

“I don't know of anyone who doesn't get along with Aurora. She's outgoing, friendly, highly intelligent, and people she meets always seem to want to share their life stories with her. It's this ability to attract people that makes her both deadly and exceptional at her job. Her instincts are razor sharp and she sees things without people having any idea that they are giving themselves away.”

“No one knows she's a cop, including the ladies on our floor. Cillian and I told everyone that she's a friend of yours from school who was a receptionist for a building company that went bust.”

“Exactly as we discussed.”

“Yes. Cillian and I hated lying to the staff but the less people who know, the safer Aurora will be and the better chance she'll have of finding something. People won't keep her at arm's length if they don't know she's a cop.”

“The ladies on this floor have been instructed not to say anything about who I am?”

Xavier gave me a sheepish look. I asked the ladies to let it be known that we are seeing each other, and your name is Maureen Belle.”

I grinned. “I must say, you are good at thinking on your feet, Mr. Bennett.”

“No one will question your coming and going if they think we’re together.”

“So I’ll be undercover as well as Aurora.”

“You’re my undercover wolf,” Xavier whispered before rising and offering his hand to help me stand.

After paying the check...No, I didn’t argue or question his insistence to pay since he earned more than my annual salary every hour of every day. He escorted me to my car and pressed a kiss to my cheek before I slid behind the wheel.

“I’ll call you,” he said before raising a hand to wave as I drove away.

When I walked into the office my entire team was crowded around Ishaan’s desk studying something on his computer.

Pull that one up,” Hunter instructed, placing a finger on the screen.

“What’s so interesting?” I inquired, dropping my purse onto my desk before joining them.

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Ishaan clicked on the mouse and the screen filled with what looked like a bank account statement listing several deposits. I leaned closer to study the figures.

“Look at this, boss.” Ishaan placed a finger on the screen, and I read three deposit amounts totaling almost sixty thousand dollars. The money had been deposited three days earlier. Ishaan gave me time to read before scrolling upward. “Look...There are several deposits totaling two hundred and sixty-three thousand dollars that were banked a few days before the official release of Matilda, three hundred and eighty-two thousand dollars before the official release of Byron, and four hundred and twelve thousand dollars before Krista. Each release period has between six and nine deposits so we can expect more before Panda hits the market.”

I noted most of the money had been withdrawn, leaving only enough to keep the account open. “Where did the money go, and how were you able to find this information in less than two days when Evan’s team couldn’t in fifteen years? It doesn’t seem like something beyond their abilities.”

“Didn’t you say Evan was refused access to the executive staff?”

“Yes, but he had their names and the means to do some cursory checks,” I argued.

Everyone turned their eyes on me, and I leaned against the desk, facing them, while they explained.

“We all spent a few hours speaking with our contacts on the streets and a couple said there was a real buzz about the Worlds Apart shares exchanging hands even though no release date for Panda has been announced. None of them seemed to know where

the chatter was originating so they were pretty much a dead end,” Hunter advised. “I called the others to come back here so we could regroup on what to do next.”

“We each picked a couple of the executive staff and took a close look at their activities on the company servers. We weren’t coming up with anything that raised red flags. There were no suspicious deletions of history and that kind of thing, so Ophelia suggested we delve into their backgrounds online, including checking for information on the dark web since they all have the intelligence to use the facility. It was after an hour or so that Ishaan discovered a son of one of the Bennett’s staff that no one knows about, or we assume they don’t. There is no record of him anywhere except for a few articles on the dark web,” Declan explained.

Ishaan continued on with details of his discovery. “The son is in care down in Florida and has been for the past nineteen years. He suffered a brain injury following a drug overdose. I hacked into the facility’s server and found his parents were struggling to keep up the payments for his care and the facility had warned, they would have to take him elsewhere if the money wasn’t forthcoming. A little over fifteen years ago, they paid out what they owed and deposited enough to pay for their son’s care for another five years. They have made large payments every five years since.”

