



# Reckless

TERRI PRAY

Loose Id

# RECKLESS

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# **Reckless**

## **Terri Pray**

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## **Foreword**

*Scars, Scratching Post, Reckless, and future shifter stories are all set in the same "universe." Although the stories are stand-alones, there are small things that interlink them. Characters who appear in one story might be mentioned in passing in another story, or have a walk-on part.*

## **Dedication**

*To my Sam, who has been known to bring my muse back on track, leading her in by the hair if need be.*

## Chapter One

The alarm rang out, breaking through Megan's dreams as the sound forced her awake and pushed the last images of her running through the forest into the background. She groaned and slapped the alarm. The first attempt failed. The second knocked the clock to the floor and yanked the power cable from the wall, which silenced the electronic protests.

She blinked and stared at the spot where the clock had been. Her mind refused to work at first, protesting at the time that glared at her in bright red numbers. She stretched out slowly beneath the covers, arching her back as she tried to work the kinks out of her body.

It was too bloody early.

Why had she set the alarm for five a.m.? It made no sense. There was no reason to be up this early in the morning.

The plane. She had a plane to catch, but not for at least another fourteen hours. So why had she arranged to wake up this early?

What part of all this had she forgotten?

Megan yawned and sat up, stretching for a moment before she swung her feet out of the bed. Her stomach knotted as memory returned. She was home. Not back in her

apartment, where she would be a safe distance away from the pack. No, she didn't dare risk staying a moment longer than she had to. The way her sister had spoken to her. The anger in her voice. The low growl—no, Ella wasn't to be trusted. Not now, not ever again.

Pain coiled around her heart, squeezing tight before it slithered away to settle in her gut. Betrayal. It never sat well with her. She couldn't even talk to Ella about this, as her sister wouldn't see what the problem was. The woman was devoted to the pack; that was her problem.

It didn't matter; whatever Ella had planned, it wouldn't work. Megan would be gone soon enough, and there would be nothing the younger woman could do about it. A couple of hours at most; then she could head for the airport. Sure, she'd spend hours in the lounge reading, drinking expensive coffee, and then she'd be gone.

For good.

*A run, I need to get a run in before I head for the plane. It's not as if I'm going to get another chance anytime soon.*

She glanced down at the clock. Was it repairable? The broken plastic across the readout suggested she'd broken yet another one. Not that it mattered. It was her clock. If she broke it, then she could replace it, or not, when she wished to. Without another sound, she moved away from the bed and walked silently over to the door, listening. If Ella heard her up and about, there was a good chance she'd start another argument.

So maybe Ella was right about the problems Megan had caused by refusing to take Shaun up on his offer to be her mate. It was a place of honor within the pack; everyone knew that. Shit, even she knew and accepted that, but it wasn't something she'd ever wanted.

Any female offered the chance to become the mate of the pack alpha would jump at the chance.

Any female but her.

The first time Shaun had declared that she was the one for him, everyone had expected her to be happy about it. They'd been ready to mark the mating then and there, until she'd said no. They couldn't understand her decision.

She was supposed to be happy about the situation.

Even then he'd been marked as the future pack alpha. Well, why wouldn't she be happy?

Not that it mattered now. She'd be gone soon enough. She'd leave her home for the final time and never come back. Her life was her own to do with as she wished, and that didn't include becoming Shaun's plaything.

All right, that wasn't exactly fair. He wasn't looking for a plaything. He wanted a mate, a bitch to walk alongside him for the rest of his life. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less.

No, she didn't want to think about that right now.

Once the coast was clear, she could get the hell out of here. That's what she needed to do. Be out. Free. Running. Megan closed her eyes and pressed her ear close to the door. Even in human form she had better hearing than most real humans did.

Nothing. Only the normal creaks and moans of a house at rest. Of Ella, she could hear not a thing.

A good long run would put her in a better temperament for the flight. The thought of being packed in with the humans for even a short flight didn't sit well with her. The smell of them. The way they leered at her left her feeling sick to her stomach.

She wasn't the first shifter to mention such problems. More than one other female from the pack had spoken of it before, almost as though the human males could sense the difference in her kind.

They disgusted her.



No, that wasn't entirely true. Some of the humans she could live with. She'd even had a couple of human friends. It could never be anything more than that, though. They didn't appeal to her. They lacked the strength she needed.

The strength Shaun had.

Oh no, she wasn't going there. She wasn't going to think about him. He wasn't the one for her, no matter what anyone else thought.

Megan opened the door and walked down the stairs, listening for any sign that Ella was awake. At least the house was on the edge of town, which meant she should be able to slip free without anyone noticing her. Or that was the plan. It had been one of the joys of growing up in this house. Whenever either she or her father had felt the need to slip free and run without the pack, they had been able to.

Now she would take advantage of that for the last time before she turned her back on the town, her sister, and the pack.

No, she didn't want to think about that. All she needed to do was enjoy the run and forget everything else. The pack ways didn't matter to her. They wanted, perhaps even needed, to smother her. Their rules would wrap themselves tightly about her being and trap her. They'd have bound her to a mate without a second thought, simply so they could get on with their own lives.

She stepped out into the glimmer of predawn light that tinged the darkness. Small hints of gold tinted the horizon. A promise of what was to come when the sun finally crept its way into her line of sight. If she read the signs correctly, the day would be a beautiful one.

Her fingers tangled in her nightshirt as she tugged it over her head and dropped it on the ground. The chill in the air played over her naked flesh. Goose bumps sprang into life, her nipples taut, the skin over her breasts and stomach tight as she focused within, seeking the beast, calling it to the surface.

It came, slowly at first, growling in protest, sniffing the air.

*Come, we can run. We can get out of here. Let off steam. Find that place of peace again. We don't need them. We only need each other,* the bitch within her soul growled but moved closer, gifting Megan with heightened senses. The air was clean. Pure. No scent of humans, or her own kind. She was safe here. No one could touch her. They wouldn't come for her. She could run and forget the rest of the world even existed.

Pain and pleasure merged with the shift. Her hands and feet changed first, nails growing, changing into claws. Her back arched. Fur grew quickly. Her center of balance shifted even as she lowered down onto her hands and knees. The shooting pain of her tail growing was the last of the pain associated with the shift.

*Mine, all mine,* she growled and arched her back. Freedom. She could smell it. The air was crisp and clean. Without a sound, she loped away from the house. This is where she belonged, not in the house, but out in fresh air, running. All she wanted to do was run.

The ground tore up beneath her paws. Her tail high. Head lifted. The wind rushed past her ears, caressing her face as she sprinted toward the line of trees. No pack. No Ella. No Shaun. Here, she was free.

Lost in the run, nothing mattered but the animal within her soul and the feel of the ground beneath her feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaun growled and headed for the door. Simon would know where he'd gone. There was nothing he needed to take care of at the farm, and if anything came up, his cousin could deal with it. Right now he had more important things to deal with.

He knew she was out there—running, experiencing the freedom that only their kind could ever know. He could feel it in his blood.

His cock surged into life, pressing against his jeans in a painful erection. His balls pressed tight against the base of his cock, aching, demanding attention. The type of attention that only worked if it came from Megan.

Stubborn female.

His clothes hit the floor before he unlocked the door. The shift hit him hard and fast. Pain and the rush of adrenaline flooded through his body as he shed his human body and dived into his lupine form. He arched and threw himself into the force of the shift. The urge to howl filled his mind, but he locked it down. Giving her any type of warning would have been foolish. He was a lot of things, but foolish wasn't one of them.

This was a hunt. One his mind and soul both craved. He had to find her. He had to show her the truth. Explain that he needed her. Wanted her. Desired her in his life. No matter what she thought, or how she wished to leave him, she couldn't do it. She was a part of his future. His life. His dreams.

He ran, the ground eaten up beneath his feet.

Only when he was far away from home did he stop and sniff the air again. There it was. That subtle hint of female on the air. One or two? One he knew had to be Megan. The other? Her sister? He couldn't be sure. Not that it mattered. He wanted Megan. He'd hunt her down and settle this once and for all.

The ground vanished beneath his paws. The line of the trees beckoned him. That's where she'd be.

He froze. Something was there. Someone. Another member of the pack? Who else would be out here? It wasn't Ella.

A pair of bright amber eyes stared back at him. The scent — female.

Who?

The low growl sounded familiar.

*Gemma?*

For a moment he considered shifting, and then he changed his mind. Whatever she was doing here, he would deal with it later. Deal with her later.

The female edged closer, her paws silent, her tail lifted. A low, pleading whimper filled the air. She ducked her head and took a step closer. Her shoulders lowered toward the ground.

He growled. The two sides of his nature warred instantly. Here she was, a female, approaching him in submission and interest, yet he knew she wasn't Megan. Therefore she wasn't and would never be the one for him.

She was close now, almost close enough to touch.

He growled, baring his teeth in warning to the female. She wasn't the one for him, no matter that she might think otherwise.

