



Bad Moon Rising: Lunar Mates Book 2

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## **Bad Moon Rising: Lunar Mates Book 2**

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## **Bad Moon Rising: Lunar Mates Book 2**

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**Dedication**

To My Family. Thanks for always being there.

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### Prologue

A low murmur rolled through the long, crowded hall as the group of eight men made their way to the curved table at the head of the room. The Council had finally arrived. Trey's eyes barely flickered over them, instead he coolly took in the presence of the two who followed. Jackson and Darius. From the looks of things, those two were no longer friends. Who would expect them to be? It was unfortunate that the Alpha position left vacant by Brant's sudden death could only be filled by one of these two men.

In the not too distant past, the matter would have been decided by battle or all out war. But old ways changed, and the High Council had decided who would take the ninth seat at their table. The hall was filled with the adults members of the pack waiting to discover which were that would be.

Two Alphas.

One pack.

And one Hunter.

With veiled amusement, he noted the space that had cleared around him on his entry. Always an outsider. But perhaps that would change if the outcome of this meeting was as he expected.

He'd been a Hunter, chasing down members of the Society, the band of outlaw wolves that threatened their secrecy, for nineteen years. At 35, he'd lasted longer than most, but now he felt another pull, one he couldn't name. The rage that had fueled his blood for so long was a dim memory. The one who killed his family was certainly dead by someone else's hand, or some other cause by now. And his own coldness, his own growing remoteness, had finally convinced him that if he ever wanted to, now was the time to retire from his position.

Of course, the final decision depended on the outcome here

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tonight.

He couldn't stay with the pack. They closed in on him, too many weres with their suspicion of him and what he was. Oh, they accepted him readily enough. What choice did they have? But he'd never truly belong here. Hunters were turned away from no pack, they were too important to the survival of their species. But trusted? Welcomed? That was another story. And now two of the only three men he could count as friends were going to drive a wedge in their childhood pack.

He was surprised at the turmoil that roiled through him, he who had felt nothing for so long. Everything hinged on the Council and the two men before it. He studied them; saw through the casual poses to the fine tension beneath the surface. They had been best friends since the den, and now faced each other in distrust and anger.

*Damn Brant for refusing to name a successor.*

A gavel pounded the room to order, and projecting a calm he didn't feel, turned to hear the verdict.

"We have decided," the Elder spoke.

*Banishment. Has to be.*

"Darius Stewart." The Elder continued when he stepped forward, "You are to be banished."

The room erupted in calls, indecipherable in the combined babble. Relief washed through Trey. Things appeared to be going his way. The gavel banged for order once again, and the elder glared at the gathering.

"You will be allowed to start your own pack in the old Alabama lands. Any males of this pack who wish to join you will have one week to decide."

Darius nodded stiffly. "Yes, Elder."

"In accordance with the old laws, you will come back before us in one year's time to be officially recognized. If you can't hold the pack, we'll allow challenges."

*Not if I can help it.*

"I understand, Elder," he said, ignoring the speculative murmur behind him.

"Clear the room," the elder ordered Trey.

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The rest of the meeting would continue in private. It was only a matter of minutes before silence descended on the group, but to him it seemed like hours. He was unexpectedly nervous about putting his plan into action.

Finally, he shut the door behind the last straggler and turned to find the elder, head cocked to the side, studying him. He was the Hunter representative for the meeting, and presented his famed outer composure as he strode to the front of the room.

"Is it time?" the elder asked.

He exhaled in relief. There would be no arguments, no asking him to stay.

"Yes, it is, Elder," he answered, smiling slightly.

He felt Darius and Jackson watching him, obviously wondering what was going on. He'd arrived home two days ago to find everything in turmoil, and had avoided them until this moment.

The elder nodded his acceptance.

"When you swore your oath as Hunter, you also swore to never seek to be Alpha. Is that your intention now?"

"No, Elder," he answered, cringing inwardly at the ritual question. No way in hell was probably an inappropriate answer, but it still found its way to the tip of his tongue. He bit it back, maintaining his still stance before them.

"We hate to lose you, Hunter, but we free from your oath." He shook his head at Jackson and Darius. "But now you will have to choose between your friends. A Hunter doesn't have many to choose from. I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do, Elder."

"Do you stay with the pack or go with Darius?"

"I'll go to Alabama," he answered.

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### **Chapter One**

Lying hidden in a dark back corner of the deck, a sleek black wolf lifted his head as the conversation drifted out. Two women chatted peacefully inside, one small and curvy with rich brown hair. Meg O'Reilly was the pack leader's mate, and in his absence, the pack watched over her. The wolf had come to like her. She was fiery and strong and gave Darius a run for his money.

The other, though, she was an enigma.

Tara Burke. Not his type—average height, too skinny, weird short spiky wine-colored hair.

But since he'd first seen her, he'd been obsessed. He decided she was the perfect height—she'd fit so snugly tucked under his arm. And skinny? No, she was long and sleek, and he longed to feel her legs wrapped around him when he plunged deep into her warm, wet depths.

She had the face of a pixie; delicate upturned nose, funky hair that just barely prevented that face from looking like a high school cheerleader. And her smell. The wolf edged towards the door, breathing deep—cinnamon and chocolate and something that vaguely reminded him of baking bread. That scent was going to be the death of him. She smelled of home and stability, and things a man and wolf like him had no right to dream of.

For two weeks, Darius had been gone. Two weeks filled with hunting for a rogue wolf, guarding Meg O'Reilly, and watching over Tara Burke. The rogue continued to evade him, frustrating him with his

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seeming invisibility. Though it appeared he had stopped stalking their people, Trey's gut told him not to let his guard down. He'd learned that lesson the hard way once before.

Tara stood and carried something to the sink, pausing to stare out at the night. If he wasn't so well hidden, he would swear she looked right at him. His mate. He felt the truth of it deep in his marrow.

He shook his head. He was turning fanciful. The lack of sleep was surely driving him insane. Darius was due home any minute, Thank God, , and after work, Tara had headed straight for Meg's. He was looking forward to some downtime tonight.

When she spoke to Meg, he silently cursed his luck.

"It's nine already," she said on a sigh. "I need to get going if I plan to get any sleep tonight."

He quickly shifted form and reached for his cell phone and clothes tucked in the nearby shadows. He wasn't taking the chance of leaving either woman alone.

The phone was answered on the first ring.

"Randall, I need you to watch Meg," he ordered curtly.

"On my way," the man answered without hesitation.

Once dressed, Trey stepped into the light spilling onto the deck, just as Tara turned. Gasping in surprise, her hand went to her throat. With a pang of regret, he realized she was afraid of *him*, not just his sudden appearance outside the door. He didn't want things to begin between them this way, but he had no time to make unobtrusive arrangements. There was no way he was letting her travel the dark country roads alone.

Meg turned and smiled in question, obviously wondering why one of the werewolves was suddenly making his presence known. A brief half-smile in response was all he could manage before his gaze unerringly returned to Tara.

He saw her several days a week, often making excuses to stop by her shop for coffee, trying to ease her into relaxing around him. But always, as soon as he walked through her door, she tensed, apprehension clear in her pretty blue eyes. His intensity put a lot of people off, but the stab of regret he experienced that his own mate feared him was a surprise.



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A pretty blush spread up her neck to her face, her pulse beating wildly at her throat. Maybe he'd given her too much room. There was alarm in her eyes, yes, but something else she tried to conceal. Interest. She stepped back, breaking free of his stare, and looked helplessly at Meg, who jumped in to introduce them.

"Tara, have you met Trey Williams yet?" She turned and winked at him. "This is my cousin, Tara. She owns the bakery downtown."

"We've met," he replied curtly.

"Yeah," Tara answered in a fake cheery voice. "Well, I need to be heading out." She cast a suspicious look at him. "You gonna be okay?"

Meg laughed. "Fine."

Reaching out, he grabbed her arm before she could step toward the door. Surprised at the shock of recognition and lust that jolted through him at the touch of her skin, he tugged her closer. With every sense focused so acutely on her, it would have been impossible to miss the way her breath caught in her throat, the way her tongue darted over irresistible lips. Meg's discreet cough was the only thing that saved him from claiming an aggressive kiss from the mouth that had been haunting him for weeks.

Reigning in lust, he slid his hand down her arm to capture her fingers. "You can't leave yet," he said softly, noting that her eyes darkened from lust to anger. It was fascinating. Everything about her captivated him.

Pulling free she stepped back, only to find herself brought up short by the tall counter that separated the kitchen and living areas. Compulsively drawn to her, he followed, pinning her in against retreat between two bar stools. Her nostrils flared in anger and she leaned around him to see Meg.

"Can't you do something about this oaf?"

"Um, probably not. No." She laughed, moving to a front window as car lights swept the room.

"That'll be Randall," he said. Looking down at Tara, he added, "As soon as he's settled, I'll take you home."

"I don't think so."

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Palms flat against his chest, she hesitated before pushing him away. His blood heated at her touch, and he almost didn't give her the illusion that she had control of the situation. His wolf side was clamoring to claim her, here and now, willing or not.

A second set of headlights flashing through the room divided his attention. He had made only one phone call.

"Stop!" he barked at Meg, as she reached for the door handle. In a few quick strides he positioned himself between her and the door, while she looked up at him with startled eyes. He nudged her away.

"Go over there with Tara. Let me see who this is."

He waited until she was across the room before easing the door open in time to see Darius sending Randall off. Opening it wider, he moved aside for Darius and retreated to Tara's side.

"Darius!" Meg squealed and rushed across the room. Trey watched, jealousy eating at him as the big man, one of the very few he counted as a friend, swept his mate up in a fierce clasp. He wondered what it would take to get Tara to greet him like that. Even as an observer, the kiss was searing, and he looked away.

Automatically his gaze sought her out, also watching the lovers and gaping in disbelief at her relative. Amusement broke jealousy's grip. Her gaze snapped to him, and he enjoyed the flush that rushed over her skin. He started to reach for her when he heard Darius's humor filled voice behind him.

"Trey, I seem to remember you saying you weren't going to lose your head when it happened to you."

He shot Darius a cautioning look and a slight head shake. Tara was still in the dark about what they were, and her role in his life. It was obvious Darius took the hint when his eyebrow arched in disapproval. Trey ignored him. He was used to going his own way.

Reaching for Tara's keys, he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"What are you doing?" Obviously irritated, she looked between his face and her keys in his hand.

She held her palm out. "Give those back. Please."

Sighing, he laced their fingers together. "I'm taking you home. Get

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over it.”

He wondered if he could get away with taking her to the house a mile down the road that he’d just bought, but one look at her drawn face convinced him not to try. She may have felt something between them, but she obviously wasn’t happy with it.

“Meg will vouch for me. I’m perfectly safe,” he said, trying to look innocent.

“Sure you are,” she said, a grin tugging the corners of her lips when Meg nodded. Theatrically she sighed, moved out of his grasp, and picked up her bag.

“Let’s go then. I have to be at work at three, and the night ain’t getting any younger.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The car ride was disturbingly silent. Her SUV had never felt so closed in before, as it did with the big man seated next to her. She had started to give him directions when they left Meg’s, but his curt, “I know where you live,” had shut her up.

It surprised her that she wasn’t creeped out that he knew. Instead she was curious and, okay, seriously turned on. How had she ended up with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome himself, Trey Williams, the mysterious private investigator who recently bought old man MacCallister’s company?

Meg said he was ok. And a witch would know, right?

Still, it was surreal. First the man started hanging out in her bakery, his cool blue gaze silently taking in every graceless misstep she took. He made her nervous, left her tongue-tied and feeling awkward. Could she help it if he was the personification of masculine perfection? Given half the chance, she was sure that tall lean body would be addicting. He could be her new chocolate. Well, if he was interested, that is. And apparently he wasn’t. Didn’t life suck? Then, to be horribly unfair, he started to haunt her dreams. Incredibly hot, erotic dreams that left her in unfulfilled agony for hours after she woke. Now, faced with the real thing right next to her,

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she was surprised she wasn't panting in need. Her panties had grown uncomfortably wet. How did he do this to her?

Maybe assuming he wasn't interested was a bit erroneous though. Sneaking a look at him, she noticed his jaw clenched hard and his white knuckled grip on the steering wheel. Was he angry or taken by some other emotion?

She'd stopped trying to read him by his third visit to the bakery. This was the most response she had ever seen from him. Always he was calm, often cold, polite but distant, and he never really smiled. She'd like to see him smile, wondered if it lightened the remote look in his eyes. She'd like to see that careful control slip.

