



Too Hot to Touch: Three Breeds Novellas (A Novel of the Breeds)

By Lora Leigh

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A Christmas Kiss

Jessica Raines would never willingly betray the people she believes in. But she did expose Breed secrets, and now someone wants her dead. Her protection is Wolf Breed Hawke Esteban—and he's got the mating urge for a woman on the run.

Christmas Heat

Jaguar Breed Noble Chavin's new role: bodyguard to Haley McQuire, a woman at risk after discovering a conspiracy against the Breed community. For Noble, being this close to Haley has brought out the mating heat, and she's more than willing to stoke it.

Primal Kiss

Betrayed Kita Engalls, drawn into shady activities involving the Breeds, can trust only Lion Breed Creed Raines to help. But their mating passion reveals Kita's fear that Creed may be guilty of the greatest betrayal of all.

**Errant Dreams*

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Lora Leigh's Novels of the Breeds

"I'm a huge fan of Lora Leigh's Breed books."—Nalini Singh, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Archangel's Shadows*

"When I'm in the mood for steamy romance, I read Lora Leigh."—Angela Knight, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Love Bites*

"Another powerful and highly erotic saga of the Breeds...Highly charged...and carnal."—*Fresh Fiction*

"It is phenomenal."—*Joyfully Reviewed*

About the Author

Lora Leigh is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Breed novels, the Nauti Boys series, and the Nauti Girls series. She dreams in bright, vivid images of the characters intent on taking over her writing life, and fights a constant battle to put them on the hard drive of her computer before they can disappear as fast as they appeared.

Lora's family and her writing life coexist, if not in harmony, in relative peace with each other. Surrounded by a menagerie of pets, friends and a teenage son who keeps her quick wit engaged, Lora finds her life filled with joys, aided by her fans whose hearts remind her daily why she writes.

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CHRISTMAS HEAT

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•FOREWORD•

They were created, they weren't born.

They were trained, they weren't raised.

They were taught to kill, and now they'll use their training to ensure their freedom.

They are Breeds. Genetically altered with the DNA of the predators of the earth. The wolf, the lion, the cougar, the Bengal tiger; the killers of the world. They were to be the weapons of a fanatical society intent on building its own personal army.

Until the world learned of their existence. Until the council lost control of their creations, and their creations began to change the world.

Now they're loose. Banding together, creating their own communities, their own society, and their own safety, and fighting to hide the one secret that could destroy them.

The secret of mating heat. The chemical, biological, emotional reaction of one Breed to the man or woman meant to be his or hers forever. A reaction that binds physically. A reaction that alters more than just the physical responses or heightens the sensuality. Nature has turned mating heat into the Breeds' Achilles' heel. It's their strength, and yet their weakness. And Mother Nature isn't finished playing yet.

Man had attempted to mess with her creations. Now, she's going to show man exactly how she can refine them.

Killers will become lovers, lawyers, statesmen, and heroes. And through it all they will each cleave to one mate, one heart, and create a dynasty.

•PROLOGUE•

Haley McQuire was hiding in Sanctuary's extensive, beautiful library the night of the pre-Thanksgiving party. She didn't do parties well, and she didn't enjoy them. Jonas Wyatt, Director of Breed Affairs, had given her permission to peruse the extensive collection of first-edition classics, but he had warned her that if one of his enforcers caught her there, they would drag her back to the party.

If she was found, she hoped that it wasn't by Noble Chavin. She smiled a bit at that thought. Noble loved books too, though. He would understand.

He was always at the library, choosing books she would never have expected him to read. Carpentry books, books on world history. He devoured them, it sometimes seemed. And when he returned them, she could quiz him playfully, and he always had the answers.

And he talked to her about the books. She liked that. Perhaps too much. And though he would probably talk to her, she doubted he would let her stay.

So when the door opened, she hid quickly. She expected the Breed entering the room to smell her instantly. She was a human, and fairly easy for a Breed to detect. Haley didn't understand why she didn't.

Maydene Brock was a Breed older, a nurse in the labs. With her graying brown hair and pinched expression, Haley had never really seen her as much of a caregiver.

And perhaps she might have sensed Haley if the men following her hadn't overpowered the room with the scent of cologne.

Haley wrinkled her nose at the smell. Even across the room, hidden behind a low shelf as she peeked between the books, she could smell the obnoxious scents.

"Do you have payment ready?" Maydene snapped.

"We need the code," Phillip Brackenmore, the head of Brackenmore Pharmaceutical Research, informed the nurse dangerously. "No code, no payment, Breed."

Maydene sniffed. “We’ll meet you at the hotel with the code. We’ll slip it out when Dr. Morrey arrives at the party. Everyone will be busy with her,” she told them smugly. “When you transfer payment, we’ll hand you the code. I don’t trust the two of you as much as you would like to think I should.”

“As long as you’re there,” Horace Engalls, president and CEO of Engalls Pharmaceuticals, replied. “Don’t bother trying to betray us. We have our own spies watching you, Maydene.”

Maydene growled at that. “I know who your little bitch is. She can watch until hell freezes over. All we care about is the cash.”

“And all we care about is the information to complete our own research. The live trials on the Breeds you suggested aren’t working out as well as we had hoped.”

“I warned you.” Maydene’s voice was smug as Haley felt chills race up her spine. “Even Morrey isn’t responding as well as you had hoped, is she? I told you, you need us.”