She lifted her head, tipping it to one side, her ears pricked up. Curiosity flashed across her eyes. A low whine filled the air. The question clear.

*Why?*

Shaun shook his head and growled again, taking a step forward. *Back off. Now.*

The shift hit the female wolf even as he watched. Lupine form changed to human female. Nude. Lithe. Young. Aroused...

The scent of her arousal filled the air. Her nipples hardened beneath his gaze. A soft down of dark curls covered her mound, thick, pouting lips visible between the curls. She stretched, arching in front of him. Every inch of her nude form visible to him.

"I know who you are, Shaun."

*And I care, why?* He didn't shift form. There was no reason to. No matter how attractive she was, he wasn't interested.

"Shift, damn you. I can't talk to you like this."

*Yes, you can, but you're too lazy to.* Shaun sighed; he wasn't in the mood to deal with this. Megan was out there, somewhere; he had to find her before she discovered he was back. If Gemma knew, then others would already know.

"Shaun, you have to talk to me at some point. We have business."

*"Like hell we do!"*

"I can help you. If you let me. She's not right for you. She doesn't even care about you or the pack."

Shaun growled; the hair on the back of his neck stood up, his teeth bared fully as he snapped at the air in front of Gemma's knees.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Gemma jumped back, her small breasts moving with the violence of the jump. "I haven't done anything wrong. I came out here for you..."

He snapped, closer this time, his teeth almost grazing her left thigh.

"You'll regret this! I'm trying to help you."

*"Trying to help yourself, you mean."* He couldn't deny that there was a part of him that desired her. But it was pointless. Trying to mate with her would fail, and then the entire pack would know his dilemma. He was cursed impotent with any female but Megan.

"You're insane, you know that? The entire pack is waiting on you to make a choice, and you turn down a naked, willing female for one who has turned her back on you at every chance." Gemma folded her arms beneath her pert breasts. "The pack will not be happy."

Megan.

If he waited any longer, she'd return to her so-called home, and he'd miss his chance. He couldn't take that risk. He took a deep breath, tasting her on the air.

*No, she'll listen to me this time.* He shook off the thought.

His mental voice surged fully into life. *"I am the pack alpha, and I have the right to choose my own mate. The pack has to accept that. If you continue to stand in my way, you'll find out what it means to anger me!"* His growl carried the words across with a force that even Gemma couldn't ignore.

She took a step back, her bottom lip trembling. "You're insane."

*"No, what I am is pissed off. Get out of my way. Now!"*

Gemma turned and fled into the trees, shifting back into lupine form as she did so.

Shaun sighed and sat down. Females. He'd never understand females. You told them the truth, they got upset. You lied to them, they got upset. If you hit on them, they got upset; and yes, you guessed it, if you didn't hit on them, they still got upset. He shook his head and stood up.

He loped through the trees toward Megan. Upwind, of course. She'd been away from the pack long enough to forget the basics. Hadn't she? There was only one way to find out. He stopped, half hiding behind one of the trees.

Megan ran through the edge of the trees, her tail high, ears pricked up. The first touches of sunlight caressed her red-brown fur, stealing his breath away. Even the way she ran caught his attention.

*Beautiful.*

He slipped out from behind the trees, blocking her path.

Megan growled, her hackles raised, stance shifting into one of defense and fury. Her teeth were bared. Front paws shoulder-width apart. No sign of submission or fear in her deep golden eyes.

*"Megan, we need to talk."*

She snapped at the air. *"Like hell we do. Get the fuck out of my life, Shaun."*

He frowned and took a step back from the snarling female. *"I came here to talk to you, but if you're going to be this way, we can settle this another way."*

Megan growled afresh and snapped at the air only a breath away from his nose. *"Back off!"*

This wasn't going to work. Until he reminded her of just who was in charge, she'd fight him. He couldn't permit that.

Shaun launched at her, growling. Megan snapped at him; her teeth grazed his fur. He twisted, locking his teeth into the scruff of her neck. She whined and tried to shake him off, her paws planted firmly on the ground.

*"Not going to let go!"*

She growled and snapped at the air, shaking her head, then her entire body, every breath in her body focused on trying to get him off her back. It didn't work. The harder she fought, the tighter he clamped onto her neck.

*"Give it up, you're not going to win. I'm the alpha. You'll accept this. Submit to this."*

She snapped at the air. Her struggles halted for a moment, then returned as she tried to throw him.

*"Fine, you asked for it."*

With his grip tight on the back of her neck, he used it to pin her to the ground. His back legs braced with his front resting on her shoulders.

She shifted, without warning, back into her human form. "Get the fuck off me!"

"Not a chance in hell." He released his grip as he shifted back into human form himself. "Not until we've had a chance to talk."

## Chapter Two

Megan snarled, twisting beneath him. With her shift back into human form, she was vulnerable.

*More than vulnerable.*

Naked, open, and beneath him. His cock thickened against the curve of her ass.

Her back arched. Hunger flared into life as she pressed against him, then flattened herself against the ground. The last thing she needed was to send mixed signals. If she responded to him in any way, he'd take that as a come-on.

*But I do want him.*

It was nothing more than a physical reaction. It wasn't her; it was the need of the female wolf within her responding to the strength of the alpha. She wasn't an animal. She didn't have to give into this hunger, this need to obey the leader. It wasn't a weakness she'd submit to.

"I'm not letting you go, Megan. Stop struggling. We have to talk!" he growled behind her. His feet firmly planted on the ground. "You're still a member of the pack. You're not a loner."

Lone werewolves were rare. In all her time, she'd only known of one. The male was a sheriff in a town roughly a hundred miles to the east. Lone werewolves normally



had a hard time with the packs from everything she'd been told growing up. Yet if she left the pack, there was a chance she'd end up alone.

It was a chance she was more than willing to take. She'd already risked too much in helping the others in the city. She couldn't walk away from that now. There was no one else to take her place.

If she didn't return, then everything she'd worked for would collapse and those she'd spent the better part of the last few years helping would be left vulnerable. She couldn't do that to them.

He was stronger than she was. She knew that. It didn't stop her from trying to get free. "I've done my talking to you. You never listen."

"I'm willing to listen this time." He leaned closer, his breath heated against the back of her neck. "Promise me you won't run."

"I...I can't." That promise once given would bind her, and that wasn't an edge she wanted to give him. He was trouble. No, more than that to her. He had the power to turn her life upside down, and that wasn't in her plans. "I don't want to be your mate, Shaun."

He growled. "A part of you does. I can smell it, your arousal, you can't deny it exists."

*Yes, I can*—if she wanted to lie. There were other lives depending on her; this wasn't just about her anymore. It hadn't been for a long time. "It's just the status, not you, I can't shut that out. You know we're damn near programmed to obey the call." *God, I can't do this, I can't be the female he wants me to be.*

"If that's all you think it is, why are so afraid? Why do you fight it?" He ground his cock against the curve of her buttocks.

"I thought you wanted to talk, not fuck me senseless."

"Hmm, what's so bad about doing both?" He scraped his teeth along the back of her neck, sending a surge of delight through her rebellious body. "We both want it, don't we?"

She growled and tried to move away, but he wasn't letting her go anywhere. "I don't want to—Just get off me! Get off me now!"

Shaun licked slowly over the back of her neck, teasing at the taut flesh. She moaned, closing her eyes. Her hands pressed against the damp earth. She bit back a groan and tried to push him off one last time.

It didn't work.

"I'm stronger than you. Remember that. I'll always be stronger than you. It's the nature of things." He didn't move for several long minutes, then slowly eased his way off her back. "You run, I come after you. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it already!" Megan rolled away from him and came up to her feet, her gaze fixed on his face. "I'm not in the mood for your sex games."

Shaun sighed and sat down on the damp earth. "You can't run from me for the rest of your life."

"Why not?" What was so wrong with running? "I'm leaving. There's nothing you can say that will persuade me to stay here."

Shaun arched an eyebrow. "If you're so determined to leave, why did you risk taking one last run? You had to know that either I'd come home early, or that one of the other pack members would attempt to keep you here. They've been waiting, wondering when you'd return."

"Wondering when you'd pick someone else, you mean," Megan growled.

"Why would I pick someone else? You're the one for me. You've always been the one for me. I knew it before the kiss."

"What?" No, that wasn't possible. How could he have known such a thing? "I don't understand."

"The scent. I grew up knowing your scent above anyone else's. There was no denying it or shutting it out; you filled my life, my thoughts and dreams." His voice a low, warm growl. Not the threat she had grown used to hearing from him. "The first time I—"

"No, I don't want to hear it!"

He smiled, a soft, hungry edge touching his gaze. "A part of you does."

"Yeah, right. You're crazy. You're completely and utterly insane," Megan snarled the words at him and took a step back. "Now, as there's nothing else, I'm going home."

"You're staying. You're my mate, Megan. A part of you knows this, accepts this, and even welcomes it." He moved toward her, closing the gap by two steps. "I need you, Megan, almost as badly as you need me. Or would if you'd only admit it."