"I should probably ask why you know where I live," she finally said, the silence making her rash. "It's kind of weird, you know? And I definitely shouldn't have agreed to let you drive me home. That can't be safe."

If possible, his jaw seemed to get harder. She began to think he wasn't going to answer when he glanced over. She felt him studying her profile in the dark, but he turned back to the road before she looked over.

"You're safe with me. I trust getting in a car with a strange man isn't something you do all the time."

Trying to lighten the mood, she quipped, "Yeah, well, what's strange?"

Arriving in her driveway, he turned off the car and looked at her through narrowed eyes. In her fantasies she was often the focus of those eyes, but filled with lust. This look was pure angry predator, and she unconsciously shrank back against the door. Certain she had crossed some invisible line in the sand, she reached with a slight tremor for the door handle.

"I need my keys," she croaked out, heart in her throat.

In a slow deliberate motion he reached for them, not taking his eyes off of her. "I'll see you in. We need to talk."

*Talking is just about the last thing I want to do with you.* Amazing. Even a little afraid of his mood, she was horny. Maybe more than before she opened her big mouth. His anger turned her on?

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*Sick, Tara. Sick and twisted.*

At the door she held her hand out, but he guided her out of the way and opened it, crowding in behind her to swing it closed. Switching on the little lamp on the entry table, she turned around to face him, her mouth suddenly dry. She wasn't thinking clearly or at all maybe, lust fogged her brain and she had let a man, one she knew instinctively was dangerous, into her home. *What the hell am I thinking?*

"Well, thanks for seeing me in," she said. "I have a very early morning tomorrow, so we should probably talk later."

Taking a deep breath, she mentally prepared herself to kick him out, but when she opened her mouth again, he was there. Snaking one arm around her waist and using the other to cup the back of her neck, he bent over her, his mouth catching the breath she exhaled.

She gasped at the rough invasion of his tongue, the sharp nip of his teeth against her lip. He stepped away, but she twisted her hands in his shirt and stood on her toes. Growling softly, he picked her up and deepened the kiss briefly before setting her down. He leaned his forehead against hers, breath coming in ragged pants.

"I'm staying tonight," he said gruffly. "Where am I sleeping?"

Fantasy Man staying the night? She tried to blink away the sudden vision of him wrapped, definitely naked, around her.

"Don't think about it. Go with your instinct," he said in a low voice, firm fingers lifting her chin, forcing her to meet his heated gaze. Answering heat curled through her body and stepping into his embrace, she didn't think.

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### **Chapter Two**

"Bedroom?" he asked. And she led him down the hall.

Once inside, he shut the door and leaned against it. "Take your clothes off," he ordered softly.

With trepidation, she reached for the edges of her T-shirt and pulled. Clutching it in her hand, she searched his face for signs of what he was feeling. Was that tenseness lust? Disappointment? She had never inspired great passion in the men in her life. She was too thin, narrow hipped, with small breasts and no butt. None of those attributes they seemed obsessed with.

"Keep going," he encouraged in a raspy voice.

Dropping the shirt, she reached for the fly on her jeans and quickly stripped them off. Next came her bra and panties and she stood before him, bare and tense. She raised her chin. Fuck him, if he didn't like what he saw. She turned to the bed and pulled the duvet down. She heard the rustle of his clothes and felt him move.

He stood behind her, his body pressed to hers, and dipped his head to her neck. Her blood began a slow simmer. With light bites, he worked his way up the length of her throat, turning her when he reached her chin. He claimed her lips, his hungry tongue delving into her mouth, overwhelming her. With a gentle push, he had her sprawled on the bed.

He studied her long enough to make her worry. More than a minute, less than five. If she wasn't so caught up in it, she would have found it interesting that she wanted him so much, yet was so afraid of his

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reaction. Would he ever speak?

He came down on top of her, nestled between her legs.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, taking her face in his hands, and then she quit thinking altogether.

He kissed his way down her neck, pausing at her collarbone, continued to trail kisses to her breasts. At first, he visited each with reverence, as if paying homage, then concentrated on her nipples. He bit, he laved, he sucked. She was in heaven.

Thank God he wasn't done. Slowly trailing downward, he kissed his way to her belly. He tongued her navel, and fire shot to her pussy. Her hips arched up, trying to find his mouth, and he made his way lower. He sucked on her clit, and she felt the waves build and roll, and after what seemed an eternity of waiting for this one man, her orgasm rolled through her. The intensity left her weak and shaking; she had never felt anything like it. *So this is how it's supposed to be!*

He held onto his control by a very thin thread. His wolf demanded he plunge into her, claim her now and irrevocably, but a small sane part of him remembered that he wanted—*needed*—more than physical compliance.

*Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.* Her response was tentative and unaffected; when she came apart in his mouth he almost joined her. With her taste still on his tongue, he leaned up to kiss her again, fingers delving into her, preparing her for the invasion of his cock. So tight. He sucked in a hard breath, imagining her clamping around him.

His tongue imitated the rhythm his body demanded, plunging quickly in and out, and when he felt her begin to cling against his hand, he knew she was ready. Inch by slow inch he sank into her, wanting to savor the sensation. He gritted his teeth, holding completely still and riding out her second orgasm. When it was finished, he began to stroke a fast and furious rhythm for himself.

He'd never felt anything so intense. Sex was a means to an end, a tension relieving exercise. This was...he wasn't sure. Almost too intense, he decided, not examining it too closely. It was enough to know he could have it over and over again. His orgasm didn't build in the increments he

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was accustomed to. It overwhelmed him, striking all at once, leaving him spent and replete in her arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Glaring at the bleeping alarm with its bright red 2:30 staring back at her, Tara managed to hit the snooze button and fall back on the bed. Right into Trey. *Oh my.* She smiled, pleasure licking deliciously at her insides. *Not a dream after all.* Planning an unhurried study, she rolled over to find him propped on one elbow, watching her.

"Hey," she said, heat thrumming through her.

That shouldn't be possible. After the third time he woke her in the night, she should be uninterested. The tenderness between her thighs was certainly at odds with the lust in her blood. She couldn't help the wince that went through her when his fingers gently fluttered over her pussy.

"You're sore," he said, eyes blazing.

And getting wetter by the second. A thrill went through her, knowing he couldn't miss that little piece of news.

Instead of rolling over her, he stood and walked into her tiny bathroom. She heard him rummaging around the cabinet, and wondered for half a second what he was looking for before diving back under the covers. When he lifted the blankets to get back in bed, cool air bit at her skin and goose bumps rose along her body. She shivered when he rolled her easily onto her stomach and dribbled something on her back.

She yelped. "Hey, that's cold!"

"Baby oil," he grunted. "A backrub will help loosen up stiff muscles," he whispered close to her ear.

He stretched out next to her, his body heat seeping into her skin. The shivering subsided while his hands gently traced the contours of her back. "I'm sorry I was so...insatiable."

"The best sex of my life, and you're sorry?" she grumbled. Irritated, she buried her nose in the pillow, enjoying the increasing pressure kneading sore muscles in her back. "Wouldn't you know it?"

"Best sex of you life, huh?" he asked, fingers pushing, working out



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a knot. She heard a grin in his voice and her heart flipped. So much for getting him out of her system.

Relaxing, she closed her eyes with a lazy smile. "Yeah," she answered.

She felt him shift his body over hers, pressing her into the bed. A delicious feeling of warmth and well-being curled through her.

"So you won't mind repeating it tonight," he growled softly, nuzzling her neck, and sending tendrils of anticipation through her.

Opening her eyes, she slowly turned her head to look at him, her sleep- and lust-fogged brain finally registering and instinctively withdrawing from this unaccustomed tableau. Bright blue eyes drilled into her with possession.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," she answered softly. One-night stands were supposed to end at one night, right? She couldn't imagine getting used to him, getting used to the craving for him, and then him disappearing from her life.

The growl deepened, sending fear skittering along her nerves. If she didn't know better, she'd look around for an animal. Make that a menacing animal.

"It is an excellent idea," he said roughly, bending to nip her nape sharply. "Tonight." Nip. "And every night." Nip. "For a very, very long time, Tara."

She was panting by the time he captured her lips in a searing kiss that curled her toes, making the foggy lust return. With a gentle nudge he pinned her on her belly, trailing kisses down her spinal cord, his hands working the sore muscles in her thighs. His mouth and hands met together over her ass. Spreading the cheeks, his tongue made one long sweep from the small of her back to her aching clit. The feeling was so exquisite she arched, whether trying to move from his grasp or into it, she couldn't say. He moved between her legs, spreading her thighs to accommodate his broad shoulders and lapped at her, everywhere but the swollen nub of her clitoris. Lost in the moment, she whimpered when he pulled away. Consumed by lust, by the need to come, she tried rolling over, but he easily held her in place.

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"Please, Trey. You're killing me here."

Fingers dancing over her pussy, his breath fanned hotly over her ass cheeks.

"You want this?" he asked, pushing one finger slowly in her clenching channel.

"Yes!"

Adding a swirl of his tongue over her clit, he asked, "Tonight?"

"Yesss," she hissed, arching her hips up.

"Every night," he said, moving his thumb to slowly circle over her clitoris.

"More," she begged, reaching for climax, holding tight to the twisted sheets. Pushing another finger into her pussy and pressing harder and faster against her, he finally let her come. Still racked by shudders, he hauled her up and bent her over the dresser standing next to the bed. She didn't get the chance to brace herself before he pushed his cock into her. He clasped her hands, arms wrapped under her belly, and waited until she met his gaze in the mirror. She pushed back against him, the heat still racing through her blood, but he easily held her still. She gasped as he withdrew and plunged deep.

"Mine," he growled, holding her dazed gaze in the mirror.

She nodded, refusing to give voice to the part of her that agreed. Her body was hot for him, but her brain screamed caution. When she moved back against him, he pinned her down, teeth clamped on her shoulder. Instead of finding the show of dominance a turn off, she started to pulse around his cock. He began a slow steady rhythm, building to pound into her with sure, long strokes. She felt the tightening in his body, heralding his orgasm as her own rolled through her.

Panting, They collapsed across the dresser, and she tried to grapple with what had just happened. Though it was incredible—she felt incredible at least—it almost felt like a punishment. As if he planned to use mind-blowing sex to get his way or deal with perceived defiance.

Without speaking, he withdrew and carried her to the shower, gently cleaning her body and then his, while she stood under the lukewarm water and watched. He towed them off in silence and before

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she knew it, they were entering the back door of the darkened bakery. He left her studying the gleaming surfaces to make coffee, and she quickly lost herself in the morning routine.

Trey inhaled the scent of rich coffee and counted to ten. The aroma calmed him more than the counting, but at the same time reminded him of his differences. Most weres hated coffee, the smell overwhelming their senses. So he liked coffee. So what? He was a loner in a wolf pack. Not so unusual. And a mate not in control of his urges. Also not so unusual.

He groaned, the sound soft and carrying only his ears as he faced the root of what bothered him this morning. The problem, as he saw it, was that Tara didn't know who he was, or what he was. Would she be able to accept him when she found out? Or would she be one of the rare mates who tried to go her own way, unable to deal with the predator in her life?

When she'd questioned their future, he had felt his wolf rise up and take control. After a taste of her, he knew he couldn't let her go. The Hunter in him would never give her up. A part of him was ashamed that he would treat his mate so roughly, but the other side sat back supremely satisfied. If he was a cat, he'd still be purring.

Pouring two cups, he listened to pots banging behind the kitchen door, wondering if she was still knotted with tension from the drive over. He smirked.

*I could take care of that for her.*

Pushing quietly through the swing door, he took a moment to look her over. In low-slung jeans and a T-shirt, she was lovely, but the dark circles under her eyes gave him pause. He'd done that, he thought, with a pang of remorse. Tonight he'd have to be more in control, make sure she got enough sleep. He sighed, wishing things were already settled between them. He knew he was in for a fight.

He set her coffee down, picked up his laptop and sat at the desk in the back corner. Might as well get some work done. The rogue wolf was still at large and still a mystery. He went through his mental file on the Society while he waited for the computer to boot up. This one didn't fit any known profiles that he was aware of, but there were too many who

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were unknown to the Hunters. They had long suspected that the Society's numbers were much larger than previous estimates. Running across an unknown rogue seemed to confirm that belief. *Of course, this one could be a lone wolf.* He'd left no calling card after all.

He signed online, trying to ignore the temptation a few feet away. The tension was beginning to ebb from her body, and he watched, fascinated, as she moved in graceful, economical strides about the compact kitchen. A sign that she was starting to relax around him, or that she could tune him out while she worked?