“So we do,” Brackenmore drawled. “We’ll meet you at the hotel and transfer the money to your account, but we’ll see what we’re paying for first. Understood?”

“Quite well,” Maydene sneered. “Return to the party now, before you’re missed.”

Haley peeked over the top of the books that lined the shelf she was hiding behind. She could barely see them, and as the door opened, she eased back down carefully, certain that if Maydene looked back, she would sense her.

She waited. She waited so long. She could feel her muscles cramping, feel the sweat that eased along her spine, but she could still feel the danger.

She looked up at the vent above her and inhaled slowly. Was that why Maydene hadn’t smelled her? The vent pulled the air out of the library and circulated it, while another vent fed dry air into the library to protect the expensive books. That combined with the scent of men’s cologne must have hidden Haley’s scent.

But Maydene must have suspected that someone was in the room. As Haley began to consider the risk of peeking over the books again, she heard movement, a doorknob turning, a muttered curse.

She took a chance and watched as the Breed made her way from the library.

Just a few more minutes, she told herself. If Maydene was suspicious, she might watch the door from outside. She might be waiting for whoever she had sensed.

My God, what were they talking about? Drugging Breeds? Selling information? She had to find Noble. The Breed enforcer would know what to do—he would know how to handle this. She had to find him before Maydene and whoever was helping her managed to slip from the estate.

Carefully, she moved from behind the shelf, thankful that someone had made the little hidden reading nook that Merinus had shown her a few weeks before. It had possibly saved her life.

Now, to sneak out of the library and get to Noble.

• • •

There was something about librarian Haley McQuire and her staid little outfits that just made Jaguar Breed

enforcer Noble Chavin insane.

He should be watching the ballroom, keeping his eyes trained on the two men they knew would make an attempt tonight to gain confidential Breed information from a source within Sanctuary.

Breeds betraying Breeds, for money. For greed. And the humans determined to destroy them. Several Breeds had already been killed in the past day, and if they didn't stop that information from going out, then more would die.

It had to be insanity, he decided again, as Haley stepped into the ballroom from the direction of the ladies' room down the hall, because nothing else could describe his reaction to how completely luscious she looked in the simple black, long-sleeved ball gown. Or how she snagged his attention against all his best efforts.

The gown swept the floor, the hem floating around her like a dark, sexy dream as he tried to keep his eyes off her. He was there to increase security, not to ogle the little librarian, who seemed to hug the wall more than she danced.

But his eyes had a will of their own. His gaze swept over the full skirt of the gown, lifted to her curved hips and trim waist, and he had to swallow as he came to where the material draped from her shoulders and barely hid the hint of curvy, sweet breasts beneath. She might have believed she had succeeded in hiding those curves with the folds of material that draped over them, but he could have assured her, nothing was further from the truth.

He should have stopped there. Dammit, he had no business looking further. But he did anyway. He let his eyes caress the smooth, creamy flesh above the material, the graceful arch of her throat.

A stubborn chin. There was fire in her. Soft rosebud lips, a pert nose, and eyes that mesmerized. Dammit to hell, he knew better, but there he was, staring into eyes that seemed to be looking right back at him. Dove gray and ringed with the merest hint of blue. Thick chestnut lashes surrounded them, and they stared back at him as though as helpless as he to break the connection.

Fiery red hair surrounding a gently sculpted face, added spark and fire to her eyes, and the look of her had his back teeth clenching as he fought unsuccessfully to drag his gaze away.

Back to her feet. Where the tip of one small black shoe peeked out beneath her dress. The dress flowed around her, drifted and moved like a whisper as though teasing him, tempting him to brush it from her legs to see all the pale, beautiful flesh he knew it hid.

Damn, if she didn't draw his gaze like a hidden flame, one he was certain would erupt into a conflagration.

He forced his gaze away then, far away, not even looking at her feet but at her slender, graceful fingers. She wore no rings. No adornments. As though proclaiming to the world no ties and no bonds. She was as free as the wind yet restrained by some force inside her.

And she was moving toward him.

Noble let his gaze move to her face once again, a frown edging at his brows, a sense of foreboding rasping at the back of his neck at the look on her face.

Perhaps he should have paid more attention to her face. Because there was an edge of fear in those odd, blue-ringed gray eyes and the pinched line of her lips. Her face was pale, but her chin was lifted in determination and purpose.

His gaze moved around the room then. She had come out of the hall and into the ballroom no more than minutes after Phillip Brackenmore and Horace Engalls had entered, the two pharmaceutical and drug-research magnates.

“Noble.” She all but whispered his name, and he heard the sound, that soft hint of longing he wondered if she even knew was in her voice, at the same moment he glimpsed the entrance of the ballroom from his peripheral vision.

He gripped her arm and jerked her behind him, ignoring her soft little cry as orders began to snap into the communications link at his ear.

“You stay!” He jerked her to the corner and pushed her into the little alcove created by the fronds of several potted plants. He pushed her to the floor and pointed his finger to her pale face. “Stay till I come for you. Understand?”

She nodded quickly even as he turned away and began snapping orders to other guests, herding them quickly from the confrontation brewing at the ballroom’s entrance and into the buffet room.