"You're being stubborn, that's all. I don't need this. Not right now." He wasn't going to let up on her. No matter what she wanted, he wasn't going to give up. It didn't help that her body was responding to him. Heat rippled through her core, coating her inner walls with a liquid desire she couldn't ignore.

Her breasts were taut. Nipples hard. Her clit ached even as she stood there watching him. She tensed, a growl sounding from the back of her throat as she tried to fight the desire that built within her. It didn't matter how her body wanted him, or the way she could smell him, she couldn't give into that hunger.

"I can smell your arousal, Megan. You can't hide that from me or from yourself. So why fight it?"

"I'm not going to be forced into this because my body has some preprogrammed genetic reaction to you, Shaun. I'm not like that."

"No, you're not. You're a coward who prefers to run rather than try, just once, to see what it would be like between us." His gaze narrowed, and he spat at the ground. "I thought you were braver than that, Megan. I was wrong. You're nothing but a cowardly pup."

"You're wrong." Her shoulders tightened, her breath hitching, and her hands clenched into fists. "I'm no damn coward."

"All you have to do is be with me once, just once, and if it doesn't work between us, then I'll back off. I don't want a mate who can't stand my touch. However, if it works, you're stuck with me. That's what you're truly afraid of, isn't it? That you're the one who's wrong. Not me."

Megan wanted to back off again, to put some distance between herself and Shaun, but if she moved, he'd have good cause to accuse her, yet again, of cowardice. Her jaw clenched. Was he right?

"You don't have an answer, do you?"

"No." She shook her head, but for now stood her ground. Megan shivered. "This is neither the time nor place to have this discussion, Shaun."

"Why?"

"Erm, lack of clothes for one."

"And this would matter to me why? We're shifters. I've seen you naked before. You've seen me. There's nothing here that we both haven't experienced at some point in the past with each other."

"This is different. This conversation is something we should have clothed."

"For your comfort level?" He arched an eyebrow and smiled.

"Something like that, yes." She growled. "Either we do this elsewhere, or I disappear, got it?"

"It's not happening. We're having this conversation here and now. Or we can move to the next level, Megan. You're my mate unless you prove otherwise to me."

*Mate.* The word sent a shiver through her spine. "There's nothing to prove."

"Right, that's why you're still standing here." He didn't wait. Without another word, Shaun reached out for her and tangled one hand into her hair, pulling her close.

"Don't! You can't!" She lashed out with her fists, trying to find a way to push him away.

"Yes, I can." His words little more than a growl as he brought his lips down onto hers, claiming them without mercy.

Megan tensed, her fists pounding against his chest. She wasn't going to let him push her into this trap.

Unfortunately, her body had other ideas.

Megan half melted against him, her lips parting beneath his, a low moan filling the air as she stopped trying to hit him. Her nipples hardened into firm, ripe pips that ached with the need to be touched. Her breath caught in the back of her throat; her thoughts fled as she let her body take over.

He growled against her lips, wrapping one arm around her waist as he eased her toward the dew-touched ground. His cock was thick and heavy against her stomach; hot and eager for her touch, her body, and the pleasure that might be shared between them.

She belonged to him...

Her thighs tightened, a roll claiming her hips as she pressed against him. His tongue dueled with hers. Tasting. Conquering. She shuddered beneath his touch. Her body heated, hungry for more than just a kiss.

The damp grass caressed her naked flesh. She whimpered, moving beneath his touch as his lips teased a delicious path across her throat. Megan clutched at his hair, pulling and tugging on the dark lengths, matching the scrape of his teeth along her neck. He'd claim her, a part of her knew this, even accepted it, but right now she didn't care. As long as he didn't stop touching her, she didn't care about anything.

"Yes, that's it, let it happen, Megan." He nipped at her throat.

*Let what happen?* the bitch within growled in the back of her mind. She tried to make sense of it, but her mind refused to follow the train of thought, caught up in her reactions to his touch.

It was too late to stop this. Even if she had been able to force the words from her lips, she doubted they would have made much sense. Her body wanted this, needed it, and there was no turning back, no matter what the sane part of her mind screamed.

Sanity had no part in this. She was a shifter, as was he; there was no denying the physical attraction between them. Nor had she ever tried to deny its existence. It was a link she had no control over, and that was part of the problem.

Megan tensed. She couldn't let this happen, no matter how deeply the she-wolf wanted it.

She shoved him away from her and rolled, coming back up to her feet, shaking, her body craving the contact it had now been denied.

"What's wrong?" Shaun frowned, his gaze fixed on her. His cock thick, erect, and eager. "I thought you were interested. I can smell your arousal, see it on you, there's no denying what you feel right now. So what's changed your mind?"

"I'm not going to be ruled by pheromones and whatever else is going on here." She tried not to look below his waist, but she glanced down, her gaze lingering on his thick erection. "When...if I ever have sex with you, it will be a decision I make with a clear head, not something I dive into because you kissed me. I don't have sex with someone without a good reason. Call me odd, but I don't think that pheromones and your belief in a predestined relationship are good reasons to jump into the sack with you."

"How would you know what's a good idea and what isn't? I mean, sure, you've thought about it, but until you've..."

Megan smiled calmly.

His jaw clenched. "Oh, fuck no. There's been someone else? I—You can't. It's wrong. You're...you're pack. Members of the pack don't fuck around with—And I'd know if one of the pack had been... You're lying, you can't have..."

"Yes." Her voice shook, and she forced herself to meet his gaze. "There's been someone else, not here, not pack, and it's over. It was over long before I decided to come home and sort things out for Ella."

Ella, there was another problem, she was a smart young woman and should have been able to handle the paperwork issues on her own. So why had Ella really called her home?

Shaun. *Fuck, the bitch set me up!* the inner wolf growled.

Megan tensed. She wanted to rage at Ella, but it would have been pointless. Ella was pack. Of course she'd do what she thought was best for the pack. It was ingrained into Ella and those who lived and breathed the pack. For all she knew, Ella and Simon had worked together on this. Yes. It would have been just like them.

Shaun growled, his hands clenched, his shoulders tight. "You let someone else fuck you? You're pack. You let a non-pack member touch you? How could you?"

"Would it be any easier if I'd done it with a pack member? If I'd fucked one of them? Would you be able to look them in the eye without wanting to kill them?"

He faltered and took a step back. "I...erm... No."

"Right, so back the fuck off! I'm not a virgin. So what! You're not; why would I be one?" Anger shook a violent path through her body. "I don't belong to you..."

"Yes, you do. You've always been mine, even if you're too damn stubborn to accept it. You feel the pull between us. Look at me; you know I'm telling you the truth. What we have can't be ignored. It shouldn't be ignored, and you know it."

"All I know is you've been hunting me down since I turned eighteen." Her voice little more than a hiss. Why did he have to do this to her? Sure, he was pissed off

because she'd had sex with someone else, yet he hadn't denied that he'd had others in his life.

"Twenty, I waited until you were twenty. I gave you time to figure out who you were, and what you wanted. I didn't even push you when you wanted to finish your education."

Megan took a deep breath and tried to force her temper under control. "Twenty, twenty-one, it doesn't matter when you first made a full move on me, you made it clear to the rest of the pack that I was off-limits. They wouldn't break that ruling. Even the humans kept their distance from me. The pack made sure of that. What was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to be mine. You know that. Shit, the entire pack knows that. You were supposed to wait for me. You didn't."

Her stomach clenched. A cold sweat coated her flesh. "And now I'm damaged goods, is that it?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I assumed you'd still be a virgin." Shaun shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his brow furrowed. "I wasn't expecting this. Fuck, I need time to think. I wasn't expecting to hear this."

*Yeah, of course you weren't. How could you? No one, no female, defies the alpha, the bitch raged.* Megan shook her head. She'd told him no. Now she'd uttered words that might push him away from her for good. Isn't that what she'd wanted?

"I left. I wasn't coming back. I wasn't going to die a virgin, so I found someone I felt comfortable with, liked, thought I might even have a future with, and it happened. Deal with it. I have." She lifted her chin and met his gaze head-on.

He swallowed hard and looked away from her, heat flaming across his cheeks.

It hurt; even though she'd spent the better part of the past ten years trying to give him the "go away" signal, his rejection hurt.



Why? It didn't make sense, until she recalled that, even with her desire to live her own life, she was still a member of the pack, and he was the alpha. There wasn't a male or female amongst the pack who would take the rejection of the alpha without feeling something in return.

Her hands clenched. Her stomach knotted, churned, and knotted again. "You're a piece of work! You know that, don't you? Go fuck yourself!" Megan turned, her voice little more than a growl as she stalked away, forcing the shift through her body. Without another word, she went from being human to wolf in the blink of an eye and sprinted away.

It was over. Done with. There was no coming back from this, and within the hour she'd be in the car and out of here for good.

## Chapter Three

“Fuck.” Shaun stood there, shivering in the dawn’s early light. God, what the fuck had he done? She was gone; she’d shifted and run, and it was all his fault. “Why didn’t I stop her?”

