



PMSing

By

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Dedication

For Brenda Cagle, who challenged me to realize my goal of becoming published.

The world is a dimmer place without you.

Index of Terms

Alpha Canis/Pater Canis - The male leader of a wolvern (shapeshifting wolf) pack
Alpha Matra/Matra Canis - The female leader of a wolvern (shapeshifting wolf) pack
Change - The act of shifting forms from human to animal
Beta - The Alpha Canis's second in command. Often the wolvern pack teacher/caretaker
Breeding Time - A female wolvern's breeding cycle. Being in heat. Also, applies to a female psychic who has ingested enough wolvern blood to alter their biology.
Bitten - Became a wolvern/werewolf from a wolvern/werewolf bite.
Challenge - Contest or fight for a higher rank in the pack
Coyotemen - Shapeshifting male coyotes
Dragonkind - Dragons
Dueling Form - The half wolf/half man werewolf form used mainly for fighting
Duel of Ascendancy - Official challenge and fight to the death for leadership of a pack
Elder - Psychics whose job it is to protect and police the members of a particular psychic community.
Empath - A type of psychic who is has the ability to feel the emotions of those around him/her
Exclude - A punishment used by the psychic communities. Usually the offender is banished from their society and treated as if dead. There is no returning once a psychic has been Excluded.
Fairie - Pertaining to the fairy species
Fairy - Any of the species of elves, dryads, sprites, brownies, and so on, who are vulnerable to iron
Finder - A psychic with the ability to Find things, or people.
Hell Hounds - Stray wolvern running together without a territory of their own. Drifter werewolves
Pack - The wolvern family unit. The family unit is made up of a male and female alpha leader pair and lesser member in a definite rank hierarchy.
Packhome - The main residence for a wolvern pack. Most often the alpha pair's home is large enough for a large extended family. Packmembers are not required to live with their alpha's residence, but many choose to.
Palestine - (pronounced Pal-e-*steen*) The County Seat for Anderson County, Texas.
Mate-bond - The magical/psychic marriage of a wolvern or wolvern/psychic couple. Only the female of the pair can perform this bonding.
Metaphysics/metaphysical - Supernatural or magical in nature
Normals - Term for normal humans with no supernatural or psychic gifts
Null - Less polite term for normal humans with no supernatural or psychic gifts
Omega - The lowest ranking in a wolvern pack
Psychic - A type of magic user who does not need spells to perform their special magic. Most psychics wrongly believe that their gifts are mental abilities.
Psychic Community - A unified group of psychics living in an area. Usually psychic communities are bound together through strong church ties, which regulate their lifestyle

and rabid anti-supernatural beliefs.

Supernaturals - Inclusive term for all the magical species, such as fairies, dragons, goblins, shapeshifters, witches, and so on.

Territory - Wolven packs residing in the U.S. define their boundaries by county or the same equivalent. Wolven Council law states that no less than two pack-free territories must separate those ruled by a wolven pack. Wolven packs are identified by county/state.

Warden - Protector of the Pack. Members of a pack whose job it is to protect and police the members.

Were[s] - A crude term used by the wolven (shapeshifting wolves) for all other animal species who can change forms.

Werepanther - Shapeshifting panther

Wereraccoon - Shapeshifting raccoon

Werewolf - An outlaw shapeshifting wolf. A derogatory term for a shapeshifting wolf

Wolven - The proper term for a shapeshifting wolf

Wolven Council - Managing body of wolven (shapeshifting wolves) who make sure that no pack, individual wolven, or outsider, endangers their species

Chapter One

Karen Ridley sucked in a breath and fought not to scream again. Unreasonable fear damped her skin with sweat. She hated fear. Hated reacting to it. But the bathroom floor was crawling with scorpions.

Perched on the tiny inside edge of the bathtub, she saw that some of the tan insects had squared off to fight one another. The dry scratch-scratch as they clamored over each other, skittered up her spine and lodged in her neck. She wanted to whimper. She didn't dare take her eyes off of the shifting floor, even to snag a towel to dry off or cover up with.

Few knew of her phobia, and fewer still knew where she was holed up in the tiny run-down motel. Her brain was too frozen to dredge up which of her enemies could have pulled off this stunt.

She wasn't a supernatural or a fey to slough off *that* much poison, but her metabolism was way better than a normal human's.

But then, she wasn't really human. Not according to the purists who'd hunted her across two states. She wasn't about to test the endurance of her mixed supernatural and human biology, either.

Karen took a deep breath and crept around the edge of the tub. Some of the crawlies were trying to scale the slick side of the off white enameled tub. Bile rose in a burning line up her esophagus. She forced her leg out and gingerly rested five toes on the toilet seat. Normally, Karen was fairly agile. Another shudder and the sight of a scorpion clinging to the hand towel hanging above the toilet nearly made her lose her footing.

It won't jump on you. It won't jump. She stared at the tiny six-legged monster with its pincers and tail at ready to jump at the first opportunity. Like her naked boob.

She shook off the vision. *Don't jump. Please, don't jump.*

Both feet now secure on the toilet seat and her eyes glued to the scorpion on the hand towel, she leaned out to the shut door and twisted the knob. It swung open. Yellow light shone down from the vanity area, highlighting the industrial brown carpeting. Something on the floor moved.

Karen whimpered and caught movement out of the corner of her eye.

Screaming for all she was worth, she reached and flicked the towel onto the floor. She swiped the spare towels and wash rags at the horrid things as well and stood shaking, gripping the shiny chrome bar as a lifeline.

She could have been safe at Packhome with her mom, step-dad, and the rest of the wolvern pack. Mom made it clear that she was more than welcome every time Karen phoned. Only with her ex-fiancé Bradley and his mate living there, Karen had to think of her pride first.

She didn't want their pity, or the guys' advances. Since she cycled like a wolvern, her hormones were on overdrive like a female wolf in heat. And the guys being guys,

were dogs. Or werewolves. Most of them were like brothers and uncles, not potential mates.

And then there was Brandon. Her ex-fiancé's identical twin was so completely different from his brother that they had never looked the same to her.

She'd get herself out of this fix. It was no worse than some of the others she'd gotten into. She'd probably laugh at this one day. *Right*. For God's sake, they were scorpions, not injured predators, angry fairies, or even serial killers. Those she could deal with, maybe even bemusedly mull over later.

But not the serial killer. Being forced by the crazy psychic werewolf hunter to drive at knifepoint had been the worst thing that had happened in her life.

Occasionally, she still dreamed of being forced to drive the car at knifepoint by the crazy psychic claiming that they were werewolves. Karen could still hear each gasp of air her mother fought for as her lungs slowly filled with blood.

The insane werewolf hunter had been so intent on trying to escape her mom's last effort to stop him that he hadn't seen the real wolveren until too late. It had been a bloody and fitting death.

Karen took another breath. It was time to save herself. She considered her options.

There was the open door and there was no telling how many creepy-crawlies in the main room ready to sting her. She made another sweep of the tiny bathroom. Above the tub was a small opaque ventilation window about three feet wide.

Yeah. Let's hear it for a bed on a budget. As in a really small, *I-left-my-job-without-notice-because-my-boss-turned-the-crazy-mob-loose-on-me*, kind of budget.

Lawrence Dailey had been a human psychic and a fairly unimaginative one at that. He lived for his computer programs and sucking up to the company's higher-ups. Dating then sleeping with him had been a stupid mistake.

She should have realized that not all psychics were like her and her mother.

Rabid paranoia of the supernatural races and a cultist religion had ruled the lives of the community born psychics she'd lived among in Arkansas. Once they had found out she wasn't 'pure' the psychic community rallied to eliminate her.

Lawrence, her lover, had led the mob.

Karen worked her way back over to the tub. Her initial fear was beginning to ease, though an occasional shudder worked its way up her spine. She tiptoed up to check out the window. It was wide and narrow and had that swirly opaque pattern found on cheap bathroom glass. It was dark outside and no light filtered through.

Thank God she was taller than her mother. Mom would never have reached it.

The window turned out to be a hand-cranked jobber that was caulked into place and served no function other than being tacky.

She glanced down at the scorpion covered hand towels and wished she'd kept at least one. Well, she wasn't getting one now.

The towel bar took a moment to wrench from the wall. Another cheap bathroom fixture, the aluminum paint was beginning to flake off of the bar. She took an experimental swing. It skittered across the glass, leaving a scratch.

She rapped at it again. Her imagination worked overtime. Visions of being trapped naked with a room full of scorpions eating her alive gave her strength. The glass

cracked. Another good whack and a chunk of glass fell. She moved before it could cut her.

Karen stared at the glass. She'd be sliced to ribbons crawling through that. She looked at the floor, considering.

Were there more of them than before? Karen shuddered and smacked the weakened window pane. Broken glass was preferable to scorpions any night.

"Dammit! Stop whacking on the window."

The order came from the darkness on the other side of the cracked glass. Startled, Karen nearly fell from her perch on the side of the tub. Throwing her arms out, she balanced. The cool air on her naked skin sent a shiver of goose bumps over her body.

"Bradley?"

Her stomach clenched at the thought of her ex finding her like this.

The voice gave a short bark of laughter. There was no humor in the sound.

"As if. You got a toilet plunger in there?"

"Brandon?"

It was him.

Relief watered through her spine. She rested her forehead against the speckled tile and dingy grout. He didn't answer, but she knew it was him.

She didn't try to use the pack bond to psychically reach him. Brandon might not like that.

There was a scraping noise from the outside of the tiny window and several thumps as he attacked the outside of the bathroom window frame.

She looked down by the toilet. There was a small toilet plunger there. Scorpions hadn't climbed the slick plastic handle, but a couple crawled around the base of the toilet. She didn't want to touch the thing.

"Yes, there's one. I thought you were still gone. Stationed out of the country. Army, right?"

Nerves made her chatty. She needed some kind of connection. The sound of his working paused. Karen wondered if he ever thought about their childhood escapades.

Or if he even thought of her fondly at all.

Brandon had been her best friend. She'd been engaged to Bradley, his twin brother. Then everything had fallen apart just like Adam, her step dad and the pack alpha, had predicted.

All because she couldn't commit.

"Brandon?"

"I got out a year and half ago. Pass the plunger outside to me through the break. I'm going to knock the glass inside. Then pull you out."

He went silent and the scratching started again.

For once Karen wished she had her mother's ability to read other people's emotions. She'd like to know where she stood with her one time friend.

So many stupid misunderstandings.

Brandon hadn't spoken to her since before high school graduation.

Not one word in nearly ten years.

If only she hadn't been so wrapped up in herself and the perfect life she'd

imagined with his twin, Bradley.

If only she'd kept her big mouth shut about him needing therapy to get past Garrick's, *may-he-rot-in-Hell*, abuse.

If only the brothers weren't at opposite ends of pack hierarchy, with Brandon as omega.

The if-onlys could go on forever.

Karen gingerly caught the end of the plunger and tapped it against the side of the toilet to free it of its occupants. Double checking to make sure that none of the scorpions were hiding inside, she eased the thing up through the hole in the window.

Strong looking fingers appeared through the opening and gripped the glass.

"Go to the door. I'm going to finish breaking out the glass."

"I can't. There are scorpions everywhere on the floor."

Brandon didn't say anything. He was one of the few who knew her terrors. Even in Arkansas, she'd only had two friends close enough for confidences. Lawrence, her lover, and Bailey Sparks, her best friend.

"Okay, just move back. I'll pull you through the window after."

She stepped back onto the top of toilet lid. The glass moved away from the frame with a grinding sound. Small pieces tinkled into the tub. The hand appeared again and knocked the loose pieces away.

"Gimme a towel."

His voice was different than she remembered. Deeper. More sure. She shivered as she caught a stray whiff of masculine scent.

"No ... I can't."

The patient silence on the other end was almost as unnerving as the scorpions.

No. Brandon would never hurt her. He'd killed once to save her and her mom.

"I dropped them on the floor."

Silence again.

Then, he smoothed fabric on the bottom edge of the window. His t-shirt. Strong male hands an expanse of brown muscle cored forearms reached through the opening.

"Come on, Tigger. Time to go."

Karen smiled. It was Brandon's own special nickname for her.

* * * *

"You bounce like that tiger in the Pooh books."

The skinny third grade boy stayed huddled, hiding away from the playground.

He peered through the straggles covering his dark eyes. Smudges of dirt and bruises shadowed Brandon Starr's hollowed cheeks.

She liked his honest eyes and the way he didn't make fun of her pig-tails.

Karen knew he was different. Kind of like the way she and her mom were different.

The boy flinched when she touched him. Terror flooded her as images filled her mind of the horrible things that the monster had done to him. Karen felt that Brandon tried to block her from seeing everything.

Bad, bad things.

Worse things than her mom had warned her about.

She cried and hung on tighter. There wasn't anything she could do but be his friend.

And she had until the eleventh grade.

* * * *

They hadn't spoken in years and now he'd called her Tigger. A knot she hadn't known was lodged in her heart loosened. She let herself be pulled to safety.

The trip through the narrow window scraped the hide off of her shoulders, back, and butt. Stifling a screech at the stinging pain, she clung to Brandon's bare shoulders as he lifted her out.

He stood easily as Karen wrapped herself around her savior. The raw scrape of her back burned and throbbed in time with her heartbeat.

Familiar arms held her so close that she fell apart, shaking in relief. Pressed tightly against his warm solidness, she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her nose in the security of his neck. A tenuous link opened between them, the connection of magic and pack.

Of home.

Images of the scorpions skittered across the back of her eyelids, making her shudder again.

"Karen."

Her name penetrated the frightened haze of her brain. She looked up. It was dark, but the shadowed planes of his face were visible.

He was older, leaner and harder somehow, and still Brandon. It was the eyes that gave him away.

She laid a hand on his cheek and smiled, startled when he set her down.

He pushed her away.

Physically with his arms. Emotionally with the use of her given name.

The link disappeared, as if imagined. The accusation in his voice finished closing him away from her.

"You're naked."

Karen wrapped her arms around herself and turned away to face the parking lot. They were at the back of the motel. A wooded lot afforded some privacy.

"I was taking a bath." She snapped, feeling put-out. "I wasn't about to go skipping through the scorpions to get a robe."

She shuddered again.

He growled with frustration.

Without warning, Brandon snatched her back up in his arms and strode away. He was all dominant male purpose.

"Dammit, you're bleeding."

"Where are you taking me?"

She hung on. The ordeal, his mixed signals, and her hypersensitive hormones had her in an emotional tailspin.

He gave that short derisive bark again and stepped out into the parking lot light.

"To my car. Unless, you'd like to brave the wild kingdom again?"

He didn't used to be surly and sarcastic.

The Brandon she *liked* to remember was shy and sweet, with gentle chocolate brown eyes and shadows in his soul. She'd once imagined that she could help heal the hurts the old alpha had done to Brandon before Adam Weis took over the pack.

The one she'd left behind had forsaken humanity to live as her mom's pet rather than deal with his past. Later, she'd heard he left the pack altogether.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one to grow up.

Karen huddled in his arms. She shook her head in answer to his question.

No. She'd rather stay with this new unpleasant version of her childhood friend than face those scorpions again.

Brandon Starr might be able to shift into a werewolf of legend, but in her mind, the scorpions were the true monsters.

She shuddered again and fought not to cling as he set her down beside the passenger door of a traditional jeep and opened the door.

Very aware of any creepy-crawlies that might appear, she watched him reach into the backseat and produce a blanket. He shook it loose and draped it over her shoulders before settling her inside and shutting the door.

The jeep held the comforting scent of a working man. Sweat, and the wood and dust combination that always clung to those who worked for Lobos Luna, her stepfather's construction business. She'd learned to equate that scent with strong capable men.

The blanket was crocheted. The heavy warmth lulled a sense of peace into her as the jeep traveled over the darkened streets. Out here on the highway, near the city limits, there were few streetlights.

"Who made your blanket?"

Brandon grunted. He appeared to be concentrating on driving. She tried again.

"I don't want to go to Packhome." Her brow furrowed and she turned back to the silent man at the wheel. "How did you find me? How did you know I"

He cut her off with a canine huff. A streetlight passed overhead, illuminating the angry glare he shot at her. Red reflected off his eyes.

Brandon lifted his chin, nostrils flaring as he took in her scent and pinned her with a feral stare.

Wolf eyes. A predator.

Brandon turned back to the road and switched on the headlights. He didn't need them. He could see in the dark. But getting stopped by the highway patrol, they didn't need.

Emotions churned inside him. Willpower and a lifetime of hiding his feelings kept him in control. Still, *she* was here.

Feeling the danger that surrounded her, he'd just known that the bathroom was the best mode of escape.

Having to stop and work out the security bars, then the window frame had allowed him to control his relentless drive see to Karen's safety. If not for the monster he was, for the filth of his past, they might have become mated.

Too bad she was still pining for his twin brother.

It had been a lifetime since his bright, bouncy Tigger had been close enough for him to reach out and touch.

He was going to have to be careful to call her by her given name. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to maintain his perspective. Or distance.

Alone at night, Brandon often wondered if being in Karen's presence would be the same tantalizing torture it had been growing up. In the tense silence, he was still on the outside looking in.

He'd been a significant part of her life, but she'd been everything to his. Now, he didn't have to take care not to step on his brother's toes.

Had Bradley been there for all her school events? No.

Had his twin shared lifeblood to heal her injuries? No.

Brandon had killed to keep her safe.

Bradley had abandoned her to the San Antonio Pack and married another woman.

Brandon had followed them. He'd kept watch over her from a safe distance, always staying close when he thought she might need him. Just not too close.

When he spoke, his voice was as dark as the interior of the car and gravelly, like before the change from man to wolf.

"I always find you."

Karen didn't know how to take that, but decided it had something to do with the pack bond.

She still didn't want to run into her ex and his mate. She opened her mouth to speak.

Brandon spoke first.

"We're not going to Packhome. My place is closer."

Chapter Two

Lawrence Dailey tingled with anticipation.
Far-Seeing was always dicey and the tiny lives of the scorpions intruded on his focusing on *her*.
That disappointment was another mark against Karen Ridley.
The bitch. He'd lost everything because of her.
To continue to Far-See with that much interference would result in a migraine.
She would die scared and alone. Exactly like she deserved.
The anticipation was better than fucking. Thinking about her macabre death made him horny.
He paced the length of the room, pausing to sneer at the less-than-affluent furnishings, and then stopped to squash an escaped scorpion.
Maybe bringing and storing them here hadn't been the smartest idea. But where else to keep the nasty little bugs until enough had been bought?
That was the beauty of the plan. You could buy *anything* off the Internet.
Calling up the image of Karen Ridley again in the Far-See shot warning spasms of pain through his eyeballs. He could push through it, enjoy the show if he wanted, but there would be consequences.
He'd masturbate through the pain with her tortured image in mind.
His walk back to the bed was a little off balance from the pain in his head and his dick. He flopped back on the bed, struggling with the zipper of his pants.
He stroked up slowly, imagining her fear when she noticed the crawling insects.
On the down stroke, he thought about how her breasts would heave when she screamed.
The insects would sting her.
He shuddered.
She'd fall.
Pleasure mounted in his balls.
She'd scream and writhe for him *then*.
He groaned. The thought of the scorpions and her fear fueled his lust. It was *better* than fucking her.
His belly jerked and the release made every muscle spasm.
A jab into his right leg stung sharp.
Shit! Lawrence scrambled off the bed, absently wiping the slime of his own ejaculation over the sting while he searched for the little bastard.
He stopped and laughed, rubbing all the while at the throbbing welt on his leg.
Damn, but it had been good. And it was going to get better.

* * * *

Brandon Weis lay on the too short couch and tried not to think, smell, to react to

the female in his cabin.

He rubbed a hand over his face, dreading what he'd have to tell Adam in the morning.

Adam Weis, Pack Father, was Brandon's personal hero. Brandon would never say the words out loud, but he knew that Adam knew.

Hell, the guy had adopted him and given him his own name. He'd adopted all of them, save Bradley, who didn't want it. Brandon dropped his last name, Starr, before the ink was dry on the paperwork.

Fine, his twin brother could keep the name. Brandon didn't care.

Bradley and his mate could breed all the Starrs they could.

Brandon was a Weis. The pack alpha was legally his father and Diana, Adam's mate and Karen's mom, was the mother Brandon had always wanted.

He was only sorry his long absence had worried Diana.

But Mack, the pack beta and Adam's right-hand man, was right. Brandon had had to leave to grow into himself.

To give the others enough distance so that Brandon could outgrow the stigma of being the omega, the least dominant wolf.

More like the scape-wolf.

That was someone else's spot now and Brandon was sorry for the poor sucker to have it. Not sorry enough to go there again. Adam wouldn't abuse the poor mutt who got the job, either.

His body was hard with the knowledge that a breeding female was in his lair.

He wouldn't do anything about it though.

He shifted on the couch and involuntarily inhaled. Her scent had already invaded everything.

Especially, the damn crocheted blanket that Tamara, his packsister had gifted him last Christmas. He'd tried to be polite before escaping the holiday gathering, but as usual failed. He'd probably hurt Tamara's feelings with his abrupt departure.

She'd been breeding then and her condition had not bothered him like this. On an emotional level. Only one female had ever had that kind of power over him.

Threading his finger through the holes of the blanket, he brought woven mesh to his nose to savor Karen's unique scent.

She didn't want him. She wanted his identical twin brother. Karen had always loved Bradley and his brother had taken her affection as his due.

While she might act favorably toward him, Brandon wasn't going to be a stand-in for Bradley. He didn't do stud service anymore.

Garrick Moser, former alpha, pervert, and sadist, was long gone. So were the werecoyotes the bastard had had a little 'arrangement' with.

Brandon was damaged goods.

With her visions and premonitions, Karen knew that better than anyone. Save for that brief period before her graduation when his hormones had taken charge of his better sense. Brandon had known his place and kept his paws to himself.

He'd keep those same paws off of her now.

Brandon smiled. It was a grim, hungry pull of his lips over elongated canines.

He'd concentrate on finding out who had put those scorpions in her room. He didn't care why the fool had tried to harm Karen. No reason was good enough.

Whatever dark hole the sicko was hiding in, Brandon would drag him out. Then he'd take plenty of time to tear the guy limb from limb. With his bare hands.

That pleasant thought followed him into sleep.

Chapter Three

Karen jerked from a deep sleep, disorientated by the unfamiliar surroundings. She rose from the soft nest of blankets in the middle of a very comfortable full sized bed for a better view of the cozy one room home.

Brandon. She smiled, remembering the embarrassed way he had shoved a pair of his boxers and a tee shirt at her before tucking her into the bed. He wouldn't hear of her sleeping on the sofa.

The scent of cedar permeated everything. Wooden shelves over wood paneled walls, which was probably the origin of the cedar scent, held the barest of essentials.

A sink and dorm-style refrigerator were tucked into one corner. Sitting on top of the refrigerator was a coffee pot and a small stack of dishes.

A worn leather sofa bisected the room into a living area. The crocheted blanket folded over the back of the sofa and faced a tiny television. It was all tidy and frugal.

“Ah-hem.”

A military supply box served as a night table. Karen was more surprised at having a guest than the sight of a tiny woman sitting on top the digital clock.

Her life tended to make reality TV tame, boring stuff. Who needed reality shows when your childhood friends turned into wolves and your mother's financial adviser happened to be a gnome?

Her stepfather, Adam, had some kind of treaty with the local fairies. Karen just hadn't realized they were *this* close.

The fairy's knees were drawn up so that she could rest her elbows while she observed the human intruder. Disapproval radiated from the small red-haired woman like a beacon. Karen didn't need special gifts to know that. The glaring eyes and down set of her teeny bow-shaped mouth were indication enough.

Karen tried for friendly. If it didn't work out she could always try a flyswatter later. “Good morning. I'm Karen Ridley.”

She waited for the polite comeback but the woman slid off of the clock and stamped to the edge of the box. Her red hair, bright as a crayon, drifted in a fine shimmery cloud around her shoulders.

The fine doll-sized leather ensemble reminded Karen of pagan warrior princess ready to march into battle. No matter that this warrior was all of three inches tall, she still looked intimidating.

Warrior Princess planted both hands on her hips.

“I don't care who you are. You aren't wanted here.” Her high, bell-like voice meant business. She pointed a tiny finger at Karen. “He doesn't need the likes of you.”

Karen leaned toward the fairy woman, ready to engage in the battle of the wits.

Her retort fell like a dud missile as her abilities kicked in. She stared at the door. Her mother and ... Adam were about to arrive and she was still lazing in bed.

She looked back at the clock and nearly groaned. Ten o'clock. The fairy was gone.

Karen jumped out of the bed. If the fairy was down there, she'd better move fast. After that welcome, Karen was ready to look for that flyswatter.

She had barely twitched the blankets into place and brushed her teeth with a filched spare toothbrush from the kitchenette sink when the crunch of gravel outside announced her parent's arrival.

She opened the door to reveal a secluded wooded lot, still cool despite the Texas summer.

Last night she'd been too preoccupied with not climbing over the gearshift and into her rescuer's lap for a round of thank-you sex. She'd done well just keeping her hands to herself.

Running for your life while your hormones were out of whack was seriously demeaning.

Diana Weis nearly fell out of the big SUV before her wolverine mate could come to a complete stop.

Karen's mother was typical for their kind. She knew that now. Psychics were practically a race unto themselves. Their metabolisms tended to produce short and plump. Their power was in their minds, not their bodies.

Her mother had lost quite a bit of the weight over the years, but she would never be called a hardbody.

Karen was beginning to suspect that she'd inherited a few pounds of that missing weight her mom had dropped.

Diana enfolded her in a happy-cookie scented hug.

"Dammit woman! You nearly gave me heart failure, jumping out of the car that way."

Adam stalked over. At six feet of construction-hardened muscle and a predatory aura, his arctic glare could freeze the meanest junkyard dog.

"Put a choke chain on the attitude, Fido. Karen's going to think she's not welcome."

Adam Weis was putty in the hands of his human mate. He smiled down at his stepdaughter and pulled her into a crushing hug of his own.

"God, we missed you." He pushed her to arms length and studied her. She could see him filing away the changes as he smiled more tenderly. "Don't go away so far again."

She saw changes in him, too. The roguish long platinum blond hair was neatly trimmed. Well, neatly for Adam. Strands of the silky pale stuff still fell over his forehead. The rest was rumpled from dragging his hands through it. He did that when thinking.

His nose twitched a bit at her scent but he didn't seem to be bothered by her condition. Could that be because he was mated?

"I missed everyone, too."

Except for Bradley. Him, she could wait until doomsday to lay eyes on again.

Diana frowned and peered at her daughter, her head cocked from years of living in a household of canines.

Uh-oh. Karen remembered to stuff her emotions under a happy attitude and a smile. Growing up with an empathic mother could drive you both insane if you didn't find a buffer.

Her mother built barriers to keep others out. Adam and the guys had an interesting time tunneling through her mother's walls. Karen simply projected happy thoughts and went for a diversion.

She nodded at the driveway.

"Brandon's on his way back. I can make coffee."

