

# Prisoner

We lay there for a few minutes, then I caught a whiff of blood and lifted my head. Blood trickled from Clay's shoulder.

“Whoops,” I said, licking my fingers to wipe it off. “Got a bit carried away. Sorry about that.”

“Didn't hear me complaining.” He brushed his fingertips across a fang-size hole under my jaw. “Seems I gave as good as I got anyway.” He yawned and stretched, hands going around me to rest on my rear. “Just add them to the collection.”

I ran my fingers over his chest, tracing the half-healed scabs and long-healed scars. Most of them were the residue of friendly fire—dots of too-hard bites or the paper-thin scratches of misaimed claws. I had them too—tiny marks, nothing to draw stares when I wore halter tops and shorts. Even after fifteen years as a werewolf, I had few true battle scars. Clay had more, and as my hands moved over them, my brain ticked off the stories behind each. There wasn't one I didn't know, not a scar I couldn't find with my eyes closed, not a mark I couldn't explain.

He closed his eyes as my fingers moved down his chest. I stared up at his face, a rare chance to look at him without him knowing I was looking. I don't know why that still matters. It shouldn't. He knows how I feel about him. I'm having a child with him—it doesn't get any

clearer than that, not for me. But after ten years of pushing him away, trying to pretend I didn't love him—wasn't still crazy-in-love with him—I'm still cautious in some small ways. Maybe I always will be.

Gold eyelashes rested against his cheeks. His skin already showed the glow of a tan. Now and then, when he was poring over a book, I caught the ghost of a line forming over the bridge of his nose, the first sign of an impending wrinkle. Not surprising, considering he was forty-two. Werewolves age slowly, and Clay could pass for a decade younger. Yet the wrinkle reminded me that we were getting older. I'd turned thirty-five this year, right around the time I'd finally decided he was right, and I—we—were ready for a child. The two events were, I'm sure, not unconnected.

My stomach growled.

Clay's hand slid across it, smiling, eyes still closed. "Hungry already?"

"I'm eating for two."

He chuckled as my stomach rumbled again. "That's what happens when you chase me instead of something edible."

"I'll remember that next time."

He opened one eye. "On second thought, forget it. Chase me and I'll feed you afterward. Anything you want."

"Ice cream."

He laughed. "Do we have any?"

I slid off him. "The Creamery opened last week. Two-for-one banana splits all month."

"One for you and one for—"

I snorted.

He grinned. “Okay, two for you, two for me.”

He pushed to his feet and looked around.

“Clothing southwest,” I said. “Near the pond.”

“Are you sure?”

“Let’s hope so.”

I stepped from the forest into the backyard. As clouds swept overhead, shafts of sunlight slid over the house. The freshly painted trim gleamed dark green, the color matching the tendrils of ivy that struggled to maintain a hold on the stone walls.

The gardens were slowly turning the same green, evergreens and bushes interspersed with the occasional clump of tulips from a fall-gardening spree a few years ago. The tulips ended at the patio wall, which was as far as I’d gotten before being distracted and leaving the bag of bulbs to rot in the rain. That was our typical approach to gardening: every now and then we’d buy a plant or two, maybe even get it in the ground, but most times we were content just to sit back and see what came up naturally.

The casual air suited the house and the slightly overgrown yard that blended into the fields and forests beyond. A wild sanctuary, the air smelling of last night’s fire and new grass and distant manure, the silence broken only by the twitter of birds, the chirp of cicadas . . . and the crack of gunfire.

As the next shot rang out, I pressed my hands to my ears and made a face. Clay motioned for us to circle back along the woods and come up on the opposite side. When we drew alongside the shed, I could make out a figure on the stone patio. Tall, lean and dark, the hair that

curled over his collar as sporadically clipped as the lawn. Standing with his back to us, he lifted the gun over the edge of the low stone wall and pointed it at the target. Clay grinned, handed me his shoes, then broke into a silent lope, heading around the other side of the patio.

I kept walking, but slower. By the time I neared the wall, he was already vaulting over it. He caught my gaze and lifted his finger to his lips. As if I needed the warning. He crept up behind the gunman, paused, making sure he hadn't been heard, then crouched and sprang.

Jeremy sidestepped without even turning around. Clay hit the wall and yelped.

Jeremy shook his head. "Serves you right. You're lucky I didn't shoot you."

Clay bounced back, grinning as he brushed himself off. "Live dangerously, that's my motto."

"It'll be your epitaph too."