Ishaan pointed to the computer screen. “I found this account that was opened in the son’s name fifteen years ago and knew he couldn’t have opened it himself. I did some more digging and a few minutes ago I found who has been making the deposits and withdrawals as caretaker of the account.”

“Who is it?” I was almost afraid to ask because I knew having to tell Xavier that it was indeed one of his executive staff was going to be difficult.

Ishaan clicked on one of the latest deposits and pulled up the details. I gasped. Xavier was going to be devastated when he found out who had betrayed him.

“Fuck. There’s not much room for doubt is there? Print off the information and I’ll call Bennett to set up a meeting with him first thing in the morning. Excellent work team. This has to be a record for how fast we have solved a case, but I still don’t understand why Evan’s team didn’t find this information. I mean, this is investigative procedure 101.”

“Um...we can explain that,” Ophelia admitted.

“Are you going to tell her, Hunter, since it was you who found the information?” Declan asked.

I waited for the bomb that was about to drop...

“Evan is the other son that no one knows about. It looks like he’s been sabotaging his team, making sure they wouldn’t find anything unusual, and even paid off the judge so he’d rule in Bennett and Groves’ favor about investigating the executives years ago.”

“Fuck...Fuck...Fuck...Has Landon been told?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“We pretty much only just finished figuring it all out, and besides, Landon won’t shout at you...You’re the boss,” Elouise deadpanned.

“Yeah, well he’ll be the one telling Keith. Landon will try to convince me he doesn’t want to be the one to hurt his good friend, but I’m not doing his dirty work for him,” I shot back.

Keith Murray was Evan’s boss and head of the securities division of the government. He and Landon had been friends since their days on the beat as junior cops. After

Keith left to join the securities department, the two men stayed in touch and often discussed difficult cases in order to gain the other's perspective. When the Worlds Apart insider trading case hadn't been solved, Keith refused to continue to accept Evan's excuses, and it was handed to Landon who in turn handed the case to me and my team. It was interesting that Evan had shown no animosity or wariness when handing over the file. Was he confident evidence was buried so deep on the dark web that he wouldn't be found out?

"Landon in his office?" I asked no one in particular.

"Yep," Declan confirmed.

"Wrap it up and put the file and your reports on my desk. You can all take off early. Good work, I'm proud of you all."

The team grinned on hearing my praise before moving to their own desks. I sighed and headed to Landon's office to tell him everything we'd learned.

Chapter Ten

Xavier

"7 am in the morning? I can meet you tonight if you prefer."

Otsana didn't sound quite right, there was hesitation, even a tone of dread in her voice, and when I'd asked if she'd found something relevant to the case, she'd brushed my question off by saying she would tell me everything the following morning.

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I disconnected the call and set down the phone, pondering what she could have discovered—if anything. Or maybe her request for a meeting with me and Cillian was only to ask further questions?”

A knock at the door drew me from my thoughts and I called out, “come in.”

Betty stepped into my office with a smile on her face.

“How is Aurora doing?” I inquired as she came to sit in the chair opposite.

She shrugged. “Okay, I suppose.”

I frowned. It wasn’t like Betty to be indifferent about someone. She always had an opinion or warning—Or both.

“You don’t like her? I saw you earlier talking about the projections, and Aurora seemed to understand what you were saying.”

She does catch on fast and when I introduced her to the downstairs staff, they all appeared to be comfortable with her.”

“But?” I urged.

“She asks a lot of questions about the workings of the company and a couple of times I returned from the restroom in time to see her shutting down the company ledgers. Aurora insisted she must have clicked on them by mistake but how could she have done so when you need passwords, and I haven’t given them to her?”

I had given Aurora that information and would have to speak with the lady when Betty wasn't around, to warn her to be more careful.

"Don't worry too much about it, I'll speak with Aurora in the morning. Otsana is coming in at seven tomorrow morning to see me and Cillian. Show her in when she arrives. It sounds like she might have some information for us."

"Already?"

"She didn't exactly say so, but I got the feeling she and her team have found something."

Betty nodded. "I'll make sure Aurora and I are here in case we're needed. Night."