Good bloody question.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

*Fine, how was it supposed to be? Explain that one. How were you supposed to bring your mate to your heel?*

The plan to seduce her, bring her around to his viewpoint, and feel her moan within his arms had failed. Utterly. He didn’t need his inner wolf to tell him that.

He growled and turned away, shifting back into his lupine form. Pain helped. He needed to hurt. To feel. To do something that would chase away his guilt for how he had acted.

*Mine, she’s mine! the wolf growled. No one else has the right to touch her. No one. She knows that. She had no right to give herself to another. No right!*

Why would she? Megan hadn’t accepted him. She’d done everything she could to keep him at a distance. How could he expect her to be true to him, to them, when there was no “them”?

*Follow her. Don't let her get away.*

Shaun raced after her. His need for her, the desire that roared through his body, hadn't eased with the revelation that she'd had a lover. No matter what she had done in the past, he still needed her, still craved the delight of sinking into her soft, wet, and willing body.

*Mark her, claim her, and make her yours.*

Yes, this time he wouldn't let her run away. Before the night was through, she'd be his.

She had a good head start on him but had left a clear trail. Even if she hadn't, he knew where she would be going. If Ella was right, and Megan was planning on leaving today, then she'd have to go home at some point to collect her things and the car. A rental, which she'd have to return to the airport.

Good, even if he missed her at the old farmhouse, there were only so many roads she could take to get to the airport, and only one airport within easy driving range.

*There is no escape for her. Not this time.*

A glimpse of red-brown fur caught his attention at the edge of the old farmstead. He inhaled, tasting her on the air. A shudder of pleasure rocked through his body, thickening his cock.

She'd taken the most direct route. It made sense. She assumed he'd rejected her.

Not this time. He was the alpha, confidence was a part of who he was and his position in the pack. This wasn't the time or place to turn his back on that.

Weakness wouldn't win the day or the female.

He leaped over the fence and raced toward the house. She'd vanished inside before he'd even landed on the right side of the fence. Fine, he'd expect that, and he'd deal with it. She couldn't leave instantly. Megan would have to dress, finish her packing, and get the bags in the car before she could think of pulling out.

Still in his wolf form, he ambled across to the car and sat down in front of it.

*What if she tries to run me over? She is that pissed off.*

Well, maybe not enough to kill him, but did he really want to take that chance?

"Shaun, is that you?"

He turned toward the voice. Ella. He stood up and turned to face the now-open door.

"Hmm, she run from you again?"

"Yes." He focused on his mental voice, hoping Ella would hear it.

"Doesn't surprise me. Well, come in and get some clothes on." Ella pushed the door open. "I've got something that should fit you. Sweats, but they'll work well enough. Unless you were hoping to impress her. Still, I don't think she'll care what you're wearing, do you?"

"No." He slipped into the house. *"Right now I think my clothing is the last thing on her mind."*

"There are sweats are on the table."

Shaun glanced around and made sure that the sweats were there before he shifted back into human form. The repeated shifting had started to take its toll on him, and his limbs shook as he reached for the sweats and pulled them on over his otherwise naked backside.

"Damn, how she can turn down a sweet-looking..."

"Ella," he hissed and tied the pants in place.

"Hey, I can look, can't I?" Ella smiled. "You're the alpha, and I know you're off-limits, but I'm still going to enjoy the show."

Shaun frowned but didn't comment. The last thing he needed was to encourage Ella.

"She's upstairs, packing."

He ran his fingers through his hair, then looked around. "Fine. Well, I'm going up there."

"Good." Ella let her gaze linger one last time on his backside. "Pity. She's no idea what she's passing by here. Even if you weren't the alpha I'd—well, never mind. Upstairs, second door on the left."

Shaun swallowed a growl and bounded up the stairs. Megan. Her scent lingered in the hallway. Powerful. Even after only two weeks at home, she'd left her mark on the house. How many years had it been since she'd lived here? Five? Six? It had to be something like that.

A door was yanked open. Megan's growl filled the air.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Well, you found me. So leave." She folded her arms beneath her ample breasts. The dark material of her T-shirt pulled taut over her chest, her nipples prominent against the soft cotton. "I've got nothing more to say to you, and after our last words, I don't understand why you bothered to follow me. Get out of my house."

Megan turned, stalked into her room, and slammed the door, shaking it in the frame.

"Her temper matches her hair," he muttered, half under his breath.

"It always did." Ella leaned on the banister halfway up the stairs. "I love my sister, I always have, but she's not being very smart about this. Shit, deep down she knows you're the one for her; it's why we clash so often now. She's been miserable ever since she returned home." Ella smiled and then shook her head, coming to a decision. "I'm going to regret this, but it is for the pack. The door is unlocked, Shaun, and I suggest you take advantage of that."

He frowned and peered back at the younger sister. "I'm sorry."

"No, you're not, Shaun. Don't make it worse by lying to me." Ella lowered her voice to a soft whisper, tears sparkling within her gaze. "You've never even seen me,

not the way I wanted you to. I've come to accept that. It's the way of the pack. But please don't ever tell me you are sorry for that, Shaun. We both know it would be a lie."

The hurt, he'd never heard such in her voice before, but how often had he listened to other females? Truly listened. She was right; it was the way of the pack. Sooner or later it hit each of them. The need. The hunger to pick a mate. To be bound to the one whom they were intended to be with.

There was no denying it.

Not now, not ever.

Shaun tried to smile, then nodded to the waiting Ella, watching as she moved out of sight. Whatever hurt he had caused Ella, there was no undoing it.

*Megan*, growled the wolf.

He turned his attention back to the door, closing his hand on it as he listened. She was still there—where else would she be?—pacing across the floor by the sound of it. Nervous or angry? Either way he'd deal with it, and her anger.

He took a deep breath and pushed the door open and closed it firmly behind him.

"What the—Leave. Get out. I never invited you in." She turned, facing him, her gaze flashing in sheer anger. "I'm busy, and I see no need to..."

He didn't wait. Shaun darted across the room and closed his hands on her upper arms, his lips claiming hers, silencing her instantly. She tensed. For a moment she didn't move beneath his lips. Her body tense, muscles knotted, her breath caught in the back of her throat. She trembled; the first real sign of life rushed through her body as he parted her lips with a touch of his tongue.

*Yes, that's it. Remember what it can be like with one of your own kind. With the one you're supposed to be with,* his wolf growled softly in the back of his mind.

She struggled for a moment, then submitted, a low rock playing through her hips as she pressed against him.

Shaun smiled, growling into the kiss as he slid one hand into her hair, holding her tight. His body knew what was needed. She understood what was between them, even if she still planned on fighting it when she could think straight.

*So, don't let her think at all.*

His hand tightened fully in her hair. He turned them until her back was to the bed, never ceasing in his sensual assault of her lips. She moaned into the kiss. Her nipples hardened, pressing against his chest through the shirt. Heat, he could feel the heat rippling through her body, claiming her, chasing away her doubts until only the need was left behind.

She didn't resist as he pressed her against the bed, covering her body with his own. She groaned, her thighs parting with a touch of his knee.

*Yes, that's it. Don't think about the fight. Just let it happen.*

Talking was the problem, or gave light to the problems between them. He nibbled along her lips, licking, tasting, teasing them further apart until she moaned and writhed beneath him. The scent of her arousal filled the air, tempting him to do more. To answer the hunger that bound them both.

Shaun reached down, catching the edge of her T-shirt as he pulled it up above her head, using it to tangle her wrists, trapping them.

"No..."

His lips claimed hers once more, silencing any more protests. She tensed. A moment passed where he dueled with her tongue, conquering her with deep, eager kisses until the tension eased and the heat returned to her responses. Arguments. This was neither the time nor the place for arguments.

"God!" she hissed, arching, moving beneath his touch as he released her lips. "Wrong, so very wrong."

He ignored the words, nipping and licking down the length of her slender throat. Her taste coated her skin, taunting him to taste, lick, and nip at her tender flesh. His

fingers caught in the waistband of her jeans even as he closed his lips around one ripe, tender nipple.

She groaned, then struggled, trying to remove her hands from the T-shirt.

“No, let it happen.” He teased the nipple with his teeth. Scraping over the ripe bud. “Don’t fight me. Just this once, don’t fight me.”

Megan kicked, struggling for a moment before she surrendered to his touch. “Yes...”

He smiled, licking around her nipple, and flickered his tongue over the now-wet tip until she moved beneath him. She lifted herself, offering her breast to his caress.

He’d dreamed of this moment.

This is what it was supposed to be like between them...



## Chapter Four

Megan bit into her bottom lip. Her body was no longer hers to command. She couldn't move her wrists, not fully, not with the shirt wrapped around them. Her breasts—why hadn't she pulled on a bra? She'd meant to. Hell, she would have put one on before heading for the car, but...

Too late now.