They trooped inside and Karen forced herself not to react to the speculative stares her attire was getting.

It was pretty obvious whose clothes she was wearing. Without underwear. And hormonal.

Adam had already scented that she was entering the state the wolveren called the breeding-time.

Basically, their females went into heat. Karen had shared enough wolveren blood over the years that, while she would never Change, her physiology had. So had Diana's.

Karen had barely gotten the coffee started before her own precognitive gift announced Brandon's imminent arrival. The jeep's engine and the crunch of gravel announced his physical presence.

Brandon warily entered the cabin. A long white box was clutched protectively under one arm. Two white plastic shopping bags swung from his other hand.

He nodded to Adam first, and then sent Diana a long, quiet, brown-eyed look. A brief glance still managed to catalogue Karen from head to toe and left her tingling.

"Oh, good grief Brandon! I am not going to snatch your donuts and send them down the disposal."

Her mother was not known as Her Highness the Health Queen for nothing.

"Unless of course, you didn't get chocolate crème filled ones. I might then."

Brandon set the pastry box on the coffee table that held the TV and moved to brush a kiss over his adopted mother's cheek.

There had always been a special bond between Diana and Brandon. The other wolveren had accused her of favoritism.

Karen thought her mom's near rape by a werewolf and Brandon's saving the both of them from that crazy psychic killer had given them a special understanding.

She remembered that night he'd been a scared sixteen year old running away from home, *from her*. The killer had made her park near his hide-away.

The waterfall had been hers, Brandon, and Bradley's place until then. The killer, Karen never remembered his name, thought to leave her and her mother's bodies for the pack to find.

Her screams and the scent of Diana's blood had brought help.

Brandon had been six foot of territorial wolveren gone ballistic all over their kidnapper. Then her friend had taken charge of disposing of the body and saving her mom, Diana.

He'd once had a special bond with her, too, a little voice whispered in the back of Karen's mind.

She squelched the voice and grabbed Styrofoam cups to start pouring half-done cheater cups of coffee for everyone.

Warmth at her back and the unique scent that was Brandon alerted her to his presence. Her stomach clenched and her breath caught. She nearly sloshed coffee on her unsteady hand.

Damned hormones.

His voice was quiet in her ear.

“I brought you something to change in to.”

The bags bumped into her hip.

The thoughtfulness of the gesture brought hormone-laden tears to her eyes and a lump to her throat.

Oh, God. She was crying over clothes. What next?

She accepted the offering and fled for the bathroom, hoping she wasn't going to embarrass herself further by stumbling into the closet instead.

Inside the bathroom, she dug through the bags. He hadn't missed a thing.

She found a modest pack of bikini underwear, a sports bra, several baby-doll tees, and a couple pair of jeans, a pack of socks, and tennis shoes. All in her size.

Damn. Tears overflowed and ran down her face. She was mortified.

There was no covering this up with a happy thought. Everyone knew she was having a fit in the bathroom.

What Diana Weis could infer from people's emotions was amazing. And scary enough for Karen to force her rampaging emotions into control before her empathic mother found out more than she wanted known.

Before leaving home, Karen had been pretty good at keeping her emotional state under wraps. An occasional phone call and rare visit had made her lax. With a mental shake, she put herself into a better, *happier* frame of mind.

She washed her face and finished dressing. Before walking out, Karen plastered a big ol' smile on her face.

They'd saved two chocolate sprinkled donuts for her. Karen mumbled her thanks and settled onto the floor near the sofa to stuff her face.

The sofa was small enough that only two people could fit, and being the highest ranking in the pack, guess who got it?

Her mom snuggled up under her mate's outstretched arm to enjoy the rare sugar-laden treat.

Karen said a quick prayer to the pastry god that the sugar rush would drown the hormone poisoning and dug in.

It was nice. She had missed the closeness of living with a pack.

She'd practically helped raise Mark, Seth, and Rick on the sly before her mom had met Adam. Brandon and his brother had kept a close watch on the younger ones to keep them away from Adam's sadistic predecessor.

She cast a quick glance at her rescuer, practically draped over the alphas' legs, and squashed any uncharitable thoughts.

That's what packs did. They bonded on a very emotional level. Physical touch grounded them.

Hell, she should be happy for everyone that after Garrick's abuse, Brandon even let them touch him. For a long time he hadn't. Losing that particular privilege and watching him turn his back on his human side had been more than she could bear. Karen understood the trauma he'd worked through that last year but had hated watching him live as Diana's pet.

Brandon opened his eyes. Dreamy content changed into a laser intensity focused on her.

She swallowed a lump of half chewed donut and met the stare.

Adam broke the deadlock. His deep voice startled her into attention.

"So what happened last night? You left dinner in a hurry, son. And this morning" Adam trailed off, including Karen in his inquiring gaze. One pale eyebrow rose.

A guilty flush worked up her neck and face.

She hadn't called to tell anyone she was home yet. She didn't even know if she was staying.

Brandon settled beside her, his arm going around her back. His heat made her scorchingly aware of him.

She tensed.

There hadn't been a chance to talk to him about keeping last night's adventure between them. Involving the pack in her personal problems was inviting more trouble to her already insane life. She tried her eyes and trying to will the message to him.

"Someone dumped a bunch of scorpions in Karen's motel room last night. I had to pull her out of the bathroom vent window."

Either Brandon was deliberately obtuse or she hadn't developed the skill. Karen figured both.

The alphas went still as their alarm factor shot up.

Furious, she turned and shoved Brandon hard.

He shouldn't have budged, but he went with the motion, falling back to recline on his elbows. His legs stretched out in a delicious sprawl as he allowed her the more dominant position. She leaned over, ready to give him a piece of her mind.

Part of her realized how easy it was to fall back into old patterns.

"I've been wondering why I smell blood." Adam's comment was dry.

"Blood!" her mom nearly screeched.

Brandon grinned as she leaned over him. His hand shot out, supernaturally fast, pulling her forward. When she dropped onto his chest, Brandon rolled over.

Now he was on top.

Karen shoved at his chest but he was as immovable as a rock.

The grin turned dark and tinged with satisfaction as he made himself comfortable.

She held herself very still as her body's demands tried to take over her thinking.

She needed to get laid. She needed condoms, her own contribution to the clamor her body was making.

Wolven were freer and more intense with their expressions than humans. Actions and scents spoke volumes more than word, though the interpretation of those actions was often different by human standards. By wolven standards they weren't doing more than flirting. Even so, she did not want her parents as audience while they rolled around on the

floor.

“And naked.” Brandon’s expression turned serious.

His intense presence filled her every sense. Sight, scent, the weight of him settled over her. She growled at him and his eyes darkened. She barely heard the rumble of his voice.

“The window frame scratched her back when I pulled her out.”

Adam heard well enough.

“Which motel? Not the run down one right inside town?”

Karen flushed again. This time with mortification at her lack of self control. She pushed at him again.

He rolled away easily, the same dark satisfaction burning in his eyes as he watched her.

Adam stood and began to pace. His hands tunneled into his silvery hair. Her mother focused on her with intent speculation.

Karen took a slow breath and tried to calm herself down.

What was Brandon up to? Staking a claim?

“Yeah. I checked the place out again when I went for donuts.” Brandon’s voice held an edge of anger. “Her room is still locked up tight, but there’s a gap in the curtain. Bunches of small open boxes were tossed on the floor. Whoever dumped all those scorpions in there had a key to the room.”

“Who would do a thing like that?”

Adam and Brandon both gave Diana *that* look. Her mom was a little naive.

Diana was sweet, smart, and as protective of her extended family as any she-wolf. But she never seemed to comprehend why someone would do harm to another.

None of them wanted Diana any other way.

“Who’ve you pissed off lately?”

“Brandon!” Sure, neck on the floor and Diana might call it wolveren bonding, but foul language was a no-no for her little ones.

He grinned at Karen. “Well?”

She glanced at her mom and then jumped to her feet for a coffee refill.

Adam immediately stuck his hands in his hair and tugged at the strands. The alpha’s pacing reminded her of a caged wolf.

“Damn. Damn, damn, damn.”

He would definitely see this as a territorial, touch my kid and die, kind of thing.

Brandon had gotten up from the floor and begun to cross the room toward Karen.

“Who is trying to kill you?”

The men froze at Diana’s soft voice.

Adam’s gaze rested on his wife, waiting for her cue.

Karen watched her mother delicately set her Styrofoam cup and her plate on the coffee table before standing up.

She scrambled for an answer. This wasn’t something she should just spit out in front of everyone.

Another thing to remember about her mother was that Diana was the alpha female and a powerful psychic. Adam rarely disciplined any female in his pack. Her mother was

the reigning queen.

For the most part, Diana was a benevolent queen who tried to keep a balance between the human and supernatural worlds. But she was the alpha bitch of the Anderson County pack and no woman on the supernatural side brooked her.

Karen had always enjoyed being treated as human, by both her mother and her pack. Apparently, the kid gloves were off.

She didn't bother with the why. Diana had picked up on the real emotion behind her daughter's homecoming, *fear*, not only hormone-induced craziness.

When Karen failed to answer, her mother came to stand in front of her. No, not her mother, the Canis Matra, Pack Mother, stood in front of her.

She didn't look sweet or soft anymore. Or naive. This was the woman who had stood up to the Wolven Council and told them what she thought of their concerns about a human alpha female.

Karen felt power rise in the room, emanating from Diana.

It was a challenge, pure and simple.

The wolven used a show of presence to intimidate, though they had little or no usable psychic power. The psychic humans she'd stupidly gotten involved in while living in Arkansas did a power show face off before using their powers on each other.

Usually, the weaker power caved and admitted defeat.

Karen was awed. She felt ... small.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her gifts were basic precognition. She was small potatoes in the psychic communities.

The power show in front of her was the most spectacular, intimidating she'd ever experienced and it didn't abate.

Diana's voice was reasonable.

"You and I are going to have a little talk while the men go do what they have to."

Karen didn't see the guys go. Her gaze never left Diana's.

She heard the door shut and a vehicle start before the power folded away.

Her mother brushed by as Karen moved out of her path with a nervous jump.

She'd like to have made her excuses and gone anywhere else, but they were playing by pack rules now.

To move was respectful. Hiding would be trouble and loose her standing in the fold.

Diana started another pot of coffee.

She didn't look up as she spoke and she didn't speak very loud. Karen had to move closer to hear.

"You've come and gone as you please since you graduated from high school. Adam and I didn't agree on that."

Her movements were calm and sure.

"I"

"Be quiet." After pouring the water into the back of the cheap white plastic machine, Diana flipped the switch back on.

"We both wanted college for all of you. I wanted you to experience the world. He said you had too much of wolven blood in you to be human. That there would be

trouble.”

There had been. Karen couldn't disagree with that. She hadn't finished college after the last big fight with Bradley. She'd been in heat then, too.

He'd wanted for her to come home, for them to mate-bond. It didn't matter that she didn't date. Just knowing she was in season with a pack of available males drove Bradley nuts.

She'd wanted more. More time. More space. Not more commitment.

After Bradley left, her main goal was to get out of San Antonio before she caused more problems for the pack there. Her hopes for a veterinarian degree were a wash.

She'd wanted space so she had hunted up a wolven-free county out of state and moved there.

Arkansas reminded Karen of home. Too much.

The psychic population was as intent on protecting their families and territory from the supernaturals as the supernaturals were of one another.

Her mom was right, or rather Adam was. Karen had a few psychic gifts and a lot of supernatural flavor.

When she'd been found out, the locals had practically come after her with torches and pitchforks.

Good old Lawrence had been at the head of the mob.

She wasn't sure if she was more disappointed in herself for getting involved with him and spilling her guts or in him for his bigoted Salem witch trial reaction.

Diana broke into her thoughts, handing her a fresh cup of coffee already doctored with sugar.

“The fact is, you haven't been around. Or a participating part of the pack in some time.”

Diana took a delicate sip of coffee, completely at odds with the power dynamo she was minutes ago.

“I won't have you waltzing in and hurting Brandon. Then you dance off to your next adventure.”

“Yeah! That is what I told her.” The small, red-haired fairy appeared on a shoulder-high shelf bearing woodworking paraphernalia. She held an Exacto knife propped upright like a medieval weapon.

Karen shot the small woman a warning glare. She'd deal with Princess Tiny later.

“Hello, Ember. Thank you for looking out for things here.” Diana pulled a folded zip sandwich bag from her pocket and set it by the sink. “I made taffy on the sly the other day and saved you a piece for your trouble.”

Ember shot Karen a return triumphant look. She wanted to smack the tiny woman into the wastebasket under the shelf.

Karen hadn't been in town long, but she was already tired of her mother's and the small woman's attitude.

She tried counting. But patience had never been one of her virtues. Her mouth opened of its own accord.

“You both act like I'm the whore of Babylon out for his virtue,” Karen snapped. Incensed that they would dictate to her about him, heat and anger rose inside her like a

live thing. “Brandon’s a grown man. I think he can decide who he wants in his bed on his own.”

She slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

Did she say that? Out loud?

The insidious hormones slipped visions of a naked Brandon in the bed.

She swallowed. Did she want that?

Oh. Yeah. Bring it on. Every sex-starved cell cheered.

She rubbed a hand over her face.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” Her powers informed her of the guest before he made it up the drive. “Someone’s coming.”

Diana nodded. She dumped her coffee out in the sink.

“That would be Chase. I have a meal to oversee and the pool house to shake down. Someone is hiding candy out there again.”

She strode to the couch to retrieve her purse and looked back at Karen. “Seth has invited a girl to dinner. You’re a part of the pack. You’re welcome to come.”

Karen shook her head. No. It would be a bad idea.

Because she was unmated, during the breeding time any unattached wolveren male turned her to jelly. All those extra pheromones she was producing for the express purpose of attracting a potential mate worked really well.

That’s why Bradley had broken their engagement.

She’d had to hide while the furor settled down. Four days later, her graduation ring had arrived in the San Antonio PO box she used with a short note and an envelope for his to be returned. Seth, the youngest and most sensitive of the guys, had emailed her with news of Bradley’s new mate.

The sound of a motorcycle coming up the drive filtered into the small room. They went outside to watch Chase drive up on the shiny black and blue motorcycle.

Karen didn’t know anything about motorcycles except that Chase was art in motion. The bike wasn’t a machine, but rather an extension of the man. Or a warrior’s modern steed.

He didn’t wear a helmet, so his golden hair streamed behind him. The black leather that protected his body from a nasty road rash, in case of an accident, was worn and painted every muscle in delicious highlight. The motorcycle stopped with a slight angled flourish and he knocked the kickstand down with one booted heel.

Golden laughing eyes traveled over both women as he threw his leg over to dismount. Whatever Chase had been before he’d been turned into a werewolf, wolveren, bled over into his carefree hound dog biker guy persona.

He spread his arms and bowed low. The blond locks slid loose and sexy over his leather clad shoulders.

“Ladies, I am at your service.” He got off the bike and straightened and Karen saw the exact moment he caught wind of her scent.

His nostrils flared and Chase’s good humor fled. His body went on alert. He actually took several steps in her direction before taking control of himself.

The spectacular way he filled out the front of his leather pants fascinated Karen. Her mouth dried and all the moisture fled south.

“I need a ride. She doesn’t.”

He flushed bright red at her mother’s announcement.

Chase turned and headed back to his bike, walking around to the opposite side before facing Karen again. This time his smile was apologetic.

“Sorry.” The once-over he gave her was hot and steamy. “And no. I like my freedom enough to say my welcome-backs from a distance.”

He threw a leg over the motorcycle then helped her mother climb into the area behind him.

Diana turned a stern eye on her daughter.

“I meant what I said.”

Karen nodded. She did, too, but didn’t want to get into round two of a situation she wouldn’t win.

With that power display, her mother would wipe the floor with her.

Chase offered a friendly wave as he drove off.

Thank God he’d showed restraint. She liked him well enough, but didn’t want to get locked into a relationship with him. That’s what would happen if she got pregnant.

Wolven males were territorial. If she got pregnant, she had no doubt he’d push to mate-bond.

That’s why Grammar Weis had moved so far away from Adam’s biological father. Adam had turned out great with his mom and human step-dad, but Karen wouldn’t want to keep her child from its father.

She tried to imagine a child with Chase’s gold locks and amber eyes. She’d always liked brown better.

She could see a little boy with dark brown hair with precocious chocolate eyes who would follow his father everywhere.

Karen shook of the thought with a snort. She didn’t need a baby. Her hormones were mucking up her thinking.

Heck, she didn’t really know what she wanted for herself.

She didn’t have much money. No job prospects.

She’d had to ditch her car back in Arkansas and take the bus home because one of the psychics worked at the DMV.

She glanced at the building Brandon called a cabin. It was a super-sized storage building turned into an efficiency apartment.

A path led to another storage building in back. A ladder leaned against the side.

She didn’t really want to face Ember again and decided to explore the second building.

Scuffing down the path, Karen’s thoughts turned back to the little dark haired boy in her fantasy.

What *did* she want out of life?

Chapter Four

Karen was engrossed in her study of Brandon's workshop.

It revealed a side of him that he kept under wraps. Where the cabin was simply a place to put his basics, this was where he lived.

Well-cared-for tools systematically lined the wall—woodworking, construction, and near the door was a space for car repair stuff. Pre-made wood cutouts for future projects had spaces, too. A Lobos Luna baseball cap held a place of honor among collector Christmas and Super Bowl cola bottles.

Amid all the tools and worktables were works of art disguised as furniture. A couple of finished rocking chairs sat waiting for some finishing touch. One had gorgeous scrolling suitable for family use. The other was for a nursery. Storks and balloons across the top piece held the twisted spindles in place.

Underneath a tarp, a decadent antique lounge waited patiently for the heavy satin to be tacked into place and the trim replaced.

On a back worktable, the pieces of a cradle were piled together. The head and foot parts of the cradle held sketches of tumbling puppies. No, pups. Wolven pups.

Wolven didn't Change until puberty. Any wolven pups who slept there would look human. But she *knew* that's what he intended to convey on the cradle.

Karen traced a finger along one area where he'd already begun carving a cute fat pup stalking a grasshopper. The carving pulled at something elemental inside. She caught herself and pulled away as if burned, moving on to the next project.

* * * *

Brandon paused in the doorway of his workshop, his inner sanctum, and watched the woman go through his trace patterns.

He studied her, noting the changes the years had wrought.

She used to wear her pretty brown hair in a long bouncy ponytail.

He'd gone to many cheerleading practices and watched that ponytail twitch and tease the boys in the stands, like a mare did when she was ready.

Now she had it cut into a sort of longish layered style that flipped up at the ends.

He decided that he liked it. She'd also put on a few extra pounds, great pounds that rounded out her rear end nicely.

He got hard just thinking about finding all the changes he'd discover under her jeans and tee shirt.

Because he was a masochist, he'd picked out one of those girly form-fitting tee shirts on purpose. Her breasts were heavenly, full and round. The globes begged to be palmed. Especially with her errant hormones drawing her nipples into hard buds whenever he looked at her.

Brandon swallowed convulsively, inhaling the seductive scent of breeding female and Karen all mixed in with the soothing smell of wood.

God, he'd never been so hard in his life.

His thoughts tumbled in his head. He should leave her alone. He should Change and run. Hunt something.

She'd been touching his things, the tools he used when he needed to escape and couldn't.

The gesture was intimate, like handling his underwear.

Yeah. He wanted to hunt, but not in the woods. He entered, lured like never before by the scent of impending sex.

Brandon knew sex. He knew dirty, sinful things that monsters did to the innocent. He knew intimately the things that should never see the light of day. He knew what it was to be bought and sold like a stud at auction. He also knew what simple animal release was. Those things he could deny.

Love, respect ... she seduced his soul with things he craved, but would never beg for.

Instinct whispered in his ear as he stalked his prey, drawing out his dark desire from the most primitive recesses of the self he denied.

This was his. The mate promised to him long ago. Bound to him by magic stronger than words. *This was something clean meant only for him.*

Arms came around her like a vise and Karen sucked in a startled breath.

She squeaked and squirmed. Her traitorous legs turned to jelly when she smelled him.

Brandon.

Wolven body temperature ran high, and his skin was a furnace against her back.

One big hand rested on her belly. It slipped down to her jeans waistband, his fingers teasing the flesh under her waistband.

A shudder rolled through her as Brandon's other hand rubbed down her thigh and back up the curve of her hip.

He growled in her ear and ground the hard bulge of his sex against her rear.

She whimpered and pushed back. Hot wet heat pooled in her center. She ached there, wanting, needing that bulge a lot further south.

Karen tried to turn around, but he trapped her against the table.

He ground into her backside again, tormenting them both.

She started to protest and he growled again. His hand left her hip to trap her hand against the table.

"No. Not until I say." His voice was deep and gravelly, like before the Change.

Hot and wet, his mouth met the apex of her shoulder and neck. Strong teeth nipped at the skin, then laved the sting away.

His hand slid under her shirt and pushed her bra up out of the way so that the heat of his hand branded her right breast.

Kneading, smoothing, he teased another whimper out of her. He gave equal attention to the other breast, turning her whimper into a sob.

"Brandon! Please!"

He growled again, keeping her trapped against the table. He did release her hand long enough to strip the little tee shirt and sports bra over her head.

Karen tried to push back against the frustrating tease of his erection.

A gentle hand on her back pushed her forward over the worktable.

Both wonderfully hot palms caught her breasts before they brushed against the rough surface of the table. A stray tool bumped her hand and was shoved to the floor when his mouth started a magical trail across her shoulders and back.

Nip, lick, suck. When he reached the end of one shoulder, he started back.

His groin ground rhythmically against her center. She needed more.

“Please, please, please.”

The words became her mantra. She needed him inside, *now*.

She twisted, still trapped against the table, between his hands and the heavy pressure of his hard heated body.

Suddenly, the pressure abated. He pulled her away from the table and turned her around to face him.

She lifted her face, reached up, wanting, needing a kiss. Her eyes closed in anticipation as his hands skimmed up her waist and torso. Hands caressed her arms while he held back the kiss. She shuddered at the torture.

Didn't he understand, she needed his mouth on hers? As much as she needed him naked, pressed against her, filling her up.

He wrapped his fingers around her wrists, pulled them down behind her back, trapping them there. He crowded her back against the table.

She protested the movement by rubbing her breasts against the soft fabric of his shirt. His hard torso teased her underneath the fabric, a promise of what was to come.

“Look at me.”

Karen whimpered. She needed

“Not until you look at me. I want to hear my name.”

She opened her eyes and stared into the intense depths of his dark eyes. They weren't dreamy. They were possessive.

“Brandon,” she whispered against the soft questing of his lips.

The questing turned into a demand. His tongue plundered her. He delved into her, tasting her teeth, sweeping the roof of her mouth.

She fought back, tangling tongues until he pulled away. Both of them were breathless, dizzy with power of the kiss.

Her hands came free and she tugged at his tee shirt. She wanted to see the beautiful planes of his body.

He obliged. The shirt flew over the table and disappeared. Her hands smoothed over the sculpted muscles. She buried her face in the shallow valley of his breastbone and inhaled.

Musk and man, *yum*.

Karen lifted her face to meet his gaze. He met her stare with a look of indecision. Her hands spread over the waist above his jeans waistline.

She understood. She wouldn't go further without him leading the way. Instead she buried her face in his chest and rubbed her cheek against the crisp hair.

“I want you, Brandon. I want to feel you inside me.”

“It's just the hormones. Any male would do.”

She rubbed her face against him in denial.

“Maybe any would do. But I don’t want just any. I want you.” She dropped her hands away and leaned back when what she really wanted to do was force him to the ground and take what she needed. “I won’t guilt you or try to talk you into it. This is your choice.”

Brandon took a step backward, taking the furnace-like heat of his body with him.

She wrapped her arms around her breasts to ward off the chill his absence left behind and watched the lithe play of his muscles.

If he said no, she’d probably leave again.

He looked back at her from under the canopy of his thick lashes.

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?”

“I won’t say no.” At this point she wasn’t capable of saying *no*.

He might run screaming into the night. Well, it wasn’t night, but he might still abandon her. For different reasons than his brother had left her to fend off other suitors.

Suitors? Sex driven werewolves maybe.

Wouldn’t it be the height of tragic comedy? To be turned away by both brothers during the breeding time, when her mind and emotions were less than stable?

“But I might? Is that it?” Brandon’s face hardened and his eyes narrowed. “Then what? You go hunt up some other guy to fuck?”

The sucker punch landed true. All her libido drained out of her. Karen turned away to find her shirt.

The slight chill spread through her body, numbing her enough to pick up the garment and dust it off.

“Well?”

Karen slipped the shirt back on. Deciding that the bra wasn’t worth looking for, she started for the door. She had to get going. *Now*. The only plan she had was to leave. On her own two feet.

Brandon stopped her with a hand on her arm. She couldn’t decipher the mix of dark and dangerous emotions in his glare. She tried to pull free but he held tight.

She had to go before the cold thawed and she fell apart.

“*What?*”

“Who do you really want, Karen? Bradley’s already taken. He made his choice.”

Her free hand connected with his face with a solid sting.

He let go of her arm and stepped back, giving her a good view of the outline of her hand left behind.

The cold melted. She fought against the easy rush of tears strong emotions evoked during the breeding time.

“Bastard.”

“Probably.”

She turned and stumbled out of the workshop.

She didn’t have her heart. She hadn’t realized that losing him a second time would be so devastating.

Other than her heart, the rest of her possessions could be replaced.

On the bright side, she did have her feet and her freedom and she intended to

PMSing
make use of both.

Buffi BeCraft-Woodall

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Chapter Five

Brandon stopped. He stopped seeing. Stopped moving. Stopped breathing.

She had left. He had turned her down and she had left.

To the cabin for now, but she'd leave town again when she was able.

His vision swam and he sucked in a breath. He tried telling himself that she would have left anyway. Sucking in another breath, he forced his feet to move.

Inside he was numb, frozen. Underneath the numbness, the beast within howled and scabbled at its cage, desperate to escape. It wanted its mate.

He crept around the worktable carefully, aching all over.

He bent to retrieve his shirt.

Underneath lay her bra. The bra he'd picked out.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

He couldn't let the monster go free. Bad things happened when he let it loose.

Besides, hadn't Garrick, the old pack leader, told him enough how useless he was? That he was only good for one thing.

Brandon did not play convenient stud for anyone, not even Karen.

He stood up. Rubbed his palms across the surface of the table for the tactile distraction and bumped the cradle in the process. It was a good cradle, the second of a matched pair he'd started a few months ago when the dreams wouldn't go away.

He believed in dreams and visions.

How could he not, with all the psychics in his life?

Lately, when Brandon slept, he saw a couple of cute little guys that looked sort of like him and Bradley. They were bold little boys with a nose for trouble. Instead of the nightmares that still haunted him, or Karen who taunted him and made him ache in his sleep, the dreams of the boys gave him a sense of peace. Of protectiveness.

At first he'd thought they were him and Bradley. Then he realized how clean and happy the kids were. Brandon supposed that Bradley's mate was pregnant.