He turned to the computer, typing the name of the Hunter database in the browser. After going through its security, he went back to his search of known members, checking MOs against the current killings. He'd read them so many times, he had them memorized, and nothing new jumped out at him. He turned to the message boards, but there was no new information there, either.

He had one lead, a message on his voice mail from the real estate agent who'd sold him his house, that she'd rented a house on the lake yesterday. The need to check it out warred with his need to stay and guard Tara. He had no reason to suspect the outlaw was still around, or that she was in danger, and blamed it on his newfound possessive streak. He clenched his jaw. As long as she kept the doors locked it should be safe, but would she do as he asked?

"I need to go check something out for a case I'm working on." She jumped at his softly spoken words and turned from a large mixing bowl to face him, a strained smile on her face.

"Sure," she said, arching an eyebrow. "I don't know why you're here, anyway. I don't need a babysitter."

He packed away the computer, and slung the strap over his shoulder.

"I want you to lock the door behind me," he said, waiting beside it. "Don't let anyone in."

"I always lock it when I'm closed. That's just good sense."

"Good," he whispered, running the back of his knuckles along her cheek. He was rewarded by a gasp and flash of awareness in her eyes. "I'll

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be back in a little while."

"And I'm supposed to let you in?" she asked with a slow smile.

"Oh yeah," he said on a laugh. "You're always supposed to let me in."

He caught her lips in a lingering kiss, one that promised a long night of passion, then forced himself to step away before tonight became right now.

Dawn was creeping up as he turned down the long dirt road leading to the house the agent had directed him to. He didn't bother with concealment. The name on the lease was a fake, but there was no doubting the woman's description. The question was, why was he here?

Trey parked the car and getting out, he looked around. It was a rundown bungalow with a sagging front porch stretching along its front. The yard, though recently cut, was weedy, the flower beds nothing more than dirt.

The front door opened and a tall lean man stepped out. A predator. He casually leaned against the rail with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Wondered when you'd show up," he said.

"What are you doing here, Jackson?"

He laughed. "Right to the point. Retiring hasn't mellowed you any, huh?"

Trey arched an eyebrow and walked up the steps to the porch. Did he need to mellow? No one had ever dared suggest such a thing. He was always the picture of tranquility, always centered. Until Tara had upset his equilibrium.

"No point in beating around the bush, is there?" he asked.

Jackson laughed again.

"Come in and have some tea. I'll explain everything."

"Tea?" he said with a wince, following Jackson into a tiny, sparse kitchen.

"Sorry," Jackson snorted. "You're the only werewolf I know who drinks coffee."

"Why are you here?" Trey grimaced at the cup, taking a drink of the tea.

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Jackson ignored the question. "So you're the Beta? The enforcer?"

"Eric is Beta," Trey answered, raising an eyebrow. What was going on here? This was common knowledge ten minutes after the last High Council meeting.

"But you're the enforcer."

"I'm whatever Darius needs me to be, for the good of the pack," he said coolly. "Surely you're not challenging his authority in his own territory."

Jackson stiffened in reaction to the quiet demand in his voice. Trey smiled. According to their laws, he could not be Alpha, but they both knew what the outcome of fight between them would be. Jackson stood little chance. He let the Hunter in him rise to the surface, calm and ready to leap for his old friend's throat.

Jackson backed down with reluctance, an Alpha visibly reaching for control. Clenched hands loosened their hold on his mug, breathing slowed. Trey watched the changes with mild interest, mind wandering to Tara. He blinked, snapping his attention back to the small kitchen.

"Why are you here, Jackson?"

"We were friends once, the four of us," he said.

Trey snorted. "How far did you expect that friendship to go when Brant died and you both claimed the pack?" He added curiously, "What did you think would happen?"

"I thought Darius would accept my leadership," he said, agitation clear in his motions..

This time Trey laughed. "No you didn't."

"Ok, maybe I didn't. But I didn't expect for you and Eric to both follow him here." He raised his hand before Trey could respond to that. "That's not important. I don't want to see Darius fail. I came to see if I could help."

Trey stretched his legs in front of him, leaned back and cross his arms over his chest. The idea that a Hunter, even a retired Hunter, needing help was absurd. That he, the most famous Hunter in a generation needed help, was ludicrous.

"Does the Council know you're here?" he asked, careful to

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modulate the suspicion out of his voice.

"Only the Elder. And the Hunters," he added reluctantly.

Ah, things began to fall in line. He nodded. "There's a message?"

Jackson looked at him oddly, shook his head. "No message. Only suspicion, and a warning to watch your back."

Trey waited for him to continue.

"There are rumors that the Society is organizing some kind of move against us. Against the Council." He shrugged. "And you have some unknown rogue in an area that has been free of all weres for a couple of generations."

He studied the signs few would see that betrayed Jackson's agitation. "What else?"

"You don't miss much, do you?" he asked with a short laugh.

Trey shrugged, the image of nonchalance. "Darius won't be happy to find you here."

"Surely Darius will accept the willing assistance of a fellow pack leader," Jackson said coldly. "I'm not here to challenge him. I just assume solve this little problem and go home."

"Maybe," Trey said. "There's still something you aren't telling me, though."

"I was...drawn here," he finally answered. "You and I are the oldest. Old to still have no mate."

Trey blinked, surprised at the change in the conversation, and felt a tick start in his jaw. The need to find and protect a mate trumped every other instinct of their kind. He lifted an eyebrow, silently urging Jackson to continue. Jackson walked to the window, and Trey wondered if he would continue the point.

"Eric met Mary shortly before the Council met. By all accounts, Darius has met his mate here." He laughed. "I'd like to meet the woman who could tame Darius."

"I doubt he wants you to meet her," Trey said dryly.

"Probably not." Jackson turned, grinning.

"And what about you, Trey? We're the oldest, you and I."

Trey went still while Jackson studied him. Finally he nodded.

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"What's her name?"

"Tara."

"I'm glad for you."

He opened the backdoor, sniffed the air.

"There's something about this place. I know she's here." He shot Trey a fierce look. "And I'm not leaving until I find her."

Silence fell while Trey considered how to present the situation to Darius. None of them were going to test the instincts of a were hunting his mate, and he was pretty sure he now knew all the reasons for Jackson's appearance. There was no question about letting his old friend stay.

Still... "You could be wrong. Could just be wishful thinking."

"I'm not," Jackson said softly.

He stood and pulled a business card out of his back pocket, leaving it on the counter. It was time to go.

"Don't approach Darius until I have a chance to warn him you're here. And why," he said as he turned to leave. "I'd hate to have to explain to the Council why I let you two tear each other apart."



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### **Chapter Three**

Tara was gone when he woke, and he felt a moment's panic. Shock coursed through him. He never panicked. Grunting, he made his way to her tiny shower. He'd be glad when he could relocate her to his house. One, it was bigger, and two, he was less jittery there. And the nerves thing was going to drive him crazy soon.

Some weres chose to live in cities and towns. He was used to spending small amounts of time in those environments working as a Hunter, but it was never a comfortable experience. Humanity pushed in on him. But he had no choice as long as Tara fought the pull of the mate-bond. He stayed where she did.

Later in the kitchen, he checked the time, amazed that he'd slept in so late. His internal clock never let him go past five, no matter how little sleep he was operating on. It was a measure of his comfort with the woman that he could settle in so deep a sleep. He poured coffee, smiling and letting the memory of last night flow over him. Who knew she would add so many normalcies to his life? Who knew normal could be so appealing?

He took her out to dinner. A first for him. And this was a woman who enjoyed food. He'd watched her, entranced, surprised at how sensual the act of eating was, hard as rock for the two hours they'd sat in the restaurant. Which was better? Enjoying her company there or getting her home and getting inside her? Something he'd managed two steps inside the front door. The memory had him growing harder by the second.

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After assigning one of the weres to keep watch over her, and angry with his unruly body, he forced his mind back to his job. He had nothing to go on and was getting nowhere fast. A run was what he needed, and maybe some time spent cleaning up the disaster of a house he'd bought.

After a short drive, less than ten minutes out of town, he was facing the place. It was a two story Victorian with wide porches around three sides. It was surrounded by woods and most important, it had three ground floor exits. It was sound, but cosmetically a disaster. He was looking forward to the challenge of bringing it back, but first things first. He stripped in the yard, tossing his clothes to the porch, and shifted. Embracing the strength and wildness of the wolf, he loped into the forest.

He ran full out for an hour before slowing to a walk better suited to explore. He'd made a big loop, ending up back in his neighborhood, and set about getting to know it inside and out.

By the time he'd worked off most of his frustration, he was running behind schedule. After a quick shower, he hurried back to town, relieved to find he'd not only beat Jackson to *O'Reilly's*, but Darius and Eric too.

He found a table in the back corner of the bar, sat with his back to the wall, and waited. Darius and Eric arrived first, and joined him in silence. He accepted a beer from the waitress and waited for her to leave with their orders before speaking.

"Is there any particular reason we're having this meeting?" he asked Darius.

"Other than to find out why he's here, you mean?"

"We know that already."

Darius shrugged. "So, I want to hear it from him."

The waitress showed up with their beers and the table fell silent again. He was relieved when he caught a glimpse of red hair. It would be unlike Darius to pick a fight with Jackson while Meg was around. More like a truce. Maybe the memory of their lifelong friendship had finally asserted itself.

They turned as one when the door opened. With amusement Trey noted the tension level at the table ratchet up a few dozen degrees. You'd never know they had instigated this meeting. Jackson approached with

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pure Alpha bravado, and Darius bristled. Trey bit back a laugh.

When he sat, Jackson slid an envelope to Trey and turned to study the other two. Trey lightly tapped the edge of the envelope against the table with affected boredom. It looked to be an interesting show.

Darius finally spoke after the waitress had delivered an un-requested beer to Jackson. "You told Trey why you're here. Now tell me."

He was surprised when Jackson started talking instead of arguing, though it was obvious he'd prefer a fight. His jaw ticked, and under the table his fists were clenched. Obviously uncomfortable with his back to the door, he fidgeted.

"The Elder thought maybe you'd like some help, and the Hunters sent that this morning." He nodded to the envelope in Trey's hand.

"Why'd they sent it to you?" Darius asked.

Trey would like to know the answer to that, too.

"Apparently, they don't have a permanent address for any of you," he answered sardonically.

He grunted. Probably true. He and Eric very recently purchased homes. Darius moved in with Meg. They were buying everything that came on the market on that corner of the lake.

He looked at the envelope. It had the Hunter insignia pressed in wax on the back lip. He slit it open, and he made a quick scan of the contents in disbelief. Folding it up, he put it in a pocket and caught Darius's eye.

"Hunter spies report that the Society has put a hit out on me."

Darius laughed, but stopped abruptly when he didn't join in.

"You're serious?"

Trey just looked at him. He never joked.

Darius swore. "We have a problem then."

Trey raised an eyebrow. "I have a problem," he said. "And it's nothing I can't deal with."

Darius narrowed his eyes. Trey noted with amusement that Eric and Jackson tried to subtly slide back. Nobody wanted to get between Darius and Trey if it came to a fight.

"You aren't a Hunter anymore. You're a member of my pack. A

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mated member of my pack," he reminded Trey.

He hadn't considered that, but it didn't change anything. He'd deal with the outlaw on his own, and he would protect his own. Frustration rolled through him. He couldn't drag Tara along on his hunt for a rogue wolf. The realization that he would have to accept help was painful, and Darius saw the moment he reached it.

"It's a pack thing. Remember?"

He'd been on the outside of the pack for so long, he didn't remember. This is what he'd wanted, right? To belong to the pack again? But it was uncomfortable, making his way back to the inside.

He was saved from trying to frame a reply by the door opening. Her scent encircled him first, and he saw Eric stiffen, too, with recognition of his own mate. He met Trey's gaze.

"Did you know about this?"

Trey shook his head, drinking her in. The last time he'd seen her she was wrapped around him. The memory rocked him. In her usual jeans and tank top uniform, she carried take out bags to the far end of the bar where Meg greeted her and Mary, Tim's mate, with a hug. The three of them settled in, completely ignoring the table of men in the bar's front corner.

Amused at this display of independence, Trey turned back to Eric.

"Tara did say something about lunch with the girls. I didn't know it would be here."

Jackson watched curiously. "So, who's who?" he asked, then listened while Eric pointed them out.

The conversation turned neutral then, with Jackson catching them up on gossip and news of the home pack, and Darius shared some news of their own. Trey was preparing to claim his woman and leave when the bar's door opened again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jackson stiffen and slowly turn to see the woman whose scent drifted through the door. They all blinked when she walked through. Short, but projecting stately image, she carried an aura of power. Black hair hung straight to her hips, and her face carried the unmistakable stamp of a Native American.

