



The Shifter's Explosive Encounters (The Special Paranormal Investigative Unit #2)

Author: *Sheryl Norbut*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Gunnolf, a powerful wolf shifter and second-in-command at the FBI's Special Paranormal Investigative Unit, has always kept others at arm's length, especially successful women. Betrayed in the past, he's convinced they are manipulative and untrustworthy.

But his rigid world is shaken when he meets Val Hayes—an intelligent, independent businesswoman with beauty and a steely resolve.

When a series of deadly bombings ravage a city, including an attack on Val's office, Gunnolf and Val are forced to team up to stop the ruthless killers.

As they work together, the walls around Gunnolf's heart begin to crumble, and he finds himself drawn to the one woman who challenges everything he believes.

With each twist in the case, their bond and undeniable desire for each other grows stronger, their passion more uncontrollable, but so does the danger.

Gunnolf must confront his biases and open his heart, or risk losing both the key to solving the mystery and the one woman who is his true mate.

Time is running out—for the investigation and their chance at love.

Total Pages (Source): 18

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 1

Val

My grip tightens around the edge of my desk, fingers aching and knuckles going white as I stare at the lines of code flashing across my screen. DAMN. The numbers and symbols blur together, taunting me. It's not like me to miss something like this—nor is it like my team. Our security system is airtight.

It has to be.

Yet, here it is, a breach lurking in the shadows like a snake in the grass waiting to strike. Letting out a sigh, I roll my eyes, stomach twists, worry, and rage warring within. I don't know what data, if anything, has been taken or how deep the damage goes.

A knock at the door startles me, still my eyes are glued to the screen. “Miss Hayes, do you need anything else before I head out?” Paige, my assistant, lingers in the doorway. Her voice is soft but professional.

There is no way I can let anyone know about this breach until I've got a better picture of what's going on. Especially not when there is a strong possibility that the breach came from within my company.

“Leave the reports on my desk, and you can leave.” My voice is clipped and much harsher than I mean it to. I force myself to soften my gaze and glance up at Paige, offering her a small, forced smile.

She hesitates and steps forward placing a pile of paperwork onto my desk, “Have a good night then.” She says.

I nod, my eyes returning to the screen, and after a moment, Paige’s footsteps retreat. My chest tightens, the knots in my stomach twist and untwist. I lean back in my chair and roll my neck, feeling the familiar pull of exhaustion settling in.

This can’t be happening right now, not to me, not to SableTech. It’s every cyber security’s worst nightmare to be hacked and to have information stolen from them without raising any alarm bells. And as the CEO and Founder of SableTech, I could be living my worst nightmare.

The thought makes my skin prickle. Strange, this restless energy humming throughout my body. But it’s not just stress. There’s something else crawling beneath the surface of my skin, something else fluttering in my stomach and despite my efforts to ignore it all day, I haven’t been able to.

It’s like I’m wired wrong today.

After battling with myself for a while, I glance at the clock. Nearly eight. The office is ‘you can hear a pin drop’ quiet. Everyone else has gone home to live their lives, yet here I remain, making absolutely no progress on the hack.

Tears prick at the back of my eyes as my exhaustion gives way to frustration. At least no one is here to witness this moment of weakness. I do my best to refocus on my screen, trying to concentrate on what’s important here.

But, despite my best efforts, my mind keeps drifting back to the strange, undeniable ache pooling low in my belly. I try to push it away, but it claws its way back, demanding my attention.

I need air. I need to move. Anything to shake this discomfort off.

Without thinking I grab my coat and head out, enabling every security system we have on my way out. I don't know where I'm going, I just start walking. The click of my heels propelling me forward.

Before I realize where I've gone, I'm outside of a bar a few blocks away from my office. The place I always wind up when the pressure gets to be too much. Tonight, I'm searching for something- maybe a drink, maybe something more...

God, I don't even know what I want anymore.

By the time I push open the door, the noise and warmth from the bar hit me like a wall. The music pulses, thick and heavy, vibrating through the floor and into my bones. I find myself gulping down heavy breaths of air.

God, I feel like a thread pulled too tight, like I'm one small tug away from unraveling completely. I dig my heels into the floor where I stand as a moment of clarity washes over me, I better go home before I do something I regret.

But, as soon as that thought comes to me, it melts away the moment I see him.

He's leaning against the bar, broad shoulders outlined in the dim light, the fabric of his shirt pulled tight across his muscled back. I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame, and I can't help but wonder if moths have the same sense of danger as I do right now.

I'm tugged nearer and nearer, even with the distinct feeling that this man might be my undoing. I don't care.

This desire has nothing to do with logic or reason. The stirring deep in my gut, the

tugging in my chest, the difficulty I have catching my breath, it's primal. Raw.

This is stupid, so unbelievably stupid. I'm not the type to approach strange men in bars. I don't do one-night stands, I don't follow whims, and I definitely don't let my body make decisions for me. But tonight... tonight feels different. Like the rules don't apply.

My feet keep moving, I can't seem to stop them carrying me across the room. The crowd parts around me like it knows I'm supposed to be here. Like they know where I'm meant to end up.

With each step I take, the buzzing in my veins intensifies. The strange heat that's been simmering under my skin all day builds into something sharp and undeniable. I'm afraid that I will burst into flames and burn to dust here in this bar.

As soon as I am close enough that I can reach out and touch him, he turns, standing up straight, and his green eyes lock onto mine. The air crackles between us, and my breath catches in my throat.

He's tall, taller than I imagined, easily over six feet. His messy light brown hair catches in the light, unveiling honeyed hues of rich gold surrounded by green. His eyes scan over me with a lazy sort of interest that feels like a challenge.

Under that gaze, I fight the urge to squeeze my thighs together, the pulsing thrum of energy now tantalizing me between them. He doesn't smile, not really, but there's a glint of something in his eyes.

Something almost like conquest. As though he already knows where this is headed, and yet I don't even know his name.

For a second, I think about walking away from whatever this is. But the idea barely

forms before he grins, and I'm mesmerized once again. It's a slow, confident curl of his lips that sends a shock of heat straight to my core. I've never seen a more delicious man in my life.

"Buy you a drink?" he asks, with his voice low that vibrates through me like the bass of the music, and that voice does things to me I don't have the capacity to understand right now.

It somehow knows how much I want this. Want him.

I nod yes, my lips parting slightly, but no words come out. His left eyebrow flickers upward, and his grin widens as if amused by me. Amused by what he's already doing to me.

What the hell is happening?

Before I know how it even occurred, we are dancing, bodies pressed close in the dim light with scarcely the hint of a word shared between us.

His hand on my waist. His fingers brushing the bare skin at the small of my back. All I can feel is him. All I want to feel is him.

Every time he touches me, it's like he's lighting a fuse inside me that's been smoldering all day.

His hand traces the line of my spine. I shudder under his touch, something deep inside me unraveling, piece by piece. His breath is hot against my ear, and when he pulls me closer, my body reacts without hesitation. I want him. No, I need him.

By the end of the night, my skin hums with electricity, my thoughts are tangled and frayed. I don't even pretend to resist as he grabs my hand and leads me out of the bar.

The night air hits us, cool against my flushed skin, but it does nothing to cool the fire burning through me.

We barely make it through my front door before his mouth is on mine, rough, demanding. It's not sweet or gentle but wild, like we're both on the edge of something we can't control.

And God, I don't want to control it. Not tonight.

Our bodies move together as though they were made to work in unison. His big hands send uncontrollable pulses of desire through me as they map out every inch of me like he's mentally recording every detail, not wanting to forget a single curve or bump.

Aching pulses between my legs, and were I not completely breathless, I'd beg him not to keep me waiting. Beg him, God, this is so unlike me. I want to scold myself, but right now, I truly don't give a damn.

And the moment he slides inside of me, all thoughts beyond the recognition of pure ecstasy dissipate. All there is-is him, this nameless man with whom I've lost myself. The way he fills me up like no one ever has before or probably ever will again, is like a fantasy.

His hips thrust, and I grind into him in perfect timing. This otherworldly force magnetizes us together, and our bodies are like puzzle pieces meant to connect. His breath is hot against my throat as the tip of his tongue flicks up from my collarbone to my jaw before his lips find their way to mine again.

A gasp escapes my lips in the brief moment our lips disconnect, as his thumb rubs careful circles over my clit. The pressure mounting. Pleasure blinds me until both of us are screaming out, my walls clamping down over him as he pulses.

Exhaustion closely follows the release. My eyelids heavy as he traces circles on my back lulling me into a deep, restful, sleep.

By the time I wake up, he's gone.

And I'm left wanting more.

My mind is anywhere but on the screen in front of me. I sit in my office, trying to focus on the mess of code I'm seeing, trying to piece together how my system was breached.

And yet, despite the severity of this situation, I can't stop my thoughts from traveling back in time to last night.

I still feel the ghost of his touch on my skin, the heat that hasn't left me since last night's pleasures. It's messing with my mind.

My fingers hover over the keys, but they don't reach them. The green eyes of my bed partner burns into my memory and the way they locked onto mine like he could see every part of me that I keep hidden.

I bite my lip.

Focus, Val.

The tension in my body refuses to ease.

Then a dull rumble shakes the floor under my feet.

My pulse spikes. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It comes again, louder and harder. The windows rattle in their frames, and a low vibration hums

through the walls.

The floor shakes violently beneath me. I stumble back from the window. My heart pounding wildly in my chest. In an instant, the world goes sideways.

A roar splits the air.

I barely register the shockwave before it slams into me, knocking me off my feet.

“Shit!”

I push myself back up to stand, through the haze of dust and debris, adrenaline floods my veins. My body snaps into action before my mind can process the situation. I shove the door open and stagger into the hallway, where smoke is beginning to seep through the cracks in the walls.

The air is thick with the acrid scent of burning insulation, and panic flares in my chest, but I shove it down. Now is not the time to lose control.

They didn't get to the main building, but judging by where the blast came from, they were aiming for one of our server rooms underground. Fuck.

“Everyone out! Now!” I can hardly hear my own shouts over the ringing in my ears as I dash down the halls. People are already pouring out of their offices, wide-eyed and disoriented.

“Down the stairs! Move!” I call out, ushering people toward the emergency exit.

I spot Paige huddled near the reception desk. She's clutching her phone. “Paige, let's go!” I snap, pulling her to her feet. She nods, dazed but obedient, and we move toward the stairwell.

More people rush past us crying, dazed, yelling 'I love yous' into their phones.

Once I'm sure the last person has descended the stairs, I glance back toward my office. Every instinct screams at me to leave, to get the hell out, but I can't. Not yet.

This bombing isn't a coincidence. It has to be connected to the data breach.

My fingers curl into fists as I turn and race back to my office, my mind snapping into problem-solving mode, and all traces of distraction blasted away.

How did they slip past our detection systems? SableTech is supposed to be impenetrable.

Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing.

I wait for another rumble, but it doesn't come.

Sirens wail all around me as I type furiously, bypassing the damaged network systems to run a quick forensic check. There's not much time, but I need to know what kind of invading tech we're dealing with.

The initial analysis pings back at me, confirming my worst suspicion: this bomb was designed to bypass standard detection systems. Advanced tech, too sophisticated for your average hacker. I glance out the shattered window. Whoever did this didn't just want to hurt us. They wanted to send a message.

And I'm going to find out who.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 2

Gunnolf

Thick smoke fills the air, spiraling through the already grey sky as we approach the crime scene. The smell is appalling, burning fiberglass and foam insulation, charred metal, and melted plastic. Welcome to Memphis.

Callie and I exchange glances, each of our noses wrinkled. “Goddess, this is going to be a rough case,” I say trying to consciously dull the assaulting scents.

Outside the building chaos reigns. First responders and uniformed police officers push back the crowd with the whine of sirens cutting through the haze of debris.

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath as I jump out of the van. My boots hit the asphalt with a thud, and I run a hand through my hair, letting out a low whistle.

My pulse pounds so hard I can feel it in my neck. Blood thrums in my ears like a drum line. For the first time since the early morning hours, my thoughts aren’t solely focused on her, the enticing human mistake with whom I’d spent last night. Thank Goddess.

I feel guilty as soon as the thought crosses my mind. How can I think that, when I’m currently standing at a crime scene?

Especially when we should’ve known this bombing was coming. Should have been faster. I exhale with frustration. But, there seems to be no rhyme or reason for these

bombings, how could we have known?

“Gun?” Kato’s voice cuts through my pity party.

“What?” I snap, eyes scanning the building in front of me. It’s a high-rise, all glass and metal, with half of the windows on the lower floors blown out. Microscopic shards of glass glittering across the sidewalk.

“It seems we have a potential victim,” Kato says, eyes narrowing with a warning. Watch your tone. I take a deep breath. Goddess, I’m on edge.

“According to this young woman,” Kato indicates a pale trembling redhead, “the CEO made sure that everyone got out, but then disappeared back into the building and hasn’t been seen since.”

“We are going in,” Kato orders, I nod. Our shifter bodies can handle the debris and toxins better than any humans can, even with their fancy fire suits.

Our team moves together, fanning out on each floor, clearing the first two floors without running into a single soul. It isn’t until the third floor that we round the corner, and there she is, the woman from last night.

Standing at her desk amidst the chaos, hair streaked with dust, her fitted business suit smudged with debris, but otherwise unharmed, “I heard you coming,” and despite her coughing her voice is still sexy, stirring my wolf within.

Her jaw is set, her eyes sharp, like she’s already trying to piece together what happened, trying to fix everything because, of course, she thinks that she is the one responsible for fixing it.

Her voice sounds like velvet, and when she looks up from her desk, there’s a flicker

of recognition in her gorgeous, deep blue eyes.

Goddess, she's beautiful. Even now. Especially now.

Fucking hell, this is not good.

"Are you alright?" Kato asks as we move closer, "I'm Agent Blackwood with the SPIU. We were investigating the bombing in town last week when we got word of this one."

"I'm fine," she says, "Thank you, Agent Blackwood."

Her body tenses as I approach her, and I extend my hand. "I'm Agent Wright, second in command."

Her jaw tightens as she instinctively steps backward, taking us all in. "I'm Val Hayes, and this is my business."

Callie, Hati, and Bruce, my team members, watch my extended hand momentarily before I realize what happened and drop it back to my side. I can see them exchanging amused glances out of the corner of my eye.

This is off to a great start.

I push the emotions back, hard, like packing dirt over a buried landmine. But my gut twists painfully. There's no denying the tug of the mate bond pulsing under my skin.

Damn it all to hell, why her?

Why did it have to be her out of everyone on this planet?

I try to ignore the tug, but my wolf growls within. Furious that she could have been harmed, and he howls at her rejection of my hand. He's pacing back and forth. Mine. Mine. My mate.

No. I won't let that word fill my head. I won't acknowledge it. Not now, maybe never.

"Val Hayes," I hear myself say quietly. Her name on my lips brings back memories of her sumptuous taste.

Her eyes narrow, lips thinning into a line, and I feel a weird rush of satisfaction for a second. I've pissed her off with my lack of acknowledgement of her, and for some reason, that feels better than letting anything else surface.

"What are you still doing in the building?" Kato asks, and I focus back on the case. My eyes swoop down over Val's curves; her muscular yet juicy thighs stir up something within me I can't control.

"Were you trying to get yourself killed?" I ask, my words coming out clipped.

"Not exactly part of the business plan, no," she shoots back, her voice calm, sharp. "But thanks for your concern, Agent Wright. Really warms my heart."

Kato shoots me a look over his shoulder and I snap my jaw shut. Fury warring with the lust and desire that I can't seem to contain. I should walk away. I should be professional.

But I can't bring myself to turn my back on her.

"Do I have your confidence?" She asks Kato, not bothering to so much as glance back in my direction. Jealousy surges within me and I clench my hands into fists at

my side.

“You do,” Kato nods.

“Yesterday, I discovered a security breach in our systems. I haven’t been able to pinpoint exactly what happened, but now with this bombing? It’s no coincidence.”

Yesterday... my cock twitches in my pants. Not now. “I’m sure your clients will be thrilled to know they’ve put their trust in a company that can’t even protect itself.”

Her eyes flash over to me dangerously. For a moment, I think she’s going to haul forward and slap me. And for a moment I want her to. Anything to break this unbearable tension gnawing at my insides.

“You don’t know the first thing about what happened here,” she snaps, heat rolling off her in waves. Goddess, I want to kiss those soft lips of hers. “So maybe save your clever little remarks until after you’ve done your job.”

“Fine. Enlighten me, then.” I cross my arms, staring her down with narrowed eyes. Even though every inch of me wants to grab her and shake the dust off to make sure she’s actually okay. “What’s your brilliant take on this?”

I can hear the team shuffling nervously beside me. Kato’s stiff as a board and fuming. I can practically feel the rage rolling off him in waves. I know he’s wondering why the hell I’m being such a prick, I know I should stop, but I can’t help myself.

He turns to face me. Oh, he wants to kill me right now. His mouth opens, but before he can reprimand me, Val steps forward.

She doesn’t back down. She squares her shoulders and tilts her chin, defiantly looking at me like I’m nothing, “Whoever did this is sending a message, and it’s

likely they are trying to cover their tracks. The good news is they didn't realize how reinforced our systems are."

Before I can say anything else, Kato steps in, his eyes darting between us. Bruce steps forward, his massive figure eclipsing me. They act like they are stepping between two kids in a playground scuffle.

"Alright, enough. We're here to figure this out, not exchange insults." His tone is calm but authoritative. Enough warning for me to shut my mouth and keep it shut this time. "It's not safe for you to be in here right now. Would you mind if we took this discussion elsewhere?"

"I figured you'd say something like that, which is why I had to get everything I could before you and your people kicked me out of my own office," she says, holding up a small thumb drive.

I bite my tongue, resisting the urge to make another comment. This is what women like her do. She takes control, even in the middle of a bombing and it pisses me off how much I admire that.

It's not every day you come across someone so cool under pressure. Most of the time, when we show up at a crime scene, everyone is either screaming their head off, crying, or shell-shocked. Especially when it comes to something of this magnitude.

Kato turns to me, tongue clicking, "You stay here with Bruce and forensics for a little while. Get your head straight before you meet us back at the office."

"Yes sir," I submit, but the fire burns beneath my surface. My eyes are glued to Val's ass as she walks down the hallway, all the way until she disappears out of sight around the corner.

Bruce cocks an eyebrow at me once they are out of human earshot, “What the hell was that about?”

“I don’t like her,” I say simply like that makes up for my bad behavior.

“Is this that weird thing where you hate all women executives?”

My eyes narrow on Bruce, and I don’t say a word. After a moment of silence, he claps his massive hands together and says, “Alright, well, let’s get to work.”

Sifting through debris in the lower levels of the building, I force myself to stay focused on the job before I get myself kicked off the case. Every time my mind wanders off toward thoughts of Val Hayes and the breathy sounds she makes right before she cums, I wrangle them back to the dust and mounds of debris.

Bruce is on the opposite side of the server room, talking to one of the forensic techs bagging evidence and taking photos, he’s nodding grimly.

It’s hot as hell here. Sweat drips down my brow as I scan the room of half-mangled servers. Only this is the initial server room which was installed as more of a decoy server room, according to the building’s security team.

I walk over, needing to hear something that doesn’t involve Val, even though with this being her business everything seems to concern her. “Find anything?” I ask, my voice still gruff.

Bruce glances at me, his expression serious, albeit a bit amused. He’s still trying to determine why this woman has caused such a reaction in me.

“Yeah,” he says, “Whoever built this thing knew what they were doing. Advanced tech, mixed with... something else.” He holds up a small shard of metal etched with

strange symbols. “Paranormal materials. We’ve seen something like this before, but this is next-level.”

“Great,” I mutter, clenching my fists at my sides. “So we’re dealing with someone who’s an expert in human and paranormal engineering.”

Bruce nods. “Looks that way.”

“Couldn’t just be a simple case, could it?”

“Not by a long shot.”

A knot forms in my chest. This isn’t over, and for some reason, I have a sinking feeling that Val will make sure she’s in the middle of this.

Because fate is a cruel bitch, and no matter how much I deny it, she’s my mate. And I don’t know how I’m supposed to deal with that.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 3

Val

The morning sun slices through the blinds' slats. Papers—reports, damage assessments, and memos I haven't had the energy to read—are scattered everywhere.

A large portion of the office is still closed down, off limits, and marked as an active crime scene, but I managed to hire a team to clean up the upper few levels so that they are operational.