Why he hadn’t pushed little Miss Haley McQuire into the more secure room, he couldn’t explain. It was something about her eyes, that edge of fear, and the fact that she had entered after Brackenmore and Engalls more than anything else.

Or it could have been that niggles of insanity that he had been trying to ignore for months.

“Librarian Haley McQuire is secured in the far left corner of the ballroom, leave her in place,” he spoke into the small mic that curved along his cheek as he helped secure the ballroom.

“She’s a hazard in the ballroom,” he was told, Rule’s voice cold. “Get her with the others.”

“Negative,” he refused the order. “Something isn’t right with that, Rule. I want her separated for her own safety.”

He heard the tension in the line. “For now,” Rule finally snapped.

Moments later, several things happened at once. A Breed female enforcer distracted Dr. Ely Morrey, and Jonas jerked the gun from Ely.

“Move in on Brackenmore and Engalls,” Rule ordered through the comm link. “Secure them and get ready to move them out.”

Noble moved toward the two, staring back at them with cold, brutal determination. They were involved with whatever was going on. Involved in trying to control and kill Breeds. The bastards needed to die now, not later.

“Please come with me, Mr. Brackenmore, Mr. Engalls,” he requested, his voice carefully bland, unemotional. He wanted to kill rather than react politely.

Those damned animal genetics. He could feel the blood he needed to spill for the threat this man represented to the Breeds.

“What the hell is going on here?” Brackenmore blustered, as Noble gripped his arm and began to move him, his wife, and Engalls to the entrance, waiting for the final go-ahead from Rule to escort them from the estate.

“Director Wyatt will discuss this with you soon, I’m certain.” Noble flashed his canines in a tight, hard smile as he watched the other Breeds filling the room, keeping a careful barrier between the guests and the clean-up of the situation that had just arisen.

Felines weren’t the only ones in attendance. Noble watched as Wolf Gunnar, pack leader of the wolves, conferred with Del-Rey, pack leader of the coyotes, to direct their own security forces in concert with the felines’.

The pre-Thanksgiving party Sanctuary hosted every year had never been so exciting. Now if they could just make certain they kept the damned journalists contained.

“Noble, give Brackenmore and the others to Mordecai. I want you to contain your librarian and get her sequestered,” Jonas said into the link seconds later. “We have a security report from surveillance that she may have been close to a meeting between Brackenmore, Engalls, and one of the lab assistants earlier in the hallway.”

Noble’s head jerked in her direction. He could still see the very edge of her skirt peeking out from where he had pushed her.

The Coyote Breed, Mordecai, his face scarred, his icy blue eyes filled with death, took Brackenmore and the others, and Noble strode across the ballroom quickly.

Haley was still huddled there and stared back at him, her eyes wide and touched with courage and trepidation. He held his hand out to her and watched as she lifted hers, her fingers trembling as he gripped them.

“They’re monsters,” she whispered, and though her eyes were dry, sorrow filled them. “Noble, they’re monsters.”

The fine hairs along his body lifted in warning, but even worse, the spots along his shoulders began to tingle in foreboding. She knew something. In that moment he knew she had seen or heard something that could possibly get her killed.

•CHAPTER 1•

THREE WEEKS LATER
DECEMBER 7

“The winter storm heading for the Virginia mountains is slated to pile on the snow. We’re looking at up to ten inches possible before nightfall, with another ten to fifteen over the next two days. The moisture we’re tracking . . .”

Haley turned off the television and stared at the black screen in satisfaction as she forced herself not to smile in glee at the thought of snow.

She tugged at the snug cuffs of her cheery red cotton blouse instead and turned to her assistant, Patricia.

Nearing fifty, but as spry as a woman fifteen years younger, Patricia looked displeased over the weather forecast. Dressed in dark brown tailored slacks and a matching sweater, Patricia had a smile that always brightened the darker hues of the clothing she wore.

"I'll never get out of that damned lane the county refuses to pave with that kind of accumulation," Patricia pouted, her brown eyes sorrowful. "I hate being stuck."

Haley frowned. Patricia's little sedan would never handle such a heavy snowfall, nor was it equipped with the same traction sensors and tires that Haley's four-wheel-drive truck had.

Living in town, Haley didn't worry as much about getting out as she did about the inconvenience of the snow itself. They hadn't had a storm like this move in for years, and the dump of fluffy white stuff almost had her rubbing her hands in glee.

But she knew Patricia, and her friend hated the snow, just as she hated the way it confined her in her little house outside of Buffalo Gap.

"Take my truck." Haley moved to the counter behind which she and Patricia worked and lifted her purse from the floor.

She pulled the car keys from the inside and tossed them to her friend.

"Are you serious?" Patricia stared back at her in surprise.

"They'll have the roads here in town clear before noon, and Sanctuary will make certain the main road is clear before then. All you'll have to worry about is getting out of that little hole you live in."

She almost shuddered. Patricia lived in one of the small hollows that dotted the mountain terrain. The mile-long track between her house and the main road was rough at all times. Filled with snow, it would be impossible for Patricia to navigate in her little car.

"You'll take my car then?" Patricia worried. "I'd hate to leave it just sitting in the parking lot." She gripped Haley's keys like a lifeline.

"The car will be fine for me until they get the snow cleared to your house." Haley shrugged, then stared back at Patricia worriedly. "But please be careful. I just bought her, and she's still unscratched."