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She stopped and slowly turned her head to look at them. Trey had the impression she memorized all their features before moving on to the group of women in the back. She pulled Tara aside and spoke to her heatedly for a couple of minutes before striding out of the bar. Her exit broke the spell that had held Jackson in place.

"Who is she?" he asked Trey.

"I don't know," he answered, shaking his head.

"But she knows your woman."

"Yeah," he answered, rising as Tara approached with a quizzical expression on her face.

"Hey, baby." He caught her lips in a quick kiss before she pulled away. Trey quickly introduced her to Jackson and Eric.

"What brings you over here? You didn't tell me you were going to be here today," he gently reprimanded.

She raised an eyebrow in response, eyes laughing. She shook that off before answering with a question of her own.

"I was just wondering what has my cousin warning me against you," she said blandly.

"Cousin?" Jackson jumped in.

"Yes, my cousin," she answered dryly. "I'm sure you noticed her. No one ever fails to, unless she wants to blend in."

Jackson grinned, throwing on the charm. Trey's hackles rose, but he fought it down. The woman was obviously his mate.

"You're lovely yourself, but my friend, Trey, assures me you're taken. He'd get testy if I tried to steal his girlfriend."

She shook her head and relaxed enough for a low laugh. Trey pulled her close to his side and made a show of glowering at Jackson.

"So. You were telling me about your cousin," Jackson said, smiling at her again.

"No. I wasn't." She smiled back. "But since you asked so nicely, what was it you wanted to know?"

"Her name would be a good start. Marital status. Address. Blood type. You know, the usual stuff," he joked. None of it was really a joke, though.

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Tara laughed again.

"Her name is Summer. She's a zoologist, and you can forget the rest. I'm not telling."

"Does she live here?"

"Some of the time. She goes where the research grants are."

"But she's living here now?" Jackson persisted.

Tara cocked her head to the side and looked him up and down. Trey saw the moment she decided she'd had enough. Her eyes narrowed and her gaze swept over the entire group.

"She'll be back in few days. What I'd like to know is what about the four of you that made her so nervous. She's not the nervous type."

"What did she say?" Trey asked.

"She said not to get too close, and to watch my back." she smiled sweetly at him.

"You can trust me," he responded.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" he asked, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "How am I supposed to convince you?"

"Time." She shrugged and walked away.

"Wait!" Jackson called. She stopped, and looked over her shoulder, eyebrow raised in question. "She's a zoologist?"

Tara nodded.

"What does she study?"

"Wolves."

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### Chapter Four

She woke to bright sunlight sneaking through the bedroom's blinds, and rolled over to snuggle back into Trey. He wasn't there. Listening to the silence of the house, she decided he'd already gone. He'd said something last night about finishing some work early and spending her day off with her. Maybe he'd be back soon.

She frowned. She was getting too attached too quickly, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She wanted to blame it all on the sex. It was unbelievable. Head. Powerful. She stretched, little aches zinging through her body to places that hadn't been so well used in, well, ever. She grinned. Yep, blame it on the sex.

Imagine her surprise when Mr. Taciturn turned out to be fascinating, even if she did have to drag information out of him. He'd been everywhere investigating whatever it was he investigated. She frowned again. That was apparently off limits. She understood client confidentiality and all that, but surely he could talk about it in general terms. He looked for missing people. Couldn't he talk about the ones he'd found? He claimed to always locate whoever he went looking for, too. With that kind of track record he should be a cop.

The air conditioner blasted on, and she burrowed deep under the covers. His smell, woodsy and masculine, seemed to embrace her, making her heartbeat kick up.

*Amazing. A man's lingering scent has me revved up.*

She glanced at the clock. Nine a.m. She groaned. He wouldn't be back for

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hours.

*What the hell.* She lightly trailed her fingertips around her nipples, imagining his tongue on the same path. Giving into temptation, she pinched them, conjuring his sharp teeth nipping at her. Who knew a little pain went so far? Her pussy creamed. Leaving one hand working her nipples, she spread the cream around her clit, aching for a touch, but drawing out the torment. Finally, panting, she reached for the hard nub, and imagining it was Trey's mouth on her as she finished herself off with a few hard strokes. She came with long sweet ripples and relaxed, sighing, back into the bed.

She drifted between waking and sleep before her early-riser's brain finally nudged her up. She never slept in. *But it's a luxury I might adjust too.* Especially if it came with great sex.

Winning, she stepped under the showerhead and adjusted the temperature down from scalding to a more comfortable heat. She didn't know how Trey could stand it. The masochist. She leaned against the wall and let the water sluice over her.

He wanted her to see his house today, and she suspected he wanted to switch their nights together to his place. Not that they'd had a night apart. She scowled. She loved her place, a 900 square foot restored shotgun house. It was not a Trey-sized house. No wonder he'd mentioned relocating to his place a couple of times. Okay, in all fairness, it may have been a few times. Problem was she got the impression if she spent one night there, she'd have spent her last night here.

Not willing to deal with the reality of his possessiveness yet, and with the afternoon yawning before her, she towed off. He'd left the coffee pot pre-set for her, and a note saying he looked forward to the afternoon when he was free. At his house. She laughed, halfway accepting the inevitable. He was certainly persistent.

She poured a cup of coffee, lacing it with a liberal dose of French Vanilla creamer, and sat on the sofa with her current romance book. Some time later, she returned to the kitchen for more coffee and looked for something to munch on. She was surprised to see twelve o'clock flashing at her from the oven's digital display, and decided on a light lunch.



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Chicken salad sounded good and she started dragging out ingredients. She was reaching for the can opener for the chicken, when a sound from outside caught her attention. She cocked her head to the side. What was that?

She cautiously edged her way up the hall, straining to hear it again. Scratching? Odd. It was coming from the front door. Feeling a tendrill of apprehension, she went to look out the window rather than open the door, and jumped back three feet when she did. Heart hammering, she crept back to for a second look. Yep, there was definitely a wolf out there.

She ran back to the kitchen for the phone, but it was dead when she picked it up. She snorted with exasperation. Reliable phone service was not a high priority on the local company's list. It was out again. She reached for her purse and her cell phone, but came up empty. Maybe she'd remembered to plug it in last night. But she didn't find it in the bathroom or the living room in her usual 'charge the phone' spots. Damn. She had a vague memory of dropping it in the side pocket of her car's door yesterday.

She tiptoed back to the window and snuck a look out. No wolf. She eyed her car and decided not to risk it. She hoped Trey would show up soon.

*Okay, so I'm a wuss. I can live with that.*

She was not going to be one of those stupid 'please kill me now' horror movie characters. No heroics here, thank you. Trey would be back soon. And in the meantime, maybe she'd just pack a bag for a couple of nights.

She was in the master bedroom stuffing her make-up bag when she heard the pop and shatter. Tossing the zipped bag on the bed, she slowly walked down the hall and paused at the living room entrance. Glass was everywhere—the popping sound had undoubtedly been a gun. Anger surged through her.

*The hell with this.*

Stalking back to her room, she dug into the back of her closet and pulled out her dad's old shotgun. Good ol' Dad even left her rounds. She shoved one into the chamber as she jogged for the back door. She'd go to

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her neighbor's and call the police.

She stuck her head out and looked around before jumping off the back stoop and running next-door, where her neighbor was cautiously peering out the door.

"Someone shot my house," she said, stepping into the neighbor's house.

The police told her to wait there, and she stayed until the sirens stopped out front. It wasn't until she was arguing with an older officer about the wolf that she thought about calling Trey.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was in his office in town before dawn. After the Hunter's use of Jackson as a messenger service, he'd called in and provided the address. There might be more news, and he couldn't afford delay.

With nothing new that might help with the outlaw hunt, he settled behind his desk and dived into backed up paperwork. His routine had been disrupted since he'd claimed Tara. Instead of finding that fact bothersome, he welcomed the change. She brought light back into the life that had been dim for so long.

By the time he typed his final report and paid the bills that had arrived in the last week, the sun was edging its way up the sky. His instinct was to go to Tara, but he had one more thing to check before he could indulge his body's need for her. Grabbing his keys, he strode out to his SUV and made the short drive to his house.

The cleaning crew had been busy. Years of neglect had been scrubbed from the walls and floors, and the kitchen was somewhat presentable. More importantly, his furniture had arrived. He checked the downstairs library first, assuring that his desk was delivered and noted the boxes of books piled against one wall. Then he jogged up the stairs to the bedroom he'd decided to use.

His bed had arrived. It was the only thing in the room and was waiting in the center, left for him to place. He walked around it, studying it with a critical eye. It was old brass, his parents' bed, and his

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grandparents' before that. He'd slept uncomfortably in the king-sized four-poster for years. What would Tara think of it? He had a sudden vision of her stretched out like a feast for him on it. Oh yeah, he was right to have ship the bed down. It would feel like his now.

The room was on the front of the house and had a big bay window facing the front yard. He pushed the bed to the opposite wall so the light of the sun and moon would stream across its occupants. Imagining Tara naked and bathed in moonlight, he smiled. Perfect.

The mental picture was interrupted by his cell voice message beep. Irritated, he pulled it out and listened with growing interest as he went to his SUV.

He followed the real estate agent's directions to a bungalow a few miles from his house. It was tucked in a tiny cove on the lake and looked abandoned. The rent was two months late and the leaseholder, Bradley Jones, had been unaccounted for and evicted, but showed up in the rental office looking to catch up and move back in. Unfortunately, with the spurt of recent area purchases, the owners had decided to sell. The agent reported that Jones did not take the news well, but was convinced to take another house. Adrenalin surged through him—this was his guy. The story was too odd, too off—Jones went out of town for a couple months and forgot about his rent? Then again, it wouldn't be the first time someone called him paranoid.

He parked and walked around the house. It was small, probably only one bedroom, and needed upkeep. The smell hit him on the back porch and excitement coursed through him. The scent was faded, but unmistakably that of the wolf who'd fought with Darius last month. Luck was with him and he didn't have to pick the lock on the door. The scent was much stronger inside. He'd found the outlaw.

Either the kitchen had been emptied, or Jones never ate at home. He found a few dishes in the cabinet and a broken coffee maker in the pantry. Moving into the next room, a combination living/dining room, wasn't anymore enlightening. An old sagging sofa sat in the center in front an older model 20" television. There were no books, no magazines, no unpaid bills, no old newspapers, only a thick layer of dust. Hoping to

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hit pay dirt, he bypassed the bathroom and headed for the house's last room, the bedroom.

The small space was dominated by an uncovered bed, which was flanked by a nightstand and a bureau. The open closet was empty. He opened the dresser and found it bare.

The nightstand was next. The top drawer was as stripped as the dresser, and he held his breath when he pulled on the bottom knob. A piece of paper rested in it. Lifting it out, he saw a list of names scrawled on it divided by a line. He scanned it quickly, a chill running down his spine when he reached the end.

The first three names were well known to the Hunters, all men high-placed in the Society. The next group was every adult were in his pack, followed by every mate. Meg and Tara brought up the end, circled in red.

Alarm coursed through him as he punched out Darius's number on his cell, racing for his car, and hurried to fill him in. Next he tried Tara. The line was busy and her cell went to voice mail. He left a clipped message telling her to call him as soon as possible and let no one in.

His world crashed when he reached her house after what seemed to be the longest drive of his life, to see the street full of squad cars. Pushing his way through the door, he found her on the couch.

"Oh, thank God," she said, when he pulled her into his arms. "The weirdest thing happened. I heard scratching on the door and when I looked out the window, there was a wolf there, I swear. I know wolves. I used to do these summer retreat things with Summer. I know it was a wolf!" She shot a dirty look at the cops milling around. "They don't believe me, but I know what I saw. Then, like ten minutes later, someone freaking shot my front window!"

He wasn't sure who was shaking more, him or her. His wolf snarled with rage, wanting to howl and rend. He'd failed to protect her. It would be the last time, he vowed. Like it or not, she was coming home, and he would not let her out of his sight again.

One of the officers approached, a man Trey knew from some of his previous investigations.

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"Williams." He nodded in greeting. "Miss, do you have any idea who would do this?"

He watched her struggle with the question and shake her head. Guiding her to the sofa, he pulled her down and kept his arm around her. The adrenaline rush had really knocked her for a loop. Still shaking, goose bumps popped up on her flesh and her breath was shallow.