"Night Betty." Again I wondered how the hell I was going to manage without Betty by my side, especially knowing Aurora was only temporary and if Otsana had indeed found the cause of our grief, the police contact probably wouldn't be with me after the following day, and I'd be back to square one.

After Betty left my office I turned my attention to the computer where I'd been rescheduling the release date of Panda. With thoughts of Otsana preventing me from concentrating, I gave up after less than an hour, turned off the computer and headed home for a session in my basement gym.

Cillian followed me into my office and made a beeline for the coffee maker, switching it on to percolate. I crossed to the desk, removed the jacket of my suit, hung it on the coat tree and turned on my computer as I sat.

The noise of the coffee brewing and delicious aroma wafted through the room. Cillian

joined me at the desk, his ass barely hitting the seat when he jerked back onto his feet as if he'd been bitten by something. I raised my eyebrows in question at his action.

"Jacket," he explained, unbuttoning his tan coat, removing it, and hanging it on the coat tree beside mine.

The click of the percolator having finished drew Cillian's attention and he went back to the appliance and poured two mugs of the hot brew. He sipped at his while striding back to the desk, and after setting down both mugs, he finally dropped his ass into the chair opposite. "Why do you think Otsana called this meeting so early?" he asked.

I was somewhat puzzled like my friend. "I really have no idea, but as I told you yesterday, after I spoke with Otsana, she sounded strange. Her voice was hesitant and unsure."

"She doesn't strike me as that kind of woman."

"She hasn't been. Since meeting her, I have found Otsana to be confident and assertive. Still, if it was really so important, I think she would have found a way to meet with me last night as I offered."

Cillian studied my face over the rim of his mug as he drank his coffee. "You like her a lot. I've never seen you openly show interest in a woman like you have with Otsana."

"The more I see and talk with her, the more I feel attracted and sex is off the charts. Don't let her know I mentioned bedding her, she would not be impressed."

"My lips are sealed." Cillian paused for a moment. "I honestly believe you two have a future and I'm happy for you man."

A sharp knock had us both looking to the large glass panel in the top half of the office door where the blind was up and Betty was visible. I waved her in and glanced at the clock to find it was only 6.30 am, earlier than I asked her to come into the office. She entered, surprising me by locking the door behind her.

“You’re early...Why did you lock the door, Otsana will be here soon?” I asked.

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Betty crossed to the middle of the room, and when she pulled one hand from a pocket of her skirt, the light glinted off a gun she held.

Blood ran like iced water through my veins when the understanding hit with the force of a meteor—Betty, a woman I'd loved like an aunt was the person who had been betraying me, Cillian, and the company.

She waved the gun at Cillian who was now on his feet, and he raised both hands in surrender.

“Get around to the other side of the desk,” Betty ordered and thankfully, my best friend didn't hesitate in doing what he'd been told.

Cillian stood beside me, dropped a hand onto my shoulder and squeezed. Tears burned my eyes. Never in my wildest imaginings would I have suspected Betty. The fact it was her who was the insider trader broke my heart.

“Why, Betty?” Cillian asked the question I couldn't since my voice had deserted me.

“I didn't want it to come to this. I should have been long gone but Xavier was too fucking slack to get someone organized. The money from this release would have gone into my account, what's left of my son's future would have been secured, and you would never have known it was me behind the trading of shares. Then, Evan lost fucking control, and the fucking cop started snooping around. When she called this meeting, I suspected the bitch had found something to show I was involved and it would have ruined everything.”

Betty smirked as she spoke and the look on her face and in her eyes bordered on maniacal. I wondered where the hell Evan fitted into this fucked up situation but that puzzle would have to wait until later to be solved. If there was a later.

“What do you plan on doing, Betty? You won’t get away with this, no matter where you run, if Otsana has discovered it’s you.”

“Oh, you’re wrong. Evan is in the process of erasing everything so whatever the bitch thinks she found will be gone within the hour.”

“There’s still me and Cillian and the security cameras will show everything you’ve said and done since you came into the office,” I snapped, becoming more and more angry.