Jeremy Danvers, our Pack Alpha and owner of Stonehaven, where he, Clay and I lived and would doubtless stay for the rest of our lives. Part of that was because Clay was Jeremy's bodyguard and had to keep close, but mostly it was because Clay would never consider leaving.

Clay had been no more than five or six when he'd been bitten. When other kids were heading off to kindergarten, he'd been living as a child werewolf in the Louisiana bayou. Jeremy had rescued him, brought him to Stonehaven and raised him, and this was where Clay would stay.

Now it was my home too, really had been since the day Clay had bitten me. It's no sacrifice. I'm happy here, with my family. Besides, without Jeremy to mediate, Clay and I would have killed each other years ago.

Jeremy watched as Clay bounded back to me. As he glanced my way, relief sparked in his eyes. If Clay was in such a good mood, my Change must have gone well. I knew they'd both

been worried, though they'd tried to hide it, knowing I'd been panicked enough and that the alternative—not Changing—would be even more dangerous.

I handed Clay his shoes. Jeremy's gaze slid down to Clay's bare feet. He sighed.

"I'll find the socks next time," Clay said. "And look, Elena found her top."

I held up a sweater I'd "misplaced" in the woods a few months ago. Jeremy's nose wrinkled as the smell wafted his way.

"Toss it out," he said.

"It's a little funky," I said. "But I'm sure a good washing, maybe some bleach . . ."

"In the garbage. The outside garbage. Please."

"We're going into town for ice cream," Clay said. "Wanna come?"

Jeremy shook his head. "You two go. You can pick up steaks at the butcher. I thought we'd have a barbecue, take advantage of the warm day. It may still be early in the season but since you seem so energetic, perhaps I can persuade you to cart out the lawn furniture and we'll eat outside tonight."

"Let's do that now," I said, swinging toward the shed. "Build up an appetite for those banana splits."

Clay caught my arm. "No lifting, remember?"

I was reasonably sure you couldn't damage a fetus the size of a pea by lifting a patio chair, especially not when werewolf strength made it the equivalent of picking up a plate. Yet when I looked over at Jeremy, he busied himself unloading his revolvers.

Since I'd first decided to try for a baby, Jeremy had read just about every book ever written on pregnancy. The problem was that no matter how many books Jeremy read, he couldn't be sure they applied to me. Female werewolves were very rare. For one to bear a child, even to a

human father, was a thing of legend. Two werewolves reproducing? Never happened. Or, if it had, there was no record of it, and certainly no maternity guides.

So we were being careful. Some of us more than others. Not that I disagreed. Not . . . really. After all, it was only nine months. I could handle not picking up lawn chairs for a while. It was the “not doing anything at all” part that was driving me nuts.

I could argue that I’d just Changed into a wolf—surely lifting chairs wasn’t any more strenuous than that. But I knew what they’d say—that Changing was a necessary stress, and all the more reason for me to reduce all other physical activity to compensate. Remind them what I’d just done, and Jeremy would probably cancel our trip to town and replace it with an afternoon of bed rest.

“You can grab the lanterns,” Clay said finally. “But I’ll get them down.”

“Are you sure?” I said. “They are oil lamps, you know. I could set myself on fire.”

Clay hesitated.

I bit back a growl, but not before the first note escaped.

“I’m thinking of the oil,” he said. “Is it okay for you to breathe that stuff in?”

“Hmmm, you have a point. And what about the air? I caught a whiff of manure out there today. God knows what kind of drugs they’re feeding cows these days.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Clay, get the chairs. And the lanterns. Elena, I need to speak to you.”

As Clay walked away, I braced myself for “the lecture.” Not that Jeremy ever really lectures—you need to say more than a few sentences for that. In this case, I already knew those few sentences by heart. He’d agree that Clay was being overprotective, and so was he, but they

knew how important this pregnancy was to me, and they just wanted to make sure it went smoothly. Just eight months to go. Thirty-four weeks. Two hundred and thirty-eight days . . .

“Have you been taking the new vitamins?”

I gave him a look. He lifted a finger, then darted his gaze in Clay’s direction, telling me to play along.

“Yes, I’ve been taking the new vitamins and, no, they don’t seem to be upsetting my stomach like the last concoction. Next time, though, as long as you’re mixing up a batch, could you add some cherry flavor? Maybe mold them into little animals? Bunnies would be good. I like bunnies.”

Clay’s chuckle floated back to us, and he quickened his pace. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder, estimating werewolf hearing distance, then lowered his voice.

“You got a call while you were out,” he said.

Clay stopped.

“It was Paige.”