The pristine cherry red pickup had been her dream vehicle, with big tires, the standard shift—and the advanced electronics was her pride and joy.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of your baby." Patricia was almost as gleeful over driving the truck as Haley was over the coming snow.

Haley looked around the nearly deserted library. The two-story glass-and-metal building was incredibly beautiful. Donated by an effort between Sanctuary and several of its supporting companies, the building had the look and feel of beautiful wood, without the cost. Even the metal-and-steel shelves had that old-wood look, and housed the thousands of paperback and hardback books beautifully.

The electronic books were housed in the main data boards and e-readers were plentiful for those who needed to check them out if they didn't have their own. But it was the paper feel of the books that Haley cherished. The history and the bridge between the past and the present that always drew her.

The library was deserted this evening. The last college student had left more than an hour before, and no one else had come through the heavy glass doors.

"Why don't you go home, before the storm hits," Haley suggested. "It's only another hour before closing,

and I can take care of that myself.”

“Or that handsome Noble Chavin, should he arrive before closing,” Patricia teased her. “When do you think he’s going to get up the nerve actually to do more than follow you home every night?”

“With Noble, who knows.” Haley turned away from her friend, tucked the keys to Patricia’s car in her purse, and hid her expression.

Noble, unknown to the curious, wasn’t courting her in any way, and she knew it. He was watching her, just as Breeds from Sanctuary often watched her. Just to be on the safe side, she had been told after she had told Callan Lyons and Jonas Wyatt about the meeting that had taken place in the library room of Sanctuary the month before.

Jonas had promised her it was a precaution only, but that precaution still had the power to make her mouth dry with fear.

“I think I’ll head home early then,” Patricia decided, as she moved behind the counter and pulled her coat on. She flipped her shoulder-length gray-and-brown hair over the stiff black collar and stared back at Haley worriedly. “You’re sure you don’t mind about the truck?”

“As long as you don’t scratch her,” Haley reminded her, but her smile was quick. Patricia was excessively careful with everything, no matter to whom it belonged.

“Should I throw a quilt over her before I go to bed?” Patricia laughed.

“If you don’t mind. And don’t forget the pillows for her tires,” she reminded her playfully.

Patricia rolled her eyes as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. “I’ll be sure to remember both,” the assistant teased her. “Perhaps I should park her where she can watch television as well.”

Haley laughed. Okay, so she loved her truck. Everyone teased her about it.

As Patricia left the library, Haley moved from behind the counter, picked up the remote, and flipped the news on again. There was all that fat fluffy stuff headed her way. Piles and piles of snow. A snowman in her yard, the Christmas lights around her house twinkling against it, it was going to be the best Christmas ever.

A smile was curving her lips when the world exploded around her. The blast filled the air, glass shattered as a wave of heat knocked her from her feet and flung her several feet away to where the children’s reading nook was sectioned off. She bounced over the low shelves, cried out in shock and pain, and crumpled on the floor as a wash of red seemed to fill the library.

Sirens were howling. Something red was flashing, flickering and the scent of burning paper filled the air. It was hell on earth.

Haley dragged herself to her knees, shaking her head as she felt the ground shake again, and another explosion rock the air.

She cried out, covering her head with her hands as more glass exploded, and the cold seemed to battle with a surge of heat.

She staggered to her feet, shock, disbelief and horror filling her as she realized the books were burning. Piles of books. Flames licked at them, consumed them. The tables, counters, and much of the interior of the library

was wood or a facsimile of it, and it was all burning.

Smoke poured around her, choking her, making it nearly impossible to see as she fought to get her bearings. She stumbled through the debris-littered section, nearly falling as another, smaller explosion ripped across the earth.

What was happening? A strike? Some sort of attack? Sanctuary wasn't far from Buffalo Gap, and she knew that it was prone to attacks from several different racist societies, but no one had ever attacked Buffalo Gap.

She choked and stumbled again, falling to her knees as her eyes burned, and she fought for breath. She wasn't going to get out of here. Tears filled her eyes, and fear filled her mind as she tried to crawl, fighting to figure out which way to move, which way to go.

"I have her!" someone yelled, a second before strong arms wrapped around her and dragged her to her feet.

A moment later she was slung over a broad shoulder.

"Was anyone else in there?" another voice called out.

"No one," she choked. She couldn't breathe, even as the cold outside wrapped around her, and she tried to blink the stinging pain from her eyes, still fighting to breathe.

"Haley, where's Patricia?" She was deposited on the hood of a car as someone shook her shoulders. "Is Pat in there, Haley?"

Haley shook her head, blinking as the fierce visage of the sheriff filled her vision. She shook her head again.

"Gone," she coughed. "She left."

"Her car is still here," Sheriff Zane Taggart barked into her face.

"My truck," she coughed again. "Gave her my truck."

Silence met the information. She coughed again, blinking, gazing around frantically until her eyes found where her truck had been parked. Right there, in front of where the big windows had been, where a fiery blazing hulk sat in the middle of melted pavement and the burning vehicles left in the parking lot by several city workers that worked nearby.

Her truck. Her truck had sat right there. And Patricia had been in her truck.

"No," she whispered, horror filling her, streaking across her mind. "No!" she screamed. "Oh God, Patricia."