Selfish bastard that he was, he didn't want the dream boys to be his twin brother's. Stupid fool that he was, he wanted to believe they were a real vision, meant for him. And Karen, too.

She had been his sanity, a shining angel of goodness in those long years of Garrick's abuse, treating him like a real person, sharing glimpses of what a real home should be. Diana, her mom, had unknowingly been Pack Mother long before Adam arrived on the scene. His and Karen's estrangement was part of what had driven him to turn away from his humanity until after she left for college. He'd been less than pathetic.

Developing his own self-worth and dignity had been a hard, lonely task costing him the comfort of a pack. He wouldn't throw what he'd gained away so that she could pretend he was Bradley.

God, he did not want to lose Karen again.

But then, he'd given her up not two minutes ago, hadn't he? Pushed her out the door for his pride.

The beast howled in rage.

Follow, follow, *follow*. It demanded.

It tore at his control until he did the only thing he could do.

He stripped down and Changed.

Bones shifted in a pleasure/pain of sensation. Muscles stretched. His face elongated. Long, sharp predator's teeth filled his muzzle. Dark fur cascaded over his body as his pads hit the floor.

Old Garrick had taught him how horrible the monster inside of him could be. He could not accept that they were one. He kept them separate. He, Brandon, the man, made sure he was in control.

What would happen if Garrick was right? What would happen to Karen, to other innocents, if he lost control and the monster turned into the twisted thing Garrick had been?

He paused to sniff the pile of clothes he had dropped and then became distracted with the scrap of fabric that held the Karen's scent. He played with it a moment, enjoying the smell. He remembered she was gone and the wolf within him grieved.

They, the wolf and the man, howled and ran. In a last act of defiance, Brandon forced the wolf on a different path than the woman had taken.

* * * *

For forever Karen alternated between walking and crying. The day seemed to be an exercise in humiliation management, because she hated the crybaby and screamer heroines that populated books and movies.

Usually, she had better control of her reactions. Not today. Probably not for the next week either.

Breeding time lasted about two weeks. A damned uncomfortable, inconvenient two weeks.

After she cried, she walked. It was a pretty cathartic cry, too.

The walking turned out to be a decent enough mind-numbing exercise that she found herself thinking about the fantasy baby she'd dreamed up while snooping in Brandon's workshop.

"I'm sorry, Sammy."

She'd already named him and let her little Sammy down.

Sammy had a playmate. But she hadn't seen the other one clearly enough to picture him.

She didn't have much experience with visions of her own, so part of the fantasy was believing that it could be a vision.

She sighed.

That was the problem with believing your own psychic power hype.

What if what you thought was a vision was really a fantasy of your own imagination?

You got yourself all worked up over nothing.

Sammy hadn't seemed like a nothing. He still felt real. Like a promise.

And the cradle had been perfect for him.

Karen shuddered a sigh.

Brandon would be nothing like her own father. The wolveren would be caring, protective, involved. If he could just let go of the past long enough to take a chance on the future.

She'd messed up again and now Sammy would never be conceived.

That made Karen want to cry again for the loss of her almost little boy. Too bad she didn't have any more tears left. She managed a couple of snuffles for Sammy's sake though.

She was so screwed up.

* * * *

Mack Spencer spooned a helping of broccoli onto his plate and passed it to the young man next to him. In his mind and heart they were all still the unruly boys he'd given up his everything to find. His parents, sister, cousins, and the psychic community at large considered him dead. Excluded. This was the family he'd *chosen*.

Rick Weis looked at the cooked green shrubbery and dug in with resigned fate on his Latino features. The boy knew better than to insult his adopted mama's menu.

Rick passed the bowl to his very dark-skinned brother Seth, who murmured thanks before passing it to the pretty human female beside him. She was full of manners.

She smiled a sultry smile at her boyfriend, said thank you and sent the bowl on.

"Broccoli? Again? This stuff should be reserved for goats." Everyone stopped to stare at Mark.

Adam, the young man's adopted father, caught his eye and frowned.

Mark grinned.

"It's go-o-o-d." He mimicked a goat bleat, drawing out the last word.

Seth sent a particularly nasty glare at his brother. They'd been warned not to do anything to embarrass or frighten Seth's girlfriend Marissa.

Which was code for *don't let anyone realize we aren't human*.

As usual, Mark was an irritating idiot. At least he made good entertainment.

Mack glanced around the table at the other occupants. The pack chatted and teased under the watchful eyes of both Adam and Diana. Between them sat the newest pack member, nine-year-old Rice.

Last month, Mack and Bradley had gone to pack-free Galveston and found the poor thing scrounging dumpsters. After an hour of hunting the cunning little guy down, they'd dragged him home and presented the dirty feral scrap to the pack alphas.

While Tank had attended their numerous scrapes and bites, all gotten for their efforts in bringing the little shit home, Adam and Diana took Rice in hand. The now clean pup ate everything set in front of him without complaint. His wary eyes constantly scanned the pack with distrust.

Mack's attention shifted to the empty chairs down the long, simple pine table. One of Brandon's first furniture experiments, Diana guarded her dining room table zealously. The boy repaired and replaced the chairs like a ghost when the pack was away.

In Mack's opinion, Brandon's distance from the pack, like a line in the sand, had gone on too long. Something had to be done about the twins' ongoing cold war. They

were identical twins, the very essence brotherhood.

And Karen's sunny charm had been missing from the table for too long.

Both Brandon and Karen were so stubborn that they refused see how much they needed each other. Mack had seen that years ago while the boy trailed her every move and she'd worried when he was out of sight. What was worse, the little idiots had forgotten that they were a part of this pack and nothing would change that.

Sudden pain fractured Mack's skull.

His visions were like shooting craps with loaded dice. Death, the other player. As always, lives were at stake.

He could only observe the scene. Absorb it as fast as possible.

The girl. Pretty. The other one familiar.

The road. The van.

Predator waiting.

Flash, flash, flash. Or was it bang, bang, bang?

Blood everywhere.

Death loomed over him. It was time to play the game again.

Death, the cheating bastard, never came for him, but to taunt.

"Can you make it fast enough Mack? Can you keep this one from me?"

The ground rose up to meet him. The dark and sick pain closed around his consciousness as his family rushed to his side.

Death whispered in his ear.

"Can you make it?"

Chapter Six

Brandon trotted into the workshop, loose from his run, but in no way satisfied. It took more than a dash through the woods to tire wolveren out, especially in wolf form. His heart hadn't been in the run and he let the rabbit he'd chosen for his dinner, go free.

He Changed, relishing the finite control he had over the magic, the same control he held over both parts of his persona, man and wolf. Human and monster.

His muscles and bones reversed the process and reshaped into the semblance of a man. It was an electrifying sensation that buzzed through every cell in his body.

Pain and pleasure. Much like loving someone.

Brandon closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, he sought out the pile of clothes and pulled his jeans over his hips. He carefully zipped over the permanent semi hard-on he had with Karen's scent lingering in the air.

To hell with dignity. If he saw her, he'd lose his resolve and take her where she stood.

He chose work instead. The miracle of making something beautiful and functional from a piece of wood soothed places in his soul that nothing else could.

There was peace in the scent of the cut wood, the feel of it in its different stages, biting rough to satiny smooth. He even liked the sharp vaporous residue of stain and sealer.

He couldn't stand the sight of the cradle and chose to start the porch swing that was on order. He moved around the workshop with a new purpose, gathering the rough pieces he needed to work with.

The phone rang. It was the extension that Adam and Diana had badgered him into installing since cell phone service was iffy out here. He let it ring a couple of more times before setting the piece down that he was working with.

"Hello." He growled the words out, halfway hoping to take his mood out on an unsuspecting salesperson.

"Oh, Thank God. Brandon." Diana's voice was rushed and worried. The receiver changed hands before she could say anything else.

"Son, where is Karen? Right now?" Adam's clipped words demanded he check. No explanations. Just follow. He set the phone down and darted to the cabin.

She was supposed to be in the cabin. Where else would she be?

The door slammed against the wall from the slap of his hand. The sound banged around the room like a shot, drawing a squeak from the brownie.

Ember stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. Her tiny fists rested on her hips.

"Where is Karen?"

Ember shrugged. Her high voice was tinged with scorn. "Who knows? We're better off without her. You can't take a fat human on a hunt. Slows things down."

Red colored his vision. The beast clawed at its cage, ripped a hole and crawled

halfway through. He shook with the effort not to Change.

“Where. Is. Karen?”

Ember shook her head. Red hair danced in the air like a flame.

The fury rose through his blood, exploding in a roar.

A tiny spark of sanity prompted him to grab his end of the phone.

“Adam? She’s gone.”

There was a fit of cussing and foul language on the other end.

“Mack had a vision. We think it’s her.”

No. Brandon’s blood ran cold.

Mack’s visions were of death. The beta had once told Brandon that Death was a gambler who liked to cheat at cards. Mack’s lot in life was to even the score.

There was a chance to save Karen from the fate in Mack’s vision. If he could get to her in time.

He glanced at the clock. They’d separated about three hours ago. By car or foot, it would still take time to catch up to her. Time he didn’t have.

“The highway. She might have tried to get to town.”

Adam relayed what he could from the near comatose Mack. Visions laid the human low, physically draining the tough human.

What would he do if she died?

“I’ll meet you there.”

He hung up and ignored Ember’s questions and her plea to go with him. He’d deal with the brownie later. The term of service he’d won from Ember in a card game was nearly over anyway.

Right now he had a woman to find.

His woman, the beast clarified. Brandon didn’t bother correcting it.

He stripped the jeans back off and willed the Change.

Muscle and bone stretched. Color muted to gray and sound became sharper, clearer. Fur flowed over skin.

Brandon dropped to all four feet and ran.

* * * *

Karen slumped down on the bridge railing. She hadn’t realized before what a whiner she was.

She was thirsty. Her boobs felt like they’d been dribbled over a basketball court from the lack of a bra.

Her feet hurt. There were probably blisters down there. Big ones, ready to burst, from the feel of them.

She also wanted to go back to the cabin and cuddle with Brandon.

Pathetic. He didn’t want her.

After the crying jag, she had had some time to think. Most of those thoughts had been centered on what *she* wanted.

Apparently, she’d become a selfish whiner after Bradley had dumped her back in college. She didn’t like that.

She hadn’t even missed Bradley as much as she should have. No doubt her ex had picked up on that before tossing his last proposal down as a challenge.

More often, back in college she worried over the rift between her and Brandon. How had he fared in the military? Had he ever sought out therapy?

Urging him to take therapy was what had caused the first fight and rift between her and Brandon. After the werecoyotes had been evicted, he'd come out of withdrawal for a short time. Karen still remembered every detail of the *The Kiss* that had killed what was left of their friendship.

The boys had been working that summer for Adam to stay out of trouble. She'd come across a seventeen year old Brandon standing shirtless, dusty, and a sweaty in a half-finished kitchen. He'd never been as bulky as his twin. But the starved lankiness he'd always had was filling in with some definite muscle. Suddenly she was aware of him as a male.

Her brain shut off and her blood rushed through her veins as he closed the distance. *The Kiss* had started out tentative and gentle. It encompassed her, stirred the senses that powered her psychic gifts into reaching out for something right out of range.

Bradley had ripped them apart and Karen had screamed as the boys Changed and tore into each other. There was not doubt in her mind that if Adam and Mack hadn't showed up one of them would have died.

Logic said it would have been the less skilled fighter. But Brandon had fought with an intensity she'd never seen before. And God help her, at that moment she'd wanted him to win.

When sanity returned, Tank explained that she was entering her first heat. All the guys got a serious talking to and Brandon returned to wolf form and hid away for the duration. Bradley and she cautiously made up. Guilt and a vague sense of loss made her pick a college far away.

The excuse of college didn't hold the same allure once she and Bradley broke up for good. Instead of facing everyone with her failure to commit, she moved further away from home. Then she wouldn't have to see what kind of woman Bradley's mate was. Or face the awkwardness of running into Brandon on his leave.

Running away to Arkansas had only given her a new set of problems not solved the old ones.

So, where was she going to run to now?

Dragging the toe of one shoe through the scattering of loose gravel on the pavement, Karen came to a decision.

She was going to stop running.

She'd find a phone and call her mother.

Okay, she'd already established that bravery wasn't her forte. Maybe she'd talk to Adam first.

* * * *

Her powers whispered to her. Karen looked up, scanning the road.

Someone was coming.

What was her Bailey doing so far away from her home, her people, in Arkansas?

It was loneliness that had finally worn Karen down. In the last couple of years she had finally let down her guard enough to try and make a real friend.

She'd looked long enough to find a place to fit in—a new job, a new town, and

people who were like her. Psychic. Different.

Bailey Sparks, a psychic and a fellow secretary at Psicom, a computer products company, turned out to be the best girlfriend Karen had ever had. After eight years of being on her own, hiding what she was, there was someone her own age that understood her.

Growing up with the close knit pack, she'd wanted to belong somewhere. The psychic community seemed perfect at first.

True, they were a bit strange with their three times a week church meetings. But as an outsider uninitiated into the proper psychic lifestyle, they'd been wary of her. The few church meetings she'd attended had made her feel like a bug under a microscope.

Lawrence Dailey had been her attempt at a relationship and he hadn't taken the news of wolverine family well. He'd become irate, slamming out of her apartment that night. He'd called her a were, a major insult among wolverine kind. Karen hadn't seen Lawrence since that night.

But she'd heard plenty.

Bailey had called, upset, to ask if it was true.

Had Karen lied to them all? Was she really a supernatural informer? The first of vampires, werewolves, and others who would carry off psychics into the night?

As briefly as she could, Karen explained that she wasn't a werewolf. She'd ingested some wolverine blood after an accident to aid in healing. Karen didn't tell Bailey how often she had gotten into accidents as a child that she'd needed aid. Later, she had gained some natural agility of her own and fared better.

Going against everything she'd been taught, Bailey confessed that Lawrence had gone to the elders, the psychics' equivalent of the wardens. Psychics did not tolerate supernaturals at all.

That warning had saved Karen's life.

A pale minivan came into view. Karen was certain it was Bailey's.

Bailey's round, freckled face came into view behind wire-rimmed glasses. Her long mousy hair was a sloppy knot on the top of her head, probably fixed into place with an ink pen. Surprise and relief was evident in the other woman's eyes and posture. She pulled the minivan to the curb and clamored out. The door slammed shut.

"I found you! I did it! I missed you at the motel, but I knew I'd have a second chance to get you."

Bailey looked like she was about to do the *It's My Birthday* dance.

Karen felt confused. How had Bailey found her on a deserted road?

And why?

Pieces started to click together.

The motel.

Had Bailey regretted her actions enough to do something about it?

Who would know of her phobia of spiders and scorpions except a close friend?

And unless she had a GPS locator her, someone would have to be psychic to find her. Like a psychic she'd confided in.

Like Bailey Sparks.

The other woman tugged at her too big flowered t-shirt. Like too many women

carrying a few too many pounds, Bailey tended to buy clothes styled for the waif thin. The crime was in selling those fashions super-sized to women who needed a completely different look.

The distinct shape of a handgun outlined against the spring flower pattern of Bailey's shirt.

"Why?" Karen stared at the bulge, suddenly nervous and very aware of the bad choices that had gotten her here.

Bailey flushed.

"Because I'm a Finder, of course. I find things. People, stuff, whatever." Bailey saw where Karen's attention was focused and started. "Oh yes. Can't forget that. Serious business, guns."

Bailey pulled out what looked like an automatic handgun.

Karen thought about diving for the gun, but there was a good chance of getting shot from the way her friend held the weapon.

Bailey pulled a clip out of her pocket and shoved it into the empty slot in the handle.

Karen added *stupid* to her list of personal attributes.

She darted out of the way. She might have put on a little weight over the years but she was still a lot lighter on her feet than Bailey.

"Right! Run!" Bailey shouted. "It's time!"

Karen heard shots. She felt the nick of rocks as bullets hit the pavement around her. It occurred to her as she dove around the back of the van that the gunshots weren't coming *from* Bailey's direction. They were further off. Opposite Bailey.

"*Crud!*" Bailey screeched from in front of the van. "Sorry! Gun jammed."

Crab-walking behind the back driver's side tire, Karen's mouth nearly dropped open at Bailey's next comment.

"I really have to take lessons."

Karen finished circling the van and thought out the situation. If Bailey wasn't the one after her then it left only one other option. Her friend was going to get herself killed trying to help.

She peered around the front. Bailey had taken an open legged stance facing the woods on the side of the road where Karen had been sitting. If Bailey had arrived only ten minutes later, Karen would have been roadkill.

"Bailey! Get over here," she hissed. "That psycho is going to kill you!"

"Actually, Lawrence is after you."

Bailey waved Karen down and took aim.

"He was assigned to keep tabs on you for years. Once it came out that you're a supernatural and not a real psychic, the elders blamed and Excluded him," Bailey called over her shoulder. "Sort of like Shunning,"

Karen was stunned. Lawrence had been keeping tabs on her? The jerk had been sleeping with her and *spying* on her?

And she thought her mother was naïve?

Another shot missed and Bailey yelled at the sniper. "Lawrence! You suck! You can't hit the broad side of a barn with a bazooka!"

Lawrence's aim got better.

Bailey screamed as her jeans covered left knee exploded in a shower of red spray and solid bits. From the ground, she got a couple of shots back in the general direction of the hill and woods, a perfect hiding place.

Karen couldn't take it. She went after her friend. When she reached Bailey's side, the other woman glared at her through the pain.

"He drew you out! Get back behind the van!"

"Not without you."

Karen bent and looped her elbows under Bailey's armpits and locked her hands together. A burning pain sliced the top of her shoulder. Karen grunted.

She pulled, dragging Bailey backwards. She hoped Lawrence wasn't so much of an asshole that he'd kill his own cousin to get to her. It was already obvious he'd maim Bailey.

She made it to the bumper when another shot hit the van next to her head, making her drop Bailey. The woman let out a gasp of pain.

"Asshole! She's your cousin!" Karen yelled at the shooter. He fired another shot and her temper flared. "Hey, Lawrence! You were a lousy lay! You ever see camels hump?"

The small satisfaction was almost worth the next shot that ricocheted a piece of minivan across her cheek. Karen bent, hoping to make herself a smaller target and grab hold of Bailey again. With luck, he'd run out of bullets soon.

Bailey made a sound that turned out to be a laugh.

"I can't believe you actually did the dweeb."

She gasped when Karen pulled her back a couple of feet.

"Hey. It was an office party. We were doing tequila shooters. And weren't you letting that computer guy drool down your bra?"

After that Lawrence had been convenient. He wasn't a threat to her emotions.

Bailey grunted. A fresh splash of red spread across her upper abdomen.

Fuck this! Lawrence was going to slowly pick them off.

She wasn't going to lose Bailey over her stupidity.

A worried glance at the red stain spreading over her friend's shirt made her wonder if it might be too late.

Chapter Seven

Karen huddled beside Bailey and forced herself to let down her mental barriers. Part of her feared that her mother's words were just words. She was afraid that if she tried to find the magical link that bound the pack together, she'd fail.

Another part of her fear was that when Bradley had dumped her, so had the pack. Her natural father had rejected her, so had her brother when he had headed back to dear old dad. She was terrified of finding out that the only family she had left wasn't hers anymore.

Karen closed her eyes and tried to settle her mind. The labor of Bailey's breathing was hard to ignore. A glance down showed the steady seep of blood soaking the awful flowered shirt red.

In her mind, Karen pictured the ethereal forest that the wolverine essence inhabited. When that didn't work, she pushed down the panic and pictured the pack as she'd last seen them together.

She started with Brandon first. He was so dark brown that his fur was almost black. His body was lean and rangy. Bradley was next, because the two looked similar though he was the bulkier brother. Seth, the youngest, was midnight black as was Tank.

The huge black wolf's pointed ears moved constantly while he observed the world around him. Rick was the smallest. Reddish brown fur covered his body. Mark and Chase were different shades of gold.

Adam, the Canis Pater, alpha wolf of the Anderson County pack wasn't the biggest. His silver and cream fur stood out from the others though with authority that marked him as their king.

She connected. It was tentative at first. Then she felt the presence of those who had no wolf form and other wolves she hadn't met yet.

Help! She called them to her.

The pack answered with a howl. One in particular rushed to her. She felt the presence barreling through space and the real world like a physical blow. Possessive fury fueled the creature coming for her.

Brandon. He was coming for her. He'd said he could always find her. She trusted that he would in time.

The rapid slaps of a punch to her chest jarred Karen from the pack link. She blinked, hissed a breath and saw the vague figure at the tree line. Lawrence. A long object moved from his head and down to his side.

She looked down and saw red spreading across her chest. It was a lot of blood, more than what had soaked Bailey's stomach. Lawrence waited a moment until she sagged down against the fender.

Karen was sorry for a lot of things. For staying away so long. Not having a closer relationship with her mother. Mostly, she was disappointed that she had missed her

chance with Brandon. Fantasy or vision, there would be no brown eyed-little boy named Sammy.

* * * *

Brandon ran full out, dumping every bit of supernatural power he possessed into getting to Karen in time. He kept his nose in the wind as he raced on the side of the highway at a mile eating run. He followed her steps to pick up every stray scent of hers.

When she linked into the pack, he knew time was running out. He grasped onto her essence and ran harder. He wouldn't lose her. He couldn't!

Stay with me. He whispered over and over as he ran. *Stay with me.*

Still she slipped further away.

He ran.

A pale colored minivan, parked haphazardly on the side of the road came into view. The scent of blood spurred the beast forward.

The wolf scrabbled to a stop, nearly stumbling over the females. Blood lay thick and heavy in the air. Because so much of it was hers, the only interest the fluid had was the life ebbing away on its tide.

He snuffled her, gave the other a quick once over, and returned to his mate. Wet wolf kisses on her cheek didn't stir her. He whined, upset and Changed into the man.

So much blood. Brandon swallowed.

She was still alive. Barely.

Kneeling on the road, unmindful of the rocks on his bare skin, he Changed enough for the tools he needed. This he could do. His hands became claws. Sharp enough for a wolverine duel, to rend and tear flesh. He'd done this before.

Carefully, Brandon used a thumb claw to puncture his inner forearm. He pressed deep into the meat, uncaring of the pain. Pulling Karen into his arms, he pressed the flowing wound to her mouth. There was healing power in wolverine blood.

He coaxed her to swallow.

"Blood of my blood," he whispered the litany normally used in more formal gatherings. There was also power in the spoken word.

"Heart of my heart. Life of my life." And faith.

"Blood. Heart. Life."

He heard the howling of his packmates nearly there to aid him. The other female would have to be tended to. Brandon kissed his beloved's cheek on the same spot he'd given his wolf's kisses.

"Stay with me, Tigger. Don't leave me alone."

He pressed a hand over the already healing wound in his arm and gingerly moved to check on the other woman.

Her knee was shattered by gunshot and she had suffered an abdominal wound. Thankfully, she was unconscious. Brandon glanced in the side of the van and grabbed a towel. It wasn't particularly clean, but he didn't care. The females could die of blood loss long before there was any need to worry about germs. He tore the towel in half.

The pack arrived, both by foot and by car, while he tended to the unknown female.

Blond and blue-eyed even in wolf form, Mark snuffled around the area before

Changing.

The pup was grown now. A full-grown wolverine male, strong enough to hold his own against a rogue werewolf.

“Good God!” Mark bent next to Karen. Grief and dismay pinching his normally smiling face. Before Diana, Karen had been the younger boys’ surrogate. Claws flashed and the blond man wounded his arm before Brandon could stop him.

“No!”

Blue eyes challenged brown.

“She needs blood.”

“And I’ll provide it. This one needs it, too.”

Mark stared down at the unfamiliar woman, then back at his packsister. It was obvious he’d rather tend one of his own, but the look in Brandon’s eye looked murderous.

Mark relented, something he’d learned to do in the last year with the former omega. Brandon wasn’t on bottom anymore and he’d painfully make you see that.

“Okay. The van’s toast. Switch places with me. I’ll carry Jane Doe to the SUV.”

Chapter Eight

The elephant sitting on Karen's chest woke her up. She glanced blearily around and found Brandon sleeping beside her. His arm was secure around her waist. His warmth wrapped around her better than an electric blanket.

She went back to sleep and dreamed. The feeling of promise, of something that was supposed to be grew stronger. Karen became aware that it was not a dream, but a vision of the future. And dream visions were always open to interpretation.

She watched as the puppy, clumsily stalked his prey and tripped over his own four feet. She *knew* he was Sammy, the little boy from her earlier dream. Her little boy.

Romping through the grass, he knocked his twin brother, Shane into a soupy dark puddle. The grasshopper lived to hop another day while the pups mud-wrestled.

Karen's new carpet didn't fare so well.

She woke up to the sound of arguing.

"What kind of sick pervert are you?" Irritation was plain in the woman's voice.

"I get my own category?" Karen heard Mark respond, in perfect Mark style.

"Wow. That's neat. But we're still going to do this."

Karen tried to sit up. She wound up hissing in pain. The argument across the room stopped and one in her own corner threatened to erupt.

Brandon growled.

"Be still."

"Oh shut up," she snapped.

"Karen? Are you alright?"

Bailey sounded more than a little worried. She was probably frightened too. Community born psychics were taught that the evil Supernaturals would carry you away in your sleep for hideous purposes.

"Drat it, Brandon," her weak shove didn't accomplish much. "I want to sit up."

Brandon obliged by arranging the pillows and setting her up against them.

"You should be nicer to him," Mark offered. "He hasn't left your side for two days."

"How do you know?"

She clutched at Brandon's hand for comfort. She didn't feel very well and that translated into grouchy. Mark was always a good candidate to grouch on.

"Because I haven't left Miss Sunshine here either."

"Well, no wonder we're both claustrophobic. Go do something constructive."

Mark lounged against the wall in a gawd-awful bright orange and neon blue Hawaiian shirt and a pair of cutoffs. He gave her a superior smirk.

"You can't make me."

She glared at him.

"Go to hell."

Mark gave a maniacal laugh that probably scared the living daylights out of Bailey. He moved from the wall, going nose-to-nose with her friend in seconds. Touching noses, he grinned his crazy grin again.

“Tell you what, Sunshine. If Tank thinks you don’t need any more special medicine, then I’ll leave off.”

Mark turned to saunter out, but paused at the door. He turned a friendly conversational smile on poor Bailey.

“Tell that rat bastard Rick, I’ll kill him if he touches you. Okay?”

Bailey looked so affronted, so out of her element, that guilt took a belated stab at Karen. Bailey Sparks had saved her life twice and was now tangled too deep in the mess for the pack to let her go easily. It was time for a crash course on wolverine pack mechanics.

Karen needed privacy. She turned to ask Brandon to go and got an eyeful of the stubborn set of his jaw. His brows were pulled down, his lips a straight line. If he’d been in wolf form, his ears would have been pinned flat.

“No.” His sharp answer stopped her question.

“Brandon.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“Please?”