“Do you really think I’m stupid enough to leave you two alive? I disabled the cameras on the way in here. When the police arrive, they will find evidence that shows you killed each other. Evan will have doctored the statements for Cillian’s personal account...big mistake giving me access to that, and they will show the deposits that coincide with each release and the money being spent immediately after. Xavier found out, got mad, and in the fight that followed you killed each other.” Betty shrugged.

“Why me?” Cillian protested.

“I didn’t want to hurt Xavier, but you have always been a self-absorbed prick who cared nothing about anyone other than yourself so you deserve to have your reputation left in tatters. Enough talk. Evan and his father will be waiting for me to join them at the airport.”

Betty pulled another gun from the other pocket of her skirt and lifted it, aiming at Cillian’s chest. I trembled slightly, not knowing what I should do to keep my friend

safe. I had no need to do anything...Seconds later, my office door was smashed to pieces and two wolves pounced before Betty could react.

Betty was knocked to her back, the guns flying free of her hands. Otsana stood over her chest, her massive wolf head close to Betty's as she growled. Another wolf I thought might be Aurora stood with a paw on Betty's arm and she was snarling, warning what would happen if the woman moved.

Betty screamed but when she attempted to move, Otsana set a paw on her throat and the older woman immediately quieted and stilled.

"What the fuck?" Cillian asked, shocked by the scene taking place.

I sprang to my feet and grabbed both guns from the floor while Cillian continued to watch the wolves in fascination.

"Cillian!"

He snapped his head toward me when I shouted. I held up one of the guns, he nodded, and I tossed it into his waiting hands.

Otsana stopped growling and her unusual eyes fixed on mine, they were filled with a mix of anger and sadness.

I winked, giving her permission to release Betty now she was under control. Otsana jumped off the elderly woman, who didn't dare move, and circled my legs, rubbing herself against me in a breath-stealing erotic way.

The other wolf did the same to Cillian who was watching the animal in amazement.

Both wolves held their tails high in the air as they circled. When Otsana sat in front of

me, I patted her head before she ran from the office with the other wolf close behind.

Keeping a gun trained on Betty, I asked Cillian to call the police which he did. I had no fucking idea how I was going to explain the wolves to him but would have to do so without revealing Otsana's secret. Would it be possible, or had her coming to our rescue put her entire pack in danger of being discovered?

Chapter Eleven

Otsana

“Explain to me why it was so urgent I meet you here?”

When Aodhan informed his wife was ill, I'd called Zarina and asked her to meet me at the Worlds Apart building.

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“Calliope is ill and Aodhan said she is barely able to get out of bed to go to the bathroom.”

“I know all that, but still don’t know why you need me.”

“I’ve been tossing and turning, worrying all night. Something was warning me not to come here alone.”

“Good enough for me. I don’t have to be at the hospital until later for an evening shift so I’ll drop over and see Calli when we’re finished here. At least you know it wasn’t your mom’s cooking since the rest of you are well.”

“True. Text me after you see her and let me know how she is doing. Give her my love.”

“Will do.”

The elevator came to a stop, the door slid open, and we stepped into the entry foyer which was dimly lit. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as we moved forward, the door silently sliding shut behind us. Zarina grabbed my arm, pulling me to a stop and pressed a finger to her lips, indicating for me to stay quiet.

Zarina’s hearing was freakish, she was capable of hearing a pin drop on the other side of the building where I’d been blessed with unusually sharp eyesight. We made a good pair and trusted each other without question.

Remaining still, I focused on listening and heard voices coming from Xavier’s

office—Angry voices.

Zarina inclined her head and we started toward the door to the office. Being wolves, we were adept at being light on our feet and moving without making a sound. Zarina slinked to one side of the door and I stayed on the other. She waited while I rose to take a lightning fast glance at what was happening on the other side of the door and checked the doorknob.