Eyes narrowed, he turned back to the officer. "Can't you do this later, Browning?"

"No," she whispered. "Let's get it over with. I've already been through it a half dozen times."

"Okay. One more time, baby." His glare made it clear to Browning once more was all he was getting.

She let out a deep breath that could have been a sigh. "About noon, I decided to get something to eat. I heard something scratching at the door and went to check." She glared at Browning. "I saw a wolf. I know y'all don't believe me, but I know what I saw. Anyway, it was weird. Really weird. So I went to call y'all, but the phone was dead. Then I went looking for my cell phone, but remembered I'd left it in the car."

She took a deep breath and looked back and forth between the two of them. He squeezed her hand in reassurance, and she gave him a weak smile that had his heart flip-flopping.

"I decided I'd take Trey up on his offer to stay the weekend at his place."

He raised an eyebrow. He'd certainly been thinking it, but hadn't gone so far as to ask for fear she'd bolt.

"When I was packing, I heard the shot and window break. It pissed me off. I got Dad's shotgun out of my closet, loaded it, and went out the back door to my neighbor's to call the police. And that's it."

His wolf was howling for release again, but this time it wanted to turn her over his knee. She went outside? With a shotgun?

"Do you at least know how to fire this shotgun?" he clipped out.

She looked at him like he'd grown horns. "Of course."

"Don't ever do that again. Scratch that. I don't have to worry about it because I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

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Obviously not wanting to get in the middle of a lover's spat, the officer prepared to leave. "Um, if we need anything else from you Miss Burke, we'll be in touch. Where can I reach you?"

Trey reached for his wallet and handed him a business card. "She'll be with me."

Tara stood and started down the hall. "I think I'll just stay with Meg," she said loftily.

He followed her into her room and closed the door with a soft, careful click. She turned to him, ready to fight about his autocratic attitude, and he gave the wolf free reign, stalking her across the room. With her back pressed against a wall, she looked at him with fear-widened eyes, which only served to make him angrier. He'd never hurt her. She had to have figured that out by now.

"You will not be alone," he said tightly. Taking a deep breath to get control his voice, he continued. "And I don't trust anyone else to watch out for you. Pack. Quickly. Or we can go now. I'd rather you not have anything to change into anyway. Doesn't matter to me."

She gasped, hurt and outrage in her eyes. "Don't I mean more to you than that? More than sex?"

He gently cupped her face in his palms and whispered, "Everything. And I will do whatever I must to keep you safe, up to and including locking you naked in my house."

## **Chapter Five**

Bradley Jones watched with mounting frustration as police swarmed over Tara Burke's house and Williams drove her away. By the time he got to his car several blocks over they'd be long gone. Running for it anyway, he growled when a group of gawkers wouldn't part to let him through. That got their attention, he noted with satisfaction as a path cleared.

Once in his car, he circled as close as possible to the scene, but there was no sign of the blue SUV. He pounded the steering wheel and turned towards Williams' apartment.

The complex was a waste of time. Several members of the new werewolf pack had lived there, but after the attack in the neighboring woods they'd moved. He'd been back two days, and so far had only been able to locate Darius Stewart.

Williams was the one the Society wanted, though. Good thing he'd noticed Trey's interest in Tara Burke. Something weird was going on there. Not that werewolves mating was out of the ordinary, but two female cousins? And not just any ordinary women either, but the old witch Tinnie Duveau's granddaughters. The other cousin was around, too. Summer. He'd seen her in town yesterday.

He drove back to his new rental house and considered checking in with the Society. Curling his lip in derision, he nixed that idea and instead brought a steak out of the refrigerator. He needed to plan his next move.

The Society kept an extensive file on Williams, and he sat to study

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it again. Williams was good. Very good. But he was better. They knew him as Bradley Jones here, but he'd had another life once. He could hunt with the best of them.

Williams would take Tara and go to ground. It would chafe, but he'd probably bring in pack members to help guard her, too. But he couldn't hide forever. The question was would he wait for Jones to find him? Or go look for Jones? He wasn't sure what he'd do if their situations were reversed. The instinct to protect a mate was most dominant of all. Though staying with her would be the choice of most weres, Trey Williams was a retired Hunter. His impulse would be to go on the offensive. By all accounts, he was a cold and calculating Hunter. Jones smiled. A worthy opponent at last. For now, he'd wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

She finished packing and walked silently to the car, unsure of how to take what had just happened. Between the wolf, the shooting, and the possessive 'prefer you naked' speech, she was on adrenalin overload. It was way too much weirdness at one time.

Leaning her head back against the rest, she curled up in the seat and stared out the window. She had the strangest feeling there was something very important going on that she didn't know about. Something to do with Trey and wolves and shooters and his sudden, total concentration on her. The problem was she'd learned *not* to trust her instincts. They were wrong about half the time.

She sighed. Meg and Summer both knew at least a little about what was going on, but it was useless to try to get information out of them if they weren't willing to talk. She snuck a glance at Trey. He'd clammed up the minute they walked out of the house. There'd be nothing from him, either.

He reached for her hand, firmly lacing his fingers through hers. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"For which part exactly?"

"For not being there when you needed me." He turned on his



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blinker to exit town. "The rest of it may not have come out right, but I'm not sorry about it being said."

She nodded sagely. "Right. You'd just prefer to have me naked and available all the time."

"Yes. No. God." He clenched his jaw. "This is not just sex. But no, I'd rather not have to share you with anyone. Or anything," he added.

"Mmm hmm. Like my business?"

He shrugged. "You're good at it. I won't ask you to give it up."

She laughed, but it was a weary sound. "You won't, huh? Good thing, because I wouldn't. That's not even on the table."

He smiled. "Believe it or not, I know that." He shrugged again. "But until I figure out what's going on, someone will have to cover for you. I can protect you better at the house."

She wanted to argue, but wasn't in a real hurry to face the nameless shooter or mysterious wolf again. Right now she just wanted to sleep for the next twenty-four hours. Who knew getting your window shot out was so draining? She leaned back again and closed her eyes. *Just for a minute.*

He gently shook her awake when they arrived, and she blinked at the house in shock. Her grandmother's house. She got out of the car and slowly walked to the front flowerbeds. They were a mess. She expected to wake up any minute, and actually pinched herself just in case.

Trey got her bag and walked up the porch steps, giving her a concerned look. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and followed him in, stopping inside the door to look around. She vaguely registered that a cleaning crew had been in.

"This is the house you just bought?"

"Yes. Do you like it?" he asked, looking nervous. "I thought you would like it. Why don't you look around?"

She nodded and walked through the familiar rooms. The only downstairs room with furniture was the library. She paused long enough to see a massive desk and piles of boxes before turning to the stairs. She wondered if she'd find her old room empty.

Upstairs she averted her eyes from the room she was most curious about and hurried past. First she wanted a look at Tinnie's room on the

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back corner. It was huge and the obvious choice for a master bedroom, but it stood stark and empty. She wondered what happened to the old iron bed or the lacy coverlet that topped it. Summer would know.

She smiled and walked back to her room. There was a time when she was an overly dramatic teenager that she'd thought their lives so tragic. Her parents and Summer's were killed in a car crash the year they turned ten, and they'd come to live with Tinnie. Then Tinnie had died when they were sixteen and Meg and her parent's had moved in. But it wasn't tragedy. It was just life.

She paused outside the door, took a deep breath, and pushed it open. Sunlight streamed in the un-curtained bay window, making the big brass bed taking up center stage gleam. Her eyes widened in amusement. It was a far cry, and a vast improvement, over the frameless twin that used to sit there.

Delighted, she stepped in and ran her fingers lightly over the old quilt covering it. She recognized it as a tie quilt. Maybe it was a family heirloom, as hers were. Tinnie's were stored back at her house.

There was no other furniture in the room, but the closet was full of Trey's clothes, and she spotted her bag in the corner. He must have brought it up when she was looking downstairs.

Why had he bought the house that used to mean so much to her? Did he know it had belonged to the Dubeau cousins? She realized with a start that he couldn't have, since he hadn't known they were cousins when he bought it, and Summer was the sole owner when it sold. And she'd arranged to miss the closing. Just an odd coincidence.

She found him in the library unloading books onto shelves and joined him. They worked in companionable silence for a couple of hours, the boxes piling up in the hall, when her growling stomach finally claimed her attention.

"Is your kitchen stocked?" she asked.

He pushed another handful of books onto a top shelf. "It is, but I didn't do it, so I'm not sure what's there. Let's go look." He grinned down at her, dusting hands on his jeans. "Maybe I'll cook you dinner."

She followed him to the kitchen, a little surprised to find herself

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staring at his butt on the way. *Well, why not? It's such a fine specimen.* As the afternoon wore on, her anger faded and curiosity rose.

He pulled two marinating steaks out of the refrigerator and she arched an eyebrow. Expecting company, was he? He grinned. "What can I say? I'm an optimist."

She laughed.

"There's a bottle of wine in there. Why don't you pour us a glass?"

"Sure," she answered, pouring wine into the two glasses he handed her, while he turned on the stove.

He picked up a glass. "What should we toast to?" he asked.

She looked around the kitchen and slowly smiled for the first time at the prospect of the house having new owners. "To your new house, of course."

The only item of Tinnie's still there was the old, scarred kitchen table. No one could figure how to get it out. Too wide for the doorways it could have been taken apart, but none of them had had the heart to do it. It still sat in the room surrounded by six chairs. She pulled one out and sat, lovingly tracing old grooves and smiling a little.

He looked over his shoulder at her. "I can't find a way to get that out of here other than taking an axe to it."

She sucked in a breath. "Don't you dare," she said softly. She looked up and met his gaze. "I grew up in the house, you know."

His pose didn't change, but she was aware she had his full attention.

"I didn't know."

She nodded. "When my grandmother Tinnie died, she left it to me, Meg, and Summer. We left it empty for years. When I needed money to start the bakery, they bought me out. Then Meg needed money to buy her house, and Summer bought her out. And finally, Summer decided she didn't want to ever live here, and we decided it would be best to sell it." She took a sip of her wine. "Why did you buy it?"

"Why?" He shook his head and smiled, as if amused at himself. She wondered what the joke was. "I couldn't figure that out myself when I did. I had to have it, and I knew you would like it."

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She froze, confused and maybe a little alarmed. "The house sold weeks ago. I only knew you in passing then."

"I knew you," he said so softly she almost didn't catch it. He turned the steaks over. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

She snorted. "Are you saying you saw me and fell in love? And bought a house before you even really met me?"

"Sometimes it happens that way, don't you think? I saw you. I knew." He shrugged. "I can't explain it."

Butterflies launched in her stomach and her fingers itched to reach over and caress his face. Instead, she started on the steak he set in front of her. It wasn't cooked as well as she liked, but the flavor burst in her mouth. She'd always liked steak, but frowned when she realized she hadn't had anything but red meat since the first night Trey came home with her.

"Remind me not to invite Summer to dinner," she said.

"Why?"

"Because she's a vegetarian and this," she said waving the fork in the air "is apparently all you eat."

He grinned. "Not true. I eat your chocolate éclairs."

She laughed. "Everyone eats my chocolate éclairs."

He smiled, but then turned serious. "So, your grandmother raised you?"

"Summer and I, from the time we were ten. Our parents died in a car accident," she said softly.

She didn't feel the usual pang of sorrow, and again reminded herself not to get too attached to Trey. She hadn't realized how lonely her life had become. Sighing, she gathered the dirty dishes and hurried to wash them. If she'd thought about it, she would have lingered. The night stretched out long before her, and with a house empty of almost all furniture, that brass bed was uppermost in her mind.

"Let's go finish the books," she said.

"Sure." He nodded from where he watched her, long legs stretched in repose. "After you."

There were eight boxes left, and by the third she was repressing a

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yawn, the roller coaster day finally catching up with her. He caught her when she swayed.

"You need to go to bed," he whispered close to her ear.

"I'm okay," she said.

"No," he answered, swinging her up in his arms. "You aren't."

He took the stairs quickly and after lowering her on the mattress, began removing her clothes. She reached to help, and he stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets. Shoes and shirt off, she stood and reached for the snap of her jeans. Watching intently, he pulled the quilt back to reveal cotton T-shirt sheets. Her favorite. She smiled, wondering if that was something else he'd bought for her.

Standing before him in bra and underwear, she expecting him to reach for her or order her to finish stripping. Instead, he settled her in the bed and pulled the covers up.

*What the hell?* She wasn't *that* tired. He couldn't have changed his mind about them. He'd bought a house for her, for God's sake!

He shifted from foot-to-foot, looking at her intently, and said, "I'll let you get some sleep."