“Ever.”

A grin teased at her mouth.

“That sounds wonderful. Since we’re on speaking terms again, can I have a few minutes with Bailey?”

He growled. Those delicious chocolate eyes of his fixed on her lips. Bending, he captured them in a gentle kiss. His tongue delved into her mouth and tangled with hers before he pulled back, nuzzling her jaw to ear.

Karen’s belly tensed in anticipation. Her hormones flared to life and she whimpered, clutching at his shirt. She was ready, *more than ready*, to make good on the heat in that kiss.

Brandon pulled away with a self-satisfied look on his face and slid off the bed. He nodded in Bailey’s wide-eyed direction.

“You have thirty minutes before Tank comes in to check you both out and Diana carts in chicken soup.”

She noticed his borrowed clothes were tight. The too small tee shirt highlighted every lithe muscle on his body. The worn jeans hugged the perfect shape of his buns as he strolled barefoot out of the room.

“Frost those and have ‘em for breakfast.”

Karen blinked and turned to her bunkmate. She flushed a little.

“Sorry about the show. They can get” She waved a hand in the air. “Intense. Sometimes the only thing you can do is go with it.”

“What about Mark?”

Karen nodded. “Throw something at him. Hard.”

Bailey laughed, and then choked. The shine of tears reflected off her eyes before she could lift her glasses and wipe them away.

“I’m sorry. This scares me. *They made me drink blood.*” Bailey slapped her hands

over her freckled cheeks. "Am I going to turn into a vampire?"

Laughing hurt Karen's chest.

"No. You won't turn into anything."

"Promise?"

Karen nodded and leaned back against the pillows. She was already getting tired.

"Karen?"

She looked back at her friend.

"When can I go home?"

Whatever Bailey saw in her face probably wasn't good. The other woman turned away with a small sound. Karen thought she might be crying. She kind of wanted to cry herself. Damn hormones.

"Bailey?" Karen took the pause as an okay to go on. "You'll probably feel strange for a while. You won't turn into anything strange though."

"What will I feel like?"

Karen sighed. Might as well get it over with. She winced at what was about to come out of her mouth.

"A PMS'ing nymphomaniac."

"Hmmm. I thought you said I wasn't going to turn into anything."

"Try not to get pregnant."

* * * *

The next night Brandon and Mark were off talking with Mack, so the females were alone for a change. The door opened and a boy about ten years old peered around at them. He assessed them with a wary gray eyed stare that reminded Karen of Brandon and the guys at that age. His nose upturned a little at the end and crooked in the middle from a healed break.

Wolven healed almost anything, but a broken bone set incorrectly still healed badly. His brown hair was cut in the standard layered boy cut that her mother employed when taking charge of someone's shaggy do.

Karen tried an encouraging smile. He frowned and she thought he growled at her. The face disappeared back around the door. A moment later the door opened wide.

This time, he came all the way into the room, a covered tray in his hands. Karen nearly drooled at the wonderful scent of meat and fresh bread that seeped into the room. Her mother followed him in and shut the door.

Karen pushed her insecurity aside and reached for a false calm. She had seen Diana briefly yesterday while Tank poked and prodded at the miraculously healing wounds in her chest. Today, Diana looked every inch a pack leader instead of an upset mother.

Diana crossed the room, giving Karen's leg an errant pat. She sat beside a very nervous Bailey and grasped the newcomer's hands. Karen watched her mother approach Bailey and do her welcome to the pack magic with a warm smile and an extended hand.

"Hello. I'm Diana," Diana enveloped Bailey's hand inside both hers instead of a traditional handshake. Karen knew her mother was 'reading' her friend. Many psychic gifts were stronger with touch. "You were asleep when I came in the first time."

Her mother let go and motioned for the boy. Taking the tray from him, she set it

across Bailey's lap. He flinched when Diana patted his arm in thanks.

She ignored the boy's discomfort. Rather, she noted it but didn't react.

"This is our Rice." Diana's matter-of-fact tone was deceptive, friendly. The territorial alpha female side that Karen had experienced earlier was well hidden for the moment. "We're slogging through all the proper paperwork, but he's ours."

Poor little Rice squirmed out of Diana's impulsive hug and darted out of range. He eyed Karen with suspicion while Diana chatted with her reluctant patient.

Karen leaned forward and caught his eye. She patted the bed, keeping her voice low, but firm.

"Come and sit, Rice. I won't touch you."

He shook his head.

She waited, holding the boy's gaze with her own. Finally, his chin dropped and he slunk over to sit. He perched in the exact spot she'd indicated.

Familiar with mistreated creatures, Karen didn't try to push the boy.

He'd acknowledged both their places in the pack and given her a tiny measure of trust by sitting beside her. Still, Rice's gaze stayed glued to Diana, his lifeline in a cruel world.

Karen was sure he was aware of every small movement she made. Exhaustion and the pain of healing wounds dragged at her. Carefully, she leaned back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

The bed, Diana's voice, and the feeling of *home* surrounded her. For the first time in years, the lonely ache inside eased.

* * * *

"Lady, it's time to wake up."

Karen blinked at the boy's light touch. Her mother stood up from Bailey's side. Apparently, she'd slept through the whole conversation. The clock on the bedside table assured her that she'd only been out of it for about ten minutes.

"Adam's called a meeting about your ...," her mother glanced down at the boy, whose posture was a tad less stiff on his corner of her bed, "accident. You should attend."

"What about me? I was there, too."

Diana cast an apologetic look back at Bailey and shook her head.

"No. I'm sorry. This is a family matter."

Red blotches adorned Bailey's round, freckled face. She opened her mouth to say something, then shrugged.

"Thanks for the hamburger."

Diana laughed. "Don't get used to it. That's contraband around here. I had Mack smuggle it in so you'd have some extra calories to heal."

Bailey made a face.

"I don't need any extra calories."

Diana waved a hand in dismissal.

"You look fine."

Bailey snorted.

"I think you need your eyes examined, but only an idiot turns down a bacon double meat cheeseburger and fries. This is super."

Careful not to jar her shoulder, Karen slid out of the bed. She had some serious heebee-jeebies about facing the pack, but if her mom wanted her at the meeting, it was the only way she'd get a meal tonight.

Rice overcame his reticence enough to offer her a hand for balance.

* * * *

“You're up.”

Brandon met their little party before she got ten steps from the bedroom door.

“I'm going to the meeting.”

He glanced at Diana, calculating. His adopted mother met his gaze. She raised her eyebrows and waited. It was a challenge of sorts. There was a brief pause to reevaluate his actions before he ticked her off, or Karen. He found that ticking off his woman didn't fill him with anxiety like it once would have. Diana, he respected too damn much to want to disappoint in any way.

“You need to rest. I'll take you.”

He settled for scooping Karen up in his arms and hearing her squeal in protest. He'd rather take her back home and spend what was left of the evening before the hunt making love to her. He nuzzled her neck, thankful and awed to have her safe.

“Oh, gross. Get a room.”

Brandon looked down at Diana's new foundling. The pup whined and bumped back into her legs. He gained a measure of defiance, shooting Brandon a glare once secure in the alpha female's protective touch.

“Sure thing Squirt. Right after dinner.”

“Brandon!” Karen smacked him on the shoulder.

Diana laughed. The happy sound drew his attention. She looked smug.

“It's about time you two.”

“Mom?” Karen felt more than a little confused. A proverbial light went on above her head. She gasped.

“You set me up! That's why you didn't argue about me staying at Brandon's instead of coming here to Packhome.”

Diana pushed her charge ahead of her and smiled back at them.

“You set yourself up a long time ago, sweetie. Now let's get something to eat before the ravenous wolves devour everything.”

Rice snickered.

Chapter Nine

Everyone stared. Karen projected a calm she didn't really have. It wasn't the territorial display of affection her grand entrance into the dining room in Brandon's arms made.

It was them.

Brandon was known for being rabid about his space. For her part, Karen wasn't sure. She'd been gone for years with infrequent trips home after her breakup with Bradley.

According to Mark, her ex-fiancé was out of town with his mate on pack business. She wouldn't have to deal with that personal awkward moment tonight.

The curious faces were a little older, but the same with a few new additions.

Mark sauntered out of the kitchen with a covered bowl.

"Thank God. We can eat now."

Karen managed to secure both her own chair and plate with a snarl that would do any full blood wolveren proud. She compromised by letting him fill her plate with grilled steak, chicken and various vegetables. Magnanimously, she ignored the bites he stole and concentrated on the meal. Her own grilling would come after.

Adam pushed his plate away. His pale blue gaze lasered in on Karen.

"Tell me about this Lawrence Dailey who tried to kill you."

He rested his muscular forearms on the table and leaned forward, waiting for her answer.

She pushed her own plate away, very aware that she had everyone's undivided attention. Nervous, Karen worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

Just how much did she want to reveal?

No matter what she said, Bailey was going to hate her later. She was a community-raised psychic and Karen had handed her over to the enemy. The warmth of Brandon's hand rested at the small of her back, offering a measure of comfort.

Karen sighed. It all came down to one thing. Did she want to be a part of the pack or not?

"Lawrence Dailey is a psychic. I met him in Arkansas. I worked under him as an office assistant in a software development company."

"You were a secretary?"

Seth yipped when Chase's hand clamped onto the teen's neck for silence. The boy's deep cocoa complexion turned dusky. He obeyed the unspoken command, though his eyes, almond shaped with a lush black fringe of lashes, remained fixed on Karen.

She remembered when he was too small to keep up with the others and had to be piggybacked by the older ones. Seth was the youngest, but not the smallest, of the old pack that Adam and Diana had adopted. At a slight and wiry five foot, Rick was the shortest of the men in the room.

“I had a ... a” She shrugged a shoulder and straightened tall in her chair. Brandon’s hand stayed where it was. She hoped he didn’t have a change of heart after this was over. “We got involved and I trusted him.”

The tension in the room shifted against her. The warmth of Brandon’s body soaked into her as he moved closer, the solid line of his leg meeting hers. He was tense too, preparing for a potential attack.

Adam’s eyes narrowed and she hurried to finish.

“There is a community of psychics in the town I lived in. At first they welcomed me in as one of them.”

Later their snubs and outright disgust confused and hurt her. Karen took a breath. Let it out slowly. She leaned into Brandon’s shoulder.

“Apparently, some of them can tell the difference between a supernatural and a psychic human.”

Diana cocked her head a little.

“But you are a psychic human.”

“No, I’m not.”

She pulled Brandon’s arm around her waist. With her hormonal state and now the injury, she felt tired, fragile, and a little like crying again.

“With all the wolveren blood I’ve ingested over the years, I’m a mix of the two.” She gave her mother a sad, tired smile. “They would sense the same about you, too.”

“And what exactly did you tell them about us?”

Adam’s question brought her attention back to him. She swallowed before answering.

“Lawrence was starting to get jumpy and spouting a bunch of ‘soulless creature of the night’ crap, so I explained that I grew up around shape shifters, the happy law-abiding kind.”

She sighed in Brandon’s warm embrace. Somehow she wound up in his lap in the telling of her story. His arms circled her, giving Karen a much needed sense of being wanted.

“Bailey called me in the middle of the night to warn me that the elders, the psychics’, uh, leaders I guess, were on their way.”

Karen’s eyes drooped. Her head found a comfortable spot in the space between Brandon’s neck and shoulder to rest. His wood and male scent distracted her.

“I took a bus, the scenic route, here,” she murmured as her body vied for opposing needs. The healing process wanted rest. Her hormones wanted hot, rough sexplay.

“Awww, man. They’re going to kiss again.”

Rice’s childish disgust prompted a round of good-natured kissy noises and laughter.

* * * *

“That’s it.” Brandon stood. He cradled his mate to him. “Karen needs to rest.”

He ignored the second round of sniggers and focused on his alpha to okay or deny the request. Adam held up a hand and he waited.

The conflicting desires to hide Karen out of sight and obey his alpha warred inside him. They weren’t mate-bonded but she was his. Deep inside where the beast

lived, Brandon accepted that she was the one mate for him. Even if she didn't accept him, there would be no other for him.

Then there was the unease that had pricked the back of his neck for the last few hours. He was more than a little agitated tonight.

"How did Bailey Sparks happen to be in the right place at the right time?"

Can she be trusted? That's what Adam was really asking.

"She's a Finder. She finds people. Things. She warned me." Karen nuzzled into his chest and shoulder again, driving coherent thought from his brain.

Brandon wanted her away from these other males. No matter that they were his pack. His chosen mate was breeding, giving off scents that the other males were ignoring because they had a few manners. Unfortunately, Brandon was only sure about Adam's and Diana's loyalty. And Mack's.

Everyone else could pretty much fuck off. He'd leave them be as long as they kept their paws and noses to themselves.

Adam nodded and Brandon swung around to get the hell out. His neck prickled again at the same time his nose told him what his intuition had been trying to point out.

His brother was home.

Chapter Ten

For one tiny moment, joy raced through Brandon's veins at the idea of seeing his twin. Then, reality and the memory of their violent parting returned. Brandon tightened his grip on his precious bundle and held his ground. The face that looked out of his bathroom mirror every morning appeared in the doorway.

Bradley loomed, his expression as grim as Brandon felt.

Brandon had stopped taking Bradley's shit years ago. He met his brother's challenging gaze stare for stare. Bradley growled low in his chest. It was the warning growl meant to keep the lower ranking and youngsters in their place.

Brandon's upper lip curled, exposing fangs. He hunched protectively over his mate. If Bradley didn't take the warning and back-off, he'd gladly tear his so-called brother's throat out.

* * * *

Karen's drowsy amorous haze evaporated with the dangerous vibration of sound that emanated from Brandon's chest and into her body. Her fingers twisted in a viselike grip in his tee shirt.

She glanced from one brother to the other. Twin images of intent, angry men faced one another. She found herself trapped in the center of a primal challenge of dominance between the brothers.

She wriggled free, relieved that Brandon let her out of ground zero for when the nuclear bomb on this war hit. He shoved her behind him.

Wolven packs, like wolves, had an established order of hierarchy. Karen realized that she and Brandon lived outside of the pack. They were a part, but held no real position. Both males were letting instinct, rather than their heads, lead them.

She realized that she didn't feel any of the hurt or resentment she'd thought she'd feel at facing Bradley again. The past was long gone. Bradley, while he might have dumped her, was still family of sorts. She didn't want to hurt him anymore than she had already. Then again, it was Brandon facing off with his brother, not her.

"Don't do this."

Karen slid her hand up Brandon's spine. The rock hard muscles were knotted, as if warning that he was about to Change.

Brandon heard the tone of his mate's voice. He felt the gentle touch on his back. He knew she didn't want a fight here.

Inside, the beast gnashed his teeth. He wanted blood repayment for the debt owed him, for the fact that his brother had stolen what was his, then taunted him for it.

Bradley's words, from the fight that had split the brothers for good, echoed in Brandon's mind.

"What a joke! You think you're man enough, wolf enough, to keep a woman like Karen?"

The brothers had nearly killed one another, physically and emotionally. Brandon had holed up to heal as usual, while his brother had gotten to retreat to the comfort of the pack to tend his wounds.

“Stop it! Both of you!”

Karen’s arms slid around his waist. The sensation penetrated the storm of fury inside. He froze. He wouldn’t endanger her by attacking Bradley with her hanging off of him like a monkey.

The voice of reason stepped between them.

Using his body as a wall, Mack held a hand, palm out on each of the brothers’ chests.

“That’s enough, boys. Cool it or someone’s going to take the water hose to you.”

The tension slid down several degrees. As pack beta, Mack was practically a third parent, riding herd on the pack, mitigating disputes. He’d taught Brandon to drive. Mack Spencer happened to be the baddest, coolest, most decent human he’d ever met.

Bradley wasn’t through. He was secure in his place in the pack. He sneered in his brother’s direction.

“What are *they* doing here? This is *Packhome*, not a shelter.”

Brandon growled and leapt forward. Mack’s hand on his chest barely held him back. He could go through, but he’d have to hurt the human beta.

“Enough!” A hot snap of raw power lashed through Brandon. The alpha’s punishment. He yelped and fell back.

Karen fell over him. Her arms wrapped around him while she glared around Mack at Bradley.

His twin’s mate had swept down over Bradley with the same avenging angel expression as Karen.

The pack fell away as Adam stepped into the circle. Irritation rolled off of the pack alpha. His eyes glowed a merciless red in his hard face. His hands clenched and unclenched. For a split second, Brandon had the urge to tuck his tail and hide before he could be hurt by the alpha.

He raised his chin instead. His fingers caressed the soft skin on Karen’s arms while he drew her scent deep inside his body. Her own unique smell, combined with the spicy seductive allure of a woman in heat calmed and excited him. He’d rather have the scent of lust in his pores than fear. Adam would, too. The alpha hated his people to fear him for no reason.

“You four. My office. Now.”

Adam turned and walked out of the room.

* * * *

Adam Weis’s office was a study in good-humored male. The scent of leather was easy even for her to pick up from the two dark brown oversized block shaped chairs and the long couch against the wall. A deep soft carpet in a sort of brownish green that begged to be laid on stretched from wall to wall. The wolveren insisted that this was the real color of forest green.

One of those huge boss’s desks, a beautiful work of stained gold, took the center of the room. Between the two banks of shelves, littered with small Looney Tunes

paraphernalia, was the large framed print of Marvin the Martian that her mother refused to allow in their bedroom. Framed crayon drawings, awards, and other family material took up wall space, as well. Adam Weis was the original family man.

Adam lounged against the desk, one barefoot crossed over the other. He preferred getting down to business unencumbered. Besides, what was the point of having expensive carpet if you didn't enjoy it? While the pups dragged their feet getting to his domain, he'd kicked his shoes under the desk.

He'd known this was coming years ago. The entire pack suffered for the misconceptions made by children trying to survive. He'd pretty much pointed out to everyone that little miss Karen didn't belong to Bradley.

Hell, he and Mack had practically had to shove Brandon out the door and into a human pack, the Army, so the pup would grow into the beta wolf he was supposed to be. Strong, independent, and dependable, Brandon was knowledgeable about blending into human society from his years in the Army pack.

He watched them slip into his lair. He was proud of all his children.

Bradley and his woman first. Though, Adam was not sure what to think of Nikki. The female's scent was a bit off, as if she weren't quite human. She wasn't psychic or any other type of supernatural he'd come across before. As a registered nurse, she often helped Tank out when he patched up the pack. So all in all, the girl had proved her mettle.

Adam didn't have any physical reason not to trust her. Only a general uneasiness that kept him from pressuring Bradley to move from their apartment to Packhome.

Bradley was loyal and stood for everything that the pack represented. He was simply a hot head who'd played at being alpha too long before Adam came on the scene. Sometimes the boy, a man at twenty seven, had to be put in his place.

When Adam Weis had taken over ten years ago, he'd made a promise to show them what being part of a pack, part of a family, meant.

"Brandon. Son, quit hovering over your mate like a vulture and sit down before she falls down. I, of all people, know that humans don't get over being shot in a couple of days. Even if you do pour a gallon of blood down her throat."

That got a startled stare out of Bradley. It was time the boy realized that he cared and stopped acting with his wounded ego.

Adam shifted to an open legged stance where he could feel the carpet under both bare feet. It was time to get down to business.

* * * *

Karen bit back a protest as she was swooped up into Brandon's arms again.

It was kind of nice really, to be carted back and forth like a china doll. Lawrence, and the dipwad who she'd finally gotten rid of her virginity with, had both complained about how heavy she was.

Brandon settled them down on one end of the couch, keeping her in his lap with an arm around her middle.

She finally snapped under Bradley's intense stare.

"*What?* Upset the bastard didn't win?"

It was uncharitable, but so what?

She was tired. She hadn't gotten to have sex yet and her hormones were screaming at being teased by Brandon's close proximity.

The woman, Bradley's *mate*, Karen amended, gasped at the outburst. She looked like she wanted to claw Karen's eyes out.

Too bad.

Bradley winced. He pulled loose from his mate's touch.

Before the other male could close the distance, Brandon moved.

Karen hardly felt the jar as he used superhuman speed to dump her on the couch and stood in a blur of motion between her and his approaching twin brother.

Brandon didn't growl. He waited, sparing a single glance at Adam, who didn't say a word. It was Bradley who broke from where he stopped midway.

"Who shot her?" Bradley demanded.

No one answered. He fisted his hands and swung his angry gaze between the other two males. Around Brandon's body, she saw the protective instincts roused in Bradley.

"Dammit! *I care!* Who shot Karen? Is the bastard still alive?"

Brandon's fingers twitched. She leaned forward and grasped them, twining hers in his rough, work-calloused hand.

Wolven touched one another for comfort. Since he held himself away from the pack, she was glad that he would accept from her what he wouldn't from the others.

"She's not yours to protect. If the one who shot her needs killing, I'll do it."

Brandon's words were spoken with calm assurance.

She attributed the wedge between the brothers to Brandon's rise from omega. Keeping her mouth shut was hard. Lord, how she wanted to add her own two cents worth.

Brandon was a big boy. He didn't need her meddling in his argument with his brother. Maybe, she hoped, they would get out of this without Adam having to physically restrain one of them.

Bradley made a sort of huff of disbelief, one that a dog, or wolf, would make.

Faster than thought, Brandon broke their contact and closed the distance between himself and his brother.

Karen tensed.

His voice was low and dangerous, daring Bradley. "You don't think I can take care of one crazy psychic stalking what is mine?"

The twins' stubborn, similar gazes locked. Karen let out the breath she'd been holding when her lungs began to complain of a lack of air.

Bradley looked away and down first. His body slumped a little.

The movement looked unnatural on him, the once stronger brother giving over to the pack's ex-omega.

"No. You've done it before."

Bradley gave a self depreciating huff before he glanced back up at his twin brother. His face was a hard mask. "You don't need me to help you. You don't need any of us."

That was so not true. Karen's eyes burned at the pain hidden in her ex-fiancé's voice.

She glanced at the other woman and saw that she, too, was on the edge of her seat. Did she ache as much as Karen to save these two from their own stubborn natures?

* * * *

The comment threw Brandon. Didn't Bradley know how hard it was to live so close to the pack but not feel worthy of being a part? To trail the hunt instead of running with the others?

He kept his distance from the pack because he didn't want to spend every moment fighting off a challenge to push him back into the least spot. Some days he felt as if the old alpha, Garrick, was still taunting him from his place in Hell.

Brandon hoped some demon with dull teeth chewed Garrick's dick and nuts off on a daily basis.

He shifted his stance, glanced at Adam who watched with maddening curiosity. Brandon would get no help from that corner. Adam was only there to make sure they didn't draw blood and didn't leave.

He whined a little and glanced back at Karen.

He did not want to do this. He wanted to be gone. He wanted to be away with his mate to finish what they'd started in the workshop. He swallowed.

Fine. If Adam wanted him to confront his brother, then he'd do it and get out of here.

He whipped his gaze back around and loosened some of his hold on the beast inside.

"You think I don't need the pack? Or just you and what's left of the old pack?" Brandon growled the words at his shocked reflection. "You guys did *nothing* for me."

Bradley looked sick.

"I tried to protect you."

"No!" Fury roiled in Brandon's belly. "*Adam* protected me. You did nothing. You let Garrick and his friends have me while you took the younger ones and hid."

Bradley shook his head. Denial and shame etched in his features. He still looked green. His words were hoarse.

"We were ten. No, *younger*. What else could I have done?"

Bradley swallowed. A fine sheen of sweat broke out on his skin. "Would you rather have given them Mark or Seth? What about Rick? He was small, even for his age."

Brandon turned and paced away. He needed distance. He might have folded all his emotions, all the unpleasantness, away inside and waited the argument out, but the beast was loose, not all the way, but enough to want to fight.

Besides, that therapist he'd seen had told him that the folding away was unhealthy, that Brandon had to work through his emotions, maybe even talk to Bradley about the past.

Damn that therapist.

"I wouldn't trade places with them for anything. Or you."

The last cost Brandon every bit of pride.

After Adam had freed them, he had forced Brandon to think of himself as a real person. For a long time, he'd hated Bradley for escaping the abuse Garrick had heaped on

him.

They were identical twins. What was different to make Garrick choose him to torment and not Bradley? Had he always had some inner weakness or was it a coin toss?

He flinched away from the touch on his shoulder, knowing instinctively it wasn't Karen or someone he trusted implicitly. Bradley pulled his hand away, as if burned. Maybe he had been.

The rejection caused a brief flash of pain over Bradley's face before he struggled for a neutral expression. He failed. Bradley looked tired. Sad.

"I guess that makes you the better man then, because I wouldn't trade for you. I'm ... sorry."

Resentment kept a tight hold on Brandon's emotions.

His brother was *sorry*? Why?

Because he couldn't be what he called the better man? Or sorry because that was his choice?

Brandon shook his head.

"Don't be sorry. Just don't expect me to do it again."

"I wouldn't! That's--*Don't even think that.*"

"Don't you? Every time one of you challenges my right not to be the one cowering under the table, you do."

Adam made a sound, a small growl of protest, because anyone under the table was a pet peeve of his.

"What do you want me to say?" Bradley threw up his hands. "I hate that it happened. If I ever run across another child molester, I'll do everyone a favor and kill him. Painfully."

Brandon shook his head. This was going nowhere. The stupid therapist didn't know shit. All they were doing was rehashing old garbage.

He turned to face Adam and out of respect kept his angry gaze off the alpha's face.

"We're leaving. *Now.*"

He held his hand out to Karen, waiting for her to come to him. The action gave the alpha plenty of time to say no, rip his throat out, or whatever.

Adam leaned back against his desk again and crossed his arms. He looked like he was waiting.

Brandon didn't care anymore.

He pulled Karen ahead of him and started for the door. His hand on her waist kept her from slowing. He knew she was getting tired of all his hauling her around and appreciated her not taking it out of his hide yet.

Because she would later. Growing up, she never let anyone push her around and as a woman she wouldn't either.

"Wait!"

He stopped. His hand grasped her shirt to stay with him.

Bradley stood in the middle of the office, arms hanging at his side. His brother looked lost.

Brandon waited to hear him out. He was still leaving though. Bradley took a deep

breath.

“Run with me. Just us.”

Brandon cocked his head, thinking. He nodded. “Not tonight. Later, after I catch this guy.”

Bradley nodded, too. He looked relieved. “Yeah. We’ll go for a run after the Hunt.”

“Brandon,” Adam stopped him when he would have slipped out the door behind Karen. He caught his adopted father’s approving gaze. “Don’t leave the property. You and Karen stay in the pool house.”

Chapter Eleven

Brandon thought he showed admirable restraint by not jerking her into another room and having his way with her. He had her in his arms, where she belonged, before leaving the house. He managed not to fall in the pool when she grabbed his hair and pulled him in for a scorching kiss.

The layout of the pool and adjoining guest house was familiar from his brief stay when he was discharged from the Army. He'd stayed only the one weekend it had taken to make his little cabin livable.