After a traumatic event like this bombing, I couldn't force people back into the office. So, only a few of the most dedicated employees manage accounts and ensure our client's security is soothed and satiated in the wake of this horrible affair. The local media outlets are having a field day with this.

I don't mind too much. I enjoy the quiet of the mostly empty office. It's only been a couple of days since the bombing, and my head hasn't stopped throbbing since Agent Wright showed up.

God, who does he think he is?

I should be focused on the very real threat we are facing, and yet, somehow, I feel more threatened by the distance between Agent Wright and me. Gunnolf Wright, I just had to research him a little. Or more than a little.

Military man. Good credit score. Several dating profiles on hook up apps. And the

man doesn't have a good relationship with his father or a relationship at all.

God, stop thinking about that dickhead.

The paperwork on my desk whispers my name and I can't help but roll my eyes as I return my focus to my computer screen. I need to go through my system logs, contact some of our bigger clients, and make triple sure everything is locked down tighter than ever.

No way am I going to let some wolf-shifter agent superstar get into my head so badly that I fuck up the business I've worked hard my whole life to build.

What a jerk. He had no right to speak to me the way he did. I haven't seen him since he barged into my office after the explosion, all pissy and brooding. He has some nerve.

He acted like I had snuck out of his bed after a mind-blowing night together without so much as a 'see you later,' like it hadn't been exactly the other way around.

Still, no matter how hard I try to ignore it, I can't forget how his eyes darkened when he looked at me like he was fighting something or the way my pulse spiked whenever he was near. It's ridiculous. I should hate him. But I don't. Well, I do hate him, just not for the right reasons.

Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes and rub my temples. The pull I feel toward him, the way he dominates my every waking thought, is maddening. I've been with men before, but none ever lingered like this.

None of them ever pulled me in so fast and so hard.

And no one has ever distracted me from my work before.

This isn't me. I don't get distracted. I don't let men get under my skin especially not the men who vanish before dawn.

There's no time for this. I remind myself yet again pinching the bridge of my nose. Desperate to bring some of my good sense back.

SableTech is vulnerable, and that has to be my priority. Not some brooding, frustrating wolf-shifter who seems to have made it his mission to irritate me at every turn.

My phone buzzes on the desk pulling me out of my thoughts. I glance at the screen, it's another damage report from our network team. I exhale slowly, squaring my shoulders. There's too much at stake to let Gunnolf, or anyone else, keep me from finding the saboteur.

But as I scroll through the report, my mind keeps drifting back to him, no matter how hard I fight it.

I just started making a dent in the damage report when there's a sharp knock at the door. Before I can respond, Gunnolf steps into my office, his broad frame taking up too much space in the room. Just great.

I straighten in my chair, forcing myself to stay calm as I glance up at him, "Can I help you, Agent Wright?"

He doesn't bother to sit or step fully inside the office. Instead, he crosses his arms and leans against the doorframe, that infuriating smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Just checking in. Wanted to make sure your little operation didn't collapse overnight. Plus, it's a great view."

He doesn't take his eyes off me.

I clench my teeth, ignoring the flare of irritation that burns in my chest and the wanting that pulses between my legs. “Did you just come here to rile me up? SableTech is handling the situation just fine, thank you.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing you riled up again,” he says through a cocky grin. My heart skips a beat and against my will my cheeks flush with heat. Do not betray me, body.

His gaze flickers to the disorganized papers and three half-drunk cups of coffee beside my keyboard. “Looks like a well-oiled machine. Clearly, everything is perfectly under control here.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “And yet, despite all this chaos, my company is still standing. Funny how that works, isn’t it?”

Gunnolf’s smirk falters for a split second, but he recovers quickly, leaning in slightly. “Sure, if you call barely holding it together standing. Must be nice to sit behind your fancy desk and have other people clean up your mess.”

It’s like he’s hell bent on painting me as some out-of-touch CEO who has had everything handed to me. I feel the familiar heat rise in my chest, but I let it fuel me this time.

I meet his gaze, unflinching, and lick my lips delighting in the way he can’t stop his eyes from flickering toward them as I do.

“You think you’ve got me figured out, don’t you? I’m just some businesswoman who doesn’t know what she’s doing. But let me remind you, Agent Wright, I built this company from nothing. I didn’t inherit it, and I didn’t get here by letting anyone—least of all someone like you—tell me what I can’t do.”

His smirk vanishes, replaced by something darker in his eyes. For a second, I think

I've struck a nerve. Good. I've had enough of his condescending bullshit.

But Gunnolf isn't done. He steps closer, his voice lowering to a rough growl. "You don't know the first thing about what's really going on here, Val. This isn't just another problem for you to solve with money and fancy software. People are dying. So, forgive me if I don't give a damn about your little empire."

I should be offended. I should be furious. But instead, my pulse quickens, and my skin tingles with the same electric charge I had felt the night I met him. I fight the urge to reach out and stroke his muscled chest.

God, why does he have to do this to me?

The room falls silent for a moment. Gunnolf's jaw tightens, and I swear I can see the muscles in his neck flex as he fights to hold back whatever additional retort is brewing inside him. But before he can say anything, my phone buzzes again. I glance at the screen, and all the irritation I felt a moment ago evaporates, replaced by cold dread.

An alert from my head of security.

SableTech's systems have detected a major breach.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, my fingers flying over the keyboard as I pull up the logs. The screen fills with lines of code, but it doesn't take long for me to see it. A backdoor has been installed. Someone's been siphoning data from our servers.

"What is it?" Gunnolf asks, the sudden shift in my demeanor clearly cause for concern.

I don't answer immediately, my eyes scanning the data. I pull up the list of

compromised files, and my stomach drops. “Shit,” I breathe.

“What?” he presses, stepping closer. “What did you find?”

I turn the screen toward him, my fingers tapping the keyboard to highlight the sensitive files that were accessed. “Someone hacked into our system and stole a list of clients, very specific clients too. Paranormal hunters.”

His eyes narrow, and he’s so close I can feel the heat of his body against my flesh. I squeeze my knees together; almost certain he can sense my arousal. I do my best to pretend he can’t.

“Hunters?” He repeats, his voice low, “Why the hell would someone want a list of hunters?”

“What about the bombing at the other location in town? Were there any hunters involved in the casualties?”

Gunnolf’s gaze hardens, bingo. “We need to get this to the team. If someone’s going after hunters, this is bigger than we thought.”

I nod, my mind already racing ahead. “I’ll send the data, but only if I am involved in this investigation. We’ve already had one breach, we can’t risk anymore.”

Gunnolf doesn’t say anything, but I can feel the weight of his gaze on me. I take a steady breath and muster up the courage to look at him.

When I do, he’s merely an inch from my face. His eyes pierce mine for a moment and then drop to my lips. Is he going to kiss me? God, please kiss me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 4

Gunnolf

“ I am so ready to go home and get some sleep,” Callie yawns, stretching her arms over her head.

“Me too. We seem to have gone nowhere since Val’s last revelation. Maybe a full night of sleep will do us all some good,” Kato says, pulling a set of keys out of his pocket.

Val. I’d been so close to her in those moments, but I haven’t been that close to her since. Even though a primal part of me wants nothing more than to take her again and to hold her softly, which somehow feels far more dangerous.

“Alright, I’m going to head to my hotel room,” I say before I get any crazy ideas like driving off to Val’s. I rub my neck, trying to shake off the restless energy gnawing at my insides.

“Goodnight,” Bruce says, turning toward Hati, “Are you up for a nightcap?”

And then, out of nowhere, the world explodes.

A blinding flash of light erupts down the block, cutting through the dark like lightning. A loud earth-shaking boom roars through the air, immediately following the light. The shockwave slams into me, harsh and violent, knocking me back a step. Heat rolls over us as though the ground had split open to hell.

In the distance, what used to be a restaurant where I'd had lunch only the day before, is now being consumed by fire and smoke. The windows burst outward. Shards of glass flung in every direction, along with tables, chairs, and debris from the building, flung out into the street. Car alarms sound wildly from the cars that were hit.

This is nothing like the blast at SableTech. This building has practically been flattened while SableTech was left standing. However, this is much more like the bomb that brought us here in the first place. My mind whirs, what does this mean?

My ears ring from the sheer force of the explosion. The chaos is so loud it drowns out everything else. I can barely make out Bruce's voice as he shouts something. I can't bring myself to look away from the scene ahead of us. What are the odds that we are here for a front-row view?

"Holy shit," I mutter, taking in the full scope of the destruction. I don't even realize that I'm moving forward until I'm standing in front of what used to be a restaurant. There is little more than a smoking crater left.

Callie grabs my arm, her face pale as she stares at the devastation. I pull away, already moving closer toward the scene, even as the heat from the blast singes the hair on my arms. Moving on instinct, my wolf senses sharpen, pushing me forward through the haze of smoke and dust. Every nerve in my body is on high alert.

My heart pounds in my chest. There's no way that anyone survived that blast. A lump rises in my throat. As the sirens grow louder, my eyes well with tears, "We need to figure out if this restaurant had a connection to the hunters." I say to Kato as he steps beside me.

"My thoughts exactly," he says, nodding.

We spend the next few hours combing through the wreckage. At first, everything was

too hot to comb through, even after the fire department had put out the hellish flames. The smell is horrible. Something that they never can show you in the movies.

My mind is a mess of half-formed thoughts. The same type of bomb as the others, with calculated destruction, and this was absolutely a statement. As though the bomber is letting us know that they won't stop just because we are in town investigating.

"It turns out this place was not only owned by paranormal hunters but was also a hotspot for them," Hati says, stepping up beside me out of nowhere.

"Hm," I click my tongue. "I figured it would be something like that. I wonder if this establishment was involved in the leak from SableTech?"

"That would be a good question for you to check in with Val about." Hati gives me a look that speaks volumes. He knows more than he'll say now, but it's still not a good idea to argue with him. That might be the straw that breaks the camel's back and causes him to call me out.

Kato steps beside us grim-faced with a sweat-slicked forehead. "We need to figure this out fast. These bombs are escalating."

"Agreed," I mutter, not bothering to hide the edge in my voice. I need to stay present, but once again, my thoughts have drifted back to Val, and Hati just gave me the perfect excuse to see her again.

Kato shoots me a sideways glance, picking up on the shift in my tone. "You think Val's breach is connected to this?"

"I think we will find time and time again that she's wrapped up in this whether we want her to be or not," I say, my chest tightening.

“There’s been no trace of the bomber. No security cameras in the vicinity picked anything up, and there are no witnesses. Whoever is doing this knows exactly where to strike and how to disappear.”

I grunt in agreement. I don’t like what that implies for Val’s safety or anyone who gets in the way of whatever sick agenda this bomber has. My blood simmers just beneath the surface of my skin. My wolf snarls at the idea of anything happening to Val. As much as I want to protect her from this, there’s no pulling her back now. We need her.

“Let’s wrap this up,” Kato says, “Forensics will continue sorting through the debris and we can go over the evidence tomorrow. For now, we need to get back to our hotel rooms and get some rest.”

There were no survivors. Not today. Only charred body parts among the building’s remains. I decide to walk instead of catching a ride with anyone from the team. The cool air helping to clear my mind.

My feet and instincts carry me to Val’s building before I even realize where I am going. By the time I’m standing outside of her door my hand is frozen in mid-air, about to knock, my heart pounding in my chest.

Just walk away. You can talk to her in the morning at a reasonable hour. No one expects you to talk to her now. I take a deep breath gathering myself. I’ll drop by SableTech tomorrow.

Before I drop my hand and turn to walk away the door swings open and there she is. Her hair is loose around her shoulders with little pieces framing her face. She’s wearing a pale pink silk robe that’s slightly off one shoulder. Her nipples poke through the thin fabric as the cool night air welcomes her.

“Gunnolf, what are you doing here?” She eyes me warily but beneath the show she’s putting on I can sense her desire. It’s the same untamed desire I feel for her.

I don’t answer right away. My gaze takes in every inch of her lingering on the curve of her shoulder, the fullness of her breasts, the slit at the bottom of her robe exposing part of her bare thigh. Something primal stirs in my chest. I’ve never seen her so undone before, so beautiful.

“We need to talk,” I say finally, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. She steps back, crossing her arms as I shut the door behind me.

Her brows draw together. “I saw the news. I already checked. We had some security contracts with the owner of the building. The owner who was not present at the time of the bombing. You should get some guys to watch over him. He’s surely still a target.”

I pull out my phone firing off a text to the local agents we’ve been working with. When I look back up at Val her expressions hardened. There’s a war brewing inside her just as sure as there’s a war brewing within me.

Before I know what I’m doing my hands are on her hips, the silk smooth against my fingers. The heat of her hips is causing my cheeks to flush. She gasps but it’s not in protest instead her fingers dig into my arms, her eyes widening in surprise as I press her against the edge of her kitchen island.

“What are you—” Her words are cut off when my lips crash into hers.

Her lips receive mine without hesitation. My wolf surges forward, driven by the fire burning in my chest. The same fire I’ve been trying to ignore since we first met.

Val’s hands are in my hair, pulling me closer until our bodies are pressed firmly

against one another. All I can think about is how much I need this. How much I need her.

I don't let my lips leave hers, not even once. Even as we stumble toward her bedroom, the pathway is already mapped in my senses from our first night together. When we reach the room, she pushes me off her. Fear rumbles through me as I stand there, trembling. Please don't make me leave.

Staring, I hold my breath. She steps back and slowly unties her robe, her eyes on mine, and the corner of her lips slightly upturned. The robe slinks to the ground, and my eyes break away from hers as I take in every bit of her perfectly naked flesh.

My eyes can't seem to decide where to settle as my cock presses hard against my jeans. She steps closer, her nimble fingers working to undo my belt and unbutton my pants, and I pull my shirt over my head, tossing it carelessly to the side.

My cock springs forth, thru my pants and underwear, pulsing. Val's proximity overrides every sense I have. I must have her right now.

It's madness. It's dangerous. And I don't care.

I cup my hand underneath her jaw and tug her upward. She pushes up to her feet, hands gripping my hips. Oh, Goddess. My lips press into hers once more. The soft skin of her exposed breasts and belly press against me the tighter I wrap my arms around her waist.

Sucking on her full bottom lip, I give it a little nibble, and she gasps. It's enough to send me over the edge. Inhaling a sharp breath of my own I spin her around. Pushing her against the wall, the bed can wait, and she arches her back giving me access to her.

The curves of her body are a work of art. I can't help but feel like I am dreaming as I push my way into her, "Goddess, you are soaking wet." I breathe against her ear, feeling her body shudder in response.

The way she feels is divine. Each time I pump into her, she moans, and electricity rolls through my body from head to toe. For a moment, I don't remember where I am or even my own name; I am lost in the perfection and pleasure of experiencing the mystery of Val Hayes.

She cranes her neck to look back at me, her flushed cheek pressing against the wall. The look in her eyes sends me over the edge and I explode inside of her. She grins, a mischievous grin, that says 'I'm not done with you yet.'

My legs are unsteady as she leads me to the bed and pushes me down. My cock hardens instantly as she climbs on top of me, the tip of her tongue licking its way down my jaw and collarbone.

The weight of her body grounding me in this moment. I'd live here forever if I could. I open my mouth to tell Val how beautiful she is but she presses her hand down over my mouth, positioning herself perfectly. She lowers herself onto me and my teeth sink into the palm of her hand.

She throws her head back moaning so loudly I'm sure that the neighbors hear her. I don't care if the whole damn neighborhood hears. I want to hear her moan like that again. I have never been ridden the way that Val rides me.

Her hips moving with the perfect balance of speed and slow undulations that cause my eyes to roll into the back of my head, my hips buck upward to press into her further. Pure ecstasy. As soon as I manage to regain my composure, my fingers find their way to Val's clit working in perfect time with the movement of her hips.

I can feel the pressure mounting within her as her walls clamp down around me. She throws her head back once more exposing her throat toward me and releases heavy sensual pants that excite me. We cum at the same time. Both breathless.

When it's over Val climbs off me. Her tendrils of damp dark brown hair clinging to her cheek. Goddess, she is gorgeous. As I try to stabilize my breathing, she climbs out of bed and picks her robe up off the floor, covering herself once more.

My heart sinks. How I long to hold her. To stay with her just as we were before, naked, pressed together. Once her robe is tied, she disappears into the ensuite returning a moment later with a towel.

“Clean yourself up and then you better be on your way. I have a big day tomorrow and my guess is your team will be needing more of my help.” The warmth that had been in her eyes before now replaced by a cold distance.

I freeze, my heart pounding. Her words hang in the air, sharp and heavy. I don't want to go.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 5

Val

Last night, Gunnolf surprised me, and I hate that I folded so quickly. I hate that his eyes pull me in and that the moment he's in my presence I lose all sense of dignity. I hate that I can't stop thinking about him even when he's not around.

That I can't stop thinking about the way his hands on my skin electrify me, bringing all my senses to life in a way that I didn't know was possible. Even now at my desk, far away from last night, far away from Gunnolf, I can still feel the heat of his hands on my skin.

I had to kick him out last night. I wouldn't have been able to bear it if he'd stayed with me and disappeared again in the morning. It was the least I could offer my wounded pride after giving into him so easily.

God, will the ghost of him ever stop haunting me?

Or am I doomed to accept my new fate?

I scowl at my computer screen, trying to focus. It's no use. My mind is completely consumed, and frustration creeps into the edges of my consciousness. God, why do I let him get under my skin like this? Why can't I just stop thinking about him?

The worst part about it all is that he switches on and off like a damn light. He's not even into me at all. He hates me, but for some reason, he's all over me, intense and

possessive in some moments, and then the next, he's distant and cold. Downright rude even.

It's infuriating.

He's infuriating.

The door to my office swings open, without so much as a knock, and Kato's booming voice snaps me out of my thoughts. "Miss Hayes, the tech specialist just landed. She'll be here in a few minutes."

The moment he finishes speaking Paige comes bouncing up behind him, "You can't just enter her office!" she states. A steaming cup of coffee in her hand lets me know exactly why he thought he could.

"Next time if Paige is not at her desk, knock. I don't bust into your place of work or home. Please extend me the same courtesy."

"Right," Kato nods swallowing hard. He doesn't say anything else but a sheepish flash across his face lets me know enough.

The tech specialists will be here soon... Great. More people. Just what I need.

Paige sets the cup of coffee down on my desk and looks back over her shoulder shooting Kato a nasty look that seems to amuse him more than intimidate him. God, ever since the SPIU arrived here, it seems every day my business feels more and more like a circus.

I stare at my screen again, pull it together, my fingers tap rapidly against the keyboard as I sort back through the documents from our security breach. If we are going to crack this case, I need to stay focused. Which means evicting Gunnolf from

my mind where he's been staying rent free since the first time I laid eyes on him, him and his perfectly muscled back and broad shoulders...

"Val," Kato's use of my first name snaps my attention back to him. His voice is soft, and his eyebrow is raised as he eyes me cautiously. "Are you okay? You seem distracted. I know this is a lot for you to take in. We work these kinds of cases every day, and it's still hard for us."

"I'm fine," I say too quickly. Hopefully, he just thinks I'm more shaken by these bombings than I want to let on. "I'm just trying to sort back through all of this data before your tech expert gets here."

Kato doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't push it either, "Minna's the best; if anyone can help, it'll be her."

I take a deep breath, "I'm sure you're right. I've looked up her track record. She's young, but that doesn't make her any less impressive. It makes her more impressive, actually."

"Glad to hear you've done your research," I hear her bubbly voice before I see her round the corner. Minna bounces into the room with a bright smile.

She's unexpected... I bet the male techs she passed on the way here are still trying to do a double take. She's short with a bright red bob that's effortlessly chic and tousled. Her thick, pink-rimmed glasses are perched on the bridge of her button nose.

Her clothes are colorful and mismatched but somehow, they all work together. She's wearing a polka dot skirt, striped blouse, and platform Doc Martens while carrying a backpack that's definitely seen better days.

"Hey, hey! I'm Minna. You must be Val!" she says, standing at the front of my desk

and extending her hand. Her nails are long and as red as her hair, but each one has a different design or charm.

Her enthusiasm is infectious, and despite my foul mood, I find myself genuinely smiling as I shake her hand. “That’s me. It’s nice to meet you, Minna.”

She plops her bag down on the nearest chair and throws me a wink, “Don’t worry doll I am here to save the day!”

Before I can respond my gut twists, a magnetic force snaps my eyes toward the door right as Gunnolf appears in the doorway. His gaze lands on me, dark and intense. My heart rate rises and skin prickles. I have to fight to keep my breathing steady.