Anger rose in my chest when I saw Betty holding a gun on the men in a threatening manner. Signaling to Zarina, I led her off to one side of the foyer to where the ladies bathroom was located. I pushed through the door and after we entered, propped the door ajar. We left the lights off, our eyesight was every bit as good in the dark as it was in the light.

I moved close to Zarina and whispered so the echo of my voice didn't carry beyond the bathroom.

"Betty, Xavier's personal assistant who is guilty of insider trading, is holding a gun on him and his best friend and partner, Cillian. The door is locked, probably by Betty when she entered the office."

"Shift?" Zarina asked with a grin on her face.

"That's my thinking. We can use our wolf strength to break down the door. I'm sure Xavier won't object. Are you okay with this?"

"Of course...Let's take the bitch out."

"She's not to be hurt," I warned and the grin on Zarina's face faded.

"Damn. You're no fun at all these days."

“Do I need to remind you of where fun has gotten you? You’re skating on thin ice with the pack, Zarina. Aodhan said the hierarchy came very close to excommunicating you last night.”

“Yeah, yeah. Aodhan said I was on my final warning, but he’s said that before.”

“We’ll discuss this later, we’re wasting time.”

While we’d been speaking, we had stripped off our clothes, stashed them neatly in one of the stalls and closed the door. We stood naked, I nodded, and we both shifted to our wolf personas. Zarina was impressive in wolf form. Her fur was snowy white and large pale blue eyes were piercing.

We left the bathroom and I was grateful to find the entire floor was still in semi-darkness and quiet. It was fortunate I’d arranged to meet with the men so early before staff had begin arriving to begin their day. Xavier and Cillian may have been injured or dead if I’d scheduled the meeting for later and that thought sent ice cold blood pumping through my veins. There was no doubt in my mind that Betty’s intention was to dispose of the men, and knowing the pair always came in early, it would have been easy to catch them together.

We padded to the door, Zarina and I locked eyes, and seconds later, charged the door. The wood splintered and glass shattered startling everyone in the office and giving me the time to pounce on Betty, knocking her to the floor to land on her back. Two guns flew from her hands and slid across the floor, out of reach.

I stood on the woman’s chest, growling, and Zarina stood close and snarled angrily. Betty started screeching and thrashing beneath me but when I set a paw hard on her throat, she quieted.

Xavier shot out of his chair, grabbed the guns from in front of his desk, shouted to get

Cillian's attention, and tossed one to him. He winked, clearly knowing it was me, and I backed off Betty. The men kept their guns trained on her, warning her not to move.

I wound myself around Xavier's legs in a sexual display and was intrigued to see Zarina was doing the same to Cillian. Given the all clear that the men had the situation under control, I ran off to the bathroom with Zarina following.

We shifted back to human form, and headed back to the office where the men continued guarding Betty who was now seated in a chair.

Zarina and I stepped over the debris from the door, and I crossed to where Betty sat. Pulling the woman to her feet, I ensured she understood why she was being arrested and her rights while cuffing both hands at her back.

A knock on the door frame had me turning to see a company security guard showing two police officer's into the office. I flashed my badge before instructing the officers to take Betty to Central, book her for attempted murder, and have her kept in a cell until I arrived. I'd add the insider trading charge and any others after further investigation.

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Betty pointed to Xavier and Cillian. “I was attacked by wolves and I want those men charged because they did nothing to protect me from the growling beasts.”

The police officers, one on each side of Betty and gripping her upper arms, looked to me for an explanation for what they perceived as an outrageous statement.

“I didn’t see any wolves. Did you, Zarina?”

“Nope, nothing.”

“Xavier, Cillian?” I asked.

Both men shook their heads.

“They broke down the door and one had its paw on my throat and was growling,” Betty screeched.

“Zarina and I broke down the door,” I explained. “Ms. Lowe was holding a gun on the men, we confirmed the door was locked, and broke it down.”

“Do you have tapes?” One of the officers directed his question to Xavier and Cillian.

Fuck...I hadn’t stopped to consider there would be security cameras recording.

Xavier nodded and I was scrambling to think of how I could prevent the officers from taking them.