For the first time Brandon was glad he'd decided to come back to the pack. With serious thoughts of loosing himself overseas somewhere, he almost hadn't. Thoughts of Karen, then of Diana, drew him home.

With one hand and a foot, he shoved the door open. Her sweet tongue in his mouth, he aimed for the bed. He set her down, stole another kiss, before she pushed him back.

"The door. Shut it," Karen gasped.

She watched him close the door and strip off the too tight tee shirt. Muscles highlighted by the fabric were unveiled in full glory. She followed the dark line of hair to his waistband. Behind the zipper was the bulge of his erection. His dark eyes were intense, meeting hers while she watched him undress.

The button pinged away. The zipper parted and he reached a hand in to free himself. Her breath hitched. Oh, boy. No underwear. His penis jutted proud and free of constraint. She wondered how he even kept a monster like that caged inside the jeans in the first place.

Brandon cocked his head. He looked out from under his lashes as he hooked thumbs in the waistband to draw the denims down. He grinned and shimmied his butt. The muscles in his stomach bunched and smoothed with the motion.

Karen wiped the back of her hand over her mouth.

Oh, Lordy, lordy. Was that drool?

"Nice show."

"Nice? I'm showing you some of my best moves."

"Uh. I'm a hands-on kind of girl. C'mere."

She gave an underhanded wave, and then patted the bed.

He kicked the jeans free of his ankles and walked slowly around the bed.

No, he stalked. Intent.

He was the hunter and she, the prey. The sultry chocolate of his eyes melted her belly.

Brandon grinned, flashing dimple. He pounced. The bed shuddered under his weight as he landed next to her in a crouch and stretched out beside her.

She rolled over to her side and slid a hand over the plane of his chest, following the dark line down. God, he was beautiful. He quivered under her touch, letting her take his shaft into her hand. She squeezed.

Brandon moaned. His head fell back and she was moved with awe at the trust he placed in her.

She explored the length of his penis, sliding her hand up and over the knob in rhythm with the slight thrust of his hips. She massaged the wet bead of pre-come into the head of his penis.

Brandon made a strangled sound in his throat.

She moved to cup his loose sac. She ran her finger up and down the line between his ass and his testicles until the sac drew tight.

Brandon growled and grabbed her wrist, pulling her up over his chest.

“Enough. My turn.” He grabbed her tee shirt and pulled over her head.

Without a bra, her breasts smashed against his chest. Taking full advantage, Karen rubbed her chest back and forth, relishing in the firm planes of his chest sliding against her breasts.

“You’re overdressed.”

His hands roamed over her body, cupping her butt through the soft material of her borrowed sweat pants.

It was her turn to whimper as he pulled her thighs around him and thrust against her core. She wiggled, wanting out of the sweat pants and him deep inside. His hands on her waist kept pulling her down against him.

“Not yet.”

He settled her upright on his belly. The length of his penis rode the line of her butt. Those wonderfully hot hands slid up her body to grasp her breasts.

Karen nearly came when the friction of his calloused fingers teased and worked her nipples into hard points. They ached for something hot and wet. Just like her nether regions ached for something hot and hard.

She rocked against him, little mewling noises escaping her mouth. Her fingers threaded through the dark silk of his hair and found a grip.

Brandon’s hands smoothed over the weight of her breasts again and then slid down over the line of her spine to her butt again. He ignored the tugging on his scalp. He shifted and his mouth covered her breast.

The wet heat made her belly contract and a shiver tingled down her spine. She arched, feeling wetness seep from between her legs. Intense pleasure ripped a scream from her throat.

His attention shifted to the other breast. A warning growl trickled out when she tried to arch away, to tug at the waistband of her sweat pants. He held her clamped to him.

She clutched his head. His other hand held her breast while he suckled. Little bites of his strong teeth teased at the tender skin behind her areola while his tongue worked her nipple.

Karen shuddered again, feeling the contraction all the way to her toes.

Brandon looked up.

A red glint in his eyes took her breath away. Again.

He moved her backward until he lay on top, his weight on his forearms.

Karen caught her breath.

“Oh. God. I’ve never cum from having my boobs sucked on before.”

“Good.” Brandon’s possessive gaze roamed over her breasts and down her body, leaving a tingling wake under her skin. An insistent throbbing between her thighs reminded her of what she really wanted.

Insecurity raised its ugly little head. Brandon was a giving, considerate lover. What ifs, swirled around in her mind chased by regret that she hadn’t seen him in this light years ago.

“I ... you know I’m not a virgin.”

He pressed a light hand over her mouth. His voice was Change graveled.

“It took too long to get here to go over that. I’m not a virgin either, so we’re even.”

He moved off of her in a blur of speed and attacked her sweats. They peeled off her legs and he flipped the garment over his shoulder while he surveyed his prize.

He grasped her ankles and spread them wide. *That* was something she hadn’t done before either.

“*Brandon!*”

He settled his torso between her legs. Those competent warm hands slid under her to cradle her butt while he placed a kiss on her belly. Brandon looked up her body and into her eyes.

“Let me do what I want.”

Karen hesitated and he placed a tongue swirling kiss on her navel. She squirmed. Her nether region got wetter.

His grip stopped her from going anywhere so she slid her legs over his back. She nearly moaned at the sensation of skin sliding against skin.

“Give yourself to me,” Brandon whispered against the wet spot he’d made. The rough growth of one cheek rubbed in the same spot raised bumps along her body. He raised his head. The brown chocolate of his eyes bore into hers, a promise of dark delight. “I won’t hurt or degrade you. *Ever.*”

God. She was going to go insane. He was pressed *there* and she needed him inside *there*. She tried pulling him up.

He didn’t budge. His hands tightened on her butt, getting her attention.

“Say the words, Karen.”

She got angry.

“Let you do anything you want? Honey, you’re killing me here. I’ll bark like a dog if you will *get on with it,*” Karen panted and writhed, trying to get closer

His smile was grim. It wasn’t real and didn’t show his dimples. He leaned down and took a sharp bite of her belly, then soothed it over with a lave of his tongue.

“Be mine. Give yourself to me. I won’t have my sons raised by someone else.”

Shock cooled Karen enough to think.

The cradle she thought was for someone else flashed through her mind.

“You know about Sammy and Shane?”

Brandon stared at her. He hadn't realized he'd voiced his heart's desire. His dream boys were real. She was breeding. If they had unprotected sex a baby was likely. He stopped breathing, and then inhaled. His chest felt tight. The pups in his dreams were *his*. Not Bradley's. His eyes flashed red. He felt his canines elongate as he struggled with the beast inside. The beast wouldn't hurt her. It/he wanted to mate. For her to say the words, to do the thing, that would bind them together. The words weren't necessary, but he needed to hear them. He let go of her butt and climbed up to meet her eyes, careful to keep his weight off her. "I won't let you go. Say the words." Something clicked in her brain, something her heart had known all along. She just had to finish what they'd started by accident as kids. Karen raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck. Brandon let her pull him down for one heart stopping kiss. Lips melded against one another. Their tongues twined. She teased the long canines and ran her fingers through his hair. She left little kisses on the edge of his lips, nibbling at the corners. Brandon pulled away and stared down at her, red eyed. She wasn't afraid of the physical changes in him. He could be a furry half-man half-wolf and she wouldn't be afraid. She didn't think she'd want to have kinky furry sex, but if it was what he needed, then she would do it without reservation. "I belong to you, Brandon Starr." "Weis." She smacked him on the shoulder for interrupting. "Fine. I'm yours, Brandon *Weis*. I always was." That's why she could never commit to his brother. "Do whatever you want with me. I trust you." With that Karen reached out into the magic that blended her own abilities with the energies that bound the pack together and *tweaked* it. Power and pain shimmered over her as the two energies that made up Brandon and Karen merged. Pleasure crashed over her as Brandon entered her body. They became one, both psychically and physically. Mated. She scored her nails down his back, arching her own as another orgasm slammed through her. He growled and captured her hands, trapping them above her head with one hand, keeping up a steady rhythm with his hips. The other he used to tease her nipples until she screamed. He wanted to do so many things to his mate, but later. Right now he needed to finish. His cock throbbed. The pleasure of sliding in and out of her hot sex built fast from being denied for so long. Brandon growled and paused long enough to move her legs over his shoulders. He grabbed her ass for leverage and shoved inside her sex hard, beating out a tempo that built in his balls and exploded behind his eyeballs.

Karen screamed again. She felt his climax and followed right behind him clamping down hard around him, every muscle of hers locked tight. She spiraled downward.

Her fists unclenched from the sheets as her numb legs found the bed and Brandon slid in behind her. His hand found her breast and pulled her back against his chest.

“Mmmm.”

She closed her eyes, reveling in the fast pace of his heart. The slight tickle of his breath on her neck raised goose bumps. In her mind she felt his satisfaction. It was stronger, more intense than what she felt with the pack link. His was a heavy possessive feeling. She’d never been an empath and realized she wouldn’t mind feeling his emotions.

She toyed with the hair on his arm, letting the feel of his body seep into her, distracting her from the ache of the healing wounds in her chest.

Brandon slid his hand from her breast to cover the wounds.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. You said you would never.”

He nuzzled the hair away from her neck and placed a kiss there, savoring the salt and sweat. He felt himself getting hard again and prodded against her luscious butt.

He felt her smile in his head.

“Ready for round two, eh Sparky?”

He laughed and pulled her close.

“Sparky? I don’t look like a Sparky.”

“Yes, you do. When you get all excited, you bounce on the ends of your toes. Sparky.”

“I’d rather bounce on you. After you get some rest.”

Karen would have argued the point, but she was tired and wanted a bath. She dozed off and began a tantalizing dream about Brandon naked and soapy in the shower.

* * * *

“Man, you should have gotten laid *ages* ago. It totally improves your attitude.”

Adam, Mack, Tank, Chase, Mark, and Bradley joined Brandon for the hunt for Karen’s attacker. They’d started at three AM and spread out to cover every inch of Palestine by foot and nose. At eleven a.m. the pack met up at a run-down hamburger place downtown.

The little place didn’t look like much. The furnishings hadn’t been updated since maybe the sixties. It wasn’t open all day, but it was clean and served a great meal for a decent price.

Disgruntled lawyers and other downtown folk shot irritated looks at the four tables they confiscated and pulled together to hold everything they ordered. The restaurant was small and lunchtime was standing room only at the bar by now.

“Shut up.” Brandon’s voice held no heat as he shoveled pancakes in his mouth.

He ignored the surprised glances that the others sent his way and gave a mental shrug. Maybe getting laid had smoothed him out. He did feel mellow.

Mark sniggered and reached for the store bought bottle of syrup only to have Tank snatch it first.

“Awww! Come on. It’s only syrup,” Mark whined like a child, his eyes tracking his stolen prize.

“Lemme see that.” Chase held his hand out for the bottle. He studied the bright printed label and then poured a drop on his finger. He licked the drop off his finger with relish and smacked his lips together. He gave the younger male an evil grin.

“Yep. Loaded with sugar and preservatives. No syrup for you.” Chase squeezed the upended the bottle until his pancakes swam in a lake of syrup.

“Dad,” Mark turned his case over to his alpha. “I haven’t had syrup in forever. Just this once?”

Mark held two fingers a space apart.

“A couple of tablespoons. Enough to taste.”

Adam looked up from his eggs and ham. He assessed the situation then glanced at Tank. The dark-skinned wolveren had the final say in all things medical.

Tank looked up from a plate of biscuits smothered in gravy. Two sides of bacon sat well away from his packmates’ reach. He swallowed, then took the bottle and read the label. He tasted the contents, shrugged and squeezed the rest over his biscuits.

Mark’s face fell. He looked like he wanted to howl in despondency while Tank took a calm careful bite of the dripping concoction.

“Chase is right. According to the label, this particular brand has corn syrup, yellow dye, and preservatives. He should use the all-natural jelly we brought and be happy he was allowed pancakes.”

“But it’s *diet* jelly.” Mark leaned over and bumped his forehead on the table. “It’s embarrassing.”

Bradley shifted his food further away from Mark and closer to Brandon. “You’re what’s embarrassing. Geesh. It’s like watching an addict begging for a fix. Get a grip and eat the damn jelly.”

Brandon liked feeling a part. He didn’t want to test the camaraderie yet, just absorb it. The overprotective teasing filled a void inside he hadn’t acknowledged existed. He watched Mark’s antics and tried not to laugh, or roll his eyes at Tank’s assessment.

“You are correct. Mark’s condition makes him crave sugar as a fast source of energy, which he already has an abundant supply of. He has a reaction to the petroleum in most dyes and preservatives that makes focusing more difficult. The ADHD syndrome also causes a chemical imbalance that, because of his special metabolism, cannot be treated with the normal run of drugs.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spock,” Mark mumbled, shooting a sullen glare at Tank then included the rest of the table in his heated gaze.

“Fine. Great. Give me the damn diet jelly.”

* * * *

Brandon almost missed the scent. He was content enough as part of the pack, with the essence of his mate connected to him that he was nearly oblivious.

He jerked upright and lifted his nose to test the air. They were in a restaurant, so his strange reaction could be attributed to the food.

Or not. He jumped up and headed to the open door. There was an old wooden screen door that kept flies out and allowed the excess heat from the kitchen to escape.

He slammed through the screen door and scanned the street. The restaurant sat on the corner of a crossroads. Brandon tested the air. Beside him, Adam tested the air.

“It’s the same male from the highway shooting.”

Brandon nodded and started off across the street. He heard Adam tell the others to split up and begin their own search of the streets around the restaurant. Lunch, or brunch since they’d eaten breakfast food, had been fun.

Now it was off to work.

* * * *

“I can’t believe we lost the *bas--jerk*.” Mark changed epithets with a sidelong glance at Diana passing through the living area. He slouched down on the sofa with a determined air of settling in for the duration.

“I mean, he’s just one human. It’s not like he knows we’re hunting him, right?”

No one answered the question. The others from the day’s hunting party sat around the room in similar positions of relaxations, though a few glances were cast in the direction of the kitchen. No one would be getting up and risk being elected Drink Guy when Eddie, the pack omega wasn’t around.

Or not. Adam didn’t let anyone abuse anyone else in the pack.

In normal pack hierarchy, the omega would be the one who got bossed around or picked on by everyone. He also either wouldn’t or couldn’t say no. Adam made sure that the other members of the pack didn’t take too much advantage of Eddie’s weakness.

Brandon rubbed a hand over the soft, thick pile of the carpet where he lay stretched out. He’d met Eddie the other night when Karen was brought to Packhome for her injuries. Looking at Eddie, so cheerful in his willingness to be led, made Brandon’s stomach cramp. He’d had to bite back his irritation when the guy had attached himself to Brandon while Tank worked on keeping Karen alive.

Eddie had talked the whole time about his computers. Apparently, the pack omega was good at programming, repairing, and *anything* with a CPU. After Tank was finished with her, Brandon hadn’t left Karen’s side until she could get up. Well, except for the odd bathroom break.

Brandon alternately dug his fingers into the carpet, and then smoothed over the indentions he made. He enjoyed the grip and tickling sensation it offered. Suddenly, he rolled over and twisted his head around to catch his pack leader’s attention.

Adam lounged in his favorite chair, one bare foot propped on the edge of a table. His hands supported his head as he stared off, thinking. As Canis Pater, Pack Father, Adam was able to mystically keep track of his people. It wasn’t an infallible sense and the alpha allowed them their privacy. That same connection usually kept him in tune with his packmembers’ moods. Adam shifted his gaze down and raised a pale eyebrow in question.

“Eddie’s a computer geek. A good one?”

Adam nodded. Brandon sensed the intent gazes of the other guys, trying to guess what he was about. Most of the older wolveren weren’t very computer literate or had only an average working knowledge. Those like Eddie or Seth who could spend hours in a cramped position over the ozone scented monitor were rare. Wolveren were good with their hands, or hunting, or other, physical pursuits.

“Can he hack?”

“What?”

There were a few sniggers.

“Didn’t Eddie hack up that cat he caught a couple of weeks ago?”

Brandon suppressed a growl at Chase’s sarcasm.

“Nope. That was a raccoon. I think I read that they smelled a lot like cats. Something about training coon hounds.” Mack’s contribution derailed Brandon’s thought process for a moment. He’d never actually compared cat to raccoon scent before.

Then, Bradley stretched and propped one bare foot on the coffee table.

“Do you guys remember the time I out-hunted those prize coon hounds of Filmer’s? That was one huge-assed coon.”

“Yo! What about the time that were-panther treed Chase?” Rick ducked out of the way of the warden’s playful swat.

“Brandon meant *computer* hacking.” Tank’s clarification quieted everyone down.

The idea of using the internet to hunt down their prey was ripped right from television and detective novels, but what the hell?

“We’re running in circles looking for Lawrence Dailey the usual way. We need credit card receipts for a hotel. Does he have a car registered in his name? Maybe he rented one to come down. Just knowing what we’re looking for would help.”

Adam nodded, thinking it over.

“I’ll see what he can do.”

That settled, Brandon stood. It was time to find his mate. He ignored the hopeful looks cast in his direction and headed for the back door.

“Hey, while you’re up ...,” Chase called over the back of the couch.

“Get your own drinks.” Brandon headed for the pool house, another very different hunt on his mind.

* * * *

“I want my own clothes.”

Karen shot a glare at Brandon, presently lolling in the bed in all his perfect, naked glory. She held up her borrowed sweatpants and shirt in each of her hands.

“These stink from two days wear. I need my suitcase.”

He stretched out. The sleek muscles of his abdomen rippled in a very interesting way, calling special attention to the dark trail of hair that went down to yet another interesting muscle. That muscle did a lot more than ripple.

Karen felt her breath catch. She swallowed. Blinked.

“You don’t need clothes.” A sexy dimple emerged in one dark whisker-roughened cheek.

He was right. She didn’t need clothes. Not for that. Her breasts tingled at the invitation. Her sex pooled in anticipation.

No wonder they called it being in heat. She was hot all over.

God, she was so easy.

Brandon’s sexy dimpled grin turned pirate-like. He twitched his stomach muscles and the other muscle bobbed at her. He patted the bed next to him in silent invitation.

“Um,” Karen stared at the nifty trick. Had he actually gotten bigger? She dropped

the dirty clothes and walked to the bed. "Um."

* * * *

Later, Karen sprawled across the bed. One foot hung off the corner. Her neck was going to develop a crick from the slow slide off the edge. Every piece of her body was sated.

Sex with Brandon, she decided, was better than chocolate. She remembered lusting after Bradley's body with the awed fascination of a teenage girl. Breaking up with Bradley had devastated her, so much, that she'd been embarrassed to come home.

Until now, she'd never really thought of Brandon in terms of a hot, mind-numbing sex animal.

Her sex animal made a cute snuffling noise in the blanket and shifted. She felt his big, very capable hands go round her ankles. *Again?*

He pulled her off the edge of the bed and snuggled in beside her. The fever heat from his body soaked into her.

Karen shut her eyes when he only drew her close with a possessive arm over her waist.

Why hadn't she thought of him in those terms before? He was just as attractive as his brother.

Actually, now that she'd seen them both together, her fickle heart thought Brandon was the sexier brother.

True, Brandon had put on more muscle since high school graduation but he still wasn't as bulky as Bradley. It was a small distinction, but a big one to those who knew the brothers. Or rather, since her graduation.

Brandon had opted for a GED. Those days, crowds of any kind upset him. These days, he looked like he still didn't like dealing with people, but handled crowds and strangers fine. And man-o-man was he fine.

"*Again?*" Brandon's breath sent a shiver down her spine. The rough tickle of his cheek tore a gurgle from her throat. "Woman, you are insatiable."

Brandon flipped her onto her back and peered down at her. The rich chocolate of his eyes gave no hint to whatever deep thoughts were on his mind as he studied her face.

His arms supported his weight on either side of her head. Suddenly, he swooped down to capture her lips with his. Brandon nipped and nibbled at her lips, as if tasting the finest delicacy.

His lower body aligned with hers. That wonderful thick part of him that her hormones craved slid back and forth at the still wet entrance of her body. Karen moaned and wrapped her legs around his waist.

The dog resisted her attempt to impale herself on his manhood. Karen growled her frustration.

"Tell me."

Brandon's demand broke through the dark haze of lust that had taken control her will.

She cracked an eye to look into his intense dark stare. She tried to shift onto him but he shook his head.

"Tell me."

“Tell you what? Damn it, stop torturing me!”

Brandon growled and slid his length along her aching channel. Almost in.

Her hips rose and followed his away movement. She whimpered and beat a fist on his shoulder.

“I’m yours, dammit,” she growled back at him. “I’m all yours. Happy now?”

The last slow slide against her wet folds was too much. Karen writhed and bucked upwards, meeting Brandon’s hard deep thrust.

The sudden fullness expanded inside her with a shout. Hers and his.

Brandon found and trapped her wrists with his hands. Then the man got down to business.

He set a slamming pace. His breath came out wuffs. Wuff, wuff, wuff.

The pleasure built again. Every sensation magnified through the mate-bond.

Karen heard the ug, ug, ug that she made every time he slammed home. She didn’t care.

His butt was tight under her heels. Under her hands, his muscles got tighter and tighter.

The tendons in his neck stood out in a stark display. Sweat made his skin gleam. Made her hungry for her mate.

Karen’s mouth found his shoulder. Salty. Masculine. *Hers*.

Her womb clenched and exploded. The force of her orgasm hammered through the mate-bond.

Brandon drove deep and froze. He threw his head back as his own release carried them away.

“Ahhhh!”

“Yesss!”

A last shudder worked down his back, making her clench around him with the aftershocks sent through her body.

His arms trembled. Brandon ground deep once more, trying valiantly to stay seated inside her. Finally, giving one last nuzzle he collapsed to the side.

* * * *

“I still need my clothes.” Karen pointed out when she recovered.

“Mmffft,” said the boneless body sprawled over most of the bed between pants.

“Good. Glad we agree.” As she shifted to slide off the bed, Brandon grabbed her ankle again. She looked down her body into his serious glare.

“No. We do not agree. You are not going anywhere.”

Karen had never been one to let someone else dictate her life. Hence, the big breakup that caused the rift between her and the pack. She wasn’t going to start now.

She jerked on her trapped foot. She would try reason.

“Look, I need my suitcase. Deodorant and clean panties would be nice.” She grimaced at her own sticky skin. “Actually, they’re essential.”

Brandon shook his head.

“I don’t want Lawrence Dailey getting a whiff of your whereabouts.”

“That’s what the deodorant is for. I don’t want a whiff of me either.”

This time when he shook his head, there was a hint of the sexy dimpled smile. He

still didn't let go of her ankle.

He had a stubborn gleam in his eyes, despite the distracting dimple. That gleam said he'd do whatever necessary to achieve his goal.

Maybe, even keep her in bed until all this was over.

Not that staying in bed with Brandon was such a hardship.

It was time for a change in tactics.

Karen turned and crawled back toward him until they were nose to nose. She rubbed noses before placing a soft kiss on his mouth.

"Please." She trailed little kisses down his rough jaw. Her fingers gave butterfly caresses over his chest and shoulders. "I'd be perfectly safe with you taking me."

He made a small noise and released her ankle. His large hands went around her bare butt and pulled her to him. She ended up astride Brandon's lap. That part of him stirred some, but apparently needed more recovery time.

Brandon ignored his cock's exhaustion and tasted every bit of flesh his mate offered. The little minx thought she was going to seduce him into letting her run off to town while that bastard Dailey was still on the loose.

He'd learned about seduction games too early from people thankfully long dead or banished. Karen's clumsy straightforward approach was both refreshing and cute. He didn't play the seduction game, but he wasn't above taking advantage of what she offered.

Besides, Brandon suspected that Karen wasn't as committed to their relationship as she let on. Was she only biding her time until the breeding time was over?

With the mate-bond neither one of them should be even remotely attracted to anyone else but each other. Did she still have illusions of fitting in with humans?

"Brandon?"

"Hmmm?" He buried his nose in his favorite spot behind her ear and inhaled.

"Take me to town. I *need* my stuff."

She said *need* like a sexual invitation. He took the opportunity to nibble some more on her neck. His hands explored every soft curve from her breasts to her buttocks.

A slap on his shoulder halted further exploration.

"Are you listening to me?"

No, not really. In a few more minutes his cock might be recovered enough for another round.

"Brandon!"

She smacked his shoulder again.

He groaned and fell back on the bed.

"What?"

Instead of repeating herself, she glared down at him from her perch on his belly. From his angle he had a good view of her world class breasts.

"Your suitcase is at my cabin."

"*Your cabin?* I've been here for at least two days and my stuff is *at your cabin?*"

Brandon winced at her voice.

Who knew a woman could screech for that long of a sentence? Well, Diana could.

Apparently, it was a skill that ran in the family.

Karen fought her way off the bed and glared at him some more from the foot.
He sighed, disappointed. He probably wasn't going to get laid again today.

Chapter Twelve

Brandon pushed the buggy behind the long swath of checkout lines at the front of W-Mart. He was disgusted with himself. He'd held out against seduction. He'd held out against threats to his manhood. He'd even held out against the threat of never getting laid again.

Ha. As if she was going to hold out on *that* threat.

No, big manly guy that he was, he caved when all the females in the pack rallied to her cause. Even Bradley's woman, Nikki was on Karen's side.

Brandon growled softly for his own benefit.

There was something about his twin's female that bothered him.

Bradley had apparently married, but not mate-bonded with his wife. She didn't have the flat smell of a null human. Perhaps whatever kind of supernatural that she was wasn't able to mate-bond them? The alternative was that one of the couple refused the mate-bond.

For ten years?

For a guy so dedicated to the pack, it surprised Brandon that his brother would snub convention and choose outside the standard expectations of a wolveren or psychic mate. Or that Bradley would live in town. In an apartment, no less. A cage.

But then, his and Bradley's relationship had always been screwed up. Once the alpha-omega pattern of their relationship had been broken, the twins had nothing else to relate.

Brandon shook his head and growled again, not sure of his ability to really forgive and build a new relationship with his brother.

"Might as well take it in stride, son." Adam strolled along beside Brandon at a safe distance from the shopping females.

As Canis Pater, Adam had taken time away from his construction business while he dealt with the Lawrence Dailey problem. Adam had capable human workers that he trusted to make sure Lobos Luna stayed on schedule. As a boss and a business owner, he compensated well for loyalty and hard work.

Brandon grunted his assessment of *taking it in stride*.

He didn't like shopping. He didn't like stores. He certainly didn't like the super friendly faces of the people who kept greeting him like a long lost relative.

He felt the need to go back to his cabin and workshop and loose himself in woodwork. He'd even take roofing if it would get him out of the store.

"Hi there Mr. Weis! *Brandon?*"

Chipper, female, and more than passable pretty stepped in front of Brandon's buggy to stop his progress.

"Brandon Starr?"

He pulled his gaze from the females milling around the jewelry counter and

focused on the one in front of him. He ignored the laugh his dad was choking on at his expense.

“Weis. Brandon *Weis*.”

She was pretty in a redheaded bright penny sort of way, exuding the same happy cheer he always associated with Karen.