She tried to jump to her feet and ended on the ground. Her legs folded beneath her as the sheriff tried to catch her.

Her nails dug into the frozen earth, and she stared at the blazing vehicle in disbelief and agony. Oh God, Patricia had been in her truck.

• • •

The report came across the radios within seconds of the blast. Noble was just coming off a twenty-four-hour shift and heading to the barracks when it crackled across the comm links.

“All available enforcers, be aware. Explosion at the Buffalo Gap Library. One dead, one injured. Officers en route. Sheriff Taggart requesting enforcer backup.”

He didn't wait for the order. He heard the names called to backup, the enforcers being pulled in to head to Buffalo Gap, and he didn't care if his name was on the list or not.

“Comm one, this is Chavin,” he reported to the dispatcher. “I'm heading from Sanctuary en route now.” He jumped on his motorcycle, revved the motor, and shot out of the driveway next to the barracks. “Advise Alpha leaders one through four, we have a compromise.”

“Enforcer Chavin, order received and being forwarded. You'll be met by enforcers Warrant, Savant, and Crayven. Be advised, Director Wyatt will be en route.”

Sanctuary's heavy metal gates swung open as he approached, the headlights of his motorcycle piercing the darkness and highlighting the faces of the ever-present protesters.

He shot through the opening, hit the gas, and tore through the press of bodies that threatened to surge against him.

“Heli-jet is being prepped and en route,” the dispatcher reported.

“Any report of the casualty?” he yelled into the link.

“No report as of yet,” he was informed.

He hit the accelerator with one hand, felt the power surge beneath him and, with the thumb of his other hand, hit the integrated traction control and advanced speed protocols before he pushed the specially designed all-terrain cycle to its limits.

Thankfully, the curvy mountain road was more or less free of traffic. The cycle's warning system alerted him to traffic and allowed him to streak around it safely.

As he sped to the town, all he could see were Haley's wary gray eyes and pale, worried face the night she had overheard the plans Brackenmore and Engalls had discussed with the Breed attempting to sell them information. All he felt was the echo of the knowledge that there was the chance that someone besides himself and the Breed Cabinet would find out what she had overheard before the hearing she was due to testify at.

He powered down as he hit the city limits, though he still pushed the cycle faster than the posted speed limits allowed.

Haley, with her bright red hair, her soft scent of desire, couldn't be gone. He knew he should have never left her protection to any other Breed. Something had warned him, some strange foreboding had told him that her life would be in more danger than one silent bodyguard could defend her against.

Damn Jonas. Noble had warned him they couldn't keep her safe like this. She needed to be sequestered, at the very least pulled into Sanctuary until the hearing next month against Brackenmore and Engalls.

The bastards. The drug they had created to attempt to control Breeds had resulted in two deaths in the past few weeks, and they had nearly lost Dr. Morrey as well.

And now, they could have lost Haley.

He couldn't imagine a world without Haley in it. He refused to imagine such a thing. It was impossible, it couldn't happen.

He hadn't kissed her yet. He had barely even touched her. He hadn't yet figured out why she drew him as no other woman ever had, though in the past week, he had begun to suspect exactly why.

He hadn't yet had a chance to decide if he could risk taking her, making her his, or if he should force himself to leave the situation as it stood.

The hunger eating at him was still controllable. The need driving him could still be buried in another woman. The heated lust could still be pumped from his body, and though satiation was never complete, it was satisfying.

He was still his own man.

For the moment.

Once he knew Haley was safe, once he made her life his primary objective, he would no longer be able to claim that singular independence. And he knew it.

He raced into town, slowing the cycle and easing it around traffic, bending over the padded chest rest and gearing down as he glimpsed the flames that blazed around the library.

And he felt the roar that discharged from his chest at the sight of the twisted, ruined, blazing hulk of Haley's truck. A roar of bloodlust and animalistic rage. Someone was going to pay. Dear God, if she was in that truck, if she was gone forever, then blood would flow.

•CHAPTER 2•

Haley shuddered in the blanket Zane Taggart had wrapped around her. The sheriff was kneeling in front of her as she sat sideways in his cruiser, her feet on the ground, the heat from the vents blasting over her upper body. Still, she shuddered from the cold and the fear.

Zane was one of those men in Buffalo Gap Haley had known almost since the cradle. He was a few years older than she, so he had always been a little protective of her. Zane was protective of all women though. He wasn't in uniform, so he must have been off duty when the explosion happened. He was dressed in jeans, a dark flannel shirt, and a heavy quilted overshirt.

He was staring at her silently as she gripped the cup of hot coffee he had pressed into her hands seconds ago, his expression concerned.

"You should let the paramedics look at you, Haley." He reached out and brushed her hair gently off her forehead.

"I'm fine." A sob hitched her breath, shuddered through her body. "Patricia's not okay, Zane." More tears leaked from her eyes.

She couldn't seem to hold them back. Patricia was gone, and it was all her fault. Because she had let Patricia borrow her truck, had given her the keys because it was going to snow.

Lazy fluffy flakes were already drifting through the air, but they no longer held the magical appeal they had only a few hours ago.

Flames still burned inside the library. The fire blazing around the building and the vehicles that had caught fire were more important than the books inside a building that would contain its own flames.

“No, Patricia’s not okay, Haley.” Zane sighed and stared through the windshield before turning back to her. “You have to tell me what happened, honey.”