“Kato,” he says without taking his eyes off me. “The fire chief is ready to give you his report from yesterday’s bombing.”

“Got it,” Kato nods in my direction before turning to leave, “Gun, you stay here incase Miss Hayes or Minna need you.”

A flicker in my lower belly at the idea of needing Gunnolf causes me to instinctively squeeze my thighs tightly together.

“Will do,” he says striding into the office and dropping onto the couch near Minna. His eyes trailing lazily down me as he does. My cheeks darken against my will. Damn.

Minna doesn’t miss a beat, her gaze flicking between the two of us before she grins widely. She unzips her bag and pulls out a laptop.

“I see what’s going on here,” she says after a moment. “No wonder you’re all flustered. I was thinking how come bad ass Val Hayes needs help from the likes of

me? But now I see, big bad wolf-boy can't stop looking at you like a horned-up teenager or more like you're Little Red Riding Hood just arrived at Grandmother's house."

I choke on my own breath as I shoot Minna a horrified glance. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I stammer, glaring at her as Gunnolf's expression tightens.

Minna laughs throwing her hands up in mock surrender. "Okay, okay, if you say so. But seriously girl if you need advice on taming wild wolves, I've got the perfect book recommendation for you."

Gunnolf scowls, crossing his arms over his chest. "Minna," he growls, not amused, "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"Prickly today, seems like I'm right then," she practically sings. "Relax, Gun. I'm here, aren't I? I can multitask you know. Banter and brilliance all at the same time. You could probably learn a thing or two from me."

Despite myself, I chuckle. It's impossible not to like Minna. Gunnolf shoots me a dirty look before laying himself on the couch and staring at the ceiling. I wonder if he's having a hard time keeping thoughts of last night out of his mind as much as I am.

"All right, let's get down to business," Minna says, opening her laptop. "What have you got for me?"

There's no need to reexplain the situation to Minna. Instead, I grant her access to SableTech's mainframe and lean back in my chair, watching as she zeroes in, fingers moving faster than I've ever seen my own move. Impressive, especially with those nails. Watching her work is like watching one of the artistic greats creating one of their masterpieces.

A pang of jealousy reverberates in my chest. What I wouldn't have given to be a natural protege.

Gunnolf has risen from his place on the couch. He now stands beside it, arms crossed. I can feel his eyes burning holes into me like they always do. It's distracting. Infuriating. And despite myself, it's turning me on. Ninety percent of my willpower is now focused on not looking at him. There's no way I am going to give him that satisfaction.

"All right, let's see what we've got here. Ooh, Val, this is impressive—security tighter than a chastity belt at a nunnery."

I snort, crossing my arms. "I try."

"Seriously, though," Minna continues, her eyes glued to the screen, "I doubt anything could have slipped through without someone knowing."

"Yeah, well, that's what I thought too," I mutter, gnawing on my cheek. "But we still had a breach."

Minna doesn't respond right away. I lose my battle with my will and glance over at Gunnolf. He hasn't moved. Hasn't even blinked. Why does he have to stand there looking all broody and intense? Why can't he just... stop?

The moment he notices me looking, a smirk lifts the corners of his mouth, and I curse myself. He winks at me. He fucking winked at me. I was wrong. I'd prefer the brooding to this.

"Ah-ha!" Minna exclaims, and my eyes snap back to her. She points to the screen, a sly grin on her face. Quickly, I move behind her to see what she's pointing at. "There's your answer, doll. The software that received the data wasn't some sneaky

outside job. This was installed from the inside. During business hours, no less.”

My heart skips a beat. “Wait, what?”

Minna taps the screen again, showing me the timestamps and installation logs. “See this? Whoever did this has direct access to your system, right under your nose. Installed it like a routine update, with no red flags or alerts. Totally seamless. They must have known your systems well enough to pull something like that off.”

I stare at the screen, my mind whirling. “Someone on the inside... At least that narrows things down.” I don’t like the idea of a mole being at SableTech but I am relieved that our systems aren’t so fundamentally flawed that someone on the outside could gain access to them. This discovery certainly is a double-edged sword.

Minna nods, giving me a sympathetic smile. “Yup. Not exactly the best news, but hey, at least we know where to start.”

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter under my breath, frustration boiling beneath my skin. “Do you think it could be the bomber?”

Gunnolf, finally speaking up, steps closer. “The bomber or someone who is working for them.”

I shoot him a glance, my jaw tight. “Right.”

Minna spins around in her chair, grinning up at Gunnolf. “Don’t get too cozy, big guy. You look like you’re ready to growl at the screen. But, fun fact: growling doesn’t actually solve tech problems.”

Gunnolf’s lips press into a thin line, but there’s a glint of amusement in his eye. “I’m not growling.”

Minna winks at me. “Could’ve fooled me. Anyway, I’ll keep digging to see if I can find out who’s behind this.”

I swallow the knot forming in my throat. This is progress. It’s not the best news but it’s progress. Sure, one of my own people has betrayed me and my life work and whoever did this has helped to set off an entire chain of events that has killed multiple people. But, now we know where to narrow our focus.

“I’ll cross reference employee records with badges used during the time of the installation and I’ll send that your way.” I say moving over to my desk, it’s not that Minna couldn’t do that herself, but I need to be useful right now. “Thanks Minna.”

“No problem babe,” she says with a wink, swiveling her chair back to the screen. “I live for this kind of drama. Now let’s catch this traitorous snake.”

Gunnolf’s eyes flick between Minna and me, something unreadable in his expression. He gives a curt nod and turns to leave without a word. The door closes behind him, and I let out my breath, slumping slightly in my chair. My nerves seem to soothe themselves with a bit of distance between us.

Minna spins back around, raising an eyebrow at me. “Okay, seriously. What’s up with him?”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance, but my face feels like it’s on fire. “Nothing.”

She smirks. “Uh-huh. If nothing is what you call ‘intense eye contact that could melt steel,’ then yeah, definitely nothing. Are you sure you two haven’t slept together?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I mutter, turning back to my computer and hoping the flush in my cheeks isn’t too obvious. Why on earth would she ask me that question?

Minna just laughs, shaking her head. “Okay, Val. You keep telling yourself that.”

As I glance over at Minna, something gnaws at the back of my mind. We are missing something crucial. My phone buzzes on the desk, and I glance down. An anonymous message flashes across my screen: ‘Stop digging, or you’ll be next’.

I freeze, blood running cold. I look up at Minna, she’s still unaware and focused on digging into my employee records. There’s no way I can tell anyone at the SPIU about this message, or they’ll keep me from the case. But who could know what we’d only just found out? And how?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 6

Gunnolf

More of the staff are back at SableTech now. But there's no way of knowing if our mole has returned to the office or is making the trauma of the bombing an excuse to stay out of sight during our investigation. Both options have merit to them.

Return to SableTech and they keep their finger on the pulse of what's going on in the investigation and just how much Val knows about the breach. Stay home and stay completely out of sight.

One thing is for sure, those who did return still don't feel completely safe being here. The scent of coffee that hangs in the air is mixed with the tense sharp scent of fear. A smell I know all too well.

Even if I can't glean who might have been responsible for the breach, I need a break from Val. Hell, I have to get away from her before I do something stupid. Especially with Minna there making wild accusations.

Okay, they aren't wild at all and that's the problem.

Being around Val, pretending to the world that I don't feel what I feel for her, is like walking a tightrope over a bed of nails. One wrong move or one glance too long at her luscious lips and I'll lose whatever thin grip I have left on my self-control. I can't afford to do that. Not now.

I grind my teeth and shove my hands in my pockets. My gaze sweeps across the rows of cubicles. Every employee I pass is a potential suspect whether they know it or not. Whoever it is can't be someone that stands out too much. No one's behavior has deviated from the norm- or if it has they have some kind of personal reason that wouldn't raise any red flags to Val.

But how well does she know her employees? There are so many of them. It would be almost impossible for her to know each of them intimately and still get any work done of her own. I'll have to ask her about this later.

My eyes narrow as I pass a group of employees near the break room. There are three of them and two look completely relaxed, animated even, as they chat about their weekend plans. The woman and her husband are taking their two-year-old on their first camping trip. The blonde man has a hot date with a woman from the coffee shop down the street.

But the third, a guy with short dark hair and a nervous twitch in his hand has nothing to contribute. His eyes flick up meeting mine for a split second before darting away. His fingers tremble too quickly against the coffee cup in his hand sending splashes of coffee to the floor.

Nervous. But why?

I file it away keeping my pace at a slow casual stroll as I continue through the office. Maybe I can convince myself that I've got it more together than I do. Once I reach the end of the hall, I push open the door to the stairwell, letting the noise of the office fade behind me as I climb up the stairs two at a time toward the rooftop.

I need some air. I need some space to clear my head.

Being around Val all the time and not ripping her clothes off is a Sisyphean task.

Every time I see her, she's more irresistible than the last. What was she doing wearing that bright red lipstick today?

Or that white blouse unbuttoned just enough to give me a peak at her cleavage when she leans forward or when I'm standing over her.

Dammit.

I lean against the railing and stare out over the city. The fresh air doing nothing to clear my cluttered mind of thoughts of Val. The way her body fits against mine or the rasp in her voice when she's stressed out or angry.

Every time she looks at me, I think my heart is going to explode. Not to mention how much my wolf is preening desperate for me to recognize her officially as my mate. I can't do that.

I grit my teeth and close my eyes. Doing my best to shut the images of her out of my mind. The way her hips rocked in perfect slow sensual circles as she was on top of me, the snort she let out when Minna caught her by surprise, or the way her eyes narrow and fingers move with confidence as she's focused on her computer.

Everything about her seems to pull me in like a Siren's song.

How long can I keep denying her before I do something reckless? Before my wolf turns on me or goes dormant. The thought of giving in terrifies me. I've never had a relationship longer than a fling and certainly never anything serious.

I've been careful. Tediously building walls around my heart. Letting her in... letting her claim that part of me, means tearing all those walls down. I don't think I can do that. Not yet.

I push myself away from the railing. A knot of frustration tightening in my chest. Focus on the job. That's what matters most right now.

Heading downstairs, I brace myself as I reach Val's office door. I don't knock. Don't even think about giving her a chance to deny me. I burst through the door without a word, letting it slam behind me, and stroll over to the couch, plopping myself down and ignoring Val's irritated stare.

Minna looks over and giggles, I roll my eyes and look away. She's supposed to be a computer genius, what business does she have being so aware of interpersonal relations too?

"How well do you know your individual employees?" I ask, daring to look Val's way.

"Well enough."

"I mean behaviorally not anything you'd find through background checks or cyber monitoring?" Her face flushes at the question.

"Not as well as I should apparently," she says, and I can practically taste the bitterness on her tongue.

"I'm wondering if you'd be able to tell if anyone was acting differently than they had been before the bombing or from around the time of the breach until now?"

"I have eyes on security cameras throughout the whole building every day." Val says pushing a button on the underside of her desk. A mechanical whir follows and several paintings across from her desk push forward and then slide downward on a track that blended in perfectly as part of the paneling, revealing a series of security screens covering the entire office.

“Cool,” Minna says, “Very James Bond.”

“Or very Bond villain,” I correct eliciting an unexpected laugh out of Val.

“I actually have every single video logged. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before, but we could have the tapes from the time of the breach analyzed to see if anything or anyone stands out.”

“Send them to Minna and we will get them to agents to analyze,” I order. I should be happy with this new development, but something is still bothering me. I stare at the screens and then something clicks.

Eyes everywhere. The bomber seems to have eyes everywhere too. There’s no way that they are working alone and able to pull off these coordinated attacks without messing up in some way or form that leaves a trail back to them.

It doesn’t take long for my gaze to fall back on Val. The way she’s sitting, the curve of her body framed perfectly in that fitted blouse... it’s torture. I grunt, crossing my arms over my chest to keep from reaching out and grabbing her.

“You’re staring again,” Minna sings but I ignore her this time.

“We better bring this back to the team at the local office. Send those videos over as soon as you can, alright?” I say not taking my eyes off Val.

“I’m not incompetent, I understood the first time,” She scoffs.

“Meow!” Minna grins, “Kitty cat has got claws.”

“Pack it up,” I say already halfway through the door.

Minna twirls around in her chair while the rest of the team settles into the room. I can't help but smile at her carefree nature. We could all stand to learn a thing or two from her from time to time.

"What have you got for us?" Kato asks after Hati slips into the room and settles down at the conference table.

Minna stops spinning, "It's official," she says, smirking. "The mole is inside SableTech, and they didn't even bother to hide it well. Installed the software during business hours, plain as day. Bold, I'll give them that."

Kato's jaw tightens. "An inside job?" Minna and I nod in unison.

"How come Val didn't find it then if they didn't hide it well?" Bruce asks in earnest.

"Okay," Minna rolls her eyes, "They hid their tracks well but once I found their little digital hidey-hole everything was out on the table."

"Not bold but wise," Hati says dreamily as though he's half lost in thought. "If whoever did this hadn't caused the breach during office hours there would be far less suspects to sort through."

Bruce frowns, crossing his arms. "So what now? Do we start interrogating SableTech employees?"

"Not yet," I say, the weight of this new information settling over me. "We'll keep digging. We need to know exactly who we're dealing with before we make any moves."

"Val has just sent over encrypted security files. So, assign a team and I will get the video files from the time of the breach set up for review," Minna looks at Kato for

approval. He nods in agreement with everything that's just been said.

"Minna and I can supervise," Callie says, "The team that's looking through the tapes. You know Minna can look at things from a tech perspective and I can look at things from a behavioral standpoint. Between the two of us we are bound to find something if there is anything to find at all."

"That's good," Kato looks over the rest of the team. "Are there any places where the SableTech crowd likes to hang out after work?"

"I didn't think to ask but I did have some unfinished business at SableTech if you want me to inquire." I volunteer.

"Go now and report back with any places you know of. I think it's time for Hati, Bruce, and me to have a little night out on the town and see if we can overhear anything that might help us. The forensics team is still analyzing evidence from the most recent bombing, and we shouldn't hear anything from them until tomorrow."

"I'm on it. I'll give you a call right away." I nod already standing and catch Callie and Hati exchanging glances. They can think what they want to think. I don't care. Arguing will only confirm their suspicions. I won't give them that satisfaction.

Back at SableTech my heart rate has spiked so intensely it feels like I might go into cardiac arrest. I head back to Val's office and for once find Paige actually at her desk.

"Agent Wright," she says raising an eyebrow at my presence.

"Hello beautiful," I say wryly. "You probably get hit on quite a bit by these tech guys here. Don't you?"

Paige twirls her hair red faced, "Here and there."

“Where do people from the office like to hang out after work?”

Her face lights up, “the Four Seasons bar and lobby. Where everyone can impress folks coming through town with their money and the mysterious nature of what they do.”

“Thank you,” I say nodding to her and then striding off into Val’s office with my phone in hand as I fire a message off to Kato. I hear Paige protest as the door shuts behind me.

Val’s sitting behind her desk, looking up from her computer. The moment she sees me, her expression shifts. Her guard goes up, but there’s a flicker of something else. Annoyance? Curiosity? Either way, it’s enough to make my pulse quicken.

“Well, well,” Val says, her tone sharp but edged with amusement. “What brings you back here? Can’t stay away?”

I lean against the doorframe, crossing my arms. “You wish. We need to talk.”

“Oh, I’m sure we do,” she replies, arching an eyebrow. “But somehow, I doubt you’re here to talk.”

I narrow my eyes. “You always have to make it hard, don’t you?”

Val shrugs, her lips curve into a smirk. “I think that’s a you problem.” She raises an eyebrow and glances pointedly down at my crotch.

Something in me snaps. I cross the room in two strides, closing the distance between us. “I don’t have time for your games, Val.”

She stands, meeting my gaze with defiance. “Then why are you here, Gunnolf?”

Because you're the one who keeps showing up on my doorstep."

Her words hit harder than they should. She's right. But I'm too wound up to back down, and before I can think better of it, I grab her by the arm and yank her away from her desk and into my arms.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snaps, her voice low but heated. She doesn't want Paige to hear us, so she might want this as much as I do.

My hands brace either side of her. "You wanted to play with fire, Val. Now you've got it."

Her breath hitches, but she doesn't push me away. Instead, she tilts her chin up, her eyes burning with challenge. I close the distance between us, my lips pressing against hers. Her hands grip my shirt, pulling me closer.

The kiss deepens, and I lose myself in her, her taste. I pull at her blouse and rip it open, buttons clattering to the floor. She might kill me for that later, but she doesn't seem to care right now. Every inch of her drives me wild.

Somehow, we manage not to alert Paige or anyone else to what's going on behind Val's closed office door. The need to not be discovered only heightens the pleasure of hushed moans.

Tangled on the carpet at the foot of the sofa, Val breaks away from me and smirks, "Well, that was... thorough," she breathes heavily, still trying to catch her breath.

I let out a breathless laugh. "Shut up."

"You owe me a new blouse," she says, standing and walking over toward a closet in her office, pulling out a fresh blouse and pulling her skirt back down from where it

had been scrunched up around her waist. “You said you wanted to talk to me?”

I had absolutely nothing to say.

The conference room is quiet, except for the occasional scrape of chairs or low murmur of Kato and Bruce while reviewing the forensics reports. It’s been hours, and we’re still spinning our wheels trying to figure out what connects these hunters and the bombings.

Hati’s sitting off to the side, leaning back in his chair, his feet kicking up on the table’s edge. He’s been flipping through hunter files, skimming over old case records like it’s no big deal. His laid-back attitude is grating sometimes.

I know better than to underestimate him. Hati’s got an eye for details most people miss, even when it looks like he’s not paying attention. Without warning, Hati suddenly sits up, his feet hitting the ground with a thud. His eyes narrow on the screen before him, and he blows a low whistle.

“Well, shit,” Hati mutters, tilting his head slightly. “I think I’ve got something.”

Everyone looks up, interest immediately piqued. A sense of relief washing over us. “What is it?” I ask.

He smirks, spinning the tablet around and sliding it across the table toward me. “Take a look at these names.”

I glance at the tablet, seeing the list of hunters we’ve been looking into. They’re all victims of the bombings. But something else jumps out at me, a common thread I hadn’t noticed before.

“These are the hunters who were targeted,” I mutter, scanning the list again. “What’s

the connection?”

Hati leans back in his chair, tapping his fingers against the table with a knowing grin. “All of them were part of the same raid a few years ago. The one that went south.” He says looking up, a darkness now in his eyes.

Recognition dawns, “The one where they killed those kids and that woman? That was a mess. They took out a bunch of paranormal, but the collateral damage...”

“Families of quite a few of the paranormal they’d employed to help them. To say it was a shitshow is an understatement.”

“How come I don’t know about this?” Callie asks, “How old were these kids?”

“Young, the oldest child killed in the raid was twelve and the youngest was two. Marcus Crowe’s kid and well, it turned out his wife was pregnant too.” Kato’s voice is thick.

“What the fuck! They weren’t held accountable for killing innocents?”

Bruce’s face darkens as he leans in to study the tablet. “You’re telling me all the hunters who’ve been bombed were involved in that raid?”

“Every last one of them. The only place that deviates is SableTech and the breach is reason enough to bomb it. I’m sure that the bomb was expected to take out the servers and destroy all evidence.” Hati looks between us. “The other thing is that the only one who was affected that is still alive or not already locked up to seek revenge would be Marcus Crowe himself.”

My mind is already racing, “The man’s a warlock. He was instrumental in helping the hunters take down quite a few cells of paranormal terrorists before the attack. After

the attack he disappeared into oblivion.”

“What magic does he have?” Callie asks.

“Confidential,” Hati shrugs. “The hunters did a great job scrubbing any trace of that information. My guess is that they didn’t want their enemies to know what was coming.”

“You think he’s the one behind this?” Bruce asks, his brows furrowing.

Hati shrugs. “If it were me, and I lost my family to a bunch of trigger-happy hunters, I’d be pissed enough to blow things up too. He’s got the motive.”

I stare at the names on the screen, feeling a knot tighten in my gut. “If Crowe is our guy, he’s not working alone. The bombings were too precise. Someone else is helping him.”

Kato nods, his expression grim. “We need to dig deeper into Crowe’s connections. Figure out who’s working with him and why. This is bigger than just revenge.”

“If we can even find anything on him.” Callie grumbles to herself.

“We will,” I say and push away from the table. There are two people I’d bet my life will be able to help us, Minna and Val. Which means once again I need to show up at Val’s doorstep asking her for help. At least this time I’ll actually have something to say.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 7

Val

Minna's fingers are almost a blur as she taps away at her keyboard, her focus as sharp as ever. I envy that focus. We've been at this for hours. Marcus Crowe might as well be a fucking ghost for all we've gotten so far.

"I've just received the age progression photos from my colleague in Indianapolis. I'm plugging it into facial recognition software and cross-referencing local security cameras and systems I've hacked into. Hopefully, we'll get something soon," Minna says, glancing up at me.

I don't bother pointing out that there's no way her hacking into local security systems and traffic cameras is legal. It's not like I haven't bent the rules before myself. With how good this guy is at staying hidden without a trace, even as the bodies pile up, this is no time to play by the book.

Even still, part of me can't stop thinking about Crowe's past. I wish I'd never known his story in the first place. That would make tracking him down a hell of a lot easier. But... his two kids and his pregnant wife were murdered by the same people he'd trusted? The people he'd helped... Can I blame him for wanting revenge?

I can't. I'd want revenge if it were me in his position. But revenge doesn't justify the deaths he's caused. Innocent people whose families are now mourning their loss just as he mourns the loss of his own family.

“Good,” I finally murmur in response to Minna, though I’m not entirely focused on her. My eyes flick to the corner of the screen, where a security camera shows Gunnolf leaving the building. What was he doing here? Why didn’t he stop by my office?

It shouldn’t matter. But it does.

He is always at the edge of my thoughts. No. Scratch that. Front and center, every damn day. It’s ridiculous. I feel like my senses have been taken from me. Replaced by desire, wanting, and desperation. I hate it.

Yet all I can think about is how his hands feel on me. The way he kisses me. And the way he always walks away.

I grit my teeth and force myself to focus back on my computer screen. I’ve had no luck searching traditional avenues to find Marcus Crowe. No credit cards, bills, lease agreements, hell, not even a parking ticket.

So, I’ve redirected my efforts. These bombs are sophisticated. There’s no way he’s getting all of his supplies from the local hardware stores. He’s likely sourcing materials from somewhere under the radar. There must be a trail, and if there is one, I’ll find it.

“I’m hitting nothing but dead ends,” Minna mutters. “Crowe’s been a ghost since the botched raid. No aliases, no sightings, nothing.”

“Not for long,” I say, keeping my eyes glued to the screen. “He can’t stay invisible forever. He might be good, but we are better.”

As I dig through another set of vendor records, my patience is wearing thin. It seems that the purchases Crowe, or one of his companions made are small and sporadic

enough to keep him hidden. But I'm not looking for big transactions. I'm looking for patterns.

There. A supplier flagged for rare, volatile materials. It's not a smoking gun, but it's something. I zero in on the details: a small shipment was ordered two months ago. These are the kind of components that could be used in bomb-making but are subtle enough to avoid suspicion.

"Minna, look at this," I say, sending the details to her. "It's a small purchase, but from a flagged vendor. Could it be part of what he's using to build these bombs?"

She leans in, eyes scanning the data. "That could be something. Let's cross-reference it with the reports from the bomb squad."

Pulling up the reports, I scanned the suppliers' records. It's a long shot, but there's a connection. The same type of material ordered was found in each of the bombs. Even the bombs that happened previously out of state over the past few years were too random to be connected to the recent bombing until Hati made the connection with the botched raid.

"We've got a match," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. It's not definitive proof, but it's a solid lead. The first real one we've had in days.

Minna smiles, a small victory in the midst of all this chaos. "Finally."

As I sit back for a moment and revel in my progress, I can't help but remember the text I'd gotten telling me to stop digging. Have I just signed my death certificate?

I push those thoughts aside and refocus. "I've got the address from the delivery. We can tell the team and have them check it out. It appears to be some sort of industrial warehouse. Let's keep digging. If Crowe's making these purchases, there's more out

there. We just have to find the next piece.”

Minna is still scanning the flagged purchases when a sudden ping from her computer draws our attention. “Wait a minute! I’ve got something,” she says, eyes wide.

I swivel toward her, my heart racing. “What is it?”

She taps a few more keys, pulling up a grainy security feed from a gas station about an hour and a half from the city. The timestamp is recent. And there, standing by one of the pumps, is Marcus Crowe. He looks almost exactly like the age progression photos except it’s clear that he’s been dying his hair black.

“It’s him,” Minna whispers, almost in disbelief. “It’s Crowe. He’s still alive.”

My chest tightens. I lean in, staring at the screen. There’s no doubt that it’s him. Same sharp features. After all these dead ends, we finally have visual confirmation that he’s not dead or living in another country.

“He’s got to be behind these bombings, then,” I say, soaking in every last detail of the photograph. He’s calm, not even the least bit of guilt on his face. Of course, there isn’t. In his mind every death he causes is justified because of what happened to his family, which makes him extremely dangerous.

Before Minna or I could even think of calling someone from the SPIU, the door to my office swings open, and Kato strides in with Gunnolf right behind him. There’s something about the way he fills the space that makes it hard to focus, but I push that feeling down. Now isn’t the time.

“Remind me to talk to Paige about her job duties,” I say, but before anyone can interject, I add, “We’ve got something. Minna found him on a security feed at a gas station, a couple of hours from here.”

Kato leans in, scanning the footage as Minna replays it. “That’s definitely Crowe.”

“And there’s more,” I say, pulling up the flagged purchase from earlier. “We cross-referenced some of Crowe’s recent material purchases with the bomb squad’s reports. The components match the explosives used in the recent attacks. We’ve also tracked the delivery address to an industrial warehouse.”

Gunnolf’s eyes lock onto mine, and there’s that quiet intensity again, the same one that makes it hard to breathe. “Good work. Two solid leads,” he says, his voice steady. “We need to move on this.”

Kato nods, already pulling out his phone. “We’ll check the warehouse ourselves. Val, I want you and Minna to keep digging and see if there’s anything else we can use. We’ll send the rest of the team to the gas station to ask questions and secure the area.”

We’re closing in on Marcus Crowe for the first time in days. But I can’t shake the uneasy feeling sitting in my gut, the one that whispers we’re walking into something bigger than we’re prepared for.

Gunnolf’s eyes meet mine one last time before he turns toward the door with Kato. “Stay sharp. We’ll handle this.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 8

Gunnolf

The warehouse looms ahead of us. Tucked away in a quiet part of Memphis. I wouldn't have known it existed had I not received this address. The building itself is exactly like every other warehouse I've seen. A hulking mass of brick, steel-framed windows, and oversized doors.

There is no security fence around the building or anything else that would flash the warning 'stay away.' According to the company that owns the building, it's been standing empty for the past five years.

Even still, my wolf senses are on high alert. Scanning the shadows for any sign of movement.

"This place has been cold for a while. I don't sense anything here," Kato mutters, his eyes scanning the perimeter as we approach the entrance.

I grunt in agreement, "We might as well still check the inside." I push open the rusted door, and it creaks loudly, echoing through the cavernous space inside. The air is stale, with dust hanging in the beams of moonlight coming in through the windows.

Moving deeper into the warehouse, it's obvious that there is nothing here. There are a few empty containers, scuff marks on the floor, and the occasional squeaking of rats.

"So this is a sort of double-blind, just somewhere to ship packages to that can't track

back to Crowe.”

“He covered his tracks well,” Kato nods. “This place hasn’t seen action in weeks. Maybe longer.”

I lean against one of the crates and scowl. “He might use it again. He’s set off several bombs since the last package arrived. There’s a chance that he’ll need more supplies. This could be useful later.”

“We’ll put a few undercover officers on it and have them keep an eye on this place to see if there are any new deliveries. If Crowe or anyone from his crew makes a move, we will know about it.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

Once we are back at the office, Kato makes arrangements with local officers. I try to keep my focus, but what has been gnawing at the back of my mind has taken over, and once again, Val dominates my thoughts.

What am I going to do? Do I tell her? Do I reject her? The more time I spend around her, the harder it becomes to ignore the fact that I can’t keep going like I have been.

“Damn, we should have seen this coming, but I let myself get my hopes up. Maybe the others are doing better than we did.” Kato says, breaking me from my thoughts.

“Yeah, he’s smart. Maybe too smart to leave an obvious trail, but we are getting closer.” I say half-heartedly, but I’m still distracted.

Kato gives me a sharp look. “You good?”

I bristle at the question, but he knows me too well. “I’m fine.”

“You need to get it together. Don’t think that I don’t know what’s happening here just because I haven’t said anything. You’re thinking about her.”

I glare at him. “It’s the job.”

“Sure,” he says, smirking as he tucks his phone away. “Whatever you say, man. I need your head in this case. Understood?”

I ignore him and head toward the bathroom. I need a moment away from Kato. The problem is that he’s right. I won’t be any good to this case if I can’t focus. But I’m right too, we may not have found anything tonight, but we’re getting closer. It’s only a matter of time before we catch him.

I catch my reflection in the bathroom mirror, but it’s not pretty. Dark circles under my eyes, and my hair is a mess, sticking up in every direction like I’ve been through a windstorm. Get it together, Gunnolf. I think shaking my head. I look like hell, and I’m starting to feel like it, too.

Leaning over the sink, I twist the cold-water spigot on full blast. The icy stream hits my hand, and I splash it onto my face. The shock of it steals the breath from my lungs. For a second, it feels like everything stops, like the cold is chasing away the exhaustion clinging to my skin. Gasping, I grip the sink, staring at the drops of water trailing down my face.

Time to get back to it.

I yank a towel from the dispenser and dry my hands as I push the door open. As I approach the conference room the muffled voices of the team filter through the door. They are back. Callie, Bruce, and Hati are seated around the conference table, slumped in their chairs.

From the look of it, the trip to the gas station didn't give them any more answers than the trip to the warehouse gave us. "Got anything?" I ask.

Bruce lets out a low grunt, his foot impatiently taps against the floor, "not a damn thing."

"The attendant only saw Crowe once. The same day of the security footage. No one in town knows him either and if they do know him, they were lying through their teeth." Hati adds.

"Same story everywhere," Callie nods, arms crossed over her chest. "No leads, no whispers, not even a hint of where he went."

Hati's brows furrow in concentration. "If Crowe was just passing through, he's smart. The gas station was old. He probably figured there weren't any security cameras. And if anyone in town does know him, they're too loyal to give us anything. No cracks, no slips. Either way, we're left with nothing."

My hand tightens on the towel still in my grip as I toss it onto the nearest chair. "So, we've got a blurry photo and a dead end."

"Pretty much," Bruce mutters.

"He's good, but he's not invincible. Let's regroup. There's got to be something we missed." Kato says, "Let's take two hours and come back fresh."

After two hours of restless pacing and scattered thoughts, I head back into the conference room pushing the door open a little harder than necessary. I'm the last one here, my eyes flicker around the room and my heart drops when I see Minna and Val both seated around the table.

Their heads are bent close together whispering quietly to one another with their laptops open before them. Val looks good. No, she looks amazing.

Her hair is down, which I've only ever seen when I surprised her at her house. She's not wearing a suit but a cozy oversized knitted sweater and a pair of vintage Levi's. Her cheeks are pink, and her lips are red once again. Her half-undone look with the red lips and the comfy clothes instantly sends me into hyperdrive. Goddess, this is not going to be good for my focus.

My jaw clenches as she looks up, and her blue eyes meet mine. A half smile lifts her lips for a moment before she returns her attention to Minna. It's the little things that get to me. The way her brows furrow just slightly when she's concentrating. She makes it all look so damn effortless like she's immune to the tension that's slowly unraveling the rest of us. But I know better. Val never lets anyone see when she's struggling.

And that pull...that gnawing bond I've been trying to shove down since the moment I met her is stronger than ever. Distracting. Dangerous.

I tear my gaze away from her, ignoring Kato's sideways glance as I head toward the table. Val's too close to this and too deep into the investigation. If I don't get her out soon, she's going to be swallowed whole, and I don't know if I can protect her from what's coming.

"So," I say, my voice cutting through the low hum of conversation, "what exactly are we getting from all of this? Anything concrete, or are we just running in circles?"

Val doesn't look up. Her fingers now typing steadily on her keyboard. "We are closing in on Crowe. Even the smallest of crumbs can lead us to something that can break the case wide open. It's only a matter of time before we get a solid lead."

We. I hate how invested she is in this case. Crossing my arms, I lean back in my chair, “Closing in on what exactly? We’ve got a cold warehouse, a useless gas station sighting, and a bunch of dead ends. Maybe it’s time to step aside and let the people who actually know what they’re doing handle it.”

Her fingers stop. Slowly, she raises her gaze to meet mine, eyes narrowing. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.” The words come out before I can stop them, sharper than I intended, but I don’t care. “You’ve done enough, Val. It’s time to step back and let the professionals handle it.”

The room goes deathly silent, “Interesting because the only real leads you have come from me and Minna’s efforts. You wouldn’t know where he was getting supplies if it weren’t for me.”

I meet her glare, heat rises up my neck, and my chest tightens. “You’ve done what you can. You’re a CEO, not an investigator. This isn’t your fight.”

Her eyes flash dangerously, but she doesn’t raise her voice. Instead, she steps closer, each word more cutting than the last. “You think you can just shove me out of the way because you’re frustrated? Because you don’t like the way things are going?” Her voice drops, cold and sharp. “What’s the real problem here, Gunnolf? That I’m in over my head? Or that I’m making you feel like you are?”

My teeth clench together, but she keeps going before I can get a word out. “You love control, don’t you? It’s what makes you feel safe. It gives you a false sense of empowerment. If you can just stay in control, then the bad guys aren’t all that scary after all, right? You can’t stand not having all the answers all the time. And this case is really slipping out of your grip. What have you brought to the table, Gunnolf? Aside from that fucked up attitude?”

I take a step forward, my fists balling at my sides. “This isn’t about control, Val.” I do my best to ignore the amazed, almost amused, open, mouthed gapes from the rest of my team.

She laughs, but it’s a cold, biting sound. “Okay, sure. Let’s not forget that I’ve seen how you lose control and how, when you do, you always run.”

Her words hit harder than I want to admit, and I feel the sting deep in my chest. The room is suddenly way too small. Too suffocating, and the truth of her words makes my blood boil. I won’t let her see how much they cut. I grind my teeth, fighting the urge to shout, to do anything but stand here and let her tear me apart in front of the team.

“You done?” I say in such a condescending and dismissive tone that even I want to flinch.

“For now,” she says, her voice icy, before turning back to the computer like she didn’t just rip me to shreds. Great, all of that, and she still didn’t leave.

Minna frowns and mouths, “What the fuck, Gun?”

Kato clears his throat awkwardly. “Right, well, let’s keep working on what we can. I want all eyes on the security footage from SableTech during the breach. Can we cross reference employees from there with security footage near the warehouse and the gas station where Crowe was last spotted?”

“We can absolutely do that,” Minna nods, keying in data points in one of her systems.

Now Kato’s eyes are on me. He jerks his head toward the hallway, signaling me to follow him.

We step outside the main office, the door clicking shut behind us. Kato leans against the wall, arms crossed. “What the hell was that about?”

I run a hand through my hair, leaning back against the opposite wall. “It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit,” Kato says, his tone surprisingly calm. “You’ve been on edge since this whole thing started, and I know it’s not just the case. So, tell me what’s going on, or I’ll send you back to Indianapolis today.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the words don’t come. We aren’t far enough away from the rest of the team, apart from Minna, that they won’t be able to hear every word we say. I know they are all listening, just as sure as I’d be listening if I were in any one of their shoes. “It’s... complicated.”

Kato raises an eyebrow. “Complicated how?”

I stare down the hallway, avoiding his gaze. “It’s Val. It’s just that we are more connected than I let on.”

“You two are sleeping together. That’s obvious to all of us.” Kato says, “But I’ve never seen you like this before, so that can’t be all.”

“It’s... it’s more than I can handle right now.”

Kato’s eyes widen and he nods with recognition, “The bond?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Shit, I guess the truth is all out there now. I can’t keep pretending this isn’t real anymore.

Kato sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Look, I get it. Mating bonds can be... intense. But pushing her away like that? It’s not going to solve anything. You’ve got

to decide what you're going to do, man, and you need to decide fast because we need you on this case."

"That's the problem," I say, my voice low. "I don't know what to do. I can't focus. I can't protect her if I'm..."

"If you're what? In love with her?"

The words hit me like a punch in the gut, and I look away, unable to meet his eyes. "It's not that simple."

Kato pushes off the wall, walking over to stand beside me. "It never is. But you've got to figure it out. If you keep treating her like a liability, you'll lose her. I hate to break it to you, but we need her. She was right when she said she brought us more solid leads than anyone else. The breach, the list of paranormal hunters, the warehouse. Let's be real Gun."

He's right. Of course, he's right. And I'm being a stubborn, emotionally repressed jackass. I let out a long breath. I still don't know what to do or what to say.

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, frowning as I see the message.

"Shit," I mutter. "We've got movement."

Kato's eyes darken. "Crowe?"

"There's been a report of activity at the old warehouse. A delivery truck came by this morning, and someone has just arrived on sight," I say, my pulse quickening.

"Let's go," Kato says, already moving down the hall, and without hesitation, I follow.

Chapter 9

Val

I stare at my screen. God, I am so sick of spending every hour of the day on my computer. Before this whole affair, I thought I was on my computer too much, and now I think I am becoming one with it—a merger I had never consciously agreed with.

But I'm finally getting somewhere, and my spite for Gunnolf's assertions that I am not helpful and drink far too much espresso is fueling me onward. Here , I chuckle to myself. I got something on you, Marcus, you slippery minx.

Organizing the data, I create twelve profiles each on a different paranormal connected with Marcus Crowe through a secret society they were all part of from freshman to senior year in college. These kinds of groups stay in contact through the years, their connections helping each other advance in their careers and social circles.

"I'd bet at least one of you has been in contact with Crowe in the past few years since his disappearance," I sing to myself. I click through the profiles, narrowing my eyes to the addresses listed. Three of the twelve members still live in Memphis. Three possible leads right here in my hometown.

Leaning back in my chair, I blow out a breath. My first instinct is to tell Gunnolf what I've found, but his harsh words from yesterday still echo in my head. I haven't spoken to him since he and Kato ran off to chase a lead. Not that he's tried to contact me, but I wouldn't have responded if he had.

“No, I’m not telling him,” I mutter, tapping my fingers against the desk. “Screw that.”

Instead, I pull out my phone and text Minna. Found something interesting. Can you meet me now at my house?

A few moments later, my phone buzzes. On my way!

I smile, relieved—at least Minna will take me seriously. It doesn’t take more than twenty minutes for there to be a knock on my door, and when I answer, Minna is standing there in pale pink silk pajamas with a hot pink fuzzy collar and cuffs. She’s wearing bunny slippers. God, I love her.

“You’ve got something good, I can tell.” She grins, stepping inside. “Cute house, way cozier than I imagined looking at your office.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“I try my best to separate work and home, although this case has seemed to blur those lines pretty intensely.”

“Spill your secrets, woman,” Minna says, plopping down on the couch.

I link my computer with my television and pull up the profiles glancing over to the curtains to make triple sure that I’ve already closed them. I did. Minna looks over the files as I fill her in.

“Whoa, do you think any of them might still be in contact with him?”

“I’m not sure,” I admit, “but it’s too big a coincidence to ignore. Crowe didn’t just become a bomb-making mastermind overnight. I think he had help, maybe from some of his old buddies. Looking into them is worth a shot.”

“Worth a shot? I’ll say honey. You’ve hit the gold mine. Gunnolf is going to be so embarrassed when I tell the team about this. You two still aren’t talking right? That’s why you called on me and not him?”

“I... don’t feel like dealing with Gunnolf right now.”

Minna lets out a low whistle. “Yeah, he can be a real dick sometimes, can’t he?”

I huff a laugh, though it’s tinged with frustration. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it, and I’ll make sure everyone knows just how much of a genius you are for having uncovered a secret society and for everything else that you’ve done,” she winks.

I nod, “Thanks, Minna. I owe you one.”

“Please, you’re helping me crack this case. We’re a team, Val. We could seriously use your help on more cases at the SPIU. Even if some people don’t know how to show it.” Minna winks and grabs the USB with the files from me as she heads for the door. “I’ll keep you posted on what they say.”

As I bolt the deadlock behind Minna, I let out a deep exhale and set my home security system. My gut tells me I’m onto something important. This secret society could be the key to unraveling Marcus’s plan and maybe even stopping his next move.

For now, I’ll let Minna carry the torch. Gunnolf can stew in his arrogance a little longer.

I grab the remote and flip on the television as I sink deeper into my chair, legs kicked up on the ottoman. That’s enough for the night, it’s time to relax.

My phone buzzes from the table beside me. Expecting an update from Minna, I unlock the screen, and the blood drains from my face as soon as I read the words: I told you to stay out of this. It's too late now.

My stomach drops. I scan the room, a sensation of being watched creeping over me. Swallowing hard, I push through the panic. If I got another message after discovering what I just did, does that mean I'm finally onto something?

If they're trying to scare me away, it means I've rattled someone. Maybe those members of society are connected to Marcus, after all. The idea gives me a strange sense of empowerment. I'm not backing down. Not now, not when I'm finally making progress.

Still, the sharp edge of the text lingers in my mind, and my hand trembles as I lock my phone and set it aside. I lean back in my chair, exhaling slowly to steady my nerves. Trying to forget the texts and the threats, I let my mind wander back toward the one topic I can get utterly lost in, Gunnolf.

As much as I pretend I don't want to talk to him, the silence between us is gnawing at me. The way he snapped at me ripped open old wounds I hadn't realized I still had. I've been through this before, haven't I?

The sharp words, the cold distance, the sudden withdrawal. Memories of past relationships flicker through my mind, uninvited but relentless. The men who promised one thing and then turned around to cheat on me, neglect me, or worse—leave me altogether.

I've been left behind more times than I care to count. Always told I was too much or not enough. Too driven, too intense, too busy. Too something .

My chest tightens. I don't know if I can go through this again. Gunnolf and the way

he looks at me with those piercing green eyes scares me more than any anonymous text message ever could. Am I making a mistake even letting myself think about him that way?

He is going to leave eventually. He's only in town on a case. Am I simply repeating old patterns? Fuck, why does this all have to be so complicated?

The next few days pass and it almost feels like business-as-usual back at SableTech, save for the occasional line of communication from Minna. All of my staff are back in the office, and the business is back in full swing. The most concerned of our clients seemingly soothed now.

The team, working off my discovery, splits up to keep an eye on the three Memphis-based members of Marcus Crowe's old secret society.

The truth is I need to forget about Marcus Crowe for the time being and focus on finding the mole in my corporation. What could possibly motivate someone to work against SableTech? Could it be a personal connection to the 'enemy'? Or perhaps monetary motivation...?

I think it's time to dig into my employees' personal lives, this is going to take a while.

Minna and I sit in a small café near my office, and it's been a few days since we last saw each other. I hadn't realized how much I missed her until now. She always seems to make everything feel a little less heavy.

"I hate this part," Minna mutters, glancing out the window like she half expects something to explode right in front of us. "The waiting. Knowing something's coming but not knowing when or where. Ugh, it's the worst."

I nod, picking at my food, which I haven't touched in a while. "You think that Crowe is toying with us?"

She shrugs. "Hard to say. Everyone's on edge. We're watching those three guys like hawks, but so far... nothing. The team's ready to move in if one of them so much as sneezes wrong." After a beat she leans in with a mischievous smile, "Oh, and by the way, Gun? He's been extra wound up lately. Like, the guy looks miserable."

I try not to react. Try not to give away just how much of an affect he has on me but my stomach twists at the mention of his name. "Miserable, huh? Poor thing." I roll my eyes, trying to keep it light.

Minna grins, "Yup. Absolutely miserable. But you know, he's been keeping busy with the case, so at least he's not completely falling apart."

"Well, that's something," I mutter, glancing out the window. If he's so miserable how come he hasn't come by? Or at the very least texted me? "Honestly, I can't blame him. At this point we're all basically waiting for something terrible to happen."

"Exactly! Like, hello, can we just get this over with already?" Minna throws her hands up in mock frustration, then smirks. "You know, Val, we could really use someone like you around for stuff like this... like, permanently."

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh? Trying to recruit me now?"

She grins. "Maybe. I mean, you've been pretty great to work with, and SPIU could always use a little more of your genius. Plus, I'm not the only one who thinks so. Just something to think about. You'd even be great as a consultant."

I laugh, shaking my head. "I don't know about that, but I appreciate the vote of confidence."

Minna shrugs playfully. “Hey, I’m just saying. If you ever want to come over to the dark side, you’ve got options.”

“Pretty sure that you’re actually on the light side, and I’m already on the dark side.” We share a laugh, but my mind drifts. The feeling has been getting worse these past few days. I’m plagued with a nagging sensation that I’m being watched. Every time I leave my office, every time I walk to my car, I feel it.

At first, I chalked it up to paranoia, but now... it’s different. The weight of unseen eyes, the flicker of movement just out of sight. Someone’s following me. I know it. Any minute might be my last and keeping these threats a secret is becoming increasingly difficult.

I’ve kept it to myself. I haven’t even told Minna. I keep saying it’s because I don’t want to make a big deal out of it, but the truth? Admitting it would make it real. And I’m not ready for that.

Minna’s phone buzzes on the table. She glances at the screen, and her eyes widen slightly.

“Looks like we’ve got a break,” she says, slipping her phone back into her bag and standing. “Gunnolf just texted. They need me back at the office to track movements and triangulate coordinates. Blah, blah, blah. I’ve got to jet. You don’t mind paying for lunch, do you, Miss CEO?”

My heart skips a beat, and I chuckle, “Of course, I’ll pay for lunch. I’m the one who invited you out.

Minna shrugs, flashing a grin as she slings her bag over her shoulder. “Be careful, okay?”

I smile tightly. “Always.”

She winks, and with a quick wave, she’s out the door, leaving me alone at the table. As the café continues to buzz around me, I sit back and let my thoughts spin. I’ve been holding back, keeping the warnings and my growing fear to myself.

But how long can I keep this quiet? If Marcus Crowe, or someone working for him is really watching me, am I putting everyone around me in danger by staying silent?

I finish my coffee and pay the tab before heading out. Truthfully, I’m never too eager to be outside on my own these days. As I walk down the street my heart pounds. My steps echoing louder than usual.

Despite a million glances over my shoulder, there’s nothing. Nothing that stands out anyway, just the usual flow of people going about their day. But in my gut, I know someone’s there, lurking just out of sight.

Forcing myself to walk calmly, I turn the corner toward my car, my pulse quickening with every step. I’m being followed. Whoever it is, they want me to know. This is torture. Like Minna said earlier just get it over with already.

Just as I reach my building, a shadow shifts behind me. My breath catches in my throat, and I whirl around?—

Nothing. No one.

My heart races as I scan the empty street. But the feeling doesn’t leave.

Next time , I think. Next time, I won’t be alone.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 10

Gunnolf

This is bullshit.

I am so sick of the runaround.

The warehouse lead has gone to hell. As usual, we were too late. By the time we arrived, the figure we'd been tracking had vanished. The officers we'd stationed nearby lost sight of whoever had come for the package, and it's back to square one.

Tracking the secret society members has led to absolutely nothing yet. There are no signs of Marcus Crowe, bombs, or anything else we can use.

"Enough of this," I growl as we park. "No more watching from the shadows. It's time we start pulling these bastards in."

Hati shoots me a glance, but he doesn't argue. He knows I'm right.

"We'll each grab a guy," I say as I exit the car. "Bruce, you take Clark. Hati, you take Ramirez. I'll handle Thompson. Kato and Callie will monitor the interrogations."

"Who made you boss?" Hati asks.

"Ask Kato then," I shrug. I'm not in the mood to play power games.

Bruce nods. “What’s the play if they don’t talk?”

“They will,” I say, my jaw tight. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Hours later, I’m sitting across from Blake Thompson. His blonde hair is perfectly combed to the side. The cocky grin he’d sported when we first entered the interrogation room has now been wiped from his face completely.

I stare at him. Eyes fixed on his. Sweat drips down his forehead, and he shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He may have stonewalled me up until this point, but I can feel it, he’s close to cracking.

“I wonder how your family will react when they find out you chose to protect Marcus Crowe over securing their own futures. These types of things tend to stain a reputation you know. Your daughter can say goodbye to a political career, and your son will never be a judge after all this comes out. It’s too messy. And they’ll have daddy to thank for that.”

He swallows hard, his hands trembling slightly as his eyes dart around the room. I’m getting through.

“Unless, maybe, they are involved? Should I call your wife and arrange for a family visit?”

A flicker of fear crosses his eyes.

“While I’m at it, I can let her know about the young woman you’ve been spending your Tuesday lunches with. Does she know about her already?”

“Don’t.” He says, but the intended sharpness of his tone falls flat. I’ve got him.

“Yeah, I figured she didn’t know about that. Word is you didn’t have her sign a prenup. Emotional damages can get... expensive.” I sigh and stretch my arms above my head.

“I don’t... I don’t know much,” he finally stammers, wiping the sweat from his brow. “But I do know Marcus Crowe tried to recruit me. He was building some kind of underground network of paranormal shifters. They were going to take out the hunters once and for all.”

I narrow my eyes. “And who else is in this ‘network’?”

Blake hesitates, looking like he wants to bolt from the room, but he knows better. After a moment, he lets out a shaky breath. “I don’t have proof... just rumors. But there’s one guy who used to work for the bomb squad. With everything going on in town... I’m guessing he’s involved.”

I lean back looking Blake over. He’s scared, but he’s telling the truth. “Give me the list of who you know.”

He nods, scribbling down a few names. As I look at the paper, my gut tightens. It’s not much, but it’s something.

“You won’t tell my wife what you know, will you?” He asks as I’m heading out of the door.

“Not unless I find out you’ve lied to me,” and with that, I let the door slam shut behind me.

Minna grabs the list already moving toward her computer. “I’ll track down the guy,” she says.

The door swings open before she can get started, and Val walks in. There's something different about her. A tension in her eyes and a stiffness in her shoulders immediately put me on edge.

"I need to talk to you," she says, her voice strained. "All of you." She crosses her arms, and when her eyes meet mine, something there sends a cold spike through my chest.

"What is it?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady, but my wolf is pacing inside me, ready to break free.

Val takes a deep breath, then looks at the team. "I've been getting texts... threatening ones. They've increased since I learned about the secret society, and now I think I'm being followed."

Every muscle in my body locks up. My vision blurs as fury roars through me. She's got to be fucking kidding me.

The wolf claws at my skin, demanding release. I can feel it trying to break through, to tear apart anything that could be a threat to her. It takes everything I have to keep myself from losing control right here, right now.

"You're just telling us this now?" I snap, "Why the hell didn't you say something sooner?"

"I thought I could handle it," she says, "But now it's getting worse."

The room is dead silent, everyone's eyes bouncing between us. Everyone knows what she is to me now. They didn't say anything after my conversation with Kato, but the ribbing stopped, so I knew they were listening.

I can't think straight. "You should've come to me the minute it started," I growl, stepping closer. "Are you stupid? This isn't something you can handle on your own."

Val's eyes narrow, her anger flaring. "I don't need you to tell me what I can and can't handle."

Before I can respond, Kato clears his throat and steps in, "Minna, see if you can trace where those texts are coming from. Callie, Hati, Bruce—start digging into the names on that list, especially the ex-bomb squad guy. We need to find him."

Everyone moves into action, leaving Val and me alone in the middle of the room. When the door closes behind the last of them, I turn to her, barely keeping my wolf in check.

"We need to talk," I say, my voice low and controlled.

Val crosses her arms, "About what? You already made it clear how you feel."

I run a hand through my hair, pacing. "This isn't about me or how I feel. This is about you putting yourself in danger by keeping this from me."

"I didn't want to be a distraction," her frustration breaks through. "And honestly? I didn't think you cared."

Her words hit harder than I expect but I swallow the blow. "You're wrong about that."

She takes a step toward me, her eyes searching mine. "Why do I feel so... strange around you? Something is going on here, something I don't understand. I've never felt so out of control around someone."

I freeze. My heart pounds loudly in my chest, blood rushing to my ears. This is it—the moment I’ve been dreading. I can’t keep dodging this, not anymore.

“How much do you know about shifters?” I ask quietly.

Val frowns. “Not much. I’ve been researching a little, but I still don’t know the specifics of everything. You lot are a bit... secretive.”

I stare at her. I don’t want to do this. Not now. Not like this. But before I stop myself, the words slip out, “What do you know about fated mates?”

Her eyes widen slightly, and for a second, she doesn’t say anything. Then, slowly, she shakes her head. “Not much. Just that... it’s rare.”

I nod, “It is. But it’s real.”

The silence stretches between us, the tension thick enough to choke on. Val’s breathing quickens and I see the realization slowly dawning on her, “Are you saying...?”

I swallow hard, my throat tight. “Yeah. I think that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Chapter 11

Val

I shouldn't be here this late, certainly not alone, and Gunnolf knows it, too, but I have to do my part in figuring out who in my company betrayed me and put the rest of our employees in danger. That sentiment didn't stop Gunnolf from growling at me and practically ripping out my throat when I told him that I was going back to the office after hours.

But SableTech is mine: every server, every line of code, every damn picture on the wall. I won't let Marcus Crowe take it from me. Not without a fight. I roll my shoulders and sit up a little straighter. Taking a steady breath, I focus on the screen in front of me.

The search window pulses as I scroll through the latest logs, tracking connections and scanning for absolutely anything unusual in the code. If Marcus got through SableTech's defenses once, he could do it again, especially since I have no idea who his inside man is.

The thought sends a shiver of dread along my spine, but I push the sensation away. I need to focus. I need to find anything that might have slipped through the cracks. Especially since I've made a target of myself. Maybe, just maybe, I can get ahead of him.

My eyes see a blur out of the corner of my eye, and something in my gut tells me to glance at my security screens. I freeze, the blood in my veins turning to ice. Shadows

slip across the screen. Quickly, purposefully, and barely visible on the camera covering the south entrance. I lean in closer, and my heart pounds as another figure appears, then another.

Oh My God.

My heart thumps against my ribcage as my fingers fly to the keyboard, triggering a silent alarm. I've got minutes, maybe less, and every nerve in my body is on high alert. I can't sit here and wait for whatever is going to happen. There's no time to think, only to act. I grab my laptop, shoving it into my bag with trembling hands, and a portable drive that I've been sending data backups onto all night.

I could call Gunnolf, but he won't make it in time, even if he drops everything. No one will. This is on me. My mind races through my options, calculating the best route. I can just hear Gunnolf's angry rant about how I'd told him I'd be fine: "SableTech is a security company. Our systems are locked down after the attack. No one will be there. I'll be just fine. I don't need anyone to watch over me."

What an idiot I was.

My feet are moving beneath me even as my mind laments my naiveté. My boots thud loudly down the empty halls. Thank God I didn't wear heels. I fly down the stairwell, nearly falling several times. I'm just steps from the emergency exit when the blast hits.

A deafening roar swallows the hallway, and the force slams into my back. My face slams into the floor, and my nose cracks hard. Fuck. My palms scrape against the floor, heat, and debris pelting me as the walls tremble. My lungs were gasping to breathe through the blood spewing from my nose and the smoke flooding the building.

With every ounce of determination in my bones, I wish myself up, chest heaving, mind numb with shock, and I stumble toward the exit. I want to look back. I want to save my life's work, but I know there's no looking back now.

The cool night air stings my lungs, and I stagger forward until I can't go any farther. I collapse against a lamppost, clinging on for dear life, breathless and shaking. Blood still gushes from my nose, but I can't feel a thing aside from the rapid beating of my heart and the trembling of my nerves.

I don't have to turn around to see what's happened, but something in me forces me to look. SableTech, my SableTech, is completely engulfed in flames. The building is folding in on itself, floors crumbling and walls buckling.

A scream lodges in my throat, but I swallow it down. I won't give Marcus Crowe the satisfaction. All those years, all that work, gone. Destroyed in an instant. Damn him!

I clench my fists, fighting back tears. I can't shake the feeling that I was supposed to go down with that building. But how did Marcus know I was here? He's sent a message, alright, but he's going to pay for every damn ember.

"Val!" Gunnolfs voice pulls my attention away from the collapse of SableTech. His expression is dark, and his green eyes are wild as they scan over me, desperate to be sure that I am here and that I'm in one piece.

"Are you okay?" He demands, growling, his hands hovering above my shoulders like he's terrified that if he touches me, I will fall apart.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, taking a step back. The words come out sharper than I mean for them, too, but I can't seem to control myself. There's too much adrenaline running through my blood, too many emotions swirling around inside of me. "I got out. I told you that I'd be fine."

He lets out a short, disbelieving laugh, running a hand through his hair. His eyes narrow as he takes in the wreckage behind me. “You call this fine? You could have died.”

“Could have, but I didn’t,” I snap back at him. I want to collapse in his arms and cry into his chest, but I can’t. I can’t even bring myself to meet the intensity of his gaze. “What are you doing here so fast?”

“You think I was going to leave you here completely alone even though you’ve been getting threats on your life?” His voice is tight with anger.

“You’re not my keeper, Gunnolf.” The words are out before I can stop them. I draw a deep breath in through my mouth. The blood has slowed from my nose, but it’s still too difficult to breathe through it. He winces as his eyes trail the blood from my nose down my shirt.

I have no idea what I look like right now, but given the intensity of the impact, I’m fairly certain it’s not a pretty sight.

“I know I’m not your keeper,” he says, his voice softening. “But I care about you. If anything had happened to you... I would have... I wouldn’t have been okay.”

A sharp pain in my chest is like a knife to the heart, and finally, I surrender, stumbling forward and collapsing into his strong arms. He holds me without another word. His own heart beating just as wildly as mine.

Sirens fill the air around us, “can we get out of here?” I finally say.

“No way, you need to get looked at by the paramedics.”

“Take me to the hospital, then please. I can’t stand around and watch the rest of my

building burn to ash.”

Gunnolf glances toward the remains of SableTech, the flames dancing in his eyes, mocking me. His jaw tightens as he takes in my wounds and the seriousness of my expression.

“Okay,” he finally says, his voice low and steady. He leans over and slides an arm under my knees, lifting me effortlessly from the ground and his lips gently pressing against my cheek. I’m too tired to protest as he carries me through the chaos and flashing emergency lights.

I rest my head against his shoulder, feeling the steady beat of his heart as he holds me close. My cheek stings, every breath reminds me of the impact as my face slammed into the floor, but even more, I can feel the trace of Gunnolf’s soft lips.

The next few hours pass in a blur. At the hospital, the bright lights and sterile walls make me nauseous as the doctors probe and examine every bruise, cut, and scrape on me. I answer the same questions from three different doctors, each more persistent than the last.

Gunnolf never leaves my side. His hand hovers near mine. He doesn’t speak much, but his eyes watch every movement, every test result, like he’s committing each detail to memory.

“Your nose isn’t broken, Ms. Hayes,” the doctor tells me, adjusting the light above my face, “but it’ll be sore for days and the bruising... it’s going to look worse before it gets better.” She gives me a sympathetic, almost apologetic look, as she touches the edge of a bruised cheek with a gloved finger.

I offer a tight smile, nodding, though every word she says is a reminder of tonight’s disaster. SableTech, leveled. My company, my home away from home, all gone. By

the time they've finished running every test they can think of and patch me up, dawn is creeping over the city.

The doctor prescribes rest and leaves me with a caution about avoiding mirrors for the next few days. I almost laugh but the ache in my ribs reminds me to hold back. I'd already been planning on it.

"You ready?" Gunnolf asks once the final doctor leaves. His hand already extended toward me.

"Let's go," I murmur, accepting his hand as he helps me to my feet. Now that the adrenaline has calmed down, every muscle in my body protests but I push the pain down. Right now, I need rest more than I need answers.

The drive back to Gunnolf's house is a quiet one. I'm drained, lost in my thoughts as I gaze out the window, the city blurring by in the early morning light. Gunnolf's presence is a steady and silent comfort beside me.

When we pull up to his house, I take it in with fresh eyes, the place is calm and welcoming in the pale light. An odd sensation creeps over me as I step out of the car. Home, it feels like home.

I don't make it far. I sink into the couch, letting the quiet settle over me like a blanket. Gunnolf moves through the room purposefully, grabbing blankets and bringing me a glass of water.

"Rest," he says firmly, his eyes softening as they meet mine. "Doctor's orders."

I nod, feeling my body relax even as my mind churns with thoughts of SableTech, Marcus, and everything I've lost in the past few hours. But as the silence stretches between us, Gunnolf's gaze hardens, his jaw clenched like he's fighting against

something. Finally, he speaks, his voice low and rough.

“Val...” He trails off, hesitating, and I feel a pang of something almost like dread settle in my chest. He takes a steadying breath before looking at me, his expression fierce and filled with frustration. “Maybe we should...reject the bond.”

For a moment, I’m too stunned to reply. “You want to reject the bond?” I repeat, the words cold on my tongue.

“If it’ll keep you safe, then yes,” his voice cracks and his eyes glaze over. “Val, tonight... it nearly killed me to see you like that.”

“So, you think you can just toss me aside and that will protect me?” I scoff, “You don’t know me at all.” I straighten myself ignoring the ache in my ribs as I do. “I was getting into trouble long before you showed up.”

His lips press into a tight line, and he runs a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. “Maybe so. But now... there’s too much at stake.”

“And yet, I survived tonight,” I say, my voice firmer than I feel. “With or without you, I’m still here. And I’m not giving up.” I leave the rest unsaid, but he understands what I mean.

His gaze softens, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly as he takes in my words. “Stubborn as hell,” he mutters, a trace of reluctant admiration in his tone.

“Look who’s talking,” I reply, offering him a small smile. “Why do you hate businesswomen so much?”

I don’t know if it’s delirium or curiosity that finally makes me ask the question that’s been on my mind for a while now. Overheard hushed conversations and comments

from the team, including Minna, have always made me feel a little out of place in this connection.

Gunnolf sighs so heavily, if he'd lived in a straw house, it would have blown over. His eyes flicker over me and his cheeks heat to pink, something I hadn't expected to see. "I- I don't hate businesswomen..."

"I know you do, I've heard the whispers, and I've faced a bit of your insults myself, remember? What I don't know is why?"

"It's a long story," he says sheepishly.

"And I don't think I'll be able to rest without a bedtime story; how perfect."

After a full minute of silence, Gunnolf swallows hard and stares at the water glass on the side table next to my head, "It's not hatred, really, just more like intense distrust. When I was younger, my mom gave up everything for my father. She dropped out of college and worked three jobs to fund his education. She built him up, and when he graduated, and it was supposed to be her turn, she became pregnant and never returned to school. She never did anything but keep a home and raise me. Only for my father to cheat on her and start a family with a woman in his company who was known to be an ambitious businesswoman. Nothing like my mother. It screwed me up. It devastated my mom, she's never recovered."

"Do you hate businessmen too?" I ask, my heart wrenching for Gunnolf's pain, but a part of me is concerned that he might be misplacing much of his anger.

"It's time for you to get some sleep," is all he says before scooping me up and bringing me to the bedroom. This conversation isn't over, but for right now, I'll let it slide.

Hours later, I wake up in a daze. Sore as hell. God, this hurts so much worse today than it did yesterday. The sun has risen high enough in the sky that the room is filled with a warm golden glow. Gunnolf should be at work by now but instead he's on the chair in the corner of the room talking softly on the phone.

My ears are ringing from yesterday's blast. I can't make out a single word he says before he meets my gaze and ends the call, moving over to me.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not good," I say pushing myself up to a seated position, a fresh ache throbs through me. Dang. "I need to check through some files —there's something I need to look into, can you grab me my laptop?"

Gunnolf cringes and my stomach drops I already know what that means "I'm sorry Val but your laptop was totally busted up in the blast."

My heart thuds in my chest, "Can you grab me my bag? I need to make sure that the hard drive in there is still intact. Those things are pretty indestructible, but I need to be sure."

"Val you were nearly blown up yesterday, what you need to do is get some rest."

"This is important," I say locking eyes with Gunnolf. He hesitates for a moment but then nods and retreats downstairs. After a few minutes, he comes back into the room with my bag, a cup of coffee, and a cheese Danish.

"Here, you need to eat something."

"A Danish?"

“You deserve a little treat. Once you’ve eaten you can check the hard drive.”

My stomach grumbles. I hadn’t had dinner the night before, I’d been so anxious to get to the office. I want to argue but Gunnolf is right. I’ll think better once I’ve had some food.

Gunnolf’s gaze flickers to mine once I’ve finished eating, a glint of determination in his eyes, “Better?”

“A bit but I can’t say the same about your sheets,” I say gesturing to the crumbs.

“That’s what washers are for,” I don’t have to ask again. Gunnolf is already handing me my hard drive.

Thank God, it’s intact. My fingers pulse as I run them across every seam and corner just to be sure. “It looks good, but I’ll have to plug it in. Do you have a laptop here?” He nods. “Will you grab that for me?”

“And then what?”

“And then I figure out who the hell in my company is involved with the Marcus crackpot.”

Chapter 12

Gunnolf

We finally have a solid lead, even if it came at the expense of a devastating blow for Val. And it did. She traced the data breach and the most recent bombing to Lucas Frye.

One of the very first SableTech employees from back when she first built her empire. I've never seen Val retreat into herself as she did when she found out who was behind her betrayal.

Still, now that we have information on Lucas, his immediate family, his friends, and every single member of his extended familial line. We know every debt he has, every overdue bill, and he's got a secret property downtown that no one else in his family knows about. What are the odds we will find him there?

I'd say they are pretty good. I can't lie. I'm out for blood. Anyone who tries to hurt my mate doesn't deserve to live.

"Are you going to behave, or must I leave you behind?" Kato's voice rattles through my skull and pulls me from my thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we need this guy alive. We need him to talk, and if I can't trust you to let that happen, then there's no way in hell I'm going to let you come along and

compromise us being able to get the head bad guy. I swear to Goddess, I will fire you so fast you won't be able to blink before you're out on your ass. Understood?"

My jaw tightens, and I can't stop the scowl from forming on my face, but I bite my tongue. He's right. Marcus Crowe is the one behind all of this, and once Lucas talks, I don't care if he or Marcus dies.

My wolf howls in agreement. Taking a deep breath, I raise my eyes to meet Kato's, "I understand."

His gaze lingers on mine for a moment. Searching for understanding. Searching for truth. He must be satisfied with what he's found because, after a moment, he smiles and claps a hand on my shoulder, "Good, because I like working with you, man. And you're my friend."

Instinctually, I smile back, "I like working with you, too." We've been a team since we both were in the service. There's no way in hell I want to break up that team just yet.

"You boys have your moment? Are we good to go?" Callie asks, smirking, as she nods her head toward the door.

"Were good," Kato says straightening and leading the way out to the vans. The uniformed officers are already waiting in the parking garage for us, wearing their tactical gear and smelling of fear and excitement. It's go time.

Lucas's secret condo is on a quiet street on the city's outskirts. The building is nondescript, with tanned brick and a manicured yard that doesn't draw negative or positive attention. It's the kind of place that you would drive past without a second glance.

Perfect for someone trying to fly below the radar.

Lucas has money. After every violation of SableTech, large deposits were made into Lucas's account, which allowed him to pay off some of his father's mounting gambling debts and his family home. He hasn't been frivolous.

He wouldn't have bought this place unless it had some sort of significance to him.

As we pile out of the vans, we move silently. The team spreads out like a well-oiled machine. Hati is on my left, Bruce is on my right, and Callie positions herself, with her sniper rifle, on top of the building across the street from the back entry point to shoot any 'runners' or surprise intruders. Kato leads the charge, as always.

A man with a freshly balding spot on the top of his head greets us at the front door of the building, trembling as he steps aside to let us in. Lucas's unit is on the third floor, and we move up the stairwells swiftly, sweat forming on my brow.

My heart's pounding, adrenaline spiking, as Kato knocks soundly on the door to Lucas's unit. Three heavy knocks that shake the walls around the door.

"Lucas Frye, this is SPIU; we have a warrant; open up."

Silence.

Until a shuffling is heard behind the door. I can sense the panic from here. Lucas is a wolf-shifter himself. Will he try to take us on? Will he try to escape? Will he turn himself in willingly?

Kato nods in my direction, and my heart pounds, adrenaline spiking as we move into formation. Bruce steps forward, and the door bursts open with a crash, splintering under the force of Bruce's boot.

With guns drawn, we move in, swiftly but methodically examining each room, not leaving a corner unexamined. It isn't until we reach the bathroom that Hati rushes forward, his long legs closing the distance in seconds. He reaches out and whips Lucas back from the window.

"I don't think so," He chuckles, throwing Lucas to the floor in the hallway.

Lucas growls, his eyes flashing as he attempts to pick himself up, "Down! Hands where I can see them!" I bark, gun trained on Lucas.

He freezes, glancing around between us all. His mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water, but no words come. He looks so much older than I expected, his face far gaunter and more haunted now than in the photos we saw of him.

Sweat beads on his forehead. "Don't—don't shoot!" he stammers, his voice cracking.

Kato moves in swiftly, securing his hands in cuffs behind his back. "You're coming with us, Frye."

"No—wait! You don't understand!" His voice struggles, panic clear in his voice, but it's too late.

"Don't understand?" I chuckle darkly. "You sound like a guilty man to me."

Kato lifts him into the air and sets him on unsteady legs as he reads him his rights. My wolf bares his teeth. My claws start to slip through my flesh. I force them back in, shoving my hands into fists. I've got to get out of here.

Outside, I gulp in the fresh air as I fight to tame my wolf instincts to shred Lucas to bits and sink my teeth into Lucas' throat. We need him. We need him to talk.

The ride back to HQ is tense. I can smell the stink of fear coming from Lucas in the marked police car ahead of us. Did he think he'd never get caught? How organized is this movement?

I keep my eyes on the road, trying to block out the rush of anger in my veins. This bastard worked at SableTech, fed information to Marcus Crowe, and almost got Val killed. He betrayed her, and for what?

My teeth grind together, and my gums ache from the pressure. The thought of Val not leaving the building in time to survive floods me with fresh animalistic anger. What would I have done if Marcus had succeeded in killing her?

And before that, the psychological torture she endured. The untraceable threats that turned her phone into a tool of fear. All that time she spent alone, scared, and looking over her shoulder when I didn't even know about the threats.

I have so much to make up to her.

I was supposed to protect her.

I was supposed to make sure that she was safe.

I won't fail her again. Even if I have to destroy this town to get my hands on Marcus Crowe and punish him for what he's done, I will.

Frye is dragged into the interrogation room and secured to the metal table. His hands are still bound. The fluorescent light buzzes overhead. I watch as he winces with each flicker of the light. He looks even worse under these harsh lights.

I take my place behind the two-way mirror, Kato and Callie beside me. Hati and Bruce enter the room, their faces set in grim determination.

Hati, the intelligence-gathering genius, and Bruce, the massive bear of a man who intimidates even the most hardened criminals. Even I know I shouldn't be in that room. I don't have the self-control right now not to rip Lucas apart.

"We've got you dead to rights," Hati says casually over his shoulder. A sort of friendliness is present in his tone that is more chilling than anything else. "You want to make this easier on yourself? Start talking."

Frye swallows hard, shaking his head, "I don't know what you want me to discuss. I don't know anything. I swear I'm just — "

"Save it," Bruce snaps, cutting him off. His voice booming through the small interrogation room. "Do you want to dig yourself into a deeper hole than you are already in? You're a smart guy, aren't you?"

"He's supposed to be," Hati adds, chuckling.

Frye goes quiet as he looks between Hati and Bruce, his shoulders slumping with defeat. Even still, I can see the wheels turning in his head as he tries to figure out an angle to get himself out of this situation.

Nothing he can say will get him out of this. We've got all the evidence we need to lock him up for a long time. But we need more information on Crowe and don't need Frye to know how badly we need him.

Hati smirks, noticing the same thing I do, and he shrugs. I can practically hear his thoughts. "If he wants to play hardball, fine. We've broken tougher men than him."

We have, and we will break this one, too.

"You're in a lot of trouble, my friend. We've got evidence linking you to the security

breaches at SableTech, the bombings, and the attempted murder of your boss, Val Hayes, and we know that you've been in contact with Marcus Crowe. Now is your chance to tell your side of the story?"

Frye looks up, his heart spiked at the mention of Val. His eyes are bloodshot and wild. "I... I don't know what you're talking about," he lies, his voice shaky.

Bruce lets out a low, humorless chuckle. "You're gonna play it that way? We've got enough to put you away for life. But maybe, just maybe, we can cut you a deal—if you cooperate."

Frye says nothing.

"I wonder what your poor mother will do when she finds out that you've been in bed with a madman, and when given the chance to do right, you chose to stay silent. I saw her posts on Facebook, lamenting the loss of those lives in the restaurant bombing. Will she be proud of you for your hand in the murders?"

Frye hesitates, his gaze flicking to the mirror. He knows we're watching. "I... I can't," he whispers, his voice barely audible. "You don't understand what he'll do to me."

Hati leans forward, lowering his voice to a dangerous whisper. "You think Crowe's gonna protect you? Let me tell you something, Frye—he doesn't care about you. You're just another pawn in his game."

The words seem to hit a nerve. Frye flinches. Silence.

Low enough that the microphones can't pick up on what Hati is saying, but without enhanced hearing, we can see Hati say, "And what do you think Val Haye's mate is going to do to you if you don't make yourself useful? He's very displeased with you

as it is. The only reason he's not in here right now is because he would have already ripped your head from your shoulders."

With this, Luca's resolve crumbles, "You don't get it," he mutters, tears welling up in his eyes. "Crowe... he's building something. Something real. He's going to protect us and make things right for the paranormal. I just... I wanted to be a part of something bigger. To make a difference in the world."

Rage simmers beneath my skin as I grit my teeth, "What the hell is Crowe planning?" I mutter under my breath. I ought to storm right in there and beat the answers out of him.

Kato throws me a sharp look of warning as though he'd read my mind. I bow my head.

Hati presses on, "You wanted to be a part of something bigger? You mean like mass murder? Psychological damage on the community, including your own family members? Attacking innocent hunters whose children will now be without fathers and mothers? Who do you think they are going to blame for the loss of their loved ones?"

Frye's jaw tightens but Hati persists.

"You my friend are starting a war between the hunters and the supernatural. You aren't helping anyone. You're playing right into Marcus Crowe's personal vendetta. You're looking at life behind bars unless you start giving us names. Who else is part of this 'network'?"

Lucas Frye loses it, breaking down into tears, sobbing into his cuffed hands with shaking shoulders. Hati glances smugly toward the window as if to say 'we've got him.'

After a moment Frye gasps for breath. “I only know a few. Marcus keeps everything compartmentalized. I worked with four others—Jaxon, Lyra, Tomás, and Karina. There’s more, at least a dozen, but I never met them.”

“You got any last names for us?”

“No, I never knew them.”

Bruce leans in, eyes flashing with triumph. “And where can we find them?”

Frye shakes his head, sobbing harder. “I don’t know! I swear! Crowe’s paranoid... we only meet in unknown secure locations. I just followed orders.”

This is the break we’ve been waiting for, but it’s only the tip of the iceberg.

“Minna,” I say, turning to her, “I need you to cross-reference those names Frye has given us. See if there’s any connection to Crowe’s known associates.”

“I’m already on it,” she says, her fingers flying over the keyboard of her laptop.

My phone buzzes in my pocket before I can check in with Kato. It’s Val.

I step out into the hallway, answering on the second ring. “Val?”

“Hey,” she says, her voice tired but relieved. “Did you get him?”

“Yeah, we got Frye. He cracked and gave us names and leads. We’re closing in on Crowe.”

There’s a pause, and I can hear her exhale, the weight of everything pressing down on her. “That’s good news. But... I’ve been getting more of those texts. The threats are

getting worse, Gunnolf.”

My blood runs cold. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I thought I could handle it,” she says, trembling.

The wolf inside me roars to life, demanding blood to protect what’s his. I grip the phone tighter, my knuckles turning white. “Are you still at my place?” Val tells him she is. “I’m coming now. Don’t go anywhere. Do you hear me, Val? Stay put.”

“Okay,” she whispers, and I can hear the fear she’s been trying to hide. “Just... be careful.”

I head back into the conference room, my heart thumping wildly, the team’s eyes on me. “We’ve got another problem. Val’s being targeted again. Minna, I need you to track those texts she just received and find out who’s behind them.”

“Go,” Kato says, “We’ll keep you up to date.”

Chapter 13

Val

I've always loved silence. Those moments of quiet when my mind can stop churning. But now, silence feels too heavy, too loaded with thoughts I cannot ignore.

The police stationed outside Gun's place are supposed to make me feel safe, but I can't help but be constantly reminded of the danger lurking beyond these walls. Are these police members even safe? Lucas Frye was one of my most trusted employees, and he still betrayed me.

How can I know how deep Marcus's control goes?

I sigh, leaning back onto the plush couch, wincing as my sore ribs expand and contract with my breath. I scroll aimlessly through the news feeds on my laptop.

Each headline blurs into the next.

No matter how hard I try, I can't distract myself from the threats on my phone—from the fact that my life is currently hanging in the balance.

It's all too much. I close the screen and let my head fall back, staring at the ceiling. For a moment, I let myself imagine what it would be like if all this chaos was over.

The thought is interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. My heart leaps to my throat, but I relax when I hear the familiar heavy footsteps. Gunnolf.

“Val?” His voice is steady, but I can feel anxiety and worry pulsing underneath.

“Hey,” I say as he steps into the room, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. He looks more exhausted than I’ve ever seen him. His dark green eyes soften when they meet mine, and for a moment, the tension in my chest eases.

“Hey,” he says, his voice low, almost hesitant.

“Hey yourself,” I reply, trying to sound casual, but there’s a tightness in my throat that I can’t quite shake. “Long day?”

He lets out a tired chuckle, running a hand through his messy hair. “You could say that.”

I watch him as he crosses the room, dropping his bag on the floor before sinking into the couch beside me. It feels good to have him next to me. He is calming, safe, and grounding. Without thinking, I shift closer, leaning into his warmth.

I’ve never felt this way about a lover before.

His arm wraps around my shoulders instinctively, pulling me to his side. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this... safe. Given everything going on, it’s a ridiculous feeling, but with Gunnolf, nothing can touch me.

“You okay?” he asks softly. His fingers stroke against my arm gently.

I nod, though I’m not entirely sure I am telling the truth. “I am better now that you are here.”

His lips twitch into a small, tired smile. “Oh yeah? You sure about that?”

I can't help but smile back, wincing as I nudge him playfully with my shoulder. "Looking at you right now, if I'm being honest, you look like the one who needs a break."

"Can't argue with that," he admits, taking a deep breath. "I've been running on fumes."

"I've been thinking," he says suddenly. His voice is so soft I almost miss it. His fingers still stroking my arm rhythmically.

"About what?" I ask, opening my eyes to look up at him.

"About what happens after all of this," he admits, his gaze fixed on some distant point across the room. "When Crowe's taken down, everything goes back to... whatever normal looks like."

The words catch me off guard—a pit forms in my stomach. We've never talked about the future like this. I don't even know what's happening with SableTech at this point.

Everything between Gunnolf and me has always been tangled up in the chaos of this case, his resentment, my irritation. But now, everything has changed. I know it, and he knows it, too.

I shift, turning to face him more fully. "What do you think it looks like?"

His eyes meet mine, and for a moment, there's something raw and vulnerable in his gaze. "I don't know," he admits, "But I can't stop thinking about us, about what happens between us when the dust settles."

"And?" I prompt, my heart pounding in my chest.

Gunnolf reaches up, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. The warmth of his gentle touch sends shivers down my spine. “I want to see what this—” he gestures between us, “—looks like when we’re not fighting for our lives every day. I want more than just stolen moments in the middle of chaos.”

I swallow hard, my throat tight. “You think there’s a ‘normal’ for us, Gunnolf? After everything that’s happened. Just the other day, you were trying to run away from this. What’s changed?”

His jaw tightens for a moment, and he tilts his head. His eyes look over me. He studies me in silence. Finally, he says, “Maybe it won’t be normal. Maybe it’ll be something else. But I’m willing to find out if you are.”

My breath catches in my throat, forming a lump, and for a moment, all my fear and apprehension fade away. But only for a moment before the swirl of uncertainty, fear of being heartbroken, and intense desire floods my senses once again.

I take a deep breath. Be brave, Val.

“I’d like that,” I whisper, barely able to find my voice.

His eyes soften, and before I can think, his lips are on mine, soft and searching. It’s a slow kiss filled with everything we’ve been too afraid to say out loud. My hands slide up to his shoulders, pulling him closer, and he responds with a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

When we finally pull apart, we’re both breathing hard, the room suddenly feeling too warm. He rests his forehead against mine, his hands cradling my face.

“I’m serious, Val,” he murmurs. “When this is over... I want to try. I want... us.”

I close my eyes, letting the words sink in. It's terrifying to let someone in like this, but with Gunnolf, it feels right. "I want that too," I whisper back.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 14

Gunnolf

Val trembles slightly as I guide her to the car. She's wearing a brave face, but I can see through it. The texts and the threats are getting to her, wearing her down piece by piece. We've had a week of bliss together while Val's recouped. I haven't let her check her phone this week, but I'm needed back with the team now. So I am keeping Val with me as much as possible.

And it's killing me that I can't do more to protect her.

"Let's get you back to safety," I murmured, opening the passenger door for her. She hesitates. Her eyes search mine as if looking for reassurance. The bruises on her face have faded from purple and black to green and yellow.

I give her a slight nod, hoping that it's enough to assure her. She offers a half smile in return and slides into her seat.

So much has happened between us since we met. On one hand, I'm not ready to return to the real world since realizing how much I care for Val, but on the other hand, I want to take Marcus Crowe and his cronies out for good before he starts a war on innocents.

The drive back to HQ is tense, and the silence between us is thick with unspoken words. I can feel her gaze occasionally, but I keep my eyes on the road, trying to push down the raging storm inside me. What is she thinking?

My wolf is restless. Pacing back and forth, demanding me to do something, anything, to eliminate anyone and everyone who is making Val's life hell.

I understand why, but right now, I need to refocus. I need my wits about me for this mission, and through that, I will be focusing on the threats to Val. Unfortunately, my wolf doesn't quite understand that logic.

We arrive back at headquarters, and the energy is intoxicating. The team is buzzing with newfound energy. As I move through the halls with Val by my side, I can feel myself merging with my wolf rather than being in opposition to him.

On the way to the bunks, Val slows down near the open doorway where the team is buzzing. They are gathered around a whiteboard that is covered in notes, maps, and photos. The generally defeated sense of fatigue we'd had prior to this is nowhere to be found.

Bruce spots us first, nodding in our direction. "Gun, you're gonna want to hear this."

I glance at Val. I'm unsure if she wants to participate in this discussion. She gives me a nod and pushes ahead of me into the briefing room. I follow closely behind without argument.

Kato steps forward with a grim smile. "It's good to see you, Val," he nods.

"Good to see you too," she nods in return.

Kato's attention turns to me, "We've been busy. I took down two of the guys that Lucas mentioned. They were surprisingly eager to talk once they realized they were alone. Looks like Marcus might not have as strong of a hold on his people as he thought he did." He gestures to the board, where Hati is pinning up new information.

“What have you got?” I ask, instinctively wrapping an arm around Val’s waist and pulling her into me.

Minna smiles from her seat at the table behind Kato, and my cheeks flush with heat.

“Turns out Marcus Crowe’s next move is bigger than we thought,” Hati adds, looking back from the board, his voice dark.

“We’ve confirmed that he’s planning a large-scale bombing at the upcoming paranormal hunters’ summit. It’s a gathering of hunter leaders—but anyone in the community is invited to be there.” Kato says. “It’s going to be a total massacre.”

Val’s eyes widen, and she shimmies out of my grip, stepping closer to the board. “He’s targeting the summit? But people bring their families there,” her voice barely above a whisper.

“Exactly,” Callie chimes in, her face pale. “It’s the perfect opportunity for him to make a statement. Crowe wants to hit them where it hurts, taking out as many leaders as possible in one strike.”

“And the families are the perfect casualty for his revenge,” I add bitterly.

Silence rings as the weight of the revelation sinks in. This isn’t just another attack. It’s a declaration of war.

I take a deep breath and roll my neck. My muscles are tight and anxious—a whirlwind of emotions within threatens to consume me. My wolf instincts call out for me to take my mate as far away from this mess as possible, but I know that’s not the right move.

Val wouldn’t want it that way, either. Not now, not ever.

Val steps forward, her eyes blazing with determination. “He needs to be stopped.” She says, “We need to stop him, but we need to be smart about it.”

“We are establishing a massive tactical team. He won’t be able to enact his plan.” Kato nods.

Val clicks her tongue and takes a deep breath. “We need to be smart about it. He’ll expect us to show guns blazing if he’s targeting the summit.”

She’s right, damn it. As much as I hate it, we will need to play this carefully. “What do we know about his plan?” I ask, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand.

“Hmm,” Kato looks at the rest of the team.

“I need to talk to Lucas. I need to find out everything I can about Marcus Crowe, and something tells me I will get more information from him than any of you could.” Val suggests.

“I can have him brought in,” Kato says without hesitation. My fists clench at my sides. I don’t like this idea one bit.

“Val, you are here to stay safe, not to make yourself a central part of the investigation.”

“I’m here to stay safe, and you’re right. What’s a better way to stay safe than to eliminate the ones threatening my safety?”

The words send a cold spike of dread through me. “No way,” I snap, stepping forward. The thought of her alone in a room with that rat sends my wolf into overdrive. “You’re not going in there by yourself. He’s dangerous.”

Val turns to me, eyes alight with that stubborn fire I've come to admire and fear. "I can handle it, Gunnolf. I need answers, and he's more likely to talk if you're not looming over him like some avenging beast."

She's right, but damn if I like it. I grit my teeth, fists clenching at my sides. Kato hesitates, looking between us, then gives a reluctant nod. "Fine, but I'll be outside the door, and so will Bruce."

I want to argue, to pull her away and lock her somewhere safe, but the defiance in her gaze dares me to try. "Five minutes," I growl, my voice low and warning. "That's all you get."

Val nods, turning on her heels and walking toward the interrogation room. I follow, staying outside with Kato, my eyes locked on the two-way mirror. My wolf paces beneath my skin, furious that I let her do this alone.

An hour later local officers bring Lucas Frye from the local jail and back to the FBI offices. This is all happening way too fast.

The interrogation room is cold and stark in a way that drains the warmth from your bones. I watch through the glass as Val steps inside. Her shoulders are squared, and her chin is lifted in her fearless way. Lucas Frye is slumped in his chair, looking like a beaten-down rat, but his eyes flicker with defiance until the moment he sets eyes on Val.

Val sits across from him, and the room becomes momentarily silent. She stares at him, her blue eyes unblinking as they slice through any bravado he may have mustered.

"So," Val says, her voice soft but confident. "You tried to kill me, huh?"

She leans in her voice low and steady. She's not trying to intimidate him; she's trying to reach him, to dig beneath his defenses, "That wasn't very nice of you, was it?"

Given the circumstances, most people would crumble in front of someone like Frye, but not Val. She's holding her ground, and it's mesmerizing and turns me on.

"Lucas," I hear the faint sound of her voice through the intercom. "We both know you're in deep. But I'm not here to threaten you. I'm here to understand."

Frye scoffs, slumping further into his chair. "Understand what? Are you all just waiting to take down Crowe? Do you think you can stop him? You're wasting your time."

My jaw tightens. If he lays one finger on her... But Val doesn't flinch. She leans in closer, her tone calm, almost gentle.

"I'm not asking about his motives. I'm asking about the bombs. The materials you've been sourcing are not standard. They're... specialized."

The sneer on Frye's face falters, replaced by a flicker of uncertainty. He wasn't expecting her to go there. "What do you know about it?" he challenges, but there's a crack in his voice, a hint of fear.

Val's posture shifts and her eyes sharpen. She's got him. "Enough to know that they're not just regular explosives," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "They're tied to something... more. Something paranormal."

I watch, my heart pounding as Frye's expression changes. He's genuinely shocked momentarily, and I know she's hit a nerve. "You think you're clever, don't you?" he sneers, but the bravado is fading. "Crowe's not just some man with a grudge. He's got... abilities. Psychic ones."

Psychic? That's not something we saw coming. I lean closer to the glass, my mind racing. If Crowe has psychic powers, maybe he can detonate bombs with his mind.

Val doesn't miss a beat. "Go on," she urges.

Frye leans forward, his voice dropping. "The supplies we used—rare crystals, herbs, enchanted metals—allow Crowe to link with the bombs. He doesn't need to be anywhere near them to detonate them. He... focuses, and boom. It's like he's there in person."

My blood runs cold. If Crowe can trigger these explosives remotely, we're facing a new threat that we're unprepared for.

"So why would you be at the office?" She asks casually, "The day you tried to blow me up?"

"The bomb still needs to be planted obviously, to go off."

"And that's what you and the others are good for." She says thoughtfully, "Where's the main stockpile?" Val presses, her voice calm and controlled.

"I don't know," Frye says, slumping in his chair. Chains from his handcuffs clink against the table.

Val sits back, her face a mask of calm, but I can see the gears turning in her mind. She's already figuring out our next move, adapting, strategizing. She stands up, her chair scraping against the floor, and I'm at the door before she even opens it.

Val steps out of the interrogation room, her face pale. I'm on her in a second, searching her eyes. "You okay?"

She gives a tight nod, “We need to regroup,” she says, her voice steady despite the adrenaline I can feel pulsing between us. “I’ve got an idea.”

We return to the room where the team is huddled around the digital map. Val doesn’t waste time. She steps up to the front, commanding the room with a confidence that makes my chest tighten with pride.

“Here’s the deal,” she starts, her voice evident. “Crowe’s not going to be anywhere near the summit. He’s using psychic connections to detonate his bombs remotely. And we can’t just hit his stockpile and hope to stop him. We need to change the game.”

The team nods, already absorbing this shift in strategy. Hati exchanges a look with Bruce, both of them ready to pivot.

“So, what’s the plan?” Kato asks, arms crossed, eyes sharp. Kato asking Val what the plan is? This is unheard of.

Val takes a breath, and her gaze sweeps the room before her eyes land on me. “We feed him false intel. Make it look like we’ve moved the summit to a new, unsecured location. Somewhere he can’t resist targeting. Somewhere he hasn’t already planted bombs. If he believes we’re vulnerable, he’ll want to strike personally to ensure his victory.”

“This is his big moment; he probably will want to be close,” Hati says, voice trailing off. “You are right about that.”

A ripple of murmurs runs through the team, but I can see the gears turning in their minds. It’s a bold move that could flush Crowe out or send him further into hiding.

I step closer, my eyes locked on Val’s. “You’re suggesting we use the summit as

bait?”

“Not exactly,” she counters, lifting her chin. “We’re creating a decoy. We’ll stage an event with minimal security on the surface but have a full tactical team in the shadows, ready to intercept. An event he won’t be able to resist, taking the bait.”

Kato nods slowly, piecing it together. “If we make it look like we’re scrambling to protect this new location, he’ll believe he’s outsmarted us. He’ll show his hand. We need to talk to the hunters.”

I want to argue that this whole plan should be shut down before it begins. The thought of Val being anywhere near Crowe’s crosshairs twists my gut in knots. But damn it, she’s right. If we want to stop Crowe, we need to force him into a corner, get him to expose himself.

“Alright,” I growl, barely keeping my wolf at bay. “But we do it my way. You need full tactical support, and Val, you stay behind the scenes. I’m not risking you out there.”

She nods, “There’s no reason for me to be there.”

Goddess, I hope she means that.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:29 am

Chapter 15

Gunnolf

Damn, I'm nervous. I'm not usually so emotional when it comes to the job, but having Val involved puts a whole other level of intensity on the situation for me. My pulse thuds in my neck as I look toward the surveillance van with Minna and Val in it through the rearview mirror.

So much for Val 'not needing to be here.' Goddess, that woman is maddeningly stubborn. At least she's in an armored vehicle, I repeat for the millionth time today.

We've already established an outer perimeter of plainclothes and undercover officers. We are not letting Marcus get away from us—not this time. He'll be locked up behind bars by the end of this night, exactly where he belongs.

"The summit leaders showed up yesterday to 'check out the new space.' I can almost guarantee that Marcus Crowe had them tailed. He'll be here. To plant his bombs." Hati says confidently from the back seat.

A flutter rumbles in my stomach. This is a good thing. We want him to be here. But I can't help but snap my eyes back to the surveillance van, which is now taking a turn down the block to park itself off on the other road.

"The trap is set," Kato confirms, nodding. "The false intel has been leaked, and we've been scrambling the usual security protocols to make it look vulnerable. Crowe will be here tonight, ready to claim victory if he is as arrogant as we think."

I stand behind cover, waiting for Kato's command. The decoy summit location is perfect. It's a sprawling event center on the outskirts of town. It's the ideal place to lure Marcus Crowe into thinking he's about to claim a major victory.

Goddess, I hope this all goes off without a hitch.

I adjust the earpiece, listening to the team's chatter. Hati and Bruce are stationed at the north and south entrances while I cover the interior, hidden behind a stack of crates. Kato's voice crackles through the comms, calm and authoritative. "All units, report positions."

"All clear on the north," Hati responds, his tone a low growl.

"South side's quiet," Bruce confirms, his voice steady.

"Perimeter's secure," Callie says from her perch on top of a close building.

Kato's Alpha presence is felt even through the comms. "Minna, status?"

Minna's voice comes from the surveillance van parked a few blocks away. "Picking up some interference, but nothing solid. It could be residual signals from Crowe's tech. I'll keep monitoring."

I exhale slowly, trying to keep my wolf under control. He's pacing, claws scraping beneath my skin, ready to rip into Crowe the second he shows his face. But I have to stay focused. If this goes wrong, if we're too late, there's no telling how many lives will be lost.

"Stay sharp," Kato orders, his voice cutting through the silence. "Crowe's not going down easy. He'll have contingencies."

We wait in the oppressive darkness, minutes stretching into what feels like hours. My grip tightens on my weapon, eyes scanning every shadow, every flicker of movement. My wolf is on edge, sensing something coming, and then it happens—the faint hum of an approaching engine, tires crunching over gravel.

Kato's voice comes through, low and tense. "We've got a vehicle inbound. Looks like it's our target."

I peer through the shadows as a black SUV glides to a stop just outside the warehouse. The doors open, and figures dressed in black tactical gear pour out, moving with deadly precision. Then I see Marcus Crowe step out, surveying the area like he owns it. A smug confidence in his movements sets my teeth on edge.

As Marcus steps closer to the warehouse, he pauses, turning to his assembled team with a look of fervent determination. "Today," he begins, his voice steady but laced with intensity, "we're taking the first real steps to change the world. They'll remember this day—and us—as the ones who stood up, the ones who knew what needed to be done."

He lets his gaze settle on each member of his team, ensuring his words sink in. "Together, we're laying the foundation for a new order, and nothing will stop us."

My jaw sets tightly, does he think he's some kind of fucking messiah?

"Hold positions," Kato commands, "Wait for my signal."

Crowe's men spread out, heading toward the entrance, unaware they are walking into our trap. Crowe strides forward, flanked by his guards, moving closer to the building. My finger itches on the trigger, but I wait, trusting Kato's lead.

"Now!" Kato barks into the comms.

Chaos erupts in an instant. Hati and Bruce spring from the shadows, guns blazing. Callie from her sniper spot, and Kato, cut off any who retreat securing the perimeter while I step out from my cover, aiming straight for Crowe. The warehouse fills with the deafening sound of gunfire and shouts. Crowe's men are caught off guard, scrambling to respond.

But Crowe... he's not panicking. He's grinning like a man who's just played his winning card. OMG, that's can't be good. He knew this was a trap. But why would he come here?

"Brace yourselves!" Kato yells, but it's too late.

A series of explosions rock the warehouse, the ground trembling beneath my feet. Dust and debris fill the air as bombs being carried by Marcus' men go off, one after another, with no regard to the men carrying those bombs. My heart stops, a cold fear gripping me. "Val, Minna, report!" I shout into the comms, but all I get is static.

I break formation, and I don't care at all that I did, as I sprint toward the surveillance van, lungs burning, fear clawing at my insides. If anything's happened to Val... I can't finish the thought. I won't.

The van comes into view, doors flung open, and I see Minna hunched over her laptop, fingers flying over the keys.

"Gunnolf, thank God!" Val's voice reaches me, and relief crashes over me like a wave. She's standing beside Minna, frantically typing on another laptop. But there's no time to dwell on it.

"What's going on?" I demand, skidding to a stop beside them.

"Crowe's bombs—the human aspects of the bombs, I can hack. But the supernatural

elements... they're linked psychically to Crowe. He can set them off remotely." Val explains, eyes glued to her screen.

"Can you stop it?" I ask, my voice rough, trying to mask the fear.

Val doesn't even look up. Her focus is razor-sharp. "I have an idea. I don't know if it's going to do anything but I'm working on disrupting the psychic link, but it'll take a minute."

A minute we don't have. Another explosion rips through the air, and I see Kato dragging Bruce, who's bleeding from a cut on his forehead, back to cover. My wolf howls, desperate to join the fight, but even more desperate to make sure that Val is safe.

"You've got this, Val," I murmur, leaning in close, trying to give her the strength she's giving us. "I know you do."

Her fingers move even faster, her breath coming in short, controlled bursts. "Almost... there..."

"She's crafting some kind of magical virus," Minna says, eyes wide with awe and admiration.

"I watch Val in the surveillance van, her fingers flying over the laptop keyboard, her face lit by the blue glow of the screen. She's locked in, focused with a level of intensity I rarely see in anyone. And damn if it isn't impressive. I can't look away as she narrows her gaze at the screen, murmuring to herself, "Alright, I'm in."

My pulse kicks up. "She's got something," I mutter under my breath, trying to keep the hope out of my voice. Val's eyes sharpen, and her fingers don't stop moving. I catch snippets of what she's saying, the tech jargon foreign to me but clear enough in

its meaning—she’s isolating the frequency Crowe’s using to keep the psychic link to the bomb.

She pauses, then adds in a low voice, “I can scramble his connection and sever it remotely.” She doesn’t look away from the screen, fully absorbed. My heart’s racing just watching her. If she can cut off Crowe’s link, he won’t be able to detonate a bomb even if he tries.

“Come on, Val,” I whisper, hands clenched at my sides as she taps a few final keys.

A green bar flashes across her screen. “Link’s down,” she says, sounding almost surprised but relieved. “Crowe won’t be able to connect. He’ll think a device is live, but it won’t respond.”

I exhale, tension finally easing from my shoulders. “Nice work, Val,” I murmur, barely audible. She just bought us time, and every second counts.

“It wasn’t a virus. It was a signal-cloaking program I developed once I discovered what Marcus was planning. I adapted it specifically for the magical components he added. I couldn’t disable them directly, but I could alter how their signals were sent and received, blocking his control.”

Kissing Val briefly on the forehead I set my sights on Marcus just as confusion shrouds his expression when he realizes he no longer has the control he’d been banking on to detonate the rest of his bombs.

Now it’s my turn to smile.

He turns to run, but I’m on him in seconds. I tackle him to the ground, pinning him with a snarl that rumbles deep in my chest. “It’s over, Crowe,” I growl, hauling him to his feet, hands locked around his throat. “You’re finished.”

Marcus, now in restraints, locks eyes with me, a knowing smile curving his lips. “You can throw me in a cell, but you can’t hold back what I’ve started,” he says, his voice unwavering. “Everyone is blind, you included. When the world is scrambling to survive, I’ll be the one they look to. I’m not just a man with a grudge, Agent. I’m the answer they’ve been waiting for—the only one who sees what lies ahead. What do you think will happen to you when they find out what you’ve taken from them?”

“I think we are going to blow up your entire operation and you aren’t nearly as special as you think you are,” I say through gritted teeth.

Hati and Kato rush forward, ripping Crowe from my grasp, all for the better, and I move forward with the rest of the tactical team, rounding up the rest of Crowe’s team.

Within minutes, the fight is over. Crowe’s men lie scattered across the ground, some unconscious, others restrained with cuffs, and a few not moving at all. The air is thick with smoke, sweat, and the muffled curses of those still struggling against the inevitable.

One by one, officers haul them up and drag them toward the line of waiting police cars, the flash of red and blue lights cutting through the settling dust.

A weight lifts from my chest. This was a close call, closer than any of us wanted to admit, but we did it. I glance over at my team, all bruised and battered yet standing tall.

A few officers clap each other on the back, a rare smile breaking out as they regroup. This wasn’t just a victory—it was a message. We’d won back control from Crowe; this time, he wouldn’t be slipping through our fingers.

A gust of cool night air sweeps over us. I exhale, letting the tension drain from my shoulders, and a small but hard-earned satisfaction settles deep within. Crowe’s not

nearly as smart as he thought, is he?

No, my Val is much smarter.

Val rushes out of the van, her eyes lit up with triumph. Goddess, without hesitation, I pull her into my arms, crushing my lips against hers. I am not gentle like I have been since she was injured.

I am hungry. Desperate. I want to consume all of her.

The world falls away for a moment. I don't care about the smoke, the debris, or the shouting back and forth of orders. Right now it's just Val and me, and that's all that matters.

When we finally pull back from each other, her cheeks are flushed, her eyes wide with surprise. "What was that for?"

"For saving our asses," I murmur, brushing my thumb over her lips. "And for being a damn genius."

She laughs, the sound like music in the chaos. "Guess we make a pretty good team."

"Yeah," I agree, my voice rough with emotion. "We do."

The team is watching, but I don't care. I feel a spark of hope for the first time in a long time. Maybe we've finally put this nightmare behind us.

As the distant wail of sirens grows louder, signaling the arrival of reinforcements, I hold Val close, whispering against her ear, "Let's go home."

And for once, it feels like 'home' is a real possibility.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Chapter 16

Val

I barely feel the cool night air as Gunnolf and I leave the car. His hand hovers at my back, never quite touching but close enough to feel his warmth radiating through my shirt. The quiet power in that small gesture sends a thrill through me, leaving me breathless when we cross his front steps.

My body is completely alive, wanting, waiting, and thirsting for Gunnolf. As the door closes behind us, there's no sound but the soft click of my shoes on the hardwood floor and the quiet hum of electricity in the air. We linger near the door, each absorbing the change from tension-filled, crime-ridden halls to this peaceful space.

Gunnolf's eyes on mine cause me to squirm, pressing my knees together. I can hardly handle the pulsing between my legs. My God, I want him to fill me up right this instant.

I bite my lip. Too afraid to look away, too paralyzed by desire to make a move.

Before I know it, Gunnolf's hands are at my waist, fingers tracing lazy circles that leave fire in their wake. The heat pooling low in my stomach ignites, stronger than anything I've ever felt.

He lowers his face to mine, hesitating just before his lips touch mine, "Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you are? How much I want to fuck you every single day?"

“And what are we going to do about that?” I barely manage to whisper, my breath catching in my throat.

“I don’t want to hurt you. You’ve been through a lot.” He whispers, his lips gently brushing against mine, sending shockwaves through my nerves. My God.

“Are you sure?” he whispers, his voice a gravelly, dangerous thing in the silence. Those two words carry an edge of hesitation, like he’s walking a line he shouldn’t cross but can’t resist. I meet his gaze, holding it with every ounce of certainty.

“Yes,” I breathe, and every nerve in my body is tethered to that word.

In an instant, his lips crash onto mine. He’s not sweet or gentle. This is something raw and primal—a pent-up storm finally unleashed.

My underwear is soaked already as his hands cup my face, rough yet respectful, his tongue sliding into my mouth. Our bodies press together tightly as though we could meld into one.

We stumble backward, my hands gripping his shoulders, feeling the taut strength of his muscles as he guides me down the hallway. I don’t know his place as well as my own, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll follow him anywhere tonight.

He lifts me with ease, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me up the stairs. His lips are still pressed against mine, and his tongue is still wrestling with mine.

The bedroom door swings open, and we barely make it to the bed before pulling at each other’s clothes. My fingers fumble with his shirt, eager and impatient, slipping over the soft fabric before finally finding the buttons. His hands are at my waist, tracing the curve of my hips, slipping under my shirt to pull it over my head.

The cool air brushes over my bare skin as the clothes leave my body, but the chill doesn't last long before his warmth presses into me. My eyes seem to roll into the back of my head.

He kisses down my neck, each press of his lips sending a shiver through me. He moves slowly, teasing me, and I thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer.

Savoring each moment and the thrill of his breath on my skin. His hands slide down my sides, his fingers digging into my hips as though he's anchoring himself.

"Goddess, Val," he murmurs against my neck, his voice rough with need. "You drive me insane."

I want to respond, but my words turn into a gasp as his mouth moves lower. Every touch, every kiss, stokes the fire building within me until I'm lost to the heat, to him. I close my eyes, letting the sensations wash over me, his touch, his scent, the feeling of his skin against mine.

His tongue flicks over my collarbone just as another gust of wind comes in from the window, cooling my overheated skin where his tongue has just been.

"Do you know how perfect you are?" he asks, dragging his tongue down toward my breasts.

My fingers tighten in the mass of his hair, and he groans at the tugging sensation. But he doesn't stop, kissing and gently biting his way down to my erect nipple.

He takes me in between his lips, gently biting down on the sides of my nipple while his tongue flickers over it. My back arches, and I push myself toward him, instinctually wanting more. Needing more.

His hand cups my other breast, squeezing it before it trails down my side. OMG. His fingers trace small circles on my hip as they make their way toward my honey pot, only making me even more wet.

I need him. I can't stand it.

His thumb makes its way to my clit, pressing down on it, "Goddess, you're so wet," he delights, "I can't wait to taste you again."

A moan escapes my lips as he rubs my clit and toys with my nipple at the same time. My skin erupts in goosebumps. My hips buck along with the movements of his thumb.

"I need you inside of me," I pant.

"And you'll have me, but first, I am going to feast on you until you cum over and over again," he says against my skin between kisses as he positions himself between my thighs.

I nearly lose it the moment his tongue flicks over my honey pot.

"My Goddess, you are sweet," he says, taking my legs and lifting them over his shoulders, holding my thighs securely against either side of him.

His tongue devours me, and he nibbles and kisses and sucks on my clit. "My God," I pant, "I am going to cum!"

He doesn't stop. Instead, he presses harder against me. Shockwaves roll through me. I squirm, buck, and try to get away as I scream out in pleasure, but he doesn't let me go.

Gunnolf keeps licking and sucking until I've cum again and again, and I can't breathe anymore.

Finally, he releases me from his mouth and leaves kisses on either side of my thighs as he moves up between my legs. The head of his hard cock resting against my sensitive clit.

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes," I gasp.

"I'll only do it if you ask me nicely," he says with a wicked grin.

"Please, Gunnolf, I want you to fill me up. I need to feel you inside of me."

"Well," he chuckles, "since you asked me so nicely."

Within seconds, he repositioned himself to my entrance, and with one thrust, he was inside of me, my walls clamping down around his thick shaft.

"Dang, you're so tight. You feel so good wrapped around me," he moans as he pumps in and out of me, stretching me out with every thrust.

"I love the way you feel inside of me." I moan.

My body tingles from head to toe as he fills me up and bends down to kiss me. I can taste myself on him, and when his thumb goes back toward my clit as he pumps in and out of me, I explode once more, and this time he cums with me.

Finally, we collapse together, breathing hard, our bodies tangled in the sheets. He pulls me close, wrapping an arm around me like he's afraid to let go. For a moment,

there's only the quiet rhythm of our breathing, the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear.

The evening passes sweetly and sensually as we wake time and time again from our slumber to take pleasure in one another once more. The sun starts to creep in through the window, and as it does, reality intrudes on our sanctuary, as it always does.

Gunnolf's body tenses beside me, and I know what's coming before he speaks. "I have to go back to the office."

I press my hand to his chest, "I know."

He leans down, kissing my forehead, lingering there, reluctant to pull away. "It's Marcus and his associates. We need answers, and I'm not letting him out of sight."

I nod, understanding, "Go," I whisper, managing a faint smile. "But come back to me when you can."

He presses one last lingering kiss to my lips before he stands, dressing in the dim light. He slips out, leaving me alone in his bed, and as I lay there, feeling the lingering warmth of his touch, I knew I'd be waiting.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

Chapter 17

Gunnolf

The elevator doors close with a quiet hum, and I catch my reflection in the polished metal. There's no hiding the slight bruising and scratches along my neck. Damn, Val and her perfectly manicured nails. I shake my head, smirking despite myself. Maybe Kato won't notice.

Who am I kidding? He'll see it the moment he lays eyes on me—and he won't let me live it down.

When I step into the office, it's business as usual. Agents are moving from one room to the next, voices low and faces serious. But Kato, leaning against the conference room doorway, locks on me immediately. He cocks a brow, his mouth pulling into a knowing smirk.

"Trust you got plenty of rest?" he asks, eyes landing on the mark at my collar.

I clear my throat, shrugging nonchalantly. "Let's just say some of us had a more... eventful night."

Kato rolls his eyes but can't hide the grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Glad to see you're looking... revitalized, Gun. Are you ready to make Marcus's pals sweat a bit?"

"Oh, I'm more than ready." I adjust my collar, shifting into work mode, feeling that

familiar surge of adrenaline. Today, we're going to dismantle the remnants of Crowe's network.

Inside the room, Callie, Hati, and Minna are already seated around the table, reviewing notes and evidence. Callie nods at me, though I catch the glint of humor in her eyes. Yeah, I'm not hearing the end of this anytime soon.

Kato and I walk down the hall toward the interrogation room, where Marcus Crowe waits. His expression is steely and defiant, even behind the glass. He thrives on the illusion of control, but the smirk on his face tells me he thinks he still has the upper hand.

We step inside. Marcus doesn't bother trying to stand since he's cuffed to the table, but meets our gaze with mock politeness.

"Gentlemen," he drawls, "to what do I owe the pleasure? Here to congratulate me on shaking things up?"

Kato's eyes narrow. "You think this is a game, Crowe?"

"Oh, don't look so sour." Marcus flashes a grin. "I'd offer you both a drink, but"—he rattles his cuffs dramatically—"I'm a little tied up at the moment."

I cross my arms, meeting his gaze without flinching. "We're not here for your stand-up routine. Let's talk about your team in Memphis—and wherever else you've got them stashed. Or did they leave you high and dry?"

He chuckles, giving me a slow, mocking once-over. "Oh, Wright, still so clueless. You really think you're getting any of that out of me?" He leans back with a shrug. "Besides, they'll be just fine without me. I trained them well."

“Trained them for what, exactly?” Kato leans in, his voice dropping to a quiet threat. “Because if you don’t tell us, we’ll find them ourselves—and they won’t appreciate being left to clean up your mess.”

Marcus raises his eyebrows, feigning hurt. “Mess? I like to think of it as... expanding possibilities. Breaking the mold. They’ll write history books about this one day.”

I scoff. “You think this is going down in history? It’s going to end with you rotting in a cell.”

“Oh, Agent Wright,” he says, chuckling, “always so naive. This is just the beginning. You don’t know what’s coming, do you?” His grin widens, eyes gleaming with something darker.

“While you’re trapped in this little game, I’m the one they’ll be looking to. I’m the one they’ll need. When things fall apart, you’ll see.”

I lean close, voice steady. “The only thing they’ll see is your downfall, Crowe. When this is over, you’ll be nothing but a footnote in the report.”

He laughs, low and mocking. “Oh, Wright, you’ve got it all wrong. I’ll be the one they remember. You’ll see soon enough.”

Just as we prepare to leave, another agent steps into the room. “Wright, Blackwood, there’s someone you need to meet.” We follow him down the hall to a small conference room, where a sharp-eyed woman stands waiting. She stands as we enter, extending a hand toward Kato.

“Agent Connelly,” she introduces herself. “FBI’s special unit on cult operations.”

Kato raises an eyebrow, shaking her hand. “We’ve heard whispers of your group but

didn't expect formal involvement."

"Given Crowe's history and our intel it was only a matter of time," she gestures for us to sit.

I smirk. "So now that we've done the dirty work, are you going to tell us what you know?"

Agent Connelly's eyes gleam as she pulls out a thick file. Opening it, she reveals pages of notes, photos, symbols, and disturbing evidence.

I let out a low whistle, "You've been holding a lot back from us, haven't you?"

"Marcus Crowe isn't just running a criminal enterprise. He's the head of a cult. We've tracked his involvement in various underground organizations, using the guise of 'retaliation toward hunters' to build a loyal, dangerous following. We believe that he started with genuine motives, but it appears that as his following grew, so did his ego."

She spreads several documents across the table, showing records of recruitment meetings, coded messages, and chilling rituals designed to cement his followers' loyalty.

"Crowe's been rallying them for years, preparing them for something big. His mental powers go beyond manipulating matter in bombs. With the right nudges, he can manipulate his followers' minds/actions as well."

Kato's jaw tightens as he studies the evidence. "So, this 'organization' of his isn't just about vengeance, money, or influence. It's about absolute control."

Connelly nods. "Exactly. This list of contacts Crowe's cohorts has provided you in

their interrogations, could be the key to dismantling his operation before he, or his remaining crew, take it to the next level.”

Armed with a list of Crowe’s key organization members and Connelly’s intel, we move quickly. Within hours, we’re set for a raid on Crowe’s main Memphis hideout—a nondescript warehouse in Memphis’ outskirts. Our team gears up alongside Connelly’s, checking weapons and running through the plan one last time.

The van rattles as we approach the hideout, it’s quiet, almost eerie. My pulse quickens; we’re finally about to put an end to Crowe’s nightmare in Memphis.

I catch glimpses of the hideout—a warehouse half-hidden by trees and surrounded by chain-link fencing. The place feels dead like it’s holding its breath.

“Two minutes,” Kato mutters from the front, his voice tense, eyes fixed ahead.

I grip my weapon tighter. We’re here, ready to tear down Crowe’s network. The team exchanges a final look—no room for mistakes.

We split up as planned. Hati and Bruce break left, moving toward the side entrance while Callie covers our backs. Kato and I slip through a gap in the fencing, each step taken carefully, every sound heightened in the stillness.

“Clear,” Kato whispers after a sweep near the door. I nod, signaling with two fingers. With a swift kick, Kato breaks the lock, and we’re in, weapons raised.

A door creaks open across the room, and we freeze. Two of Crowe’s men emerge, deep in conversation, oblivious. Kato signals, and we move in sync. I grab one, yanking him into the shadows, while Kato tackles the other. A low thud, and he’s out cold.

We press deeper into the warehouse, where the main room unfolds. A table stacked with weapons gleams under a dim light, surrounded by ritual items—candles, jars of dark powders, rows of files. The tools of Crowe’s madness, all waiting for his next move.

Then, a door opens on the far side, spilling light. One of Crowe’s top lieutenants steps out, flanked by two guards. He stops, eyes widening as he recognizes us.

“Go!” Kato hisses, and the lieutenant bolts for the exit, his men scrambling after him.

Bruce and Hati appear from the side, intercepting one guard. Hati sidesteps and hits him with a punch that sends the guy crashing into crates.

I reach the lieutenant first, shoving him hard against the wall, my arm braced against his chest. “Game’s over,” I growl.

Kato’s voice crackles over the comm. “Sweep’s done. The place is packed with enough gear to arm a small militia. The few men still here are being hauled out to vans.”

The warehouse is cleared in under an hour. It’s full of evidence that confirms everything Connelly shared—Crowe’s operation was primed for chaos. He was ready to declare war.

Back at the office, Callie finds me while I’m removing my gear, her gaze steady.

“You did good today,” she says with a nod. “But... there’s something I need to say.”

I sigh, expecting a lecture.

“By all means, Callie. Don’t hold back.”

She folds her arms, her voice gentle but firm. “Look, I’ve known you a long time, Gunnolf. And I’ve seen you shut yourself off, convinced you’re too broken to deserve anything good because of... your past.”

My jaw tightens. “Broken, huh?”

She steps closer, her gaze softening. “If you want a future with Val, let that fear go. She won’t wait forever.”

Her words hit home. The truth I’ve been avoiding stares back at me, raw and undeniable. The thought of losing Val... it’s something I can’t bear.

“I guess you really are a sniper,” I mutter. Callie just smiles, giving my arm a reassuring pat before walking off, leaving me with more to think about than I’d like.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:30 am

The familiar, worn binder marked “SableTech” in bold letters is in my lap, a relic of every late-night battle and hard-won victory. SableTech has been my lifeline, my heart, and now, sitting here on my sofa, I know it’s time to say goodbye to it.

My fingers trace the edges of the binder, and it feels almost surreal like I’m letting go of an old friend or a part of myself. But under the sadness, there’s a glimmer of relief—like shedding old skin for something new. Still, I’m a bit afraid. I think of Gunnolf, of what might come next, and of this loyal, frustrating, fierce man who’s snuck past every wall I’ve ever built.

What if he chooses to run? And, maybe worse, what if I let him?

A knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts. I open it to see Gunnolf, his smirk softened by the warmth in his eyes. “Hey, you,” he murmurs, stepping inside and pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead.

We settle onto the couch, and his gaze drops to the binder in my lap. “Planning a grand finale?” he teases, arching that infuriatingly charming brow of his.

“More like a quiet goodbye.” I take a breath, meeting his gaze. “I’m letting SableTech go. It’s time. Most clients have already moved on, and... so should I. I’ll be sure that my employees have a cushion for the transition, but I’m ready for something new.”

He looks at me. No teasing now, only a quiet understanding. “You’re letting go of the past,” he says, voice low, each word like a promise. “That’s brave, Val. But I never doubted you would find your way through this mess.”

A small smile tugs at my lips. I hesitate before telling him the next part. “Minna offered me a position as a consultant for the FBI and SPIU. I’d have more freedom, more time to explore... other possibilities.”

He grins, his thumb tracing small circles on my palm. “Sounds like a good fit to me. But just try not to make us look too bad, alright?”

I laugh, nudging him, but my humor fades when I catch the way he’s looking at me—intense, unguarded. He lifts my hand, pressing it to his lips, his breath steady.

“Val,” he says, his voice rougher than I’ve ever heard. “I’ve fought this bond, convinced myself that distance was safer for both of us. But the truth is, I don’t want to run. Not from you. I want everything—all the messy, terrifying, incredible things this bond could mean. Like I told you—I want us.” His eyes meet mine. “I love you, Val.”

I cup his face, brushing my thumb over his cheek. “I love you too, Gunnolf.”

He pulls me into a kiss, tender and lingering as if it holds every unsaid word. When we finally pull apart, he rests his forehead against mine, holding me close.

“So,” he murmurs with a grin, “what else do you have planned for this new chapter?”

I smile. “So, I’ve decided to officially join the SPIU as a consultant. Guess you’ll be seeing me around, Agent Wright.”

“Oh, I can handle that,” he says pulling me closer. “But don’t expect me to go easy on you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I tease. “I’m already teaching Minna some tricks on firewall coding.”

He chuckles, pressing another kiss to my forehead, and I feel that flutter in my stomach, the sense of a new beginning.

Then Gunnolf's phone buzzes, and he raises an eyebrow before answering and putting it on speaker. "Gunnolf, Val, you both there?" Minna's voice sounds through the line, urgent but with a hint of relief.

"Yeah, we're here," Gunnolf replies. "What's going on?"

"We've got something big," Minna says. "Connelly dug deeper, and Crowe's connections reached farther than we thought. It's been confirmed he wasn't just building a local cult—he has cells in several states, all primed for something bigger."

Gunnolf's jaw tightens. "So, he was planning to create a network far beyond Memphis. Was he trying to unify shifters against hunters or something else?"

"It's more complex," Minna responds. "Connelly found evidence of Crowe's endgame—a downright absurd and obscene document. I mean, I feel for the guy. The loss of his family clearly made him lose his mind. Anyway, he positioned himself as a savior, aiming to pit supernatural against hunters and humans alike."

I frown, "So he's been feeding his followers promises of a new world order."

"Exactly," Minna replies. "Connelly and her team are mobilizing to take down the cells Crowe has set up across the states. They'll handle dismantling the network, but they wanted you to know how extensive his plans really were. Crowe's reach was... unsettling."

Gunnolf's hand tightens around mine, his voice steady. "Good. Let Connelly's team finish what we started. Crowe's followers might have looked to him for answers, but his 'New Order' ends here."

Minna's voice softens. "Get some rest, both of you. This is over. Connelly's team has it from here."

A few nights later, we gathered at a cozy bar downtown—the whole team, Connelly, and even a few agents from neighboring units pitched in. It's not just another night. It's a victory, and we're soaking it in.

Gunnolf stays close, his hand in mine, and for once, I don't feel the need to hide anything. I belong here—with the team, with him. As I glance around the table, I catch Callie and Bruce in a fierce debate over the best takedown techniques, Hati raising his glass to another round, and Minna laughing at something Connelly says. The weight of everything we've been through lifts, replaced by something warm, solid. This team isn't just a job. It's family.

Gunnolf clears his throat and raises his glass, catching everyone's attention. "To peace and calm... until the next case."

Everyone laughs, raising their glasses.

Gunnolf's arm slips around my shoulders as the night winds down, and we head back to my place. There's a new ease between us, a quiet understanding like we've finally found our way. When we settle onto the couch, I lean my head against his shoulder, and for the first time, I feel something more than just relief. I feel peace.

I look up, meeting his eyes. "So... what now, Agent Wright?"

He smiles, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "Now? Now we see what comes next, whatever that may be. And we face it together."

He leans down, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that feels like a promise and a beginning. As we sit there, wrapped in each other's arms, I know this is our next chapter, and whatever the future holds, we'll be ready for it—together.