“Oh. You don’t remember me, do you?”

The pretty redhead looked familiar but he she could have been anyone. Females not-Karen had always blurred into the background

He glanced back at the females and saw that they’d moved on to mess with hats and belts. The scarf Karen wrapped around her tight jeans clad butt gave him a new appreciation for glittery frothy material. He could see all kinds of possibilities. Every one of them involved sheer scarves. And a bed. Or the couch.

“We went to school together.”

The redhead’s long fingernails gestured in the air, demanding his attention. Moving in, she wrapped her talons around the handle of his buggy.

The musk of her interest clogged his nose. Her laughter sounded contrived.

“Of course that was ages and ages ago. And you’ve been gone. When did you get back to Palestine?”

Uh. Brandon let her have the buggy and took an instinctive step toward Adam.

If ever there was a time he needed his alpha’s help, it was now. Only a glance told him that he’d been abandoned.

Damn. Left to fend for himself in favor of a cupcake display.

To give Adam credit, they did look like good cupcakes.

“I got out of the service a year and a half ago.”

“Ooo. A military man.”

She fluttered her red claws near the low neckline of her blouse, calling attention to the plump mounds that threatened to escape.

“I completely support our troops. I even have a page on my Web site dedicated to our brave men serving our country. Here! Let me give you my card.”

The perky insistent female pulled a handy card from the back pocket of her painted on jeans and tucked it into his tee shirt pocket.

“Hello, Heather.”

Brandon smelled his mate and felt Karen’s arm go around his waist. He glanced over at her bright smile. It looked a little sharp at the edges.

What relief he felt at his rescue was tinged with an odd sense of guilt.

What had he done wrong? Not run screaming in the opposite direction? He’d wanted to.

“Karen?”

The redhead squealed and moved to throw her arms around his mate.

Brandon moved. Fast.

“Oh, God! It’s been since when? That last cheerleading party after graduation?”

The females went through the ritual of oohing and ahhhhing over each other before Heather the ex-cheerleader drew back with a look of surprise. She glanced back and forth between both Karen and Brandon.

“Oh, goodness. I am sooo embarrassed. You two are together?”

“We’re married,” Brandon blurted at the same time Karen said, “We’re engaged.”

Heather laughed.

“You two need to get your stories straight. Uh-oh!”

She looked over their shoulders in the direction of the jewelry counter and gave them a distracted good-bye wave.

“I’ve got to go before my daughter gets another hole in her ears. You know how kids are.”

Brandon watched Heather leave with relief.

Karen smacked him on the shoulder.

He jumped and looked down at her.

“What?”

She looked furious. She smelled hot. Like an idiot, he grinned.

“Don’t you dare try the sexy dimple thing with me.”

Karen threw her hands in the air.

“Married? What is with that?”

She thought he had sexy dimples?

His second disappointment of the day, her disparagement of marriage to him, sunk in.

“We’re mated. Same thing.” He tried for an offhand attitude.

Karen flashed her left hand under his nose.

“I don’t see a ring. Do you?”

He growled and jerked her to him.

“That can be remedied.”

He kissed her hard. While she was still too dazed to object, he towed her to the jewelry counter.

His woman wanted a ring. Fine. He’d buy her a ring.

“Can I help you?”

The nice saleslady was an older woman who looked him over but didn’t make him feel threatened like Heather did. She was dressed in an appropriate dark blue business style jacket and skirt.

The badge clipped to her collar said that her name was Martha and that she’d been working there for fifteen years.

Yea, Martha. Maybe she knew something about rings.

Brandon leaned over to look at the shiny collection. They all had a look of cold sameness, lacking the individuality he put in his woodwork. He couldn’t imagine any one of them on Karen’s slender fingers.

“Which one do you want?”

“Huh?”

Karen looked a little confused, so he prodded her. He wanted this done as soon as possible so they could get back to Packhome. Maybe Adam would let up on his staying close to home edict enough for him to put in some time at his workshop. Some of his furniture orders had deadlines coming up.

“The rings. Which one?”

Karen looked from him to Martha the saleslady and back again. The storm that threatened when Heather was stalking him returned. She smelled angry again.

Brandon sighed.

“You said you didn’t have a ring. *Pick one.*”

She smacked him on the shoulder again and called him a jerk.

He was sort of expecting that. His attitude had been a little gruff trying to hurry her up. He really wanted out of the store.

She stormed off in search of her pack of females.

“Didn’t work out the way you expected, eh son?”

Brandon shot a glare in his dad’s general direction. Tucked under one big arm, was a dozen colorful frosted cupcakes.

A sales receipt was taped to the top of the clear plastic box announced the goods bought and paid for. Food for the taking.

Martha the sales lady looked embarrassed.

“Sorry about that.” He shrugged then pointed at the cupcakes. “Can I have one, please?”

He always said please with his dad and Mack. For some reason it always annoyed Adam.

His dad narrowed his eyes.

“No. Not if you’re going to ask like that.

“Okay. Gimme a cupcake.”

Adam tried to look smooth, glancing around the counter for his wife. He made scoping for Diana look as if he was considering telling him no a second time.

Brandon checked his adopted mother’s position.

“Food Nazi at ten o’clock.”

“Check.”

Finally, Adam wrestled the clear box open and gave Brandon the blue frosted one.

It was a nice gesture that told volumes about the guy that had adopted a motley pack of dysfunctional teenagers.

After all these years, his dad still gave the former pack omega his favorite colored cupcake. Then again, the other night Adam had stood over Eddie, the new omega, to make sure he finished his dinner. After that Eddie had escaped back to his computer.

Both Brandon and Adam stared at the sparkly jewelry inside the glass case while they ate. Adam licked his fingers and pulled out the second blue cupcake and handed it over.

“Maybe you should get the ring anyway and ask her right. After she cools off.”

Brandon let the sweet frosting melt on his tongue and enjoyed the rush of sugar in his veins. He glanced at Martha, who nodded.

Maybe, Karen wouldn’t mind staying with the pack females for a ring. Then, Brandon wouldn’t have to go shopping.

Or he could have one made. That idea had possibilities.

When offered, Martha politely declined one the cupcakes.

She looked and acted like a classy lady. Besides the store manager would probably get aggravated if she ate when it wasn’t her break.

That was another reason he liked working for himself and Lobos Luna doing cabinet work.

“All I asked was which ring she wanted.”

Adam swallowed before snorting his opinion.

Martha chuckled. She reached under her counter for a roll of paper towels. Tearing two sections off, she offered them the towels with her own advice.

“A lady wants to be proposed to romantically. She may be the kind who wants *you* to pick out the perfect ring.”

Brandon choked on cake. He used his paper towel to brush the crumbs off of Martha’s counter before she made them leave.

He glanced toward Karen. From this vantage point, they had a good view of the women at the makeup and perfume aisle.

“Propose? But we’re already mated.”

Martha’s confusion was short lived. She blushed, finally figuring the mated part was for mating.

Adam finished off his fourth cupcake and set the rest on the glass counter.

Brandon glanced at the alpha’s plain gold band on his left hand. Adam tapped the band against the counter while Brandon selected a green cupcake. There were no more blue ones.

“What makes you think you’re getting out of a wedding? To them, being mated, living together, and doing the deed doesn’t equal a committed relationship.”

Adam ignored Martha’s surprised stare.

“You remember how long we all lived in two separate houses while Diana deluded herself that we weren’t all one family?”

Brandon nodded. He remembered using the time to get space from the pack.

He still had the red collar Diana had bought him when he refused to Change into a human. His adopted mother had understood. She’d given him a safe place to hide while he sorted through all of the trauma that had been his life. The second time he’d tried that, she sided with Adam and they practically threw him out of the nest.

Adam’s irritation over Diana’s refusal to move was still evident.

“If it wasn’t for those fairies burning down her house we might never have gotten everyone under one roof.”

“Excuse me, but the proper term is alternate lifestyle.”

Martha glanced around, for any potentially offended customers. She wasn’t as cool about it as Adam had been while scoping Diana.

But then Martha didn’t have the years of dodging the Avenging Angel Diana fighting the war against food additives, saturated fats, and preservatives.

“No, no.” Brandon pointed at a little figurine in the tall locked case on the counter. “Fairy-tale fairies.”

Adam frowned at the interruption.

“My point is, son. That with modern human women, you have to have all the bases covered. Get a ring.” He tapped on the glass for effect. “Take her to dinner ... in a *fancy* restaurant. And ask her to marry you.”

“But ...” Brandon was starting to see *invited* crowds in his future.

Adam shook his head.

“If you ever want to get laid again, you’re going to have to do it right.”

Adam looked over at Martha. “Right?”

Martha laid her tasteful manicured hand over her chest and laughed. Her face blushed bright pink, from her gold necklace to the light blond of her dyed hair.

“When you are right, sir, you are right.”

Martha’s saleslady gaze zeroed in on Brandon. Her sharp predatory gaze much more suited to one of his kind than hers, her smile very sure of her prey.

“Now, which ring do you want? I can suggest some very nice matched sets.”

* * * *

Lawrence Dailey was pissed. He swept the lamp onto the floor and relished the crash it made. Little pieces of lamp flew all over. One of the slivers bit into his cheek.

Karen Ridley was supposed to be in little pieces. She was supposed to be scorpion stung to death. She was supposed to be shot. He’d shot her himself!

Why was the whore gallivanting all over W-Mart without a care in the world?

He was the one suffering.

Now all he had was a nearly empty bottle of tequila and still no home or job to go back to.

The bitch had no respect for him.

And who were those people she was with? Her family?

Lawrence’s concentration was scattered and he couldn’t do a Far-See on her like that. Something niggled at his brain, something important he should remember.

He pulled on his hair, unable to drag the information out of hiding.

Think, think, think. He jerked on his hair with every *think*.

He was a smart guy. He’d made lots of money for Psicom computer products as a hands-on guy.

What he needed to do was to face her, to get his hands on her.

Lawrence took another pull off of the tequila bottle and stumbled over the lampshade. He kicked the damn thing off his foot, taking his slipper with it. The shade flattened with a satisfying crunch under his bare foot.

Something small and brown crawled under the bed. He turned, intending to stomp the scorpion flat. The damn things showed up when he least expected.

The room tilted. His stomach lurched as his ass made contact with the floor, yelping at the sudden sharp pain.

Damn broken lamp. He cut his butt.

He rolled over onto his knees and got up. The soused psychic crawled onto the bed. Butt in the air and huffing at the effort, he finally wrestled out of the silk pajamas.

Lawrence cursed Karen Ridley again.

The bitch now had the destruction of his favorite pajamas against her.

If he moved just so, he could reach the shard jammed in his right butt cheek.

Patting the area, he lost his balance and his grip on the shard. Lawrence’s face buried into the blanket as he fought his way up again. The glass in his butt moved with his struggles.

Reaching back again, he jerked the shard out with a painful grunt. Letting gravity win, he flopped down, and rolled over.

Lawrence stared at the hunk of glass in his hand. A smile pulled at one side of his mouth as he stared at the lovely red swirls, his blood, against the white ceramic.

More pretty red streaks dripped down onto his already blood covered palm. He figured he probably needed stitches, but didn't care. He was numb enough from the tequila that he could ignore the injury.

Karen, he couldn't ignore. The bitch had to suffer. She had to die.

He stared at the slick red blood as it dried on the shard. The redness covering his hand made him hard.

He'd take something from her since she'd taken everything from him.

Imagining the blood was hers, he gripped his penis and started pumping. When the blood dried, he replenished from the cut on his ass.

The thought of taking something, no someone, from the bitch filled his balls with heat. He pumped harder.

He exploded in his hand, the slick juices of his release mixing with the pink tint of blood.

Lawrence let out a relaxed sigh.

Coming made him a little more sober. The cut on his ass started to hurt. But now he had a plan and he'd better get started.

Lawrence wobbled to his feet to get showered, bandaged, and dressed. Out of habit, he found his slippers and shoved his feet into them.

Something tickled the toes of his right foot.

Screaming, he grabbed his shoe as the damned scorpion struck.

It got him four more times before he could get his slipper off. He shook it out and squashed it under the heel of his slipper.

That was another thing Karen Ridley would pay for. All the times those damn scorpions stung him.

Chapter Thirteen

Karen nibbled on an all-natural oatmeal cookie and tried to tune out Mark's sugar withdrawal whining.

He flopped backward on the porch. The edge of his oversized shorts in eye-bleeding red, yellow, and orange flame flipped in the wind. He'd ditched his shirt while mowing the front yard.

She had to admit he was attractive. Some women would call all that ripped muscle pin-up material. Not her. For Karen it would be like lusting after her brother.

Ick.

"Store-bought cupcakes. And buttercreme icing." With his arm thrown over his eyes, he sounded like a whipped puppy. "First the maple syrup, now cupcakes. Next I'll have to share a room with Eddie."

Karen gave up ignoring him and offered him a cookie from the stash in her lap. Mark sat up and sneered.

"No. I don't want another friggin' All-Natural-Cardboard-Cookie."

He got up with the same fluid muscular grace that all the wolverines had. With that body, his fair skin and hair, Mark could have been a Viking in another era. Or a model in this one.

He snatched up his water bottle and stomped over to where he'd left the mower. Adam preferred the push type to riding mowers, especially since he had enough hands around the house to push them.

"What I *want*, is store-bought maple *flavored* syrup, buttercreme icing, on a *real* chocolate chip cookie."

"Man, that is one whacked guy." Rice slipped into Mark's vacated spot and stared as the frustrated wolverine took his agitation out on the lawn.

Karen shrugged.

"He's got a sugar problem."

She offered Rice one of the oatmeal cookies. He took two with an impish grin.

"I like Diana's cooking."

Karen smiled and almost reached out to ruffle his hair before she remembered her promise not to touch him. Instead, she set her hand on the porch and leaned into it, waiting for him to relax again.

"Mark likes her cooking too. He's just addicted to sugar and can't handle a lot of it." She didn't want to go into the litany of Mark's dietary problems.

"His problem is he's whacked."

She was glad the mower would drown out their words to Mark's supernatural ears. Watching Mark wrestle the old mower over the lawn, she had to say he looked more put-upon than usual.

The poor guy had enough problems without a nine-year-old calling him whacked.

Mark had a thing for plump, freckled Bailey. Apparently, Bailey was mad at him for something he had said.

Her friend had yet to realize that you ignored about three fourths of what Mark said. He had a habit of talking instead of thinking.

Karen liked Bailey. Her friend was great. Bailey was earthy, no nonsense, with an offbeat sense of humor.

What bothered Karen was that Mark usually dated busty bimbo types. Or that was the type that had tried following him home last night for dinner. Diana had made Mark pack the bimbo up and take her back to town.

So what was it about Bailey that had caught her brother's attention?

Except for Brandon, Karen considered her mom's and Adam's adopted brood her brothers.

"It's the blood."

"Hmmm?"

Karen turned back to Rice, realizing she'd muttered at least half her musings out loud.

His eyes fixed on the cookies.

"Can I have another?" She handed over her last two and dusted off her lap.

Mumbling thanks around crumbs the boy appropriated her tea.

"Wolven blood." The little boy continued as if he'd never been distracted.

"It binds a human like you to one of us if it's not dill ... dil-luded."

"Diluted? As in, if you only take blood from one wolverine then you're bound to him?"

Rice shrugged. He eyed her as if she would pounce on him.

"That's what my old alpha said. He had this chick locked up forever, 'cause she kept running away. He said he could find her anywhere because of the blood."

"What happened to her?"

Rice shrugged again.

"She died when the pups were born. He died when a stray challenged him. Then I ran away because I didn't want no mean-assed stray for alpha."

Karen chewed on her bottom lip as she thought over Rice's comments.

Could it be that the only reason she was attracted to Brandon was because of his supernatural blood?

Thinking hard, she couldn't come up with a single time that she'd had someone else's blood.

Brandon *had* said that he could always find her.

Maybe she wasn't really mate-bonded to him, after all?

What if what she felt was a combination of the breeding time and having taken his blood for healing? The pack bond explained part of her connection with him.

She'd felt territorial and wanted to scratch Heather's eyes out when she thought the woman was poaching. Then what had Karen done? She'd gotten all commitment freaky when he insisted on buying a ring.

Well, actually she was ticked because he made it sound like an obligation.

The furry jerk.

Cookies and self-doubt sat in her stomach with the weight of a large rock.

What if the only reason Brandon was attracted to her was because of the pheromones she was producing? Was the only reason he talked about a long term commitment because of the premonition of children?

That was a sobering thought.

She wanted to be wanted for herself. Not because she could breed wolveren pups.

“Heard about your trip to town.”

Ember the Annoying Fairy replaced Rice. Karen saw the boy hunting something in the tall grass Mark had yet to mow. She glanced down at the small red-haired female.

“You heard that I bought deodorant and underwear? You need to get out more often.”

“Very funny, human.”

Ember’s tiny leather-clad body made her look like a miniature dominatrix. She fluffed her fly-around hair and perched on the edge of the step beside Karen.

“I heard about his latest conquest.”

“You mean Heather?” Karen waved her hand. It was nothing. “We all went to school together.”

Ember snorted.

“I may not like you, human, but I don’t dislike you enough to revel over your future pain.”

Ember said *human* like Karen said *roach infestation*. It was nasty and you put up with it until the exterminator hit on the right combination of chemicals that didn’t kill you outright or give you cancer within six months.

“What about my future pain?”

Ember looked incredulous.

“He’s been out of the human Army for a year and a half and he does not date.”

Karen laughed.

“Are you trying to tell me Brandon is gay? Because, that is *sooo* not going to work.”

Ember rolled her eyes.

“I mean that he was compiling a list of suitable wolveren female candidates for a mate.”

Ember looked a tad too innocent.

“Don’t the alpha leaders of a pack do the negotiations for an out of territory mate?”

“So you’re trying to tell me that he’s only playing with my affections? Hmmm, fairy?”

“I’m a brownie. And no, he’s not toying with you. But he might be confused. Think about it, human. Didn’t he give you blood while you were injured?”

Her deed for the day done, Ember hopped to her feet.

“Oh. Will you look at the time?”

The vile little brownie didn’t have a watch unless it doubled as a belt. Karen watched Ember jump down the steps and saunter off into the grass.

It was probably a little vindictive of her to hope that Mark would mow the

brownie over.

* * * *

After a week of being stuck at Packhome, Karen was ready to scream.

Apparently, her one day out at W-Mart was just that ... her one day out.

She had her suitcase and her new toiletries, but was expected to live indefinitely in the pool house until Lawrence Dailey was killed.

She had no illusions that the pack intended to catch him and turn him over to the police. Not only had Lawrence Dailey attacked a pack member, Karen herself, but he'd had the audacity to do it in pack territory. Neither insult would be dismissed.

Adam, the Canis Pater, had decreed that Karen, the females, and anyone school age was not to leave the main living areas of the property for any reason.

It was archaic, macho, king of the castle crap and very on par for a wolveren male. Especially for Adam who happened to be the king of this particular kingdom ... Packhome.

Brandon followed in his hero's footsteps and became the despot of the pool house. All because Lawrence was still in hiding and the menfolk had to get back to their respective jobs. Bills had to be paid, you know.

Her every move was noted and passed on to Adam, her mother, or Brandon. All in all, Karen was tired of confinement and sick of anything in possession of a penis.

The good news was that she wasn't breeding anymore. Yeah. Her hormones could shift back to normal.

Then again, Brandon had been pretty distracted lately. He kept saying that he had to go back to his workshop to work on orders. He also *had* to put in a kitchen for one of Adam's houses. Or an entertainment center.

She decided to make a garden.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Karen looked up from the persistent clod of dirt that defied her shovel. She stopped and leaned on her shovel, offering her ex-fiancé a cold glare.

"What does it look like I'm doing, Einstein?"

That was the irritating thing about Bradley. You could insult him all day long and his puffed macho chest never deflated.

"Digging?"

"Yes. I'm digging. Now go away and boss someone else."

He shook his head, very Adam-ish, and pointed to the main house when she stepped both feet up onto the shovel.

Maybe her added weight would put a dent in the dirt. She tried a couple of experimental bounces, succeeding in wedging the shovel a couple of more inches deeper. Dirt this hard would push her garden plans way into next summer.

"There is dirt by the pool house. Dig there."

"Make like the wind and blow off."

The dunderhead responded by picking her up off the shovel and tossing her over one shoulder. He headed back to the main house.

Karen kicked and squirmed. His back was a little broader than Brandon's. More muscle mass filled out his frame. He didn't even flinch at her fists.

“Put me down!”

Bradley laughed.

“Get a grip, Karen. What were you trying to do? Dig your own grave? No one is going to let you out of sight while that maniac is on the loose.”

“Put her down.”

Brandon’s voice was calm. The danger emanating from him was anything but.

Bradley stopped, tense.

Karen kept quiet for the moment. Every time they had sex, Brandon insisted she tell him that she was his.

Was the man territorial? Just a tad.

Now he’d come up on his brother, her ex-fiancé, carrying her. Karen kept her mouth shut. She didn’t want to add to an already volatile situation.

Bradley apparently decided not to fight it out. He shrugged her off his shoulder and gave her a push between the shoulder blades in his brother’s direction.

Karen squeaked at the handling and looked back at Bradley.

He looked, neutral, careful. He looked like a man with regrets. Then the moment passed and he put both hands up.

“Doing my job. Keep your woman out of the trees.”

She glanced at Brandon’s unreadable face.

“I wasn’t in the trees. I was going to make a garden.”

He looked skeptical, so she stomped by.

Forget the garden. Her main goal had been to pass the time while under house arrest. She didn’t have any seeds to plant in it anyway.

Brandon snatched her by the arm and reeled her in.

“You have his scent on you.”

Burying his face in her hair, his nose unerringly found the spot behind her ear to make her shiver. Goosebumps raised down her body.

“He picked me up.”

Brandon growled.

Perhaps that wasn’t the smartest thing to say.

“Well, I’d rather have yours on me.”

That seemed to perk him up a bit. At least the part of him that perked the most was up.

“You will.”

He covered her mouth with a possessive kiss.

* * * *

“Karen!”

She saw her mom, Diana doing an awkward jog toward them. Over the years, her mom had lost a lot of weight. However, an Olympic athlete, her mom was not.

She and Brandon met Diana halfway.

“Where is Rice?”

A frisson of alarm shivered down Karen. It might have been psychic bleedover from her mom’s empathic gifts, but she didn’t think so.

“Why would I know where he is?”

“Something has frightened him enough for me to pick up on. He said he was going to watch you dig a hole.”

Diana Weis didn't look afraid. She looked ready to kick butt.

“At first I thought you two were fighting again and that scared him.”

Karen shook her head.

“Don't worry. He's probably playing tracking games. We'll find him.”

Brandon waved at his twin, who would have heard everything with his wolverine hearing. The two wolverine males ran back to where Karen had decided to start her garden.

Karen hugged her arms around her torso and gave her mother a weak smile.

She had a bad feeling about this. *Bad* like the time a psycho psychic werewolf hunter waited for her and Diana outside an Italian restaurant. Karen had blown off the feeling then and her mother nearly died.

“Mom, you should call Adam and the others home.”

She hated herself for the look on her mother's face. Fear, anger, worry.

Karen swallowed. There would be no forgiving herself if anything happened to the boy.

“I think Lawrence may have him.”

Chapter Fourteen

“You know who’s calling on the phone and who’s about to drive up. How could you miss one sicko? What good is a Super-Caller ID if you can’t use it when you need it?”

Karen looked down at her feet, embarrassed. You could always trust Mark to ask the one question everyone wanted answered in the least tactful way possible.

Brandon pulled her close and gave the other male a fang filled growl.

“Back off.”

Karen patted Brandon’s arm, appreciative of his support.

“No, I’ll answer.”

She directed her explanation to Mark, who blushed and mumbled an apology. The bigmouth did have a good heart and he was just as worried about the pup, er ... boy, as everyone else.

“Sometimes a psychic has the gift to Hide from others. It’s not a common gift. I didn’t realize Lawrence might have it. He’s freaky good with numbers and computers.”

Karen didn’t point out that her mother had the gift of Hiding and several others that helped in Diana and Adam keeping Packhome safe from intruders. Diana’s abilities had never been observed and catalogued or trained under psychic teachers. But she was no less capable than the elders that protected the psychic communities.

“You came home because Lawrence Dailey would be out of his element here.”

Adam’s observation shamed her. True, she had come home because she had hoped the level of technology around here would throw Lawrence or anyone else following her awry.

City folks were naturally at a loss when their cell phones stopped working. Internet addicts went frantic at the loss of their high speed connection. Trees and cows were a plague from hell. She nodded.

“Good tactic.”

Huh? Adam’s warm gaze and swelled chest looked a lot like pride. Go figure.

Well, the man had been more of a father to her than her own good-for-nothing-sperm-donor-dad. She said a short prayer for the wolveren alpha’s good nature.

Eddie, the omega geek of the pack, raised his hand as if he were in school. Adam nodded and the omega flushed, happy as a puppy at being allowed to speak.

“I-If Lawrence Dailey is trying to kill K-Karen, then we s-should wonder why he captured R-Rice.”

“Because he’s a sick bastard?”

Chase leveled a serious look at Eddie. The omega visibly shrank into himself, but carried on.

“N-No. W-What I mean is ... I-Iv’e been studying m-m-mental-l-l illnesses.”

“No kidding.” Chase sneered.

“Leave off him.” Brandon narrowed his eyes, meeting the warden stare for stare. With a casual shrug, Chase leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Go ahead, Eddie.” For a change, when dealing with a pack member, Brandon’s voice was encouraging. “What do your studies tell you?”

Eddie’s prominent adam’s apple bobbed. Head ducked, he crawled over to her and Brandon. The omega had found his champion and would probably stick close from now on.

Karen took a moment to stroke Eddie like a pet while he basked in their attention. “Eddie.”

The omega hunched a bit when prodded, then nodded his head until it looked like the appendage would snap off and roll across the mud colored carpet. Eddie shoved his thick black glasses in place and took a deep breath.

“I-I think Lawrence D-Daily is g-getting worse. If he was at P-Packhome, then he p-probably knows what we are. He knows about K-Karen’s in-in-involvement.”

Good old Eddie had been all ears when she confessed her sins about confiding in Lawrence at the table.

“W-We need to find R-Rice before h-he decides to kill all of us and m-m-makes the pup his first v-victim.”

“What makes you think he’s going to try to take out a wolven pack in their own territory?”

Adam’s question was pure wolven, I-am-top-of-the- food-chain, mentality.

Eddie’s enthusiasm for her and Brandon was eclipsed by his love for his alphas. The omega beamed, happy to help.

“N-Natural progression. A-And he’s stupid.”

On that, they all agreed.

* * * *

Eddie’s assessment of Lawrence’s stupidity was based on past performance reports at Psicom, Inc. Eddie had hacked into Psicom’s management records and found that as a programmer and debugger, Lawrence Dailey was phenomenal.

As potential management material, he was a nothing and a tattle-tale. Every year he put in for the management training program. The company had been putting Lawrence off for years with piddley reasons for not promoting him.