“I don’t know.” She stared back at Zane in shock. “It was going to snow. You know how pitiful Patricia’s car is in the snow.” Another sob tore free. How pitiful it had been. The explosion had destroyed several other vehicles as well, Patricia’s being one of them.

She lowered her head, fighting the sobs that shook her shoulders as Zane patted her knee.

“Come on, Haley.” He lifted her chin until he was staring back at her. “You gave Patricia your keys, right?”

She nodded unsteadily. “So she could get to town after the snow. She hates being snowed in.”

“Yes, she hates that.” Zane nodded. “Go on.”

“That’s all,” she whispered. “She went out to leave. I turned the television back on. I wanted to see the snow.” Her lips trembled. “They were showing the snow in other states, and I wanted to see it. And then . . .” She blinked and shook her head.

She had to stop crying. She had to remember what Jonas Wyatt and Noble had told her. She couldn’t tell anyone what had happened at Sanctuary until the hearing. But she knew, oh God, she knew Patricia had died because of it. Somehow, some way, the Breeds’ enemies knew what she had seen and overheard. She knew it. She could feel it crawling over her skin, digging its way inside her brain.

“Haley.” Zane stared up at her, his blue eyes sharp, concerned, but knowing. “You have to tell me what’s going on here, honey. Someone blew up your truck. That wasn’t an accident. You and I both know it wasn’t an accident. Now, you have to tell me why.”

She shook her head. She couldn’t lie to Zane. She was a horrible liar, and she knew it. And she couldn’t look him in the eye when he was staring at her like that. Determined and worried, compassion and pain glittering in his eyes.

She looked at her truck, and her stomach ached with the sobs and the fear she was holding in. Her chest felt constricted, tight, and filled with pain.

There was nothing left of Patricia. She was gone, while the snow drifted through the air, and the flames billowed around them.

Firefighters were working to put out the blazes, several twisted hunks of vehicles were nothing but charred skeletal remains of what they had been.

“We found a Breed, Haley,” Zane told her then.

Her head jerked around in terror. Haley could feel the rest of the blood leeching from her body, agony tearing through her.

“No.” Sometimes Noble came in late. Returned books, helped her lock up.

“He was shot behind the library. Someone killed him. Now tell me what the hell is going on, or I’m taking you in for your own protection.”

“Who?” The word wheezed out of her as her stomach churned sickeningly. She was rocking, slowly, back and forth, and didn’t notice as the coffee cup slipped from her grip and crashed to the ground.

She was going to throw up.

“Who was the Breed?” She nearly pushed Zane back as she forced herself to her feet. The quilt dropped behind her. “Where is he?”

She was shaking so hard she had to grip the open door as Zane grabbed her shoulder.

“Haley, dammit, tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Was it Noble?” she screamed back at him. “Tell me, damn you. Who was the Breed?”

She tried to tear away from him, the sickening fear of Noble, gone, dead. No, it couldn’t be Noble.

But it had been time for Noble. It had been. She had been waiting for him.

She stared around and jerked away from Zane.

“Where is he?” She sobbed again, stumbling around the door and gripping the side of the car as she tried to force her legs to move.

He had said behind the library. Dead behind the library. She wasn’t crying now. The fear and the pain was going too deep for tears. If Noble was gone, she couldn’t bear it. Not Patricia and Noble. It couldn’t happen. Not like this. Not because of her.

As she forced herself around the front of the vehicle, she heard a sound so wild, so animalistic, her head jerked up. It was Noble. She knew it was. She couldn’t accept anything else.

“Noble!” She screamed his name and heard the sound again.

It rocked the night. Like the wild lions that patrolled the borders of Sanctuary. If the night was quiet, sometimes, you could hear them. And now, it sounded as though one had stepped into the city itself.

Her head jerked around, staring into the parking lot, watching as the flames flickered around it. And she saw him. All that wild black hair blowing back from his savage face. His lips were pulled back into a snarl as he pushed a police officer attempting to hold him back to the side.

Black-leather pants and heavy motorcycle boots. A leather jacket that he was unzipping as his gaze caught hers. He moved like the jaguar he was bred from, a hard, graceful shift of muscle, a ripple of danger.

“Noble.” His name tore from her lips again as he snarled. The sight of it, the sound of it, should have been frightening. The flash of his canines, the hard edge to his black eyes, should have frightened her as much as it did the officers and bystanders.

She tried to make her legs move. Tried to run to him but they weren’t functioning as they should. She

stumbled again and heard his throttled growl a second before he jerked her into his arms.

Warmth covered her. She was only barely aware of his jacket going around her shoulders, because he was holding her, jerking her against his chest and swinging her off her feet.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face against him to block out the sounds, the sight, and the smell of the fire.

He smelled like the night. Like winter. Like the snow that was drifting around them. There was no death around him. There was nothing of the nightmare and chaos around her.

For the first time since the night had turned into hell, Haley finally felt safe.

• • •

“Chavin, be advised of reinforcements landing,” the comm link crackled with the information as Noble buried his face in Haley’s hair and held on to her. His arms tightened around her as he let himself rest against the hood of the sheriff’s cruiser and let himself soak up the knowledge that she was alive.

As he held her, he was aware of the Breed heli-jet landing on the other side of the parking lot, and of the sheriff moving closer to them.