Each touch of his lips or tongue sent a new wave of pleasure through her body that threatened to chase away her ability to think. She shivered, arching beneath his touch, her eyes half closed. Her hands clenched with the need to sink them into his hair. With her wrists caught, she couldn't do that.

So, she could throw the shirt away. It wasn't as if it was tied in place.

True, but a part of her liked the helplessness. She could almost believe she didn't have a choice.

The bitch within growled in protest and howled in pleasure all at the same time. The alpha had chosen her. He would take her. Make her the female alpha of the pack, ahead of the other females...

What female wouldn't want to be first amongst their brethren? They'd envy her, but that wasn't why she had finally accepted his touch.

*I need this, if only once.*

Her jeans parted beneath his touch, his breath hot and welcoming against her belly as he eased slowly down her body, tugging, pulling her jeans and panties away. Baring her fully to his view. Her thighs ached with the need to part for him. It didn't matter that the human part of her mind wanted to argue with him. The bitch simply wanted him. In her. Now. No arguments.

She bit back a whimper. She wanted him, needed him, but there was nothing she could do to hasten the procedure – or was there?

Somehow the sweats he'd been wearing had now been kicked free, leaving him nude. His cock now heavy, thick, and heated against her thigh as he shifted between her legs. A low roll played through her hips. She lifted up against him, eager to feel him slide into her body.

"Give in to it. Don't let your doubts stop you now." He kissed his way over her belly and down between her thighs. His warm breath caressed her lower lips. Teasing her senses. Heat rippled along her inner walls. Her clit throbbed. Her belly and breasts taut and eager for more. She couldn't shut out what was happening, nor did she want to. She'd waited too long for this moment.

There had been too many years of denying the pull, and now she was ready to explode after a few brief touches.

"You taste so good." He licked, gently, over her swollen nether lips. "Like nectar. I've never tasted anything so sweet."

Heat flushed along her cheeks, threatening to turn her scarlet. A low moan slipped from her lips as she arched and pressed into his touch. A soft touch parted her nether lips fully, allowing him intimate access to her being.

He pressed a finger between her labia, seeking entrance to her body even as he locked his lips around her throbbing clit. She groaned, her inner walls tight on his finger. Her hips rocked, the hunger in her body more than she could ignore. Nor did she want to ignore it.

Thought fled. Her body now eager for his touch. His finger eased deeper within her clenching core, until she moaned in sheer delight when he touched that shell-like hidden spot within her pussy.

"Yes, that's it. Let yourself go," he growled against her clit, his voice sending small vibrations through her body. "Let it happen, it's what we both want."

"Please, I can't..."

The desire that he had brought to life was such that she couldn't deny it. He was right; she wanted it. She needed it; they both did. Her body was tense, the pressure built with each passing moment. Her thighs clenched. Desire coated her inner walls, leaving her slick, eager for more, needing each new touch he promised her.

His breath teased her clit. Her hips lifted from the bed. Hands clenched in the shirt as she writhed and bucked beneath his touch. So close, so very close, yet she couldn't hit that one beautiful moment of pleasure she now craved.

"Shaun!" she pleaded.

Shaun lifted his head. "Megan?"

"Please." She poured every ounce of need she felt into that single word. "Now!"

A low, pleased growl filled the air as he shifted his weight. "Hands and knees."

"Not like that." She squirmed, trying to move back away from him, but it didn't work.

"Yes, like this." He moved onto his knees. "No arguments. Don't fight me on this."

*It doesn't have to be this way. Can't he see that? I don't want to be treated like an animal.*

The bitch in her needed this, all of it, including his insistence on how it was to happen. It was a part of the pack, of how shifters mated for the first time. Dominance. Submission. The natural order between male and female shifters. Her shoulders tensed. Her stomach knotted even as her inner walls clenched in growing hunger. She didn't

fight him; she didn't even tense as he helped her move onto her hands and knees, her wrists still caught in the shirt.

"Calm; don't let the fear get the better of you. There's nothing to be afraid of." He brushed one hand over her naked buttocks, his voice a soft growl that sent shivers down the length of her spine. "I'm not going to hurt you, trust me. I've waited too long for this. Far too long to risk chasing you away now."

Shaun leaned down and pressed a kiss to her back. The human side of her screamed a protest, but the bitch, oh the bitch parted her thighs and arched her back with a low growl of pleasure.

"That's right, my Megan. Trust me, relax, and enjoy it."

The head of his cock pressed between her thighs, brushing over her nether lips. She tensed and then pushed back, searching for something more from him than a casual touch. He eased her nether lips apart.

"Tell me you want me; tell me..."

She whimpered, trying to find the strength to speak, to tell him what she wanted. Her throat threatened to close, her back arched a little more, a low roll played through her hips, and yet she still couldn't give life to her desires in the manner he wanted.

"Lost your voice?" he growled softly.

She nodded, trembling violently, her head lowered toward the mattress.

"Do you want me?"

Megan nodded again, little more than a low whimper slipping from her lips. Why could she speak when she was trying to protest his actions, but when she wanted to beg and plead with him for his touch, she couldn't utter a single word? Not that it mattered. Not now at least.

"You're mine."

*Yes, if only for the moment, yes!*

Thought fled as he thrust into her slick core, stretching her tight inner walls. She cried out, rocking with the power of his penetration. His balls slapped against her body. She braced, trying to hold herself in position, but it didn't work. Each new thrust threatened to rock her to the mattress, and her thighs tensed. She sobbed, arching to meet him.

Her core clenched endlessly on his cock. Slick sounds filled the air. Her breath burned in her lungs. Her body eager for each and every touch. Her nipples tight as they brushed against the mattress.

His hand landed hard and fast against her bare backside with a loud *crack*. Her eyes widened, her pussy clenched tight on his cock with the shock of the smack. She looked back over her shoulder, trying to find a way of stopping him. It didn't work. Nothing came.

*If he spans me again, I'll...*

The next slap sent a full ripple of pain and pleasure through her core.

"You've led me in a merry dance, Megan." He lifted his hand, then brought it down with a firm *crack* against her backside.

She hissed, arching as she pressed back against him. For a moment she struggled, but the next slap ended that. Heat washed through her bottom into her pussy. She groaned, unable to shut out the confusing waves of pain and pleasure. No one had ever spanked her before. Nor had she ever thought it was something she'd enjoy.

She hadn't done anything wrong. No, in fact, she'd had every right to...

"Don't ever run from me again."

The next slap was louder, but it didn't hurt as much now. Something else happened. A softness within her that she wanted to deny. He had no right to spank her. So why wasn't she stopping him.

Because she'd run. She'd known the trouble it would cause, and still she'd run. She'd hurt everyone...

“Don’t ever run from me again, or I’ll spank you in front of the rest of the pack.” He settled both hands back in place on her hips, pulling out almost to the tip before he thrust back within her, threatening to send her to her belly. Tears swam before her gaze. Pain and pleasure merged into one overwhelming surge of sensation. Her breath burned in her lungs. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t speak.

Nothing made sense to her now, the pressure unbearable as it threatened to tear her control from her grasp. She struggled, not with him, but with herself. The need to run fought with the need to accept, but her body took over and pushed her toward the brink of sanity.

Shaun smiled. “Come for me. Come for me now. I know you want to. I know you need to.”

Yes, that was it. She needed that release; there was no denying it now. She tensed, pushing back against him, her body strung tight as she struggled to find a moment of sanity within the maelstrom.

It hit, full force, threatening to toss her into the darkness. She cried out, lifting her head from the bedding. Every fiber of her being screamed out in pleasure. Liquid heat wrapped about his cock, claiming him, offering herself in return as she bucked and writhed, sweat beading across her breasts and belly alike.

Nothing else mattered but what she now shared with Shaun.

Each time she thought she’d reached the limits of her endurance, she found there was yet more to come. She couldn’t take any more. She risked her sanity if she let it go on any longer. One final wave tore through her senses. Even as he growled behind her, Megan’s grip on reality faltered and tipped her into the darkness of her own mind.

## Chapter Five

His beast roared in triumph. After all these years, he'd finally done it. Why had he waited so long to force the matter when he knew that the female shifters had no respect for a male who waited and lingered in the shadows as he had done?

*You didn't linger; you pushed, pressed...*

He shook his head at the thought; he'd never pushed as far as he had done so today. He'd not given her the chance to change her mind, and that's what he now knew he should have done years ago.

Would she love him?

No, it was too soon to think about that. He'd pushed her into this. She'd left him with no choice but to show her how an alpha dealt with his female when she wouldn't do as she was told.

Besides, what good was love, or the lack of it, if she left him? No, she had to stay now. They'd worked together. Their bodies suited each other well.

*Liar, it's more than that.*

Yes, it was. The thought of losing her left him feeling sick. Cold. Alone. She'd stay. No matter what plans she had set up prior to this moment, she would stay. There was

no other choice for her now. For both of them. They were mated. Bonded. His body acknowledged that. His beast howled for joy.