Suddenly she couldn't bear the thought of being alone.

"Lay down with me for a while," she said, and added when he hesitated, "please. Stay with me until I fall asleep at least."

After a minute he nodded. He toed off his shoes and removed his shirt before climbing into the bed next to her. He gathered her to him, his front to her back, and she snuggled in, marveling at the sense of security. But the jeans had to go. They chafed against her hyper sensitive skin.

"The jeans," she whispered. "They itch. Take them off please."

He sighed. "You know what will happen then."

She smiled, knowing he couldn't see her face, and rubbed against his chest. "Yeah."

"You need sleep."

"I can sleep later."

With a surge of anticipation, she heard the slide of his zipper and felt the dip in the mattress as he lifted his hips to tug them down. He spooned back against her and she recalled with satisfaction that he didn't

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wear underwear. Just all that smooth skin.

Turning, she waited for the usual urgency to overtake him, but he had a firmer grip on the situation than ever before. She didn't stop to examine why, as she ran her fingers over his nipples, and sought his mouth with hers. She couldn't hurry him up. After the day she'd had, she wanted fast and hard and furious, and wanted to howl with frustration when he didn't give it to her.

Instead, he pinned her wrists above her head and leisurely explored her face and neck with his mouth, dropping light kisses here, gentle swipes of his tongue there. It set her on fire, his tender assault on her senses. She felt fine tremors roll through him, and knew the restraint cost him.

When he finally reached her breasts, she strained against him, trying to thrust a hardened nipple into his mouth, but still he remained in control and avoided it until she thought she'd die from the strength of her need.

He trailed kisses down her body, pausing to swirl his tongue around her navel. She thrust her hips up in silent demand. She wondered, half-seriously, if she would die if she didn't come soon. Desire rode her hard and she continued to grind against him until he nipped her hard in punishment.

He growled. "Still."

Love at first sight. He couldn't believe the words had come out of his mouth. He needed her. He wanted her. But did he love her? All he knew for sure was that he could no longer live without her and he had to convince her she couldn't live without him before something happened to change her mind. Like finding out about the wolf.

He meant to hold her, sooth her into sleep. Then the jeans came off and he was a goner. He wasn't sure what he felt, but he could show her at least. Let her put the words to it.

He was lost in the sensation of her as he edged his way down her belly, determined to taste her, and then to drive her new heights. Settling between her thighs, he drew the scent of her desire deep into his lungs. He swirled a finger around her wet opening, delighted by her moan of

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pleasure.

With a light bite on the inside of her thigh, he nibbled his way to the crease of her leg. When the urge to break skin, to permanently bind them by mixing the enzyme in his blood with hers, began to override his logic, he ruthlessly grabbed control and slid his tongue in her slit. She gasped and attempted again to move against him, but he held her hips down with a firm arm.

His tongue thrust in and out of her, and her sighs of enjoyment washed over him. The sighs became groans when his finger found her clitoris, and she came in seconds. He lapped at her cream until the shudders subsided, and then his thumb found the hardened nub. Again and again he brought her to orgasm. Again and again she begged him to fuck her. Despite his slipping control, Trey wanted her completely desperate for him, unable to determine where her desire began and where his ended, unable to view pleasure as something that didn't include him.

He finally lost it when she claimed she couldn't take anymore and started to cry. His wolf howled for release and giving it free reign, he flipped her over and pulled her to her knees. No longer aiming for restraint, he sunk into her, thrusting as deep as he could repeatedly. The wolf in full rut, he bit the back of her shoulder, only vaguely hearing her gasp of pain. He felt the metallic rush of her blood on his tongue and came with it.

They collapsed together on the bed and he drew her up in his arms. He dropped a soft kiss on the mark he'd left on her. He'd given her no choice, and though he knew he should, felt no regret. Her breath deepened into that of sleep, and he held her there for several minutes. She was exhausted. Tomorrow would be soon enough to confess what he'd done. In the meantime, excitement sang through his veins.

He left the bed and reached for the jeans he tossed on the floor. In the kitchen he pulled out Tara's left over steak and sat at the table, but looked up when a knock sounded on the kitchen door. He sighed. Jackson.

"Hey," Jackson said when he opened the door. "Midnight snack?"

"Is it midnight?" Trey asked dryly.

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Jackson laughed. "Nowhere near." Turning grim, he added, "I heard what happened today."

Trey grunted in response and speared a piece of steak with the fork. "Eric?"

"Yeah." He rolled his eyes. "Darius has apparently decided to tolerate me, but everything will come through his Beta, thank you very much."

"You have to admit the situation is unusual. How would you feel if Darius suddenly showed up in your territory? Especially with council approval." He noticed Jackson's severe expression. "Exactly."

"Fine. I get it," he said watching Trey rinse the plate at the sink and shift on his feet. His eyes narrowed. "You look a little antsy. I can hang around if you want to go run it off."

He put his arms up in the classic sign of surrender when Trey growled low in his throat.

"Hey man, I'm not after your woman. Her cousin maybe," he added with a slight smile.

Trey clenched his jaw. "I know. And I think I will." A run in wolf form sounded fantastic, just the thing to work off his surge of energy and think about his problems. It would have to be quick though. He suspected Tara wouldn't sleep long.

Stripping off his jeans, he opened the door and dragged the verdant smell of the woods into his lungs. He left the door wide and shifted form as he leapt from the porch, landing on four paws.

He ran for an hour, dodging trees and jumping small gullies. Eventually he worked his way back to his backyard and approached the house cautiously. The kitchen door still stood open, but the light looked different. He was at the door before he caught her scent mingled with the night and Jackson. She stood by the counter keeping a suspicious eye on Jackson. She looked up at his entrance and gasped. He sat on his haunches by the door, unsure of what to do. She needed in on this secret, and she wasn't running in terror. Jackson looked back and forth between the two of them, obviously unsure how to proceed.

Finally the light in her eyes changed, and they narrowed. She



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cocked her head to the side and muttered, "Son of a bitch."

Jackson choked back a laugh.

"You might as well come in," she said and tossed him the jeans left by the table.

If the wolf could have arched an eyebrow he would have. He stood and entered slowly, pushing the door closed with his snout. He turned back to her, shifted into human form and pulled on his pants.

"You okay?"

"Okay? Oh yeah, sure. It's everyday I find out I've been sleeping with a werewolf, you know?"

"You don't seem surprised," he said cautiously.

"Oh, but I am. I had no idea until you came to the door. I'm assuming it wasn't you I saw this morning. No, of course not, you're bigger." She paused for a breath. "I'm going to kill Meg and Summer. 'Cause of course, Darius is one too, right? And you," she said, looking at Jackson who nodded in response.

She narrowed her eyes at Trey. "You are not the Alpha."

"No," he said, giving into the urge to finally arch an eyebrow.

She sighed. "I already know, but go ahead and tell me anyway."

"Tell you what?" he asked.

"Your role in the pack," she said, waving a hand in the air.

"My role?"

"Who are you, Trey? What are you?"

"You know who I am," he said with frustration. "I'm Trey Williams. Werewolf."

"I think I'll be going," Jackson chimed in.

"That's right," she said snidely. "Cut and run."

He stiffened. "Your mate needs a lesson in manners, Trey."

He glared at Jackson then looked to her to diffuse the sudden tension. "You can't talk to the Alpha of another pack like that, sweetheart."

Her eyes narrowed on them both and she said tightly, "I will not be censored in my own house."

"Your house?" Trey asked.

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"Shut up," she said to him and turned to Jackson. "And if you think you're getting anywhere with Summer, you might want to sit down and shut up too, before you waste a whole lot of time."

Blinking, she turned back to Trey and lifted her hand to her shoulder. "He said mate! Things have changed so much that it's no longer polite to ask?"

She sat down at the scarred table and put her face in her hands. "Oh, God."

Trey pulled at the chair next to her, flipped it around and sat. "Maybe it would help if I knew what you already know. And how."

She looked at him, tears pooling in her eyes. "Are you a Hunter? That's all I need to know."

He froze. There was no way she could know so much and not be one of them. Cautiously he said, "I was a Hunter. I retired when Darius came down here."

"I need to go home, Trey. Take me home."

He shook his head in denial, closed his mind against the anger welling up. "You *are* home. The bonding is complete. You can't leave me. We'd both go crazy."

"Yeah right." She snorted. The room was uncomfortably silent for several minutes.

"My grandfather was a Hunter. I was fourteen the last time I saw him. It wasn't a great loss. He was never around much anyway. But I will never forgive him for not coming home when Tinnie was dying. For not coming home when we buried her."

She stared at the space above his head lost in thought, while he reeled. What were the chances that three cousins, the granddaughters of a werewolf, all were destined to be mated to weres? And how had he been able to leave his mate, by her account, for long periods of a time and ultimately forever? He looked to Jackson and saw his own shock reflected on his face. It just wasn't done. Before tonight, he would have said it was impossible.

He took a deep breath and reached for her hands. "Listen, baby, it's not like that. I don't know what the story was with your grandparents, but

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I have never known a mated pair to be separated for more than a few nights, much less weeks. I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you, Tara."

She looked at him with dull, distracted eyes. "Tinnie warned me. She said there would be two Hunters. That one would try to take over my life, and one would try to end it. And here I am."

"Look at me. Look at me, Tara." He paused until she did. "I just want to share your life. There's a part of me that's...animal, yes, but I control that. I do not want to run your life. But I *will* be a part of it. Neither one of us has a choice about that anymore," he said as he rubbed his mark on the back of her shoulder.

She looked at him with a remote sadness that tore at his heart.

"Why don't you go back to bed? It's been a difficult day and we can talk about it more tomorrow."

Nodding, she stood and left the room. He waited until he heard the bedroom door close, then turned to study Jackson.

"I don't think this needs to go beyond us and Darius. I'll find out who the grandfather was before we consider notifying the Council."

He nodded and rubbed a hand across his face. "Yeah. That works for me."

"Good."

Jackson looked at him. "Three granddaughters of a were, mated to weres. What are the odds?"

Trey shrugged. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Me either." Jackson stood and said his goodbyes.

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### **Chapter Six**

Trey threw the fax onto his desk in a fit of frustration and dragged a hand over his eyes. Bradley Jones did not exist. He had no driver's license, no birth certificate, no social security number, and no visible means of support. There was no record of him until he'd come to this town in 1991. Oddly, that happened to be the same year that Tara had last seen her grandfather.

He raised his gaze to the ceiling, wondering if it was too soon to wake her. The sun was not yet up, and he'd made love to her just a couple of hours ago. And at what point had he begun to think he was making love to her and not fucking her? He snarled. A question for another time. Other issues pressed on him now. Who was Jones? Who was her grandfather? How to make her stay?

He needed a good run. Eric was whittling on the front porch, so it was safe enough to go out for a little while. He dropped his clothes by the desk and shifted on the way to the door. Pausing at the bottom of the stairs, the wolf lifted his snout to catch its mate's scent, and turned toward her.

Hoping to find her awake, he lightly padded through the open door. She was curled on her side facing him, and lazily opened her eyes. Without stirring, she held out a hand in invitation. In two leaps he was snuggling up beside her. She buried her nose in the fur at his nape and wrapped her arms around him with a contented sigh.

He shifted into human form and rolled her over, settling between

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her legs, her morning softness calling to him.

"Hey, I liked my wolf," she said drowsily. "He was warm and cuddly."

"Cuddly?" he asked in mock outrage, sliding into her. "Wolves are not cuddly."

She smirked. "Mine is."

The smirk became a groan of pleasure when he lifted her legs over his shoulders and thrust deep.

"Hmm," he answered, nibbling her neck. "Accept the man, keep the wolf."

It had become a game with them over the last week. Part of a complex truce. He came to her in the morning as the wolf. She welcomed it into the bed. He shifted. They fucked. Lots of complaints later about missing the wolf, they both had an orgasm that beat every one before it.

He almost snorted. *Cuddly*. He hadn't been cuddly when he was a pup. It should have insulted his ego. He was a Hunter after all. Instead he was surprised to find it filled him with tenderness, an emotion he'd believed himself incapable of just months ago. She accepted the wolf. She was not certain about the man, but surely that would come.

She keened as she came and the sound, like music to balm his soul, pushed him over the edge with her. Collapsing on top of her, he slowly lowered her legs, trailing his fingertips down her calves as he did. She shivered in response and he rolled over, dragging her to spoon against him. Pulling the quilt up, he tucked it around her and waited for her breathing to deepen back to sleep.