In every report, the rat found someone to turn in for petty theft or using a supposed out of town business meet for a mini-vacation. There were dozens of people he’d ratted out to the head office for various infractions.

Since Eddie hadn’t found any local charges on Lawrence Dailey’s credit card accounts, Adam decided to do a local sweep of the surrounding area in wolf form. He sent Mack out to recheck the hotels and motels.

All the womenfolk and children were again confined to the premises.

Karen had other plans. Adam could ream her out later. Heck, Brandon would get to her first and Adam would gnaw the rest of her hide.

The door to Bailey’s room hit the opposite wall. Her friend jumped and stood ready in a basic self defense stance that reminded her of Mark’s years in karate.

She didn't know what belt level he was at, but the theory was that the discipline would carry over into his normal life. If that was the case, then they would have been hunting Mark as a rogue werewolf years ago without the training.

"We need to talk."

Bailey blinked behind her glasses. She narrowed her eyes and put her fists on her hips.

"Talk about what? My locked door? About keeping me prisoner with only Hyper Jerk for company?"

Bailey was in rare form. She was on a tear, counting off her grievances on her fingers as she marched across the room to face Karen.

"How about making me drink blood? Locking me in? That bears repeating twice."

"Lawrence has Rice. He's gone completely looney."

Bailey gasped. She took a breath. Fear and contrition warred on her features. Then anger.

"That ass. He kidnapped a child?"

"That child could probably eat him for breakfast if he's not careful."

Bailey hesitated. She pulled her glasses off and fidgeted with the arms.

"Do you think he knows what ...? That Rice is a ...?" Confusion filled Bailey's features. "He is a"

"Wolven," Karen supplied and nodded. "Yes, Rice is one of them. He's too young to Change yet though."

"Oh. I was going to say"

"Werewolf? Monster?" Karen gave her friend a sardonic smile. "Be glad you didn't."

"Wolven? Werewolf? There's a difference?"

"Yes, there's a big difference. Right now they're out hunting Lawrence down like a rogue werewolf."

Karen's laugh was dry.

"Werewolves are the crazies. Wolven are your everyday law-abiding citizen."

"O-kay."

"I want you to Find Lawrence."

Karen waited while Bailey debated. She didn't mention that Lawrence had tried to kill them both. It was one thing to warn Karen about the community trying to off her. It was another thing entirely to hand over another psychic to a pack of wolven to be eaten alive.

It wouldn't reassure Bailey to know that they probably wouldn't eat Lawrence. The eating of two-legged life forms was considered barbaric by most supernaturals. Not vile or cannibalistic, just really gross. So Karen kept that tidbit to herself.

"They're not going to eat my cousin, right?"

"Bailey."

She gave her best alpha female impersonation and stared down at her friend.

"Lawrence Dailey tried to kill me twice, you once, and has a nine-year-old child in his grasp. How would the psychic community react if the roles were reversed?"

"We'd hunt him down and burn him at the stake. I'm in."

At Karen's surprise, Bailey shrugged and explained.
"We only started the old witch trials in self-defense."

* * * *

Rice curled up in the corner of the sturdy dog kennel and fought the urge to whimper. He wrapped his arms around his stomach and rocked back and forth. He tried not to look too hard at the shadows in the corners of the rooms. He wasn't a baby. Before, when he had had to dig in dumpsters for something to eat, the dark and the rats had never bothered him.

He hated being weak almost as much as he hated being trapped. Also his head hurt from the drug in the dart that the man had shot him with. He'd already puked his guts up in the corner.

The rocking didn't help his cramping stomach, but reminded him of Diana's silly chore of tucking him in at night. Adam didn't make him eat scraps either. The alpha let him win at play wrestling sometimes.

Rice wiped at his watery eyes.

It was all stupid, missing something you'd never had before.

If he could Change he would, and then the man would be sorry. Rice decided he'd bite the asshole when he got the chance, even if he didn't have any fangs. But then he might get rabies or something.

The man's eyes were freaky. Brandon had eyes like the wolves Rice had seen in a zoo once. Even the mean old alpha he'd run away from didn't have eyes like the man who'd captured him. What Rice saw in the man's eyes was worse than crazy and it scared him to the bone.

The door to the small room banged open and the sick man walked in. He smelled *wrong*. Soap and aftershave couldn't cover up the nasty smell of his sickness. It was a scent that was part of his blood, part of what the man was.

Adam said that there was no helping a thing with bad blood. It had to be put down or everyone suffered.

"Wake up, monster."

The man had a wooden baseball bat. He swung and he beat on the metal cage until sweat ran down his red face. The man watched him the whole time, laughing each time the bat made contact with the cage and Rice jumped.

The boy put his arms over his head. He wouldn't cry. He wouldn't.

"I said wake up, Monster!"

Rice looked up and the crazy man laughed again. The man stopped and silence filled the room.

The cage was bolted in the center of the room. Little pieces of foam were stapled to the bare plywood floor. At the base of the walls, shreds of old green carpet remained. A single piece of wood covered the window and the fastest means of escape.

If Rice could get out of the cage.

The man began a slow circle around the cage, inspecting his captive. Rice stayed as close to the center as possible.

"How old are you, Monster?"

"Nine."

“Pretty scrawny for a nine-year-old.”

Rice lifted his chin. His hands clenched into fists at his side. Adam said that wolveren were at the top of the supernatural food chain. That he should be proud of his heritage.

“I’m big enough.”

The man laughed his freaky laugh again and hit the bars with the bat. A big splinter chipped off and flew in the cage with Rice.

“You’re not big enough to do fuck with.”

Rice froze. He had good ears. He’d heard about men who liked to do boys instead of women.

“What’s your name, Monster?”

Rice stayed frozen.

“Name! What is your name?”

The crazy man beat on the bars until Rice went to his knees and hid under his arms. When the noise stopped and Rice looked up, the man was behind him. He turned to keep the man in sight. The guy stared back at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. I don’t screw kids.” The man grinned as if he had a fun thought. “But you’re just a monster. Ha ha.”

The man dropped the mangled bat outside the door and left. His off-key whistling trailed off.

Rice started shaking. He didn’t stop even when he wrapped his arms around himself and pretended it was Diana.

Chapter Fifteen

Karen, Diana, and Seth followed Bailey through the yard and into the woods. The Finder explained that she wasn't going to Find Lawrence Dailey since he could Hide. She'd Find Rice, like she had Karen.

Apparently, a Finder was like a lodestone. Once she homed in on something, the fastest way to it was the direct way. In Karen's case, Bailey had had to consult maps and stay in the general course direction.

The plan was for Diana to call the males from their own hunt for Rice once they were close. Calling was something either magical or psychic the pack alphas could do to draw, no demand, their pack to come to them.

Adam had stated on more than one occasion that psychic gifts were the same as magic. The difference was in the way it was used.

"Do you really think this is wise?" Ember asked from her perch on Seth's shoulder where she would have the smoothest ride.

Karen had been actively trying to forget the brownie's presence. Bailey was fascinated by the brownie's existence. Karen told her she could have the house brownie, and then Ember spoiled the fantasy by announcing that only Brandon could pass her on.

Karen would *love* to find out how that worked and move on it. Fast.

"Wise?" Diana snorted. "This is the most unwise thing we've done. It's guaranteed to tick off Adam completely."

"But we're not about to leave Rice in the hands of a monster."

Karen finished her mother's thought while waiting for her turn to scramble over a fallen tree whose girth came to her hips. Bailey huffed on the other side. Diana sat and swung her jeans covered legs over one at a time, taking a moment to check that her tennis shoes were still double knotted.

"What?" Diana asked. "You wouldn't be looking at someone like that if you ever caught a shoestring on a log during a hunt."

"You hunt? With the wolveren?" Ember's high voice rose in awe.

"Ah, no. And don't you dare smirk, Seth."

None of them, the females not lucky enough to catch a ride, paid much attention to the foliage except to knock limbs aside or stomp vines down underfoot.

Neither Karen or her mother were big on camping. Bailey, she suspected had never been in anything wilder than the City Park. Seth, of course was at home in the woods and Ember the brownie was probably as attuned to nature. Most supernaturals were.

"It was just a game, Mom."

Diana had found out about the wolveren pack one night after becoming prey. The wolveren, all teens at that time, ran off the wercoyotes hunting her and started a game of their own. Diana and Adam had met that night. Her mom still called him her furry knight

in tight sweatpants.

“Some game. Ha ha. You furballs ran me into the ground.”

Diana grumbled and huffed over the rough terrain. She slapped away Seth’s dark outstretched hand.

“We’ve always loved you, Mom.”

Seth’s soft statement made Diana stop her complaining. She gave her adopted son a melting smile full of love. The guys Adam rescued from the old alpha, Garrick, had idolized Diana as the perfect mother long before she knew what they were.

Move over Mrs. Cleaver.

Karen laughed.

“Geesh, Mom. You’ve got them right where they want you.”

“Don’t you start.”

Bailey stopped so suddenly that Karen bumped into her.

“We’re there.” Bailey was wheezing so hard that Karen nearly missed what she said.

“Oh, God in Heaven,” Bailey panted. “Let me live through this and I swear I’ll join the gym. I’ll workout three times a week and give up Spaghetti O’s.”

“Don’t worry Miz Bailey. We’ll protect you.” Seth’s young handsome features were set.

Not a stray leaf or twig was caught in the short black carpet of his hair. No sweat shone on the smooth cocoa of his face. His shirt looked as clean as when he put it on. Of all of them, he was actually competent in the woods.

This time Karen didn’t hate the wolver for it.

“Oh, Gaia. He spoke.” Ember dropped from Seth’s shirt into the leaves without a sound. “I’ll go check out the local gossip.”

“She speaks to animals,” Seth sidled closer and explained to Bailey. It was news to Karen, too, but she kept quiet. It was kind of cute to watch her brother take a shine to a female.

“Seth, find a spot and Change.” Diana frowned at the exchange. “We’ll keep you as backup.”

“But, Mom.”

“Change!” Diana’s cold tone brooked no argument.

Seth slunk into the brush as best as a six foot tall teenage wolver could. Silent as he was, it still looked awkward and embarrassing. He was after all, about to strip just a few feet away from a group of females.

Diana’s cold tone invaded her eyes. For the first time Karen saw it directed toward Bailey.

“Keep downwind from him. He’s only seventeen.”

Oh. Karen’s eyes widened with surprise. Bailey looked pretty surprised too.

Karen reminded herself to have another talk to her friend when all this was over.

“Right,” Karen stepped past both women in the direction Ember had gone. “Let’s get this Goober.”

* * * *

A few yards away, the woods valiantly succeeded in reclaiming a small yard

carved out to accommodate a run down double wide mobile home. It had faded hardboard siding the color of washed out blood and a curled shingle roof.

Karen imagined that the missing pieces of underpinning made a nice shady retreat for all kinds of critters.

A shiny gray car sat in the driveway. Actually, it was a rutted path that led into more trees and presumably to a road.

“I don’t like this. I’m calling the pack.”

Diana and Karen huddled on either side of Bailey. Karen didn’t like it either. Seth woofed beside her.

“Okay. It doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere. I’m going to find Ember. She’s been gone too long.”

Diana glanced at her daughter. Karen shrugged. She wasn’t worried about the brownie. This was a case of keeping your friends close and your enemies closer.

Karen walked far enough away from the perimeter of the backyard to stay out of sight.

The loud banging noise from the mobile home went on forever. Her blood ran cold.

What if Rice was on the receiving end of that?

She started for the mobile home.

“Human!” Ember stood on a slim dogwood branch near Karen’s head. “Do not move too hastily. That is not the sound of flesh being hit. It is wood and metal.”

“And you know that, how?”

Ember didn’t bother to answer.

Which was fine. Karen didn’t care to speculate on how the brownie could tell the fine nuances of how a beating sounded.

“Wait for your pack, human. What good are any of you besides the wolf pup? This man is dangerous.”

The banging started up again and Karen listened for the difference. She thought she detected a slight clanging sound. She prayed Ember was right.

The back door opened and Lawrence Dailey was outlined in the doorway. His expensive slacks and polo shirt were wrinkled. His hair was mussed.

He unzipped his fly and pulled out his member to pee. Lawrence stretched in pleasure as he emptied his bladder. A couple of shakes and he tucked his Johnson away. He turned, scratched his butt and shut the door behind him.

“Wow. That’s big for a human.”

Karen sniggered at the brownie’s awe.

“You know the phrase, ‘It’s not what you have, it’s what you do with it’?”

Ember seemed to consider her words. She shook her fine red hair into a bloody halo.

“The proverb has a ring of truth to it.”

“Yeah, well Lawrence humps like a drunk camel.”

Ember crossed her eyes and snorted a laugh.

* * * *

The crazy man came back into the room and stared at Rice. A shiver of danger

went up his back. Rice could smell the sour scent of his own fear. His stomach cramped bad and his shoulder where the dart got him burned like fire.

“Get up, Monster.”

Rice shook his head.

“Get up! It’s time to pay up.”

The man pulled a key ring from his pocket and unlocked the door. Rice stood up and watched.

Now if only he could get past the man.

The man laughed at him and slipped inside the cage. This time he held a knife in the other hand. Rice smelled silver.

“You’re not going anywhere yet, Monster.” The man leered at him. “Let’s play a game.”

“No!”

Rice rushed the crazy. He didn’t care how bad he hurt, or that the silver knife might kill him. He wanted to be free. Now.

The knife came down like a hot brand over his shoulder. Rice found meaty flesh and sank his teeth deep. The man screamed and tore free. Rice hung on and bit him again.

* * * *

Karen, Diana, and Bailey all ran for the house when the first scream sounded. Karen ran for broke for the back door and wrenched it open.

“Rice!” Diana yelled from the front door as Karen climbed into the small hallway facing a washing machine and dryer. She ran toward the noise coming from an open doorway and nearly barreled over the boy.

“Aahhhh! I’ll skin you alive, Monster!”

Lawrence appeared in the doorway, hunched over and holding his left arm. Karen snatched up a battered baseball bat that rolled into the hallway.

“This is for trying to kill me!”

She swung the bat and connected with his shoulder.

“Owww!” Lawrence howled.

“This is for my little brother!”

She swung the bat and cracked the side of his head. Blood flew from the hit. Lawrence collapsed at her feet.

She raised the bat in case he moved again. A long moment passed while she waited for him to twitch.

When he didn’t, Karen sucked in a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding and lowered the bat.

“Remind me never to tick you off,” Bailey commented from behind her.

Vague noises of Diana fussing as she began to check over her lost pup filtered into Karen’s hearing.

“Hey, didn’t you say you were going to call the others?”

Bailey’s question to Diana triggered the connection Karen had with Brandon. He was coming.

Through the link, pure animal instinct washed over her, drowning her in his fury. She gasped and dropped the bat. Overwhelmed, she leaned against the wall, the other

women's concern was a minor distraction. Bailey's voice was a warble in the background.

"Karen? Are you alright?"

Yes. No. She shook her head. Maybe.

He was coming for her and God help the idiot who got in his way.

* * * *

The pack hunted and lived as a unit. That is what separated them from the inferior weres. Brandon the wolf ran with his brothers.

For the first time in his life, he felt almost whole. The wolves scented and called out to one another periodically. So far there was no trace of the missing pup.

He was beginning to have doubts about the decision to leave the stray psychic friend of Karen's out of the pack's business of dealing with Lawrence Dailey.

Adam didn't want to put the female in the position of betraying her own kind. Even if she had gone out of her way to help Karen, none of them were certain of the female's loyalties. She did share blood relations with Dailey.

Ahead, the huge silver-and-cream wolf lifted his muzzle and howled for the pack's attention. Scattered around and through the woods surrounding Packhome, the other packmembers answered.

Brandon looked to the west and cocked his ears. First forward then back. He tested the air, seeking a clue as to what sought his attention.

He was so caught up in his curiosity that he jumped at the soft wuff near his hindquarters. The alpha wolf walked abreast of him and scanned the direction that caused his inattention.

Brandon the wolf lowered his head and whined. He wouldn't abase himself like that to any of the other wolves.

He held a tight leash on the beast's nature but he still felt everything so much keener when the beast was out, including the overwhelming love and desire to please his alphas.

The huge pale wolf gave him an encouraging lick on the ear and he went back to studying the west. He felt the pull to go. Trouble was building.

He concentrated, not noticing the thin growl that rumbled in his chest.

Brandon the wolf darted into the woods. He didn't heed his alpha's bark.

This was more than pleasing the pack's leaders. This was his *mate*.

She was not safe. She was not where he had left her.

His instincts and the mate-bond told him to hurry. Nearly twenty years of acquaintance told him that Karen had gone on her own Hunt.

Fear for her safety bred fury as he ran. Wolven had incredible stamina. He could run at top speed for miles before he had to slow down to a lope for a breather.

He was so intent on running, envisioning what he would do to the human male if he so much as breathed near her, that he barely recognized the Call.

Diana's beacon acted like a homing signal.

Brandon pulled on his reserves and ran faster. Instinct and pack awareness told him he didn't run alone, and his alpha was just as pissed as he was.

* * * *

Lawrence returned to the world in a haze of pain. The pounding in his temples vibrated through his body. Either acid or flames gnawed up his arm in agonizing waves. He couldn't move his arms or legs and began to thrash.

A sound penetrated the pain and fear. Lawrence realized that the haze was more than pain. His eyesight blurred out of focus on the dark four-legged animal standing over him. Sharp needles of pain stabbed the sensitive orbs in his head.

"Back up, Seth. He looks sick."

Lawrence recognized the bitch's voice as another wave of pain climbed up his arm and pushed past his shoulder. He tried to curse her but the words were torn from his body with a scream. He barely noticed the black wolf growl and snap at him.

"I can always Find him again. Maybe we should untie him."

Lawrence wanted to rip out the throat of the traitorous cow he called cousin.

"Gut 'im and let him play in his own intestines."

The monster child's words fed the need inside him to destroy.

The pain spread in spasms throughout Lawrence's body. He struggled.

"Oh. My. God. He's Changing."

And when I get free, you're going to die.

The pain in his body eclipsed everything else.

He had to escape. The pain. His bonds.

With a roar of triumph the werewolf scrambled to his feet and howled his fury.

"Everyone out," Diana ordered.

Chapter Sixteen

Karen herded a wide-eyed Bailey to the door before her mother gave the order. Lawrence alternately writhed, whined, and grunted on the floor inside the metal cage.

They'd tied him up with a roll of packing tape found in his rental car. They'd dragged Lawrence inside the cage and locked it after deciding he'd live from Karen's homerun hit against the side of his head.

She didn't want to think about *that* move for fear of losing her lunch. She was already apprehensive about facing both Brandon and Adam. The weird thing was, she was more nervous about her boyfriend, ah ... mate, than her stepfather.

Outside, they looked around for the best course of action while the noise inside the house escalated.

"What's happening to him?"

Bailey stared back at the mobile home and had to be dragged off the porch.

"He's changing into a werewolf."

Karen wasn't going to dignify what Lawrence Dailey was with the term wolver. She had a sinking thought. If Lawrence survived the Change, there was going to be one ticked werewolf after them.

"Did anyone think to check his pockets for the keys to the car?"

The women stared at one another a full second before running for the gray sedan. It was locked.

"No! no, no, no!" Diana and Karen beat on the driver's side window.

"What's this made of? Kevlar?"

The metal cage rattled and snapped. A roar of triumph echoed through the little yard.

Rice reached up and punched the passenger side door and jumped inside. The boy climbed into the driver's seat and pushed the buttons on the power locks. He ripped the cover off of the steering column and began pulling pieces out. Seth began to yap, a fast hurry up.

Glass exploded outward as the werewolf jumped through the living room window and onto the porch. Unused to his new body, he slid across the porch and through the railing. The car started.

"Oh, fuck."

Karen silently agreed with Bailey. Diana was so busy urging Rice to hit the gas that she didn't care to correct Bailey's language.

The werewolf was seven-and-a-half-feet of pure muscle that Lawrence Dailey had never had as a human. The same light brown hair that covered Lawrence's human head furred his body from the tips of his pointed ears and the muzzle of sharp predatory teeth, to the huge furry claw tipped feet sticking out of his shredded slacks.

The werewolf threw his head back and howled. Karen knew that sound.

He was Hunting.

The car sprayed rock as they turned in the driveway.

“Oh, my God! He’s chasing the car!”

He bounded after them and leapt. Bailey screamed. The awful sound of werewolf nails grating against the car was worse than Seth’s barking and mad scramble of black fur from the front seat to the back.

Karen ducked into the floorboard and searched under a bunch of small mailing boxes. She found a long blue-and-white umbrella. The kind that didn’t collapse.

Seth lunged through the back window. Safety glass rained in on the women while the wolf barreled into the werewolf hanging on to the trunk. His sharp teeth found the creature’s shoulder and he sunk them deep.

Lawrence the werewolf howled and clawed at Seth. He shook the wolf from side to side. Ferocious growls mixed with the scrape of nails over metal.

Seth cried out when a hard swipe of the werewolf’s powerful claw sent him flying to the ground. He hit the ground with a thump with a yelp.

“Seth!” Karen tore her gaze from the still pile of black fur to focus on Lawrence.

The werewolf climbed up the trunk, unhindered by the bloody shoulder wound. His wide canine head stuck through the window. The werewolf’s eyes lit with the with the hunger of the newly Changed and Lawrence’s own insanity.

Karen jabbed at him with the umbrella.

He sniffed the air, homing in on Bailey cringing as far away from the werewolf as the back seat would allow. Lawrence’s tongue caressed over his sharp teeth showed in a wide demonic grin.

“Ohhh Vailey, you thell sooo good.”

The lisping werewolf had to hold tight as Rice fishtailed the car. Lawrence’s new senses focused on Bailey’s pheromone laden scent so that nothing else mattered.

The psychic grabbed boxes and chucked them at the werewolf. He ignored the small irritation, intent on the scents of frightened prey and Bailey. Karen jammed the point at him. At the second jab, he jerked the umbrella from her grasp and threw it behind him.

“Vailey, Vailey, Vailey,” the werewolf crooned.

Everyone slammed to the side as they wove back and forth on the road.

“Voth uv you will ve thorry.”

Lawrence rolled with the car movement. Grabbing Bailey and Karen by their flailing arms, he threw himself backward off the back of the car. Both women were pulled through the window with him.

The werewolf dropped the stunned and breathless women.

Heightened senses registered Seth’s attack. He spun, roared and grabbed the wolf midleap.

Karen thought she heard a crack, the sound of bone, then Lawrence flung Seth a hundred yards into the trees. The trunk of a wide oak stopped his flight and he fell, a crumpled heap at the base.

Lawrence turned back to the women.

Growling laughter sent chills down Karen’s spine.

Caressing a palm over the humongous bulge of his erection through the strained slack's fabric, Lawrence laughed again. His long, sharp claws made the action more horrific, more perverse.

"Wait here, Vailey. I want you."

Karen found her breath and jumped to her feet. She had to distract him.

"Gross. More camel-humping."

Lawrence growled at the insult. She hoped to draw his attention long enough for Bailey to get away. Her friend would have enough nightmares when this was over without being raped by a werewolf.

She dodged a plate sized hand and claw that could take her head off.

Was that the car turning around?

The werewolf turned his nose back in Bailey's direction.

"Gee, Larry you suck at assassination."

She remembered he hated the nickname. He snarled at her and flexed his claws.

"You die now, Vitch."

"Not today, Jerkoff."

Karen jumped out of the way as wolves barreled out of the trees and into the werewolf. Several Changed and then there were five wolveren ready to duel.

Lawrence rushed the giant silvery wolveren in full dueling mode. Adam slapped the attack aside with an open clawed fist that left gaping red tears in the werewolf's shoulder and chest.

"Back off," Adam instructed the pack and stood back himself. He gestured at one of the other wolveren males.

Dark brown fur covered the male's lethal body. The wolveren glided into the makeshift dueling circle made up by the pack.

Like the rest of the pack, his fur only covered his body in the same growth pattern it would a wolf or dog. A heavy ruff and coat protected their necks and backs from biting attacks, but thinned over their chests, bellies, and groin areas.

Everything on them was super-sized. There were no Hollywood neuter-gender wolveren.

Behind Karen the car door slammed. She helped Bailey to her feet, fielding the woman's confused questions.

"What's going on?"

"Adam passed the duel off to one of the other wolveren."

"Who? *Why?*"

"Brandon," she whispered and reached out to clutch anyone, anything. Both Bailey and her mom grabbed a hand.

Why? Because wolveren males were he-man chauvinists who could back up their crap with muscle and Brandon had a right to defend his mate.

Lawrence looked dazed for a moment, waiting for the attack from all sides. When it didn't come, he lunged for the nearest opponent. Brandon.

Brandon ducked and raked his claws down Lawrence's belly, leaving bloody furrows. The werewolf chomped down on Brandon's shoulder and worried at it like a dog. Karen tried not to whimper. The thick ruff around their necks would protect them

from the worst of neck attacks.

The duelists grappled. Sharp claws, designed for rending and tearing did the job well. Blood flowed freely in rivulets down both combatants bodies and dripped into the ground. Bloody chunks of fur joined the blood.

Lawrence had the adrenaline of his first change to power his attacks. It began to wane and his clumsy swipes and snaps were blocked by Brandon. The wolverine was fueled by territorial fury as he methodically slashed at major vein areas and bit chunks of flesh out of the werewolf's forearms.

"I think I'm going to be sick." Bailey turned around. Her hands covered her mouth.

Karen didn't dare take her eyes from the fight until Lawrence fell to all fours and curled into a fetal huddle.

She looked away, swallowing hard at the awful wet crunching sounds that followed. Her stomach churned at the violence of it.

Bailey was sick and only made a couple of steps before she doubled over and retched. Karen just stared. She felt detached from the events, not at all sorry for the bastard.

It was Diana who put a comforting arm around Bailey's shoulders and helped her stand again. A chance, morbid look assured her that the pack had pulled the remains out of sight

A warm body leaned against her. A small hand grasped hers. Karen looked down and squeezed Rice's hand.

"I wish I could've fought him." His voice was low, unhappy.

"You did." Karen's attention was drawn to the feral creature approaching her.

The dark fur over Brandon's body flowed backward like water. His muzzle pulled inward into human features. The extra bulk of the man/wolf dueling form went back into whatever magical place it was stored until called.

Only his eyes and the canines filling his mouth kept Brandon from looking fully human. The blood coating his naked body made him look less than sane.

Thank God that the change to another form healed all but serious wounds.

Karen could actually feel the fury that roiled inside him. Rice pressed closer to her side.

Brandon didn't seem to notice the boy at her side.

He snarled.

"What the hell do you think you were doing, woman?"

Karen blinked, suddenly irked. Rice pulled out of her grasp and slunk away in the direction of Adam as they tended to Seth. Brandon reached out, grasped her by one arm and dragged her against him.

"Excuse me?"

Karen looked up at the untamed visage staring down at her. Part of her realized that he'd been building up to this caveman routine all along.