Yet Megan still slept. Her eyes closed, long lashes caressing the soft, pale upper curves of her cheeks. Peaceful and beautiful. How had he ever waited?

She hadn't given him any other options. He knew that. So, perhaps he could have kept a closer eye on her, but in truth, he'd never expected her to run in the middle of the night the way she had. There'd been no real warning, and not one member of the pack had helped her.

Afraid to turn her back on the pack, on her family, Megan's fear must have been more than he had ever understood. But why? Had he frightened her that deeply? Shaun moved away from the bed and into the small bathroom. He glanced back at the bed, then washed up, delighting in the soft scents of the woman that lingered within the bathroom.

His woman.

The bed creaked, and he found himself leaving the bathroom before he'd completely dried off. Small beads of water clung to his naked flesh; his gaze fixed on the bed. "Megan?"

She groaned and opened her eyes, frowning. "Where — Oh, we — Oh God."

That wasn't the reaction he'd been hoping for. "Yes, we did. You regret that?"

Megan sucked her bottom lip in between her teeth. "I...I don't know yet. I haven't had time to think on it."

Think on it? What was there to think about? Her body still bore the marks of their shared passion. The scent of it still lingered in the air. How could she deny, or even need to think about, what they'd shared? It made no sense to him, yet the words were hard to ignore.

"I see."



"No, I don't think you do." She sighed and reached for her robe at the side of the bed. "I have a plane to catch."

His heart sank. "You're planning on leaving still?"

"Yes, I am." She pulled the robe on and moved out of the bed. "I've got work to see to, promises to keep, and I can't stay here." She tied the belt on the robe even as she turned to look him in the eyes.

"You can't, not after what we've shared here. It's not right—not fair to either of us." He reached out, closing one hand on her arm. Had she forgotten his promise to spank her in front of the entire pack if she ran again? God, this wasn't going according to plan. "I thought—I mean, how can you walk out on what we shared here?"

She tensed beneath his grasp and tried to pull herself free. "What we shared was...was a one-off. Never to be repeated again. I don't see a need to..."

"Look at me, Megan. Really look at me and tell me you can walk away from what we shared?" *Please, look at me, listen to me, don't turn away from me this time.*

"The ticket is paid for." She flinched and looked away from him.

"And that's your excuse to leave, the ticket is paid for? I can replace that money, you know that. So don't use it as a reason to leave me, to leave the pack, again. It's wrong. You know that. We both know it." His grip tightened on her arm. The last thing he wanted was to see her leave.

"You...you spanked me."

"Yes, I did. Pack discipline. I'm still the alpha. Even with you as my mate, you're expected to be submissive to me, no one else, just me. You know that. You've always known that. And you responded to that. Your body enjoyed it, enjoyed all of what we shared."

"It's not just about me, or you, anymore." Megan rubbed her temples. "My work, I can't just walk away from it. There's no one else who can step in and take my place."

"What are you talking about?" He frowned. He hadn't even asked her about her work.

"I've spent the last few years building working relationships between our kind and those humans we need to deal with. Certain factions in law enforcement for one, and there are now medical facilities that have been alerted to our presence."

Humans who knew about them? "Why do we need that? We've always been self-sufficient, dealt with any problems ourselves. Why get the humans involved?"

"Out here we look after our own; in the cities that's not always possible. You wouldn't believe how many of our kind work in positions of authority now. I've been able to trace witches, shifters, even vampires in key positions who have been able to help build the network. I can't walk away from that."

"Shit. Fine. I'm going to need a little time to think that through. But that still doesn't change the fact that we're mated, Megan."

*Deny it, I dare you. I can still smell your arousal.*

It took every ounce of self-control he possessed to prevent the wolf's words from gaining life.

Megan opened her mouth to protest, but no sound escaped her soft, kissable lips. Her gaze narrowed, heat flushed across her cheeks, her jaw clenched as she closed her mouth.

"Delay your flight. At least give the pack enough time to accept I've taken a mate and that mate chooses not to stay. Two days. That's all I'm asking you for, two days to give us a chance and let me find a balance between your work and the demands of the pack."

"Why the time limit?"

"Megan, you're asking me to find a way to explain to the pack why you won't be staying here on a full-time basis. That can't be done instantly. We both know that."

"One day. I don't have a lot of time to spare. There are meetings I have to attend. Reports I have to complete and hand off."

"Agreed. One. But I expect a full day."

Megan nodded, and only then did he let go of her arm. "Thank you for that. I know it wasn't an easy decision for you to make."

Megan took a step back and looked away from him, hiding her face and her thoughts in one simple move. "One day, no more, and that's only to give the pack time to accept you've mated and that I'm leaving. That way the other females in the pack will finally accept that they need to look elsewhere for a mate and the pack can return to normal. Maybe that will ease some of the tension in the pack?"

One day. He'd bought himself twenty-four hours. Would it be enough?

It would have to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Megan growled once Shaun left the room dressed in the same sweatpants he'd worn when he'd forced his way in.

"Why did I let him do this to me?"

They'd made love. She'd agreed to wait one more day before catching her flight. Now what? Stay here—do the time, it was only a day after all—then catch the next flight out. Simple, right? So why did her choice feel so wrong?

Any time with Shaun was dangerous. How many times would he get her into bed in the space of a day?

Only as many times as she allowed him to. Her strength equaled his. Even when he'd pushed her back onto the bed, she could have stopped him. If she'd wanted to, and that was a part of the problem. That's why she, even now, coped with wave after wave of anger when she thought about what they'd shared.

If she hadn't wanted it, then nothing he could have done would have forced her onto the bed. There was no one else to blame; she'd done this to herself by coming home.

Megan growled and stalked across the room into the bathroom. She needed a shower. At least if she was going to talk to the rest of the pack, she'd do so after a bath.

Water hissed into the tub, sending a cloud of steam into the air. Once she'd cleaned herself off, she could face him again. Clean clothes. Washed hair. No trace of his scent. It would be easier this way. She took a deep breath and tossed the robe aside. That would need to be washed as well, the mingled scent would have seeped into the cloth—not something she wanted to take with her. Other shifters would be able to pick up on that, and she'd be marked for the rest of her life.

She grabbed her shower gel, fresh towels, and stepped into the heated caress of the water. She closed her eyes and opened the gel, tipping a decent handful into her palm. The fresh smell hit her, tropical fruit. Good.

Bubbles foamed in her hands as she smoothed them over her naked, wet flesh. Her skin tingled. Even here she could feel his presence. Taste it in the air. Shit, of course. He'd used the bathroom. Had he used one of her towels?

She growled and scrubbed down her body, then used half a bottle of shampoo on her hair. She had to get rid of the smell. Or at least bury it for a time being. She didn't belong to him...

*Yes, she did.*

She blinked and rinsed out her hair. Shaun would be better off without her. She'd be able to find a life elsewhere. Once they were apart, they could move on with their lives.

Alone?

No, she wasn't going to spend the rest of her life alone. There were other shifters out there, ones who didn't belong to the pack, who wouldn't expect her to take over as the female alpha. She didn't want the extra responsibility of being the pack alpha, not

on top of everything she was already involved in. Sooner or later she'd find herself torn in two between her work and the pack. She had a career ahead of her. One that meant leaving her home and the pack. Why would she want to stay with him?

*Because he's my mate.*

Megan growled at the thought. She wasn't staying with him. Once she was on the plane it would be easier. His presence wouldn't be there, infecting her every thought and move. A wicked smile touched her lips.

An infection.

She'd never thought of the mate bond as that before, but it fit.

Megan cranked the water to cold and shivered beneath the icy assault. Her skin grew taut. Her nipples hardened into pips that stood out from her body, begging for something more than the harsh touch of the ice-cold water.

It wasn't working.

She turned the water off and grabbed her towels, wrapping one around her hair and the other around her body. Shivering, she rubbed herself down and walked back into her bedroom, searching for clean clothes. At least that was one good thing with the timing, she'd had most of her clothing already packed, so she didn't have to look too hard to find what she needed.

Shaun would be waiting for her, with Ella, and she couldn't hide upstairs for the entire day. She tucked her clean shirt into her jeans, pulled on her sneakers, and headed for the kitchen. Food. Coffee or juice, maybe both. Either way she wasn't about to face the rest of the pack without something in her stomach.

Ella stood behind Shaun, setting a cup of coffee on the table in front of him, her breast almost touching his arm. Megan growled, the sound catching everyone, including herself, off guard.

"Something wrong, Megan?" Ella smiled and glanced over at her sister and offered a warm, tentative smile.

"I—er—No, everything's fine. Tired, that's all. I wasn't expecting matters to change the way they appear to have done. Sorry, some of the reactions are—Well—I'll get it back under control soon enough."

"Of course you will." Ella's smile twisted into something that left Megan feeling chilled to the core. "Well, you'll need something to eat. I know Shaun has already called a pack meeting."

"Already?"