The wolf padded back down the stairs and out the open kitchen door. He would take an hour and let his problems drift away. Jones. Tara. Tara's mysterious grandfather. Jackson and Darius sniffing around each other like a couple of untried pups. He snorted in disgust.

He loped off into the woods on the path that would take him to some warm springs he'd discovered. He shifted when he reached the small depression. Better than a Jacuzzi, they bubbled warmly around him, and he laid his head back against the mossy ground and gave into the sigh that welled up.

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He fully expected Tara to start in on him again about going back to work when he returned. And why not? There was no sign of Jones. He'd abandoned his new rental and hadn't sought another. He hadn't been heard from or spotted by anyone around town. He seemed to have dropped out of town as quickly and unexpectedly as he'd dropped in.

Arrangements would have to be made. There was no way Jones was gone. Jones was waiting him out. But the needs of one's mate could not be ignored, and she needed to insure her business was flourishing as usual. Discrete guards could be put in place, schedules drawn up. It was not the same as the safety of the house, but he could make it work. Decision made, he stood, shifting on the run, and returned to the house, hoping to find Tara still in bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was going stir crazy. She understood the need for caution, but Trey was out of control. She couldn't step out onto the porch without someone following her. The urge to sneak out had begun to creep up on her, and she felt like a teenager on a short leash. Just a little room to breathe. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently.

The bakery was in good hands. Milo and Jane were more than capable of running the show for a few days or weeks even, and Jane had brought her niece in to help out. Maybe that was the real problem. Her business was running perfectly well without her. She made a conscious effort to unclench her teeth.

If they didn't find Bradley Jones soon, she was so out of here. There was another shocker. The mild mannered reclusive Jones was a werewolf? And had targeted her for some reason. It didn't make any sense. Trey was convinced it was because of him. For days she'd struggled to remember what she could of Jones. He'd been part of the local landscape for years, but never a member. Innocuous. Another case of her instincts failing her. How could she have missed a werewolf all those years? Kind of like missing Trey.

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Snorting with disgust, she went to the kitchen. Her Gift at work. She was a spell caster with a talent for food. In a way it made sense—she could whip up a recipe with the best of them. Make up her own, too. There was magic in the concoctions she created. It'd taken her years to realize that. And still, the thing she should be able to depend on—her instinct—continued to be deficient.

She was standing in the pantry thinking about making fudge, when Trey came back. He moved so silently, she didn't hear him. He was just there, his arms wrapping around her waist and lips nuzzling her neck. The memorable heat unfurled in her belly, and she relaxed against him, enjoying the swirl of his tongue over her pulse. He pulled her into the sunlit kitchen and she blinked, at the glare or his setting her away she wasn't sure.

"Okay," he said, his voice strained with tension. "Here's the deal. You can go back to work, but you'll have someone with you at all times."

She expelled a pent up sigh of relief and launched herself at him. *Yes!* With her legs wrapped his waist, she held his face in her hands and rained kisses over him. "Thank you! I'm going crazy here!"

He laughed and walked towards the old scarred table. "I know."

He set her on the edge and tugged her shirt over her head, pausing a moment to admire how her nipples pebbled under his gaze.

"I can relate," he growled softly.

She arched her back, offering herself to him, and murmured, "Anyone could walk in on us."

"They wouldn't dare."

Her laugh ended on a startled gasp when his lips found her breast, his tongue circling it before he sucked the tip into his mouth. She was suddenly primed and ready, and fumbled with the snap on his jeans. It popped open, she tugged the zipper down, and then her hand circled his cock. With the shock of contact, he bit down on her nipple and she yelped, squeezing him hard. He shoved into her grip.

"Yes," he hissed. "Like that."

So many people were in and out of the house these days that she expected someone to walk in at any moment. It added to her excitement

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and her pussy was screaming for attention. He managed to get her shorts off without taking his mouth from her breasts or slowing the thrusts in her hand. *Hurry, hurry, hurry* beat like a mantra through her head. When his fingers found her clit, she cried out his name. He lifted her and thrust into her, spinning around to sit on the edge of the table. Gasping, she threw her head back and shuddered around him. Lost in her own orgasm, she barely registered his groan when he came. They collapsed back onto the table together. She smiled dreamily. She'd never look at this old table in quite the same way again.



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### Chapter Seven

She entered the back door of the bakery, glad to be here, but already missing Trey. The kitchen was empty, its steel surfaces gleaming from a recent cleaning. Remembering her promise, she locked the door and called to check in. At ten, the morning rush had mostly passed. She followed the low buzz of conversations from out front where Milo and the local lingerers greeted her warmly. She sighed. It was good to be back.

Pouring a cup of coffee and grabbing a Danish, she returned to the office and her desk. Paperwork had piled up in her short absence—bills and order confirmations, delivery change notices and miscellaneous mail, the week's receipts. She rifled through the junk mail first, dropping it in a small can at her feet, then pulled out her check ledger and paid the bills. She noted a couple of delivery schedule changes on the large desk calendar and turned to last week's books.

At least business hadn't suffered while she was gone. As a matter of fact, it increased; the small town equivalent to rubber necking. *I should get shot at more often.* She grimaced. Aside from the unpleasantness of repeating the whole ordeal, she could only imagine Trey's reaction. He'd probably hide her away on some desert island. *Hmm...an idea with merit.* She could go for some isolated tropical time with Trey. She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and smiled. Yes, a Bahama Mama, some white sand, Trey, and no one else around sounded pretty damned good.

"Well, don't you look content?" Meg drawled.

She cracked an eye open and half glared at the interruption before

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sitting up and turning her full attention on Meg. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked defensive. Wonderful. Tara had a few things to say to her baby cousin, and now was as good a time as any.

"Have a seat," she said, nodding at the chair in front of her desk.

Steps reluctant, Meg moved towards the chair and gripped its back. "You're still pissed at me, huh?" she asked.

Tara sighed, anger dissipating like wind from her sails. It was impossible for her to stay angry with anyone for a week, much less one of her cousins. She looked contrite at least. With Summer gone, it was left to her to fill Meg in on some of the bigger Duveau family secrets.

"Sit down, Meg," she said wearily. "Do you remember Grandpa Jack? Tinnie's husband?"

Tara saw nothing but avid curiosity on Meg's face, and no wonder. Jack was persona non grata with her and Summer. She watched Meg sip her cappuccino, and took a fortifying sip of her own now cold coffee.

"Jack was a werewolf."

"What?" Meg cried out the question and jumped to her feet. The chair scraped across the floor and Tara winced at the sound. It seemed to go well with the conversation. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

She took a steadying breath, arranged the timeline in her mind, and started talking. She told her everything. How Jack was rarely around, how he disappeared when Tinnie got sick and never came back. How she and Summer had tried to track him down, but had gotten nowhere in their search. When she finished, Meg looked back at her, shock plain in her wide-eyed expression.

"Trey is your mate. And Darius is mine. Do you suppose Summer has one?" She shook her head and paced. "I don't know enough. This can't be common, even for werewolves. Is it because we're witches, or because Jack was one of them?"

Tara shrugged. "Summer would be the one to ask probably, and I doubt we'll be seeing much more of her."

She picked at the Danish on her desk, then looked up to catch Meg watching her suspiciously.

"There's more," Meg said.

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Tara bit back a bitter laugh. Must be nice to have reliable intuition.

"Do you know much about them yet? Their hierarchy for example? Have they told you about the rogue?"

She nodded. "I saw it. Darius said it was Bradley Jones. Who'd have thought? I never had any idea." So her intuition wasn't completely whacked out.

"And hierarchy...Darius is the Alpha. Eric is the Beta." She cocked her head to the side. "And I'm not sure what Trey is, but they all defer to his judgment."

"He's a Hunter," Tara said softly. Meg stopped in her tracks and went back to her chair. Catching Tara's gaze, she leaned forward.

"All right, spill. You've got that 'it couldn't be worse' tone going on."

"They're a...special organization, I guess you'd say, of werewolves who hunt these rogues. Jack was a Hunter." She paused. "They're supposed to retire when they mate. The bond shouldn't let them stand that kind of separation." She shrugged and added bitterly, "That didn't seem to stop, Jack."

"Ah, I think I see." Meg leaned back in her chair, resting her elbows on the arms. She arched an eyebrow. "Trey isn't Jack. I don't see him taking off. He's relentless, steadfast."

She closed her eyes and heard the conviction in Meg's voice. Among the cousins, her ability to read people was superior, and they'd learned not to question it. But what did that mean really? She already knew he was unyielding and committed. But where would his loyalty ultimately lie? With her or the Hunters? Her grandfather had picked them. Trey could too. Did she really want him to stick around, anyway? Part of her craved him, but part of her was damned suspicious of anything resembling happily ever after. Hell, she didn't know anymore.

The chair creaked and she opened her eyes to see Meg standing. She tossed the paper coffee cup in a nearby trashcan and picked up her bag.

"I've got to get the bar. Are you going to be okay?"

She smiled and knew it was a weak effort. "I'll be fine."

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After allowing herself a minute to wallow in self-pity, she returned to the books. The first day after the shooting business had gone way up. It gradually trickled back down to more normal levels in the following days. The increase had leveled off in the last couple of days, and she hoped that meant she'd gained a few new regulars. She was adjusting the next week's orders when the phone jangled. She heard Milo answer it, and a second later he stuck his head through the door.

"It's some insurance guy for you on line one. He said it's about your window."

"Thanks, Milo. I got it." She reached for the phone as disappeared around the door.

"Tara Burke," she said into the receiver.

"Ms. Burke," a nasally male voice said. "My name is Andrew Smith from National Insurance. I'm the adjuster assigned to your case."

"Yes, of course. What can I do for you, Mr. Smith?"

"Well, I need to have a look at the house, and I have some forms you'll need to fill out. I'm passing through town now on my way to another meeting. I could fit you in if you can meet me at your house. Otherwise it will be at least two weeks before I can get to it."

Crap. Two weeks with a boarded-up front window. Trey would kill her if she went, since he didn't have anyone watching her today. He'd let her come to work with the understanding that she wouldn't leave the building. But Jones had disappeared, so what could it hurt to go three blocks over to her house in broad daylight?

"I can be there in five minutes," she said and hung up.

Telling Milo she'd be back in a few minutes, she grabbed her bag and went out the back door. She paused long enough to lock the door before turning to the opening of the long alley and walking to her SUV. A scurrying sound came from behind her. Too late she realized it was a ploy to get her outside and alone before she got completely turned around. Bradley Jones' face flashed in front of her before the world went dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

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It was late afternoon when she woke. It took her a moment to remember what happened. Lying motionless, she tried to breath as if she was still knocked out, and cracked her eyes open enough to peak around. She was on a narrow cot pushed against the back corner of what appeared to be a one-room cabin about twenty-five by twenty-five feet. She was alone. Standing, she grabbed her pounding head and stumbled to the closest grimy window. Wiping it with the edge of her shirt, she peered outside. Woods. Unfamiliar woods at that. She could be in any hunting shack in south Alabama. Damn.

She started for the front door. It flung open before she reached it, and she shrank back. Bradley Jones stalked in and she unsteadily retreated until the backs of her legs once again hit the bed. Flinging the door closed behind him, his eyes flickered over her, but he didn't utter a word. Instead he carried a grocery sack to the kitchenette on the opposite wall and unloaded a six-pack of Coke and some deli sandwiches. He set two of each on the small table and nodded at her.

"Sit. Eat."

Her stomach rebelled at the thought. Whether from the hit on the head or her current circumstances she didn't hazard a guess. Rather than anger him, she walked to the table with ginger steps, careful not to jar her pounding head. Once seated, she reached for one of the subs and unwrapped it. Jones dove into his while she picked hers apart. Expecting to need energy to get away, she tried to force her usual hearty appetite to appear. She nibbled some of the ends and popped the top of the Coke.

She wondered where Trey was. Probably freaking out by now and looking for her. He better hurry. She wasn't waiting around for him to come to the rescue. Her instincts were screaming at her to get away now and for once, she was confident they were right.

Glancing up, she caught Jones staring at her. His eyes were too bright and he was a little ripe, but otherwise he looked normal.

"You don't look like him," he said.

She blinked in confusion. "Like who?"

"Your grandfather. Jack Wilder."

"My grandfather was Jack Duveau."

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He snorted. "Don't be stupid girl. You had to know what he was, and I'm sure your mate checked it out. And came up with nothing."

She inhaled sharply, curiosity warring with the need to flee. Was he just guessing or well informed? And why was he talking about Jack like he knew he was dead? They didn't even know that for sure.

"You knew my grandfather?"