Clay’s shoulders tightened. He hesitated, then shook it off and resumed walking.

“Now this is the part of being coddled I do like,” I murmured. “He doesn’t even complain about Paige phoning. Does she want me to call her back?”

Jeremy said nothing, just kept watching Clay’s back, letting him get farther this time before continuing.

“She was relaying a message. Someone’s been trying to reach you. Xavier Reese.”

At that, Clay wheeled. Jeremy grimaced.

“You tried,” I said.

“Reese?” Clay strode over. “The guy from the compound?”

“That’s the only Xavier I know.”

“What the hell does he want?”

I had my suspicions. “Did Paige leave his number?”

“You’re not going to call him, are you?” Clay said. “After what he—”

“He saved my life.”

“Yeah? Well, if it hadn’t been for him, your life wouldn’t have needed saving. And I’m sure you’d have been fine without his help. The only reason he jumped in to ‘save’ you was so he could hold a marker over you—” He stopped, jaw setting. “That better not be why he’s calling.”

I took the message from Jeremy. “I’ll know in a few minutes.”

“Hey, Elena!” the voice crackled across a weak cellular connection. “Remember me?”

“Uh-huh.”

I settled onto the sofa and pulled my legs up under me. Clay sat on the other end, making no effort to look like he wasn’t eavesdropping—enhanced hearing meaning he could hear both ends of the conversation. I didn’t care. If I had, I wouldn’t have let him in the room in the first place.

“Uh-huh?” Xavier said. “That’s all I get after three years? We spent a harrowing week together, locked in an underground prison, fighting for survival—”

“I was fighting for survival. You were drawing a paycheck.”

“Hey now, in my own way, I was just as much of a prisoner as you.”

I snorted. “A prisoner of your greed.”

“Trapped by my shortcomings. It’s tragic really.”

“Know what’d be even more tragic? If you teleported into the middle of a wall and got trapped by your shortcomings there. Does that ever happen?”

“My momma taught me to always look where I’m going.”

“Damn.”

“What did I ever do to you—er, better not answer that.”

I glanced over at Clay, who motioned for me to hang up.

“What do you want, Xavier? I was just about to head out for ice cream.”

“And that’s more important than talking to me? No, wait, don’t answer that either. Since you’re obviously not going to play nice, I’ll cut to the chase. You owe me a favor.”

“No, you said I owed you one. I never agreed. As I recall, you offered the trade in return for giving me two pieces of advice about the compound, but you hightailed it out of there yourself after only telling me one.”

“The second was about the dogs. They had trained bloodhounds and attack dogs.”

“Right, that’s what nearly ripped my throat out. Left a nice scar on my shoulder, too. Thanks for the warning.”

“Okay, so you only owe me half a favor, and I’m really only using that as an opener for a fresh deal. I’m a useful guy, Elena. I could really help you out.”

“Uh-huh. So who’s chasing you?”

“No one. Let me finish. I started thinking about this last year, that I should get in touch with you and renew our acquaintance.”

“Uh-huh. Who was chasing you then?”

“A Cabal, but that’s not the point.”

“I’m not a bodyguard, Xavier.”

“That isn’t what I have in mind. This particular proposal has zero violence potential. It involves another of your . . . specific skills. In return, I can tell you where you’ll find that rogue wolf you’ve been hunting.”

I glanced over at Clay. “What rogue—?”

“David Hargrave. Killed three women in Tennessee. Your Pack has been looking for him for almost five months.”

“Who told you—”

“Contacts, Elena. I’m a regular Rolodex of supernatural contacts. Point is, I know where Hargrave is hiding. That got me thinking. If I gave you that information, you might be willing to do a little something for me in return.”

“So I do this ‘little something’ for you, and you give me an address, and I show up to find Hargrave cleared out a week ago . . .”

“No. If you agree to the deal, I’ll tell you where to find Hargrave right away. Not only that, but I’ll wait until you have him, and then you’ll do the favor for me. I don’t con anyone who can rip out my liver with her bare hands.”

“What’s your end, then? What do you want?”

“It . . . takes some explaining. Come to Buffalo tomorrow and I’ll tell you.”

“Buffalo? Too far. Meet me halfway, in Rochester.”

“Buffalo is halfway. I’m in Toronto. Your hometown, if I remember the compound records. Hey, maybe you can recommend a good sushi—”

“What are you doing in Toronto?”

“That’s where the, uh, service would take place. Should make it easier for you, right? Operating on familiar ground? Anyway, I’m here setting it up, so I’ll meet you halfway, in

Buffalo, tomorrow. Got a place all picked out. Nice and public. A daytime meeting. Absolutely nothing for you to worry about . . . so there's no need to bring the boyfriend."