"No point in delaying things, is there?" Shaun looked up from his coffee. "They need to know. If you still plan on leaving, then we have but a short time to speak to the pack. We meet with them at noon, in the barn here. Your sister has been kind enough to allow us to use it for meetings in the past couple of years, so it will serve that purpose again."

The barn? Well, it made sense. It was away from the town and yet close enough so that the pack could make it here without problems. The humans in town didn't know about their kind, or if they did, they tried to ignore the monsters living amongst them.

Monsters. Oh, she was well aware what the humans thought of shifters. Those who knew of their existence were terrified of them. Horror movies and urban legends had only made matters worse. Fortunately, their existence was kept hidden from the vast majority of humanity.

"So, you're going to announce the mating?" Ella's smile faltered.

"Yes. I don't see a point in hiding it, do you? Not when it will solve some of the problems the pack is currently facing. The females will understand that I'm off the market. The tension with the males will end because the females are no longer looking for a way to get into my bed. It works for all of us."

Ella growled, her shoulders tense, and she turned away from the table. "Fine. Think that way. You're wrong, of course, but you won't accept that until you see it for yourself."

"Ella, what's wrong?" Shaun pushed to his feet, his gaze fixed on the young female.

"You're a fool. They won't accept her as female alpha if she's going to leave. You both know that, even if you're too stubborn to admit it right now."

"They will accept I am mated and no longer on the market. That's the primary issue here." Shaun rested his hand lightly on Ella's shoulder. "Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Megan's hackles rose. This was her mate, her male, and he touched another. How could he do that in front of her? It wasn't right... She was leaving soon enough, and he could do whatever he wanted, with whomever he desired, once she was out of the picture.

"They will expect your mate to stand at your side."

"It won't be the first time a male alpha has led alone. Mates die. Sometimes it's best they are kept apart. The Blood Moon pack is led by a female alpha with no male; her mate – well, it's said she killed him."

"That's different. Mark was a fool, a bully, and an abusive asshole. He deserved to die. Megan's not dead. She's able to stand at your side. She's strong enough to do so, and neither of you wants to kill the other. The pack won't accept this."

"The pack will accept it and..."

"She's right." Megan sighed and rubbed her temples. How had she allowed herself to be tangled up in this mess? Only a fool would believe that the pack would accept their traditions being thrown out the window. "God help us, but she's right. The pack won't accept this easily. Hopefully, they'll believe I'll return after a while. We'll tell them that I've got work. That's not a lie, so body language won't give us away. It's an open-ended contract, so again it will cover some of the uncertainty. Look, I'll explain to them some of what I'm doing. Maybe they'll understand the situation then? It's worth a shot. But if we just announce that I'm leaving, never to return, all hell's going to break loose."

Shaun growled and paced across the kitchen floor. "Well, we'll see how it works. The pack isn't as bound by tradition as you think, so they might be more open to you leaving than you both believe. Trust the pack, and trust me."

Trust? Easy to say, harder to do.

"Fine, do as you wish. You always do anyway, Shaun," Ella huffed and walked out of the kitchen into the yard, the door slamming shut behind her.

"Stubborn."

"It runs in the family." Megan shrugged. "I've never seen her like this, though. It's almost as if..." Realization hit her like a blow to the gut. "She's in love with you."

"It's the position." Shaun's voice became quiet, his words lacking the certainty she was used to hearing from him.

"No, it's not. We both know that. God, why didn't I see it before?" The fact that her sister had turned her over to Shaun only added to the confusion. How could she do that when it was obvious Ella wanted Shaun for herself?

"She did it for the good of the pack. We both know that. Ella isn't going to put her own desires ahead of the pack. She's a good female and deserves a good mate at her side." He sat down at the table and drained the last of his coffee. "How the fuck did we get into this mess?"

"Do you really want an answer to that?"



## Chapter Six

*Kiss her.*

Shaun blinked and struggled to keep his beast under control. Kissing Megan would be a mistake. She'd respond. He'd sweep her onto the table. There'd be sex, again. And Ella might walk back in on them. No matter how deeply he wanted to claim and reclaim Megan, hurting Ella wasn't worth the pleasure of tasting his mate.

"Noon?"

"Sorry?" He frowned and turned his attention back to Megan. "Oh, the meeting. Yes. Noon."

"And the other packs, will they be informed as well?"

"Yes, of course. The stability of the pack is important." His cock throbbed at the sound of her voice, the knowledge of her presence so close to where he now sat. *Now. Do it now*, his wolf urged.

"Yes, I suppose it is. I'd never really thought about it until now. I didn't want to think about it. I had other, more important, things in my life. The pack—they weren't important to me. I know that's heresy to most here, but I wanted my own life."

He smiled. "You're an odd one. You're the only female I know who doesn't want pack alpha status. Why is that?"

"It never interested me." She shrugged and grabbed a mug of coffee before she settled down at the table.

"Don't you realize that means you're the one best suited for the role? You wouldn't be in position because of greed or the desire to lord it over the other females. You'd put the good of the pack ahead of yourself."

"God, you don't know how wrong you are."

"No, I'm not." Why couldn't she see it?

"If I wanted to put the good of the pack ahead of everything else, I wouldn't have run. Don't you get it, Shaun? I'm as selfish as the rest of them; it's just that my desires in life have nothing to do with this damn pack." She drained the coffee and set the now-empty mug down.

The kitchen of the old farmhouse was filled with homey smells. Fresh biscuits. Had Ella been baking? It was possible. The smell might have cut down on the perfume of arousal that would have drifted down from Megan's bedroom.

He wanted to feel some level of pity for Ella but couldn't. Not because he didn't care for Ella—he did—but because he had done the natural thing, at least for his kind.

"Ella... This isn't going to be easy for her."

"Nor will it be for several others in the pack, if what Simon has said is correct." And that was another matter they'd have to face. Did she know about Gemma and the others?

"Ah, you've been approached; it's been more than the longing looks when you're in town?"

"A lot more. Even this morning there was a run-in with one of the other females."

"What?" Megan's entire body tensed, the single word a snarl that sent a shudder down the length of his spine. "Who? What did she do? How dare she—If I—Shit, I'm doing it again."

"Yes, you are." He grinned. "I'm guessing there's at least a part of you that wants to be with me."

"Bah, it's the mating thing, nothing more, and you know how that can work." Megan didn't look at him and wandered across the kitchen. "Hungry?"

"Yeah, sure." His stomach rumbled in agreement. *Not just for food, Megan.* Couldn't she see that? Couldn't she feel the tension in the air every time he looked at her? If she could, she wasn't about to admit to it. Not with the way she was doing her best to avoid looking at him.

"Bacon? Pancakes? Anything in particular you want?"

*You, naked, over the table, with syrup?* the wolf in him suggested.

No, saying that wasn't the best idea right now. Knowing his luck, it would send her scrambling for cover and a locked door to keep him at bay. No, better that he kept such thoughts to himself, or for better times. Saved for a day when she looked at him without fear and without a wary glint in her eyes.

Would that day ever come?

"Food, Shaun?"

"Yes, sorry. Pancakes?"

"Sure." She frowned but said nothing as she turned back to the stove and began to rummage through the cupboards.

Homey. A female preparing food for her mate. Could any male want more?

If she was willing to be at his side, then all would be well. With that he'd be at peace, but such was unlikely to happen; she wasn't the submissive, willing type. Hot, wet, angry, and needful, that suited her far better than submissive.

"Been a while since I made breakfast." She glanced over her shoulder, heat touching her cheeks. "If the pancakes burn, don't blame me. Never did get the first couple right."

"I'm sure they'll be fine. I wasn't expecting you to cook for me."

"I guess not, though it's something that would be a part of being your mate, no doubt." A flicker of resentment flashed across her gaze as she glanced back at him.

"If it's that much of a problem for you, then please, don't bother on my account." He pushed back from the table and frowned, his gaze fixed on Megan. He didn't need this, not from her, not from anyone. "I'll leave. No point in me hanging around, is there?"

"You'd leave? I mean, really leave, until the meeting?" She turned fully to look at him, the surprise real. "Why? Do you have things to do at the farm? Can't Simon handle that for you?"

"Sure, he could, if there was something urgent. No, it's not that. Why the hell would I want to stay in a house with a woman who can't stand me? I'm a shifter, not a fool. So I'll be back when the meeting —"

"But what about Ella?"

"What about her?" Shaun washed the emotion from his face and locked his gaze with Megan's.

"She'll assume something has happened between us. She'll..."

"And I would care, why?"

Megan took a deep breath, shaking as she did so. Heat flushed across her cheeks, her hands clenched at her sides, the pancake mix forgotten on the counter. "You can't humiliate me like this."

"Why not? You've been doing it to me for years, in front of the entire damn pack. Every time I turned around there was an accusing look, the silent question, asking me why I hadn't brought you to heel yet. What do you think that was like for me?" He didn't growl or snarl; he didn't spit the anger at her. Instead his voice was calm, cool, and barely more than a whisper.

Megan flinched, the color draining from her cheeks. "You hate me that much?"