“Betty disabled the cameras. She wanted to stage our deaths to make it look like we’d killed each other,” Xavier explained and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Is that correct, Ma’am,” one of the police asked Betty.

“Yes, but I’m telling you, it was wolves that broke down that door,” Betty insisted.

“Of course, Ma’am. We will have someone talk with you about that at the station.”

The police, with the security guard following, escorted Betty away and Zarina made for the coffee machine.

“Anyone want coffee, because I sure need one?” Zarina asked.

We all agreed coffee was needed and Cillian handed me the gun he’d been holding and crossed the room to help Zarina. Xavier handed me his gun and I bagged both to log into evidence at the station before placing them on his desk.

Xavier stepped closer, gathered me into his arms, and we shared a bruising kiss before he whispered how grateful he’d been when Zarina and I broke into the office.

“Enough you two. Come and sit down. I have questions...A lot of them,” Cillian put two of the mugs onto a small round table that was surrounded by four comfortable chairs. Zarina put the two she’d carried on the table and we all sat.

I pulled a notebook, pen, and small recorder from my pocket. “Before we start answering questions, I need to take both your statements while events are clear in your minds.”

I ensured both men were okay after their ordeal, and when they assured me they were, I hit record and taped both of their statements which were identical. Obviously,

they left out the part about the wolves, saying instead it had been Zarina and I who'd broken through the door and the shock had been enough for us to disarm Betty and bring her under control.

I switched off the recorder and palmed my notebook, flipping to the page where I'd recorded several points about Betty's activities within the company.

"The team uncovered quite a lot about Betty and her family which was why I called for this meeting. I suspect she was aware she had been discovered and came in to frame you both so she could escape undetected. Or so she thought."

"Should I be here?" Zarina questioned.

"I have no objection to your hearing what Otsana has to say. I guess it's not normal procedure but Cillian and I have nothing to hide and I doubt you would go to media with anything you learn."

"I agree," Cillian added.

"It certainly isn't proper procedure but since Zarina played a part in disabling Betty, and you two agree to her staying, I won't object. You can certainly trust her not to take the information public."

I spent the next hour outlining Betty's insider trading scheme and the involvement of her eldest son, Evan.

"It's hard to believe Evan was working against us discovering what Betty was doing, but being his mother, I guess it makes sense. Betty said he and his father were waiting at the airport for her. They must have known why she was coming here and did nothing to stop her from attempting to murder us both.

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“Evan and his father were arrested an hour ago and taken to Central. They both insist they had nothing to do with any of this and didn’t know what Betty was doing which we know is not true. The judge Evan paid off so you would win your case against having senior staff investigated, including his mother, has also been arrested. At this point, we have not ascertained if any of Evan’s team were aware of what was happening.”

“Did you know Betty would be here?” Xavier asked.

“Zarina and I were on our way here for our meeting when the police called in to say Betty wasn’t located at home and I figured she’d come here to confront you both. When we saw her holding a gun on you...Well, you know the rest.”

“Wait...You two are the wolves? Is this some kind of alternate universe I’ve fallen into when I was asleep?”

Xavier laughed, Cillian’s words had been identical to his when he’d witnessed me shifting. “Took you long enough to figure it out.”

Zarina pierced me with a quizzical stare. She was wondering how I was going to sort out this mess.

“Excuse me, I need to make a call.” I hurried from the office and out in the foyer, placed a call to Aodhan. I needed his advice urgently.

I explained everything that had happened and Aodhan offered his advice.

“Thanks, big brother. I think you are right about us needing to be more trusting of humans. We live alongside them and fuck ups are going to happen but we still need to be cautious of where we place our trust. I have no issue with these men.”

Aodhan requested to meet them so dinner was planned for the following night at my home. Mom and Dad would also be invited to give their input.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Hopefully Calli will be feeling better by then.”

I disconnected the call and returned to the office. Three pairs of eyes fixed on me, expectation clear. I sat and took a deep breath.