His head jerked up as Sheriff Taggart pulled the edge of Noble’s jacket over her shoulder. He flashed a feral snarl at him, the thought of the man touching her finally sending him past the limits of what little control he felt he possessed.

Taggart lifted his hands, his eyebrows arching.

“She was afraid the dead Breed behind the library was you,” the sheriff told him, his blue eyes knowing as he watched Noble.

Noble tensed and let go of Haley just enough to activate his communicator.

“Jonas?”

“I have you. We’re on scene.”

“There’s a Breed behind the library, apparently dead.”

Silence filled the line for long seconds.

“Fuck. We had Jason covering her.”

Jason was young, but fully trained. He wasn’t inexperienced.

“I want her out of the open. I’m bringing her to the heli.”

“Negative. We have vehicles coming in and a civilian in the heli. Transfer her to one of the secured SUVs.”

Noble grimaced. No doubt, the first Leo was in the helijet, the Breed who only a few knew was a Breed, and an interfering bastard at the moment, had decided to check things out himself.

That meant there was no way to transfer Haley to Sanctuary. Not and preserve the secrecy of Leo’s identity

from her.

He listened through the link as Jonas sent Mordecai Savant and Mercury Warrant to check the body and prepare it for transfer.

“You guys are going to fuck with my investigation, rather than just helping me secure the scene, aren’t you, Noble.” Zane tucked his fingers in the belt of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. “You know that’s not going to go over with me. Right?”

“Talk to Jonas about it,” he snapped. “My concern is Haley right now, Taggart, and where she’s concerned, then your best bet is just staying the hell out of my way.”

He turned and carried her to the vehicles pulling into the outer edges of the parking lot. The library was pretty much lost. The books had fed the flames that had whipped through the windows as they burst. It was a wonder she was still alive and relatively unharmed.

Relatively. He could smell her blood, her pain. He could feel her fear and her disbelief, and it was enraging him.

Clamping a firm hold on his control wasn’t easy. As he carried her to the SUVs and slid with her into the backseat of the nearest one, he could feel that rage pumping through him.

Someone had dared to harm her. To attempt to kill her? The attempt was against her; otherwise, the young lion Breed, Jason, wouldn’t be dead, and her beautiful truck she so loved wouldn’t be a hunk of twisted metal.

“They killed Patricia.” Her head lifted from his shoulder as the door closed behind them. Her eyes, that dark ring of blue spreading into the gray, darkening them further.

He saw the pain and tears in her eyes. Noble let his arms tighten around her for long seconds as he watched Jonas stride to the SUV. Beside him, was the taller, broader form of the Leo, barely disguised in a hooded jacket, and his son Dane Vanderale. Evidently, neither of them were content to wait in the heli or at Sanctuary.

Behind them, the sheriff followed more slowly, his rugged face set in a scowl as Breeds moved between them. That damned sheriff wasn’t going to be content to let this go, he thought, as the others moved into the long seat across from Noble and Haley, and the doors closed behind them.

The combined stares of the three powerful men didn’t bother Noble, but evidently, there was something about them that made Haley self-conscious.

Her head lifted, her expression flickering with wariness.

“Someone found out, didn’t they?”

Haley stared back at Jonas Wyatt, knowing exactly what had happened. Brackenmore and Engalls had somehow learned that she would be testifying against them during the January hearing.

“We don’t know that, Ms. McQuire,” Jonas answered carefully, his expression carefully blank.

She moved, forcing herself from Noble’s lap and sliding onto the seat beside him.

“She hasn’t been seen by a medical professional, Jonas.”

The younger of the other two men leaned forward. She knew him. The vice president of Vanderales Industries and beside him was the president, CEO, major shareholder, and whatever other title anyone had ever found to attach to him. Leo Vanderales.

And she had a feeling she knew why they were there.

She glanced out the front window to where the flames were finally dying down within the library.

“All the books are ruined,” she whispered, looking back to the elder Vanderales. “You were so kind, Mr. Vanderales, to help donate all those lovely books.” Her breathing hitched. “I’m very sorry.”

His head tilted just slightly, his amber eyes staring back at her curiously. “Why would you apologize to me, Miss McQuire?” he asked her.

She sniffed back her tears, aware of Noble brushing back the side of her hair to examine the gash she could feel against her temple.

“Because it was my fault. Someone killed Patricia and destroyed the library because of me.”

“Ridiculous,” Dane Vanderales snapped, a frown veering his brows.

“My dear, the choices others make because of your kindness is not your responsibility.” Leo sighed. “And Dane is right, you need to be attended to. You’re bleeding, my dear.” He turned to Jonas. “Have her taken to Sanctuary.”

“That’s not possible.” Jonas shook his head sharply.

“And why would this be?” Leo’s tone was dangerously smooth.

“Leo, you know exactly why.” Jonas bit out. “Let’s not air our disagreements in front of Ms. McQuire and see what we can do to help her out here.”

There was a tension brewing in the vehicle now, wrapping around her, tightening her nerves to breaking point.

“She’s obviously in danger because of her courage in coming to you about what she saw and heard,” Leo pointed out imperiously. “She should be taken to Sanctuary.”

“No one is asking me,” Haley pointed out, watching as the two Vanderales men glared back at Jonas.

“I don’t think they believe you should have an opinion.” Dane leaned back in his seat with a grin.