"I don't hate you at all; that's part of the problem." He didn't move. He wanted to. Every fiber in his being screamed at him to move, to pull her into his arms and show her how deeply he wanted her in his life. Not this time.

*She has to move, not me.*

"Ella..."

"She's your sister. You'll be able to explain it to her."

"I can't. She already thinks I'm a selfish bitch. This will only make things more difficult. God, I've hurt her so many times. No, I'm not going to make matters worse between us."

Worse, how could it be worse? He frowned, watching her closely. The urge to wrap her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right grew with each passing moment.

*No, wait. She has to realize that you're not going to be a soft touch. She's a female in the pack and has to be brought to heel.*

So why did that idea feel wrong to the point where he wanted to throttle his wolf?

His shoulders tensed, hands clenched at his sides until he let out a slow breath and forced his body to relax.

"You don't understand. I've already let her down, let the pack down, and..."

"I thought you didn't care about the pack."

"I don't, I mean, didn't—Fuck. I don't know what I mean." Megan leaned against the counter and folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Don't do this to me, please. That's all I'm asking."

"And you deserve that, why?"

"I don't." She faltered and looked away from him. "If what you're saying is true, and I'm not accusing you of lying, then you'd have every right to want to teach me a lesson. But that won't heal things between us. Will it?"

"No, it won't."

"Then what do we do?"

Shaun finally moved toward her and opened his arms. "We try to forget the past and work together. I know it's not going to be easy, but I'm willing if you are."

For a moment Megan didn't move, her body tense, shoulders tight as she leaned against the counter and watched him. "They're going to want me to stay here, aren't they?"

"The pack?"

"Yes."

"You already know the answer to that." Why wasn't she moving? Couldn't Megan see that he was offering the olive branch?

"Yes, but I want to hear it from you. I need to hear it from you. I've been away so long, on the run from you and the pack for so many years, that I'm not sure of anything concerning them."

There it was. The admission. She wasn't as sure of herself as she appeared to be. "Come here, please."

Megan moved swiftly into his arms and buried her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry. My world—I feel like it's been turned upside down, and I barely know what's going on."

Shaun brushed his hand over her hair, his inner beast growling in contentment. She was his mate. She needed to learn to lean on him. Wasn't that the way of things? Alphas led the pack, the female leaning on the male, understanding that she was always submissive to him. Only to him.

"No, the pack won't accept it. We can lie. Try to hide. But they won't accept an alpha being away from the pack for any real length of time. After two or three weeks, there would be a call for me to go after you or lose my position as alpha." His hand itched with the need to tangle into her hair, but he held back. If he could show her, even once, that being his mate was more than dominating her, then they'd have a better

chance. He closed his eyes and held her, stroking her hair, trying to be calm. These were the things that made sense if he wanted to find some calm middle ground with her.

Middle ground? How could there be a middle ground if Megan was the only one forced to give up on her dreams? What would he be giving up?

Nothing.

"I'm not sure I can do this. No, I know I can't. Can't we end the mating? Or..."

"No, for me there's no other choice. I either claim you as my mate or be without a female in my life. My beast will give me no other choice. You are the one I want."

She flinched in his arms. "I don't understand. Shifters choose their own mates. They can have more than one if they so choose, even as an alpha male or female. There's the primary and secondary."

"No, most of us can. Some of us are closer to real wolves than we want to be. Or worse, it takes the need to claim one as a mate to extremes. I can't function with another female." There it was, out in the open, his secret.

"What? You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I wish I were. It would make life a hell of a lot easier, for both of us. Believe me, I don't want to force you into a relationship with me, but the choices are very limited from my side of things."

"Are you saying that, if given the choice, you wouldn't want me for a mate?" Megan tensed within his arms, her voice edged.

"No, oh hell no, Megan. I've always wanted you. Even before the kiss. I've watched you since you first began to change into a woman, but knew I couldn't do anything. So, I waited, hoping you would look my way when the time came. When you finally agreed to—I'd been waiting for that kiss for a long time." His cock twitched at the memory of the kiss. The way she'd blushed and how her lips had parted softly beneath his.

"I didn't know."

"No one did, not even my family."

Megan pulled back enough so she could meet his gaze. "You never spoke of this to anyone? A pack member? A friend? I assumed – I mean, you're the youngest alpha the pack has ever seen, so why wouldn't you..."

"Why wouldn't I act like a kid in the locker room? Because I am the alpha, and I've never forgotten that. Every move I've made, every decision I've anguished over, has been with that in mind. All but one."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I should have brought you to heel, per the laws of the pack, years ago. I didn't; I watched, waited, and hoped you'd come back to me of your own free will. Only when I realized you'd keep running from me did I push things. Really push things with you. Perhaps if I'd said something to you sooner, tracked you down, made you realize how we needed to be together, then things would be different."

Megan shook her head and moved away from his embrace, walking toward the stairs. "I've got a few things I need to think about, Shaun, before the meeting. I can't face the pack like this; they'll see right through anything we tell them. I'm not walking out on you or saying I won't be at the meeting. I'm asking for an hour, at most, to try and make some sense of all of this."

If he gave her the space she needs, and she'd hopefully come back to him. If he tried to hold her too close, he'd crush her.

"Take all the time you need, Megan. I'll be here when you're ready." He smiled and fought to keep his doubts from his face.

What else could he do if he wanted even a chance of it working out between them?



## Chapter Seven

Megan walked slowly up the stairs and into her room. He'd let her go. Not even an argument. Did he trust her? Yes, of course he did; he had to, or he wouldn't have let her walk away, especially after the way she'd pleaded with him to stay and not leave the house.

She closed the door and walked to the small window, looking out into the yard. Ella was there. Somewhere.

She could leave. Get out through the window and make a break for it.

Betray his trust and run like a coward. No, she couldn't do that. He'd let her go if she really wanted to. She wasn't sure she wanted to leave.

*He's the right one. A strong mate. We could rule well here,* her bitch growled in joy at the thought of the male who waited for her in the kitchen. *He runs well. We'd hunt and play. Come, accept him. He needs us, and we need him.*

Her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She couldn't deny how her body reacted when she thought about him. Her eyes closed, shutting out the world as she listened to the noises of the farm. Ella, she was there, not moving, over by the barn. The yard was quiet except for a few birds.

They didn't keep horses or farm animals. Too risky with the way they shifted. Not only that, but there was always the risk that something would happen to set off the beast, and they'd be exposed to the humans. Still, the smell of the fields, of the crops and the way the wind played through the cornfields, added to the peaceful background noise of the farmhouse.

Shaun paced in the kitchen, the sounds of his footfalls unmistakable. He paced back and forth across the room, muttering under his breath.

She'd led him on a merry chase; that much was obvious.

Megan growled and stalked across the room. Only after she'd stalked three times through the room did she realize that she was matching Shaun, step for step. *Wonderful, just fucking wonderful*. Even without a formal acknowledgement of the mating, she was acting as if they were a fully mated and paired-off couple. Not her idea of fun.

The meeting. The entire pack would be here. So why did she have this sudden urge to strip off, walk back down into the kitchen, and fuck him senseless?

Heat rippled between her thighs. It didn't matter to her body that they'd already played this game in her bed maybe two or three hours ago. The scent of their passion still lingered in the air. Her bedding ruffled from the way they had played. Her nipples hardened, pressing against her bra cups. She groaned and clenched her fists, nails digging into the palms of her hands.

The pain didn't help.

She muttered beneath her breath and started to sort through her clothing. It would all need to be washed when she got back to the city. Work... She'd still be back in time to start the contract. She'd left enough time to – What was she thinking? They weren't going to let her leave the pack without tossing Shaun out as the alpha. No matter what she tried to tell herself, that wasn't something she could do to the man.

Megan tensed at the thought. Asking an alpha to give up his pack was unheard of. How could she do that to him?

He was expecting her to leave her work behind.

No, not him, the pack. The traditions were involved. They were bound by laws that they had no part in making.

*Why don't we?* the bitch suggested calmly in the back of her mind.

Megan faltered. Did they have a means of changing things? This was the twenty-first century, not the seventeenth. This was the new world, even by the traditions of their people. So why hadn't anyone attempted to change the rules?

Because they weren't rules. Traditions were a lot harder to overthrow than mere rules. There was nothing written down to argue. Just ideas that had been handed down from one generation to the next. No one argued against them. Yet she couldn't be the only one who was unhappy about the bonds of those traditions.

What was she missing here?

It had to be something simple, something so obvious that she was blind to it.

It took generations for form traditions, and one to alter them. One strong enough to stand up to the rules and to find a way of changing things. Was she that one? Was he?

If she had any sense at all, she'd be downstairs in the kitchen, talking this through with Shaun. So why was she still in her bedroom?

He might try and talk her out of this; perhaps he liked the traditions?

Her stomach knotted. She'd be taking a risk. She knew that. But if not her, then who? How could she expect someone else to stand up in the face of the pack and change things if she