“I just spoke with my big brother—Aodhan. He took over the Alpha male role of our pack after our father retired a year ago. I’m the Alpha female. Xavier witnessed me shifting in the early hours of yesterday morning when I became preoccupied and careless so he is aware of some of what I about to tell you, Cillian.”

“So I have dropped through a black hole into an alternate universe?” Cillian sounded almost disappointed.

I laughed. “No you haven’t.”

“Damn.”

We laughed at Cillian before I continued explaining.

“Aurora is ill today which is why I brought Zarina with me. I sensed something was wrong and it kept me awake all night. I knew I’d more than likely need help, which proved to be the case. When a wolf has a mating link, we develop a kind of sixth sense about everything surrounding them and I have that with Xavier.”

“I knew you’d fucked,” Zarina blurted.

I glared at my friend and she made a show of zippering her mouth shut.

“Continuing on...When I saw Betty holding a gun on you , and found the door locked, Zarina and I went to the bathroom and shifted. We are more agile and powerful as wolves. I knew the shock of seeing us would shock Betty and enable us to take control.”

I explained about our pack, and once done, gave Cillian the opportunity to ask questions.

“Is Aurora a member of your pack?”

Xavier showed interest in the question Cillian had asked.

“Her real name is Calliope and she’s my sister-in-law. She uses a different name when she is undercover and it is true that she’s a beat cop when not assigned to help one of the teams.”

“That’s why Betty didn’t like her,” Xavier mused. “She sensed Calliope was a threat.”

“If my team hadn’t uncovered what was going on, Calli would have figured it out. Last night when we were at my parents’ for dinner, she insisted Betty was the one insider trading and she only needed a day or two to find the evidence that proved she was right. Of course, I’d already learned that it was Betty and Calli was pleased with how fast she had zeroed in on the woman. Aodhan wants to meet you both so dinner at my place tomorrow night at 7 pm.”

Both men agreed to attending.

“I’m sorry about the situation with her youngest son. I had no idea she had children. If she’d come to me, I would have willingly paid to ensure he was well cared for in the facility,” Xavier stated.

“You single, Zarina?” Cillian asked, seemingly satisfied he’d heard everything he needed.

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Xavier and I looked at each other and he shrugged. He had a kind of ‘what can we do, they’re both adults?’ expression on his face.

“Yep and staying that way but I could be persuaded to join you for dinner, and a fuck could be on the table.”

Cillian held his hand out. “Give me your phone and I’ll add in my number. Text me with your address and I’ll pick you up at 7 pm.” Zarina dropped her phone into his palm, he did what was needed and handed it back. “I’ll look forward to fucking you until you don’t know which way is up.”

I sighed but admitted to myself the pair were perfectly matched and pushed to my feet. “I have to go and sort things out at Central.”

Xavier stood and pressed a kiss to my lips before he and Cillian walked Zarina and I to the elevator.

“I’ll call you,” Xavier stated before the elevator door slid closed and we descended toward the ground.

Zarina and I had driven to the building in separate cars, and when we reached them, we hugged.

“You’re invited to dinner tomorrow night too. Aodhan wants your opinion on them.”

“I’ll be there. Talk to you before then. Love you, Ots.”

“Love you too and thank you for your help. Be gentle with Cillian. He comes across as being confident and a little wild, but he’s a good man.”

Zarina nodded before we both climbed into our cars and drove away.

Epilogue

Xavier

Two years later.

I looked over at Otsanawho was lying on a lounge beside me on the grassy strip bordering the sand of Waikiki Beach. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined loving a woman as much as I did my bride.

We had begun dating after she had saved my life and although her brother and sister-in-law had accepted us easily, Otsana’s parents and other members of the pack had been wary. I’d done everything I could to assure them I wasn’t a threat and neither was my best friend.

Slowly, ever so slowly, they began to accept us both and their attitude had done a complete U-turn when a crazed gunman had broken into Otsana’s home, the wrong home as it turned out. The man had been looking for his ex-girlfriend who lived in a house two doors further down the street. Cillian and I had turned up with Zarina at the right time and disarmed the nutcase but not before I’d taken a bullet to the shoulder and Cillian had taken one to his hip. It proved to the pack we would go to great lengths to protect our women and the pack had considered us allies ever since.