Haley ignored him, glancing to Noble instead as he spoke into the mic that curved around his tough, angled cheek bone.

“We need to get her to a secured site, one way or the other,” Noble growled. “She’s bleeding, Jonas, and she’s scared out of her damned mind. Sitting here glaring at her isn’t helping the situation.”

“And you think taking her to Sanctuary will?”

“No,” Noble snapped. “Her home will be easier to control. I want a team under my command, men I choose. I want the area declared off-limits to any other Breeds, and I want full security protocols placed around it.”

Jonas stared back at him blandly. “Those are a lot of wants for an enforcer,” he said softly. “A low-ranking one at that, Noble. You’ve barely been within the hierarchy a year now.”

“And I was invited in,” Noble reminded him. “I didn’t apply.”

Haley blinked as Jonas grunted. She felt light-headed, uncertain. She lifted her hand to her temple, where the pain seemed worse, and touched dampness. Drawing it back, she saw her own blood.

“Choose your team,” Jonas suddenly stated. “We’ll cover you until they get there.” He pulled the mic wand to his cheek. “Lawe, Rule, pull everyone to Haley McQuire’s home. I need a medical attendant and the sheriff to follow.”

Immediately, three of the Breeds standing outside were sliding into the front of the SUV limo. The engine started, and the vehicle was pulling out as the snow began to fall faster.

Haley stared at her bloodstained fingers before lifting her eyes to Noble. “I’m bleeding,” she whispered.

“Not bad.” He laid a folded gauze pad that Dane handed him from a first-aid box he had acquired from beneath one of the seats over the wound. “Everything’s okay, Haley.”

“It’s not okay,” she whispered, staring into his dark eyes, his savage face. “Everything’s not okay anymore, Noble.”

•CHAPTER 3•

Haley’s little brick house was strung with multicolored Christmas lights outside. In the front yard sat two wire deer covered in white lights. The two conical evergreen trees at each side of the front of the house were well lit, and there was a large fir wreath on the door.

Inside the large living room, across from the fireplace, was a six-foot Christmas tree that glowed with lights reflecting every color in the rainbow. An angel perched at the top, a small light in her folded hands, her wings spread, a serene expression on her face.

The fireplace was laid with fresh logs and ready to light, and four stockings dangled, two on each corner of the mantel.

A television screen hung on one wall, a coffee table between it and the couch, and two chairs sat to the side.

It was a large, simple room. It led into a large kitchen and a smaller dining room. There were two bedrooms down a short hall, each with an attached bath, and a cramped attic above.

The house seemed to reflect her. Gently welcoming, a sense of restrained excitement filling it with all the Christmas decorations. As though someone here truly believed in the Santa nonsense.

Noble stood in the entrance to the kitchen, his eyes narrowed as a female Breed, Shiloh Gage, checked Haley’s injuries where she sat in the living room. Shiloh was the closest thing they had to a medic outside Sanctuary’s labs. But with Dr. Morrey still recovering from the attempt to destroy her with the drugs

Brackenmore and Engalls had tried to develop, that left only the council scientist, Amburg, whom Jonas had kidnapped months before, to treat injuries. And Noble knew he would rip Amburg's throat out before he allowed that bastard to touch Haley.

"I think I'm okay." Haley had her head turned as Shiloh treated the narrow gash at her temple.

The once-white blouse Haley had worn was torn and stained with blood. There were scratches on her arm, one of which looked deep. Her hands were red, almost blistered. The dark pants she wore were in the same condition as the blouse. Her bright red hair was mussed around her face, singed in places and darkened with her blood.

"You're fine." Shiloh patted her knee kindly, her round face filled with sympathy as she lifted a piece of gauze and taped it to Haley's temple. "You'll be good as new in a few days."

Shiloh pulled the surgical gloves from her hands and dropped them into the small waste can that sat beside her. Rising, she adjusted her black uniform pants and turned back to Noble.

Dressed in the enforcer uniform, her dark auburn hair secured in a French braid, Shiloh looked more like a playful teenager than a full-grown, fully trained Breed enforcer.

"I need to clean up." Haley came to her feet, and Noble barely caught himself before jumping for her.

She swayed a bit, and he had to force himself to remain in place as she moved to the hallway.

"You should rest a bit more, Haley," Shiloh warned her, following her.

Haley held up one hand, waving her back. "No. I have to clean up, Shiloh. Just . . . Just let me clean up."

Her voice was stronger than it had been earlier. The shock was wearing off. He could see the anger flickering in her gaze even before Shiloh had finished.

When the enforcer looked back at him, he nodded toward Haley, indicating that she should follow and cover her until Jonas, Leo, and Dane were finished with the meeting in the kitchen. Noble then joined the others in the kitchen.

The sheriff wasn't exactly pleased with the information he was getting. He didn't like being excluded from the investigation, and if Noble could read the man, and he liked to think he could, then he was guessing Zane Taggart wasn't going to be as easy to control as Jonas was hoping.

"Wyatt, you're pissing me off," Taggart retorted at Jonas's suggestion that the sheriff leave the investigation in their hands. "A friend of mine was just killed, and you want me to just back off?"

"Your friend has just lost one friend," Jonas reminded him. "Let's not add to the count. The further you stay away from this, the safer it will be for her."

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