The cowed and frightened youth was replaced by a very competent and dangerous wolverine male. He'd guard the pack well if Adam made him one of the wardens.

"You were supposed to stay at Packhome."

Shining white fangs flashed while he growled the words out. His eyes gleamed red and the blood of his enemy was drying dark on his body. Half-healed bites and gouges marred the perfection of his body.

He didn't scare her. She still didn't care for the attitude. Karen jerked back. She glared up at him. They were causing a scene and she didn't care about that either. Still connected to him, the dark emotions roiling inside him touched off her own insecurities.

"You expect me to stay there just because you say so Tarzan? Ha! I make my own decisions."

His eyes narrowed. His hands fisted at his sides and Karen felt the connection between them break off. He leaned in face to face.

"I expect for you to take better care of my sons than throwing yourself in front of a homicidal werewolf."

"Don't be a jerk. You act like I'm already pregnant."

Brandon took his time straightening and folding his arms over his bare chest to look down at her.

Her breath caught at the blank face he presented.

He raised one dark eyebrow over his now human eyes. No fangs peaked through. He sounded almost bored when he finally spoke.

"Why do you think it's called the Breeding Time?"

With that Brandon turned around and strode into the trees. Karen was too stunned to do more than stare at his first class butt.

She blinked and looked around at everyone. The women stared. Bailey's pale face was wide-eyed with shock. Her mother's face lit with dawning joy.

It couldn't be true. Not so quickly.

None of the males met her gaze directly. The dogs.

Her shock gave way to more less sure emotions. A baby was a great thought in theory. But reality was a different matter entirely.

She wasn't mother material. Mothers were supposed to have it all together, be serene and supportive. Look at all the times she'd screwed up.

Karen focused on her stepfather.

"I'm pregnant?"

Adam's pale skin pinked from his scalp to down his neck. A red smear of blood on his collar bone was a boundary she didn't cross.

Wolven weren't bothered by casual nudity and she'd learned early on that if she let it bother her it would drive away her best friends.

"Why didn't you guys tell me?"

Chase, still in his huge furry form, backed away from her approach. His vicious looking claws were spread wide.

Awww. Come on darlin'. Gimme a break. I don't talk to no female about making babies."

"Not my business." Bradley was quick to point out.

"Too busy studying. Adam'll kick my butt if I don't make good grades in college." Rick cut his eyes over to Bailey and grinned. "Hey, sweetheart. Need a ride out of here?"

Mark growled and stepped in front of Bailey, ending the drama over Karen's pregnancy. All seven-feet of yellow blond territorial wolveren snarled down at his packbrother. Mark's ears were pinned back to his head.

"Back off. Touch her and I'll rip your throat out."

Bailey moved away from the two wolveren. Her horrified and hunted expression saying clearly that the supernatural weirdness was too much for her to accept.

Mark wouldn't kill his best friend over a female going into heat.

Hurt, yes. Kill no.

Karen didn't think that Bailey would find that piece of wolveren psychology very reassuring.

Even in human form Mark was a head taller than the Hispanic-looking male. Rick snorted a laugh and danced back to the trees.

"I'm backin', bro. But you better watch out that your tasty chica don't run off."

To wolveren, human ethnicity was no different than hair color. Rick sometimes played at being human. He could speak fluid Spanish and had accepted much of the Hispanic culture into his life. Though, he eventually dropped the accent he'd adapted to fit in through school.

Diana came to the rescue and steered Bailey away from Mark's unwanted attention.

"Enough. Rice, Bailey, Karen. Get in the car. The guys can clean up here."

Adam stopped his wife with a touch. Without offense, he accepted Bailey's flinch and rapid retreat to stand beside the car. Understanding filled his pale blue eyes. He had, after all, changed from wolf, to monster, to big naked man in front of her.

Watching her mom and stepfather gaze into one another's eyes with love and dedication made Karen ache with longing.

Under the collective gazes of the pack, Adam skimmed both his eyes and his hands over his mate to be double sure of her well being. Love shone through every possessive movement and Diana's allowance of it.

From her feet, he rose, pulling his mate into his embrace. Adam's fingers threaded through her short dark cap of hair. Then they kissed.

It was beautiful and full of heat. No one would question that they were meant for one another. The alphas parted with the hazy mix of love and desire.

With a teasing grin, Adam nudged Diana in the direction of the car, giving her a smack on the butt to get her moving.

She did, with a saucy smirk and an extra twitch of her hips.

"Rice!"

"Sir?" The boy skidded to a halt and squeaked.

"Keep an eye on your mom. You wouldn't believe the trouble women get into on their own."

Diana sputtered, shooting her husband a glare as if she would grow teeth and claws of her own. Which was impossible, of course. One had to be born a female wolveren to Change.

Karen had heard Tank mention that it had something to do with hormone levels.

"But she's not my"

“You arguing with me, son?”

Rice shook his head. His eyes were wide and he heaved a breath before darting to the beat-up rental car. The wolveren would dispose of the evidence later.

Karen started to join Bailey in the back seat when Adam’s light touch stopped her. She looked up into her stepfather’s strange husky blue and black ringed eyes. Platinum blond hair that still startled her with the short length framed his chiseled features.

“Give him time to adjust. He doesn’t take change very well.”

She wanted to ask what Brandon needed to adjust to.

Her? Being a father? No, Brandon would make a stellar dad.

Having to settle for her as a mate? Running away all these years hadn’t proven her to be the kind of reliable, stable woman he needed.

Karen didn’t have any answers. She nodded and climbed in the back seat. She’d held things up enough that the guys wouldn’t get home until well after dark. They’d make sure no sign of their presence remained in this place.

“One kiss is all you get,” Diana snapped at her husband who’d moved to her window. “I’m still ticked that you didn’t tell me I was going to be a Grandma.”

He gave her mom a guilty little boy look.

“I thought you might give up trying for a baby if you heard.”

Her mom and Adam wanted a baby? Karen was stunned. She shared a look with Rice before the boy scooted closer to Diana and leaned over to get Adam’s attention.

“What about me?”

Adam reached in to ruffle the boy’s hair.

“What about you? Oh, yeah. Remind me to call my brother, Dom, and see if that judge has signed the adoption papers yet.”

“Adoption? Me? I’m gonna be adopted?”

Diana laughed at the byplay.

“Actually, Rice, it’s probably already a done deal. Now get buckled up.”

She turned her attention back to her husband.

“Get moving, Fido. I want you home at a decent hour.”

Karen felt drained. She slouched back in the seat, fending off Rice’s questions. The kid had turned into a chatterbox.

On the other side of the backseat, Bailey had withdrawn into silence. The plump psychic stared out the window at the bloody disturbed path of dirt that marked Lawrence’s temporary resting place.

“Bailey”

Karen’s tentative touch was shrugged off. She tried again and met the turmoil in Bailey’s eyes.

“Don’t.” Bailey shook her wild tangle of brown curls. Tears glittered behind her glasses. “He was my *cousin*. My aunt’s only child. I can’t tell them ... anything. I can’t even go home.”

Bailey turned back to the window, drawing her quiet misery into a fortress around her.

Karen let her friend alone. She didn’t have it in her to draw Bailey out or allay her

fears.

Karen had problems enough of her own.

“Did you really mean it when you called me your little brother?”

Rice had twisted around in the seatbelt. His chin rested on the headrest, dark eyes fixed on her with serious intent. He reminded her a little of Mark’s acting out at that age.

The tiredness receded a bit and she smiled at him.

“If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck”

“Did you call me a duck?”

“Do you waddle around and quack at the full moon?”

Rice whipped around to Diana, outrage filling his young face.

“*Mom!* She called me a were-duck!”

Rice would come out of this escapade okay.

Diana’s satisfied smile met hers in the rearview mirror. It was going to be fun playing big sister to the kid.

“Karen, don’t pick on your brother. Rice, turn around and sit in the seat.”

“Hey!” Rice’s excitement was loud. “I’m going to have to change my name. I can’t go around being called Rice Weis.”

* * * *

Karen sat in the den and sniffled over an old movie. She’d never considered herself to be the sniveling sort before. But that was before she’d been stuck at Packhome literally barefoot and pregnant.

She’d sat down for a minute when the movie started and now she was stuck in the deep leather cushions of the sofa. So she’d stayed and watched. Eddie had even brought her a bowl of popcorn.

Her feet were swollen to the point that she didn’t like wearing shoes at all. Her belly was swollen because she was six months pregnant with twins.

According to Adam and Tank, wolven had a two-month shorter gestation than humans. The babies had dropped low and everyone watched her like she was going to pop any day now. She certainly felt like it when the boys started wrestling inside her.

And Brandon, the dog, was gone on another architectural something-or-other trip out of town. When he was around, he was distant or working on the little house he and the guys were building in the spot where Karen had wanted to dig her garden.

She was officially hiding out in the main house because the paint fumes were still too strong for her to be in the new house.

She missed Brandon. All the neat furniture he’d made and put in it made her feel worse.

“Geez, you’re fat.” Mark eyed the huge mound that had become her middle with trepidation.

“As usual, your grasp of the obvious is astounding.”

Mark shrugged. He looked a little lost.

“What’s up? Because I know you’re not in here to watch Tim Hans go to the top of the Empire State Building to find the love of his life.”

Karen watched his gaze and snatched up the remote for safekeeping.

“Change the channel and I’ll neuter you.”

“You are an evil woman, Karen Ridley.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. Mark settled with stealing her popcorn. He didn’t even complain about the lack of butter or salt.

“Bailey ran off last night.”

Karen didn’t know what to say. She’d known Bailey was having a hard time adjusting. The alphas determined that the psychic female would be a good addition to their number. That made the rest of the pack insistent on Bailey staying.

Bailey’s nightmares about Lawrence’s Change and his intent to rape her once he’d killed Karen had made her wary. Bailey would have to set aside everything she’d been taught about supernaturals to accept pack life. It hadn’t helped that Karen was too caught up in her own miserable drama to be supportive of her friend.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” was all Karen could think to say. Mark obviously felt responsible for Bailey.

He glared at her and put the popcorn back in her nonexistent lap.

“She’s not my mate. There are plenty of other women out there. Besides, I’ve got a hot date tonight.”

Mark stomped out, leaving her alone again.

Good. She wasn’t in the mood for Mark’s strange mood swings or company in general.

Karen rubbed at one of the moving knobs on her belly as her babies fought for space inside her womb. She wished Brandon were here to rub her back, and then changed her mind.

He was so distant that sometimes it was like having a stranger touch her. They’d only made love a few times since Lawrence’s death. Either he was gone or he waited until she was asleep before he came to bed.

The only good thing was that Ember had not taken up residence in their new home. The annoying brownie still showed up to make her life more miserable, but only when Karen ventured outside.

“Easy there Sammy. You too, Shane. There is no more room for the wrestling match.”

* * * *

Brandon stood in the entrance to the den and watched his mate. Full and round with his babies inside her, she reclined on the sofa like a pagan goddess of fertility.

He’d wanted to tear into Mark for being close to his female, but stayed back rather than be the ass he’d become when Karen first came home.

Having finally found a place, he didn’t want to cause another rift between him and the pack. He also didn’t want Karen to look at him like he was the mongrel stray begging for scraps at the back door.

He’d used his time researching antique homes and making restoration bids to evaluate what he wanted out of life. He’d done pretty much the same when Adam and Mack had pushed him into joining the Army. His banishment gave him time to think without all of the distractions.

He liked the respect the pack gave him now. Adam had asked him to consider being a warden after the boys were born. The house was built so his family would be safe

on pack property. The only problem that he didn't know how to deal with was his relationship with Karen.

She was the only female he'd voluntarily gotten involved with. She was the only sexual encounter since becoming a full adult. His therapist would say he had issues about the abuse he'd endured as a child.

Brandon thought it over, mulling it over for several days. He decided it wasn't that he was afraid of a relationship. It was that the only relationship that he had ever wanted was with Karen.

His real fear was that she still thought he wasn't worthy of her, that she didn't want him. He could have found the answer through the mate-bond link. But that would mean looking past the barriers he'd put up long ago when he'd forged the blood-bond. It would mean exposing his soul for her inspection, him, the monster inside and all.

And so the gold ring he'd had special made was still tucked safe in the bottom of his bag. Out of sight. Like his heart.

Her soft curse brought Brandon back from his musing.

She rolled out of sight and he darted over the couch, afraid that she'd fallen. What he found brought him up short.

Karen was on her hands and knees picking up popcorn from the carpet. She looked so sexy, his woefully neglected cock stood up to say hello.

"Move it or loose it."

Brandon blinked at her growl. He had to work to keep the block on the link he'd developed with her and blank his emotions from his face.

"Damn it. I can't pick up this with you in the middle of it."

To Brandon's horror, his mate's anger turned to tears and she reached for the tissue box on the couch. His gut clenched at the sight of the pile of wadded tissues beside the box. He went to his knees and pulled her back against his chest.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry."

The clean scent of her drew him. He buried his nose against her neck. One arm went around the ball of her belly. His other hand drifted, touching what had been forbidden these past months.

"Please don't cry, Tigger. I'm sorry."

"You're a sorry dog." She sniffed and blew into the tissue. "You left me."

"I'm not a dog. I'm a wolf."

Karen started crying again.

Sorry dog that he was, he was hard and excited from her being next to him. Even with her crying, he didn't think he could let go.

"Tigger, Karen. I can't do this anymore." And he couldn't, either. He was about to start begging for her to let him in her life for good.

Karen froze. She nearly fell over by twisting around. She knew she was a mess. She was all puffy from water retention and crying. She probably had popcorn stuck to her.

Brandon's words struck her like a blow. He'd had enough of her. She knew she blew hot and cold sometimes. Her hormones had been all over the place since she'd come home.

Screw pride. She couldn't loose him now.

Karen grabbed the fabric of his button up shirt in her fists and pulled herself close enough to fling her arms around him. Her stomach got in the way of pressing too close. Then she made things worse by crying again.

"Please don't go."

Karen fought his attempt to peel her off him and failed.

Instead of getting up, he started wiping at her face with a tissue. He looked startled, like he didn't know what to say.

Karen took advantage by hanging on like a monkey. She wasn't going to let him go until he heard what she had to say.

She really hated these hormonal swings. Before she could take a shuddering breath to speak, or start bawling again, Brandon spoke.

"I don't want to go. I love you."

His guts spilled, Brandon wiped at the tears leaking out of her beautiful eyes. Okay, they were a little red and puffy, but still beautiful.

When she only sucked in a breath he decided to go for broke. He couldn't loose her now. He rested a palm on her damp cheek.

"I know I'm not the greatest catch for someone like you. I'm damaged goods. You knew that when we met."

Uh-oh. A storm started in her eyes and she drew back. He rushed on before she could interrupt. Savagely, he demolished the wall around his feelings. Baring himself through the mate-bond was the only way to prove himself.

"I love you, Tigger. From the first day you found me hiding in the dark, you were my light. My shining angel."

He brushed the back of one hand against her wet cheek. Emotion lowered his voice to a near whisper. "I always knew you were supposed to be mine."

She smacked him on the shoulder then rubbed the non-injury away. Her tears began to subside. Thank God.

Psychicly, the mate-bond drew them together, adding another dimension to the biblical phrase of *knowing one another*. The depth of his emotions awed her.

"You are *not* damaged goods."

There were dark places in him, yes. She'd always been aware of that. A person didn't go through the horrors of what he had and not have scars.

Karen wrapped her fingers around his. Through the mate-bond, she embraced that part of him that he tried so hard to deny and failed. The supernatural power and the wild instincts of the wolf were too much of what he was.

"You really do love me."

Brandon nodded and settled on the carpet. Popcorn crunched underneath.

She hesitated when he pulled her into his lap. For the first time she felt shy with him. She'd gotten pretty heavy with the twins.

He pulled her astride his lap anyway. His hands drifted over her in light touches. He reminded Karen of the concerned and possessive once-overs Adam gave Diana. The feel of Brandon's needs through the mate-bond coupled with his touch, comforted her. It also reminded her of her own needs, neglected these past months.

They'd done some pretty amazing things in the sack. She was carrying proof of that.

Karen smoothed the fabric of his light blue button up shirt into place. A loose thread marked where she'd pulled a button off in her haste to keep him from leaving. Ducking her head, she hid behind the fall of her hair.

"I missed you. I love you, too."

"Really?"

The soft insecurity in his voice told her she'd been remiss in not telling him sooner. He'd been a bossy jerk, but there was enough of the old Brandon still in him that he would try to protect himself if he thought she didn't feel the same way.

She should have realized that he'd try to give her space not to feel trapped.

"Yes, you furry dunce."

Brandon grinned and explored the contours of her body.

"You know, you've got a mouth like Mom. You have no respect for wolveren superiority."

"Ha! My mother didn't raise any fools."

"No, she didn't," he agreed. "Let's go fool around."

He urged her to her feet and pulled her in the direction of the back door. Karen laughed. She felt like a barge being towed into port.

"You know, we're going to have to clean that up."

"Yeah, I know Mom's rule about messes. You make it, you clean it up."

They got as far as the back porch. Karen felt an odd sensation low in her abdomen and stopped. Warm liquid ran down her legs, soaking her shorts, and pooled underneath her.

They stared at one another.

Karen watched the blood drain from Brandon's face. He carefully patted both of her shoulders.

"Baby, stay right here. *Don't move.* I'll be right back."

Karen watched her mate, the wolveren who'd faced down the frenzy of a newly turned werewolf, turn tail and run back in the house, bellowing.

"Tank! Dad! *MOM!* The babies are coming!"

She shook her head. Labor hadn't started yet. She felt wet and sticky.

Oh, yech.

She eased down the steps to walk across the yard to her own house where she could clean up and get ready to meet her sons.

Just past the pool house, his swearing caught up with her.

"Damn it, Woman! You were supposed to wait."

Karen smiled. She was through with waiting.

From now on, she was going to make sure she lived her life to the fullest.

Epilogue

Karen lounged beside the pool, inhaling the happy scents of an afternoon of barbecue, chlorine, and the apple juice Shane had spilled on her ten minutes ago.

Because of her swollen fingers, her one-of-a-kind emerald and gold leaf wedding ring set hung from a chain around her neck. The weight was comforting between her breasts, close to her heart. Like the man who'd given it to her on their wedding day two weeks after the twins birth. It had taken that long for her mother to organize the event.

Of course, Adam made the perfect father of the bride. No one was more surprised than Bradley to be asked to stand up for the groom. The brothers were handsome in matching tuxes, Brandon being the sexier of the twins.

Karen rubbed the ball of her stomach and waited for the irritating contraction to subside. She was thankful for the distraction of their busy family to keep Brandon busy.

Her husband's uncanny ability to home in on impending trouble to her or the boys was almost psychic. Karen had a theory that because of the mate-bond, some of the abilities he might have had if he'd been a psychic were manifesting. She'd come to rely on him as her own trouble barometer.

In the middle of the night he'd gotten up, checking their home, then the entire property for anything amiss. As expected, her labor had started by daylight as a dull grinding ache in her lower back.

Though, Brandon might not be reacting to the baby's birth at all. Her twin sons were small tornados of mischief waiting to happen. And the day wasn't over yet.

"Me, too! Daddy! Me, too!"

Sammy bounced on his short, two-year-old legs and prepared to jump into the pool after his brother.

"Hold on, Sport. I'll catch you."

"Uncle Braddy!"

Sammy jumped into his uncle's arms only to be tossed to Grampa. He squealed with delight and screamed when Adam blew a raspberry on his stomach before tossing him to his next 'uncle', Chase.

"How do you feel, sweetie?"

Karen looked over at her mother, bouncing four-month-old Susie on her shoulder, and smiled. With the longevity passed on with both sharing wolverine blood and the mate-bond, her mother was still a young woman in the supernatural community.

It was hard to believe that her daughter and her little sister would grow up together. Some human perceptions would never change.

"It's not too bad yet. I wanted to enjoy the day before he freaked out."

Diana snickered and nodded at the pool. Brandon passed his son off to his brother and swam to the edge.

"Freaked out about what?" His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Karen rubbed her belly and gave him wide innocent eyes. You just had to love that wolveren super hearing.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh,” he said right as her face tightened with another contraction.

Brandon paled and nearly lost his hold on the side of the pool.

“You’re in labor! And you didn’t tell me?” His voice rose several octaves.

“Woman, you haven’t seen freaked out yet.”

* * * *

Something felt off. Not right.

Every one of Brandon’s protective instincts stood at attention. This enemy wasn’t his to fight, though the consequences of failure would be his burden. He didn’t voice the feeling to the pack as they waited on his little porch and in his living room.

The echos of Adam’s worried pacing only made the hair on his nape stand up more. Diana’s hushed reassurances did nothing for the prickly sense of doom that had dogged him since he, Karen, and Tank had holed up in the bedroom hours ago.

The more tired she became, the less she threatened him.

“Karen, I want you to stop pushing between contractions.”

Tank’s steady even voice was at odds with the sheen of sweat on the pack doctor’s face and stress points.

“It didn’t take this long with the twins.” Brandon didn’t mean to speak the words out loud.

Tank looked up from his post at the end of the bed.

“Be patient. Every pregnancy and birth is different.”

Brandon had very little idea what went on at Tank’s end of Karen. Only that the baby was supposed to come out and the doctor would catch it. Tank was the authority on supernatural births. *Brandon* was supposed to stay up top and be cheerleader and punching bag.

Wolveren births were often difficult with a high infant mortality rate. So much so, that most wolveren didn’t speak of the baby’s existence until it arrived healthy. He’d been told how lucky they were that the twins’ birth had gone so easily.

“What’s wrong?” Karen gripped his hand with less intensity than expected.

Anxiety filled her eyes while she strained to see over the big mound of her belly. “Tank? The baby should be here by now. *Aggggh!*”

“Damn.” The curse was scary for being in Tank’s deep precise voice. The scent of blood became stronger. “Do not push.”

Her hand clenched tighter as she fought the contraction. Through the mate-bond, he could feel a shadow of the pain that took over his mate’s body.

Brandon controlled the frantic fear that scabbled inside him. He wanted to run to the end of the bed and force Tank to fix the problem.

“What is it?”

“The cervix has swelled. She will have to redilate. And yes, there is some bleeding.” Tank wiped his hands on a cloth, just barely in Brandon’s line of sight. The red stain of his mate’s blood put a sick feeling in his stomach.

“I need to push. It’s too much.”

Tank shook his head. Black braids and beads clicked together with the motion.

“No. If you push now, you’ll tear worse.”

“Give me drugs then. I need drugs.” Karen’s weak demand was impossible, but she didn’t seem to care. Her pain filled gaze turned back on him. “Brandon, I need drugs now.”

Tank’s hand on her knee kept Brandon from answering

“Karen, drugs would likely not help. You are sufficiently supernatural enough to gain immunity from the benefits. Also, there is the chance that the baby is not.”

The big wolverine physician crouched back down to check his end of things again, but his voice was reasonable enough to piss Brandon off.

The baby was not what? Supernatural? Brandon thoughts scattered with the onset of his mate’s next contraction.

“Don’t push. Remember, Tank said not to push.”

Karen shook her head. Sweat soaked strands stuck to her face and cheeks.

“Gotta push. *Nowww*”

She arched with the effort to keep her baby inside, slumping into a limp heap afterward.

Brandon glanced up as the door opened and Diana slipped inside. Silently, she moved to Tank’s side. A small knot of tension eased inside him that she’d remembered his request that Nikki not assist in his children’s births.

Brandon didn’t know why, but he didn’t trust his brother’s wife.

Too much was going wrong already.

The contraction rose and peaked. Karen’s body overrode her attempt to stop pushing. The next several moments were a blur as Tank announced the crowning of the baby’s head, then the shoulders. The quiet baby was handed off to Diana as the doctor turned back to Karen.

“One more push for the afterbirth.”

Karen whimpered, her eyelashes dark half circles against her pale, pale skin. Her body temperature felt alarmingly cool. Calm, sad acceptance filtered through the mate-bond.

“No! Stay with me.” He leaned down to her ear, his hand holding hers tight. “Don’t you dare leave me, Tigger.”

The rattle of equipment was background noise. But Tank’s voice was the instruction of God Almighty.

“She needs blood. Now.”

Brandon let go of his mate to change one hand into an arsenal of claws. The pain of slicing his own arm was nothing. Not with the prospect of losing his mate.

Careful not to jostle her and disrupt the doctor’s work, Brandon pressed the bleeding wound to her lips. When Karen wouldn’t swallow on her own, he massaged her neck into accepting his life-giving blood.

Bending close, he whispered into her ear.

“Stay with me Tigger. I love you. Don’t leave me.”

Brandon jumped at Diana’s touch on his shoulder. The big dark-skinned doctor stood behind her with a bundle. He hadn’t noticed that Tank had finished, covering

Karen's legs with a blanket.

"We are not done yet. Your daughter needs blood, as well."

Diana traded places with him at Karen's side. A last glance showed his mate, pale and asleep. Her life was a steady force through the mate-bond.

The tiny infant lay still in Tank's hands.

His sons had come into the world full of fight and energy. Her hold on life was tentative, as if she was still deciding whether to give them a chance or not.

Brandon brought his arm up. The wound was still leaking blood, but barely, as his wolveren metabolism repaired the damage.

"How do I ..."

"Give her little drops."

Brandon nodded, catching the rivulet onto his finger and bringing it to the baby's mouth. At first she didn't want to take the digit and he ended up swabbing the inside of her mouth.

His second attempt irritated the baby. She scrunched up her face and made a weak squeak.

"Blood of my blood."

He gave her another drop.

"Heart of my heart. Life of my life."

Her eyes opened and she stared blearily in his direction. The sense of impending doom eased.

Brandon wasn't aware of his small proud smile as he ran a finger down his newborn daughter's cheek.

"She knows me."

Diana's quiet laugh and grasp on his wrist brought him back to the present. With sure movements, she wrapped his arm.

"How could she not? Now let's get everyone cleaned up and comfortable."

* * *

Karen woke to humming in a dark room. She sought, bumping her hand around, and found her husband's ultra warm body in the dark. The humming stopped and she heard a protesting baby squeak.

"How do you feel?" Brandon's voice was soft. He moved closer to her.

"Better than I should, considering. How is she?"

"She's fine."

"She really okay?"

Brandon's smile was felt through the mate-bond, as was his lingering worry for her health.

"Tank pronounced her a healthy, human psychic."

"I thought wolveren genetics were dominant."

"Tank's technical assessment is magic." His lips pressed against hers, deepening into a hungry kiss. "You don't call that dominant?"

"Little Joline Diana Weis, meet your mom."

A warm, wriggling bundle settled in her arms and brought fresh tears to her eyes.

"Oh, Tigger. No more tears. I can't take it."

Karen reached out and found him. She drew him to her for another kiss. It was hot and managed to stir her even though she'd just given birth. With a bit more wolverine blood and a couple of days rest, she'd be ready to show him just how much better she felt.

“These are happy hormonal tears. Things are just the way they are supposed to be.”

The End