He laughed, the sound grating like nails on a chalkboard, and the hair on the nape of her neck stood on end. His eyes looked wild, and she realized he was insane or so close to it the difference didn't matter.

"I can take you to him," he said slyly. "Maybe I will after I take care of Trey Williams. No one said you had to live"

And she knew what happened to Jack. "You killed him."

"Of course," he said, grinning evilly and spreading his arms wide. "This town wasn't big enough for the both of us. For such a famous Hunter, he was very easy to kill."

She gasped, shocked at the hurt that speared her heart. He'd sucked as a husband. So what? He was still her grandfather. She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and lurched, gagging, to the sink. Turning the tap on, she scrunched over and stuck her mouth under the faucet, gulping water and spitting it out.

She rested her elbows on the edge of the sink and hung her head, taking deep breaths. A flash of blue caught the corner of her eye and she canted her gaze to see an old-fashioned porcelain teapot. Behind her she sensed as much as heard Jones move and knew her time was limited. The idea flew through her so fast she didn't stop to consider it. Grabbing the handle of the pot, she spun as Jones leapt. In slow motion she saw the round bottom crash into his skull. His eyes rolled back and he slid to the floor.

She stood frozen in place while Summer's voice in her head screamed *run!* Knowing Summer was with her, in spirit if not body, freed her feet. She heard a groan behind her as she lurched for the door. Flinging it open, she stumbled off a small porch and skidded to a halt into the night.

The shack sat in a large clearing that appeared to be surrounded by

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woods. It was too dark to tell for sure, and with no idea where she was, she had no choice but to give her neglected sixth sense free rein. Summer was always harping on her about not practicing. If she got out of this, she'd become an apt pupil. *Not if, Tara. Just run.* The full moon hung low in the sky, and she took off in its direction when she heard a low growl and sensed movement from the door.

She made the tree line and hit a brick wall. Leaning her head back, she looked into the feral eyes of Trey's friend, Jackson. He grinned and put a finger to his lips to signal silence. Snarling echoed through the clearing and she spun in time to see Trey in wolf form leaping through the air at Jones. They crashed together and fell to ground, each jumping right into the fight and going for the other's throat. This was no test of strength. This was a battle to the death. Tara's heart lodged in her throat as she watched the older wolf tear a long gash into Trey's flank. He growled in outrage and wrestled Jones to the ground, jaw clamped over this throat. With a sickening crack, she heard his neck break.

Her body was overcome with shudders and she sank to the ground, head in her hands. Someone was sobbing, loud gulping sounds, and she wished the idiot would just shut up long enough for her to get her fuzzy brain working again. It didn't help when she realized she was the idiot. Crying never helped, but once started she couldn't stop.

Someone lifted her up and she clung to his arms when she realized it was Trey. He carried her around the cabin and put her in his SUV before turning to murmur something to Jackson and the others she hadn't identified. She didn't care. She just wanted to curl up and sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was several hours later when the tapping woke her. A glance out the bedroom's window showed the moon high in the sky, and she judged it sometime after midnight. Trey was curled protectively around her, and taking care not to disturb him, she moved out of his grasp. Grabbing a robe, she tread on light feet down the stairs and to the door.

She didn't check before opening it wide, knowing Summer waited

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on the other side. The evening in the woods seemed to have opened the floodgate of her powers. She felt it flow through her freely for the first time in years and reveled in the beauty of it. She'd expected her cousin to come.

In mutual silence they went to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee.

Trey found them there at dawn, heads together, whispering like schoolgirls. They looked up when he entered, guilt plain on their faces. He looked from one to the other before filling a mug and sitting at the other end of the table.

"What?" he asked.

With a sad smile, Tara shook her head. "I need to go home, Trey. Summer's going to give me a ride."

He snorted. She couldn't be serious. "You can't go. The bond, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'll only be across town. I just need some space. With Jones dead, there's no reason I can't."

His wolf growled a denial and he wanted to throw his head back and howl. God save him from independent witches. He could force her to stay, but there was no telling what she might do in retaliation. He could see the difference in her, see power in her. He didn't want to test her newfound strength on himself. More than that, he wanted her to choose him.

He closed his eyes and thought fast. He had to let her go long enough to see they couldn't take the separation, but would that be long enough for her to come back to him out of want and not just need? This was worse than the pain and rage that had taken him over when Jones threatened her life. There was an enemy to fight then. This fight was against his own nature. It appeared he did have another dragon to slay for her. He'd give her time. At least for as long as he could stand.

With a curt nod, he stood and tried to keep his feelings on the matter remote. "Take your time, but I'm not letting you go."

He turned and exited the house.



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## Chapter Eight

Tara rushed to pack her things then stood in the foyer and gave the house one last longing look. Trey thought the mating bond would bring her back, but Summer had brought her the secret of Jack's distance. Tinnie had a spell to break the bond and had left the secret in one of her journals.

Summer dropped her off at her house and she went to the storage box that held Tinnie's papers. She found it in the third book and made a list of the ingredients she would need for the spell, then headed for the bathtub. It could wait. Right now she needed relief from the urge to return to Trey that crawled through her. *It's just sex.*

Two days later she prowled through the house repeating it like a mantra. *Just sex. Just sex.* If that was true, why hadn't she used the spell? Stepping into her small kitchen, she eyed the book lying open and waiting on the table. Sighing, she pulled a chair out and sat. She could break the bond, but it wouldn't change anything. She was in love with Trey Williams. Did it matter how they'd come together? Only to her pride.

She smiled and looked around, thinking about his big empty house, and dug the yellow pages out of a bottom kitchen drawer. An opportune cancellation opened a slot the next day, and she went in search of boxes and newspaper. She even knew what to do with the spell.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the third morning, he'd had enough and decided to go get her.

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He was going crazy from her absence. He needed her in a physical sense of course, but he'd also gotten used to her being around. He missed her. He had to find a way to convince her to come home.

Annoyance coursed through him when he turned onto her street and saw the moving van backed up in her driveway. Where the hell did she think she was going? He'd given her space to come *back* to him, not take off. Parking in front of the house, he stalked up the path and inside. He was forced to dodge two men carrying a sofa and it stoked his anger. His wolf growled for release. *No no no*. The key to this situation was control.

Following the sound of rustling paper and the radio, he found her in the kitchen, placing a wrapped plate in a cardboard box. The cabinet doors all stood open, shelves empty. She was making fast work of it, whatever her plan was. He stopped, blocking the archway, and crossed his arms over his chest, feet spread wide. He knew it was an aggressive stance, but he couldn't seem to help himself. She looked up and smiled, reached for a roll of packing tape, and attacked the box.

"Hey," she said. "I expected you earlier."

"You did, did you?" he ground out through clenched teeth. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Excuse me, ma'am?" a male voice said behind him. "We're almost done. Did you have anything in here you wanted on the truck?"

She grabbed Trey's hand and pulled him out of the way. "Yes, this is the last box here."

Dropping his hand, she hefted it over. The mover turned with it and left the house. She moved to the opposite end of the table, and he looked with curiosity at the open book, small cauldron, and another smaller box on the floor at her feet. It was the first sign he'd seen she was really a witch.

"I know how they did it," she said.

He closed his eyes and reached for calm. He had the feeling he'd walked into the middle of the wrong conversation. Wanting to get to the *come home now* part, he decided to push her. He was surprised when the wrong question came out.

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"How who did what?"

She ripped a page from the book. On closer examination, it looked like an old journal. Waving the paper in the air to get his attention, she pulled a lighter out of the box.

"This is one of Tinnie's journals. She and Jack didn't like each other." She snorted. "That's an understatement. They couldn't stand each other. It took her a few years, but she found a way to break the mate bond."

Ice ran through his veins.

"It doesn't matter if you break it, Tara. I won't let you go. It won't change the way we feel about each other."

A beautiful smile spread across her face, and he fought the urge to pull her to him and hide her damned book.

"I know. So I have a gift for you."

She set the lighter to the bottom corner of the page and flicked it. Flames raced up the side and she dropped it in the black pot in front of her. Blue flames shot up in the air and the fire poofed out as quickly as it'd started.

Peace settled through him, but his desire for her still raged in his blood. With relief he realized she hadn't broken the bond, but she'd destroyed the spell.

"I won't use it," she said softly, stepping around the table. "And no one else will either."

Unable to resist any longer, he grabbed her and crushed her slight body against his.

"You're coming home," he whispered in demand.

She relaxed into to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. Nodding, her answer was muffled but clear against his chest.

"I'm coming home."

The End

## **Bad Moon Rising: Lunar Mates Book 2**

### **Author Bio**

A native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of story telling? After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a student, and a wedding photographer, this mother of three has turned to writing fulltime. She is a staff reviewer for Romance Divas and a member of RWA. She's looking forward to her first release with Cobblestone Press in 2006, *Bound By Love*.

**Loribelle Hunt**

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## **Chapter One**

It came from deep in the woods, a low, lonely howl that tugged at Laney's soul. She heard it and her ears pricked, her body suddenly going tense. She looked up from the book she was reading in the den of her small cabin and waited, wondering if the sound would come again.

Seconds passed. A minute. The teasing notes rose higher and crested on the balmy night air, causing a slow, tingling heat to creep over her body. Laney shivered and her nipples turned into hard peaks. Hearing that sad, tormented cry made her breathing ragged and her heart quicken. What was it about that voice?

When the haunted notes finally faded, she shook herself from her sensual fog and snarled. This had to stop. For four nights now, she'd been hearing that same relentless baying. The new neighboring pack was going to start a war with her brother if they didn't back off the border and stop calling out within hearing range of the wolves under Seth's protection.

Nerves jangling, she turned her book over and got up from the couch. Anger and frustration mounted within her as she moved quickly through the house to the back porch. She'd promised to watch over things and take care of any emergency pack business while Seth was away for

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the week, but she had a sinking suspicion that confronting the alpha of a rival pack wasn't what he had in mind when he'd left his instructions. Be that as it may, she had to do something. Seth and the other males weren't going to return for another two days, and that persistent calling was really starting to get under her skin.

Laney stepped off the porch into the moonlight and crossed the shadow-mottled yard with determined purpose. The wind rose up and swirled around her, strengthening the odors of pine and moist earth--and something else she couldn't quite identify. The combined scents filled her lungs and made her feel strangely restless as she headed toward the tree line that began a short distance from the house.

She walked straight into the woods, choosing to remain in her human form even though her jeans and bootlaces kept snagging on the briars as she moved over the rough ground. It would be faster traveling in the form of the wolf, but she preferred the slight sense of protection wearing clothes offered her.

Dressed or not, she knew going into the woods unescorted was potentially dangerous. Seth would likely strangle her if he ever found out about her going near the border alone, but it would be so much worse for everyone if he came home and discovered members of a rival pack stirring close to the border, marking their territory. She had to reach this rogue male and talk sense into him before anyone else from her pack could answer him and stir up trouble.

She walked maybe ten feet farther into the woods before the male's call rose up again. The notes struck her with the force of a silver bullet, shooting hot sensation from her head straight to her toes. Her breathing hitched. Her senses swam. A tiny tremor wracked her small body. Now that she was closer to the source of the call, the lure was more pure, more potent. Alluring.

Laney stopped in her tracks and clamped her eyes shut tight as heat pooled thick and wet between her thighs, soaking her panties. A tender ache started inside her and she gritted her teeth to hold it at bay. Still, the notes played over her skin like the brush of velvet fingers. The sound *beckoned* her, called to her inner beast until she shook with pent-up

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desire.

A desperate, cloying need to return the male's call had her pussy clenching in anticipation. Unaware of what she was doing, she ran trembling hands over her small, firm breasts and squeezed, shuddering as a bolt of erotic energy zipped through her veins. Her bones creaked and shifted. She closed her eyes and fought the urge to embrace the change...

The wind shifted, and the fragrant scent of male lust wafted to her from somewhere deep within the woods. Laney's eyes snapped open in an instant as realization crept in on her. This wasn't just some lonely cry she was hearing. It was a mating call.

A burst of black fury surged through her. *Damn males!* No wonder she felt so strung out and needy. Some horny male had been calling out to her for nights on end!

Her lips compressed in a thin line, Laney tilted her chin and gazed up at the moon. It hung at three-quarters. It would be another day or two before the full moon held sway. Even so, the night was clear. The moon loomed large and bright overhead. No wonder she felt like a bitch in heat.

A heated blush stole into her face at that unspoken admission. Her lip lifted into a silent snarl. One thing for certain, she had to get this howling situation under control before her brother came back and discovered what was going on.