I danced my fingers over Otsana’s swollen belly. There were three months of her pregnancy to go and she glowed with good health. I’d been extremely happy when she’d given up work three months earlier, knowing she’d be safe for the rest of her

pregnancy.

We'd found out a few months earlier we were expecting twins which was exciting for everyone involved as twins were apparently rare among wolves. The decision was made to wait until the babies were born to find out their sex, a decision that was respected but disappointed our families and close friends.

Otsana had insisted on decorating their nursery in mostly white as parents back in the 40s, 50s, and 60s had done, saying she would purchase items in blue or pink after their births. It wasn't as if I couldn't afford for Otsana to purchase whatever she preferred.

I smiled as I thought back to our conversation. After Otsana had told me of her preference, I'd asked why our children couldn't be dressed in bright colors, spots, stripes, and a combination of all. Cillian and Zarina had been with us at the time and listened intently since Zarina was in the late stage of her pregnancy and I knew the couple had been buying bright colors for their expected son.

Otsana had been tactful, keeping in mind Zarina's preferences, but firm when she answered. "They are babies, pure and innocent and deserve to be dressed in the purest of white, pale lemon, blue, or pink, at least for the first couple of months of their lives."

Zarina argued there were gorgeous clothes in bright colors now and there was no need to be so conservative. She believed dressing her son in bright colors would make others happy when she was out and about with him.

Otsana, always conservative in how she dressed, and old fashioned in her thinking had snapped back saying, "They are babies, not circus clowns to be dressed in a way they provide pleasure for ogling strangers."

Cillian and I weren't stupid, we stayed out of the conversation, and after the ladies agreed to respect each other's opinions, the discussion ended.

I knew nothing about babies and to be honest, could see both sides of the argument. I was proud of Otsana for standing up for her beliefs and values while respecting Zarina would do things differently. There was no doubt that the she-wolf, who was such a huge part of Otsana's identity, would be as fiercely protective of our children as she was of me and others she loved. I looked forward to learning if our children inherited the wolf gene and my beautiful wife's shifting ability.

Otsana struggled to sit up on the lounge , and my offer to help was met with a glare, and I had enough sense to remain put. After a lot of huffing and puffing, she managed to pull herself into position.

"I don't know why you wanted me to wear a bikini, I look and feel like a beached whale. I'll be so glad when this pair arrive." She caressed her stomach lovingly. "Ooh, they're feisty this afternoon."

Otsana reached for my hand and positioned it on her belly, keeping hers over the top to hold it in place. A strong kick had our hands bouncing and I laughed.

"That's a soccer player for sure," I announced.

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“What makes you think it won’t be a ballerina?” Otsana asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

“One of each,” I grinned. “And if they are a boy and a girl, it can be either way around.”

We turned our attention to the sandy beach and watched as Cillian and Zarina made their way toward us with their son in Cillian’s arms.

The change in the pair since meeting each other had been nothing short of miraculous. They were both much less prone to run wild. While Otsana and I had elected to wait almost a year before marrying, the impulsive pair had tied the knot after only six months.

Six weeks earlier, Zarina had given birth to their son who they had named Velatin Cillian Groves after Zarina’s father and of course, Cillian. Assured all was well, they’d accepted our offer to holiday in Hawaii.

Zarina dropped onto the grass beside Otsana, and after handing their son into my wife’s outstretched arms, Cillian sat beside his wife, pulling her close and kissing her cheek.

I watched Otsana fawning over our soon to be godson who seemed intent on understanding everything she was saying.

The baby was cute as a button having inherited his dark hair from his father, and ice blue eyes from his mother. A blood test a week after his birth revealed he had

inherited the wolf gene.

Watching my wife, my heart swelled with love. My she-wolf bride was going to be an extraordinary mother to our children. Of that I had no doubt. And once again, I thanked the powers that be for the alignment of the stars that had brought us together.