"Uh-huh."

"I like all my limbs just where they are."

I rolled my eyes. Clay mouthed something, but I waved him off and took down the time and address from Xavier.

"It's Buffalo, not the Gaza Strip," I said as we returned to the study with Jeremy.

I plunked onto the sofa. Clay tried to sit beside me, but I swung my legs up to stretch out. He reached to yank them off his spot, then stopped, remembering my "condition," and stalked across the study to sit on the fireplace hearth.

"I need to get out of the house," I said.

"You got out yesterday," Clay said.

"To go to the grocery store. And last week, you let me go to Syracuse for a movie. The highlight of my month so far, dinner afterward and everything . . . oh, wait. I didn't get dinner, because you thought it was getting too late for me, so we ended up grabbing sandwiches to eat on the way back to jail . . . I mean home."

"Fine, you want to go out? We'll take a trip to New York next weekend, visit Nick. You're not traipsing off to Buffalo—"

"Traipsing?"

He fixed me with a look. I returned the glare, then glanced at Jeremy, who only leaned back in his chair. No sense appealing to him anyway. I knew which side he was on. Prison guard number two.

I took a deep breath. There was only one way to win Jeremy over. Steer clear of histrionics and mount a logical defense.

“You don’t want mutts knowing I’m pregnant,” I began. “And I agree. But Xavier is half-demon. He can’t smell that I’m pregnant, and unless I wear a tight shirt, he won’t be able to tell by looking. I’m certainly not going to volunteer the news. All I want from him is David Hargrave.” I paused and met Jeremy’s eyes. “We do want Hargrave, don’t we? He’s killed three women—”

“You don’t need to remind me of Hargrave’s crimes.” And you can’t guilt-trip me with the reminder, his eyes added. “I have every intention of making this meeting with Reese. Either I will or Clay will—”

“Absolutely. Despite Xavier’s hopes, I’m not planning to show up alone. Call Nick, call Antonio, even call Karl if you can find him. I’ll take whatever precautions you want.”

“Clay can handle it by himself, with backup from Nick.”

“Clay? Oh, you mean the guy Xavier expressly warned me not to bring?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Clay said.

“You scare him.”

“He’s never met me.”

“Sorry, let me rephrase. The idea of you scares him. But I’m sure, once he meets you, he’ll see that all those nasty rumors are completely unfounded.”

“I’ll send Antonio,” Jeremy cut in before Clay could respond.

“If you send anyone, even yourself, Xavier will be out of there in a flash. I’m the only Pack member he knows, so I’m the only one he’ll talk to.”

“Too dangerous,” Clay said, crossing his arms and leaning back against the fireplace, as if that settled the matter.

“Dangerous? Do you remember what Xavier’s power is? Teleportation. Limited teleportation. The guy can move about ten feet. Worst thing he can do to me? Poke me in the eyes, go ‘nyuk nyuk nyuk’ and zip away before I can smack him.”

One look at Jeremy and I knew I was losing “calm and reasonable” points fast. When he opened his mouth, I cut him off.

“Yes, the first time I met Xavier, I ended up as a guinea pig for mad scientists and a play-toy for a sadistic industrialist. I could argue that it took him two tries and a good dose of my own stupidity to finally nab me, but it’s still a valid point.”

“You think?” Clay muttered.

I glared at him. “I admitted to the stupidity part. Don’t push it. Yes, it’s possible that Xavier has found someone willing to pay big bucks for a female werewolf, and he’s said, ‘Hey, I can get you one of those.’ But I doubt it. He learned enough last time to know that if he tries it, he’d better spend that money fast, because he’s going to end up in little bitty pieces when either I get free or Clay catches up with him. But it is a possibility. That’s why I won’t even suggest going alone. The meeting will be held in a public park, which we’ll scout first. You can bring the whole Pack as backup if you like. I’m taking Clay too, whether Xavier likes it or not. But I want to catch David Hargrave, and if this is our shot, I say it’s a chance worth taking.”

Clay opened his mouth.

“Let me rephrase that too,” I continued. “I want Hargrave caught. I do not intend to play any role in catching him. For the next eight months, I’m out of the mutt-chasing business. I not only accept that, I wholeheartedly agree with it. No matter how bored I get, I won’t take chances. Talking to Xavier, though, is a reasonable balance of risk and reward.”

Clay and Jeremy looked at one another, and I knew I’d won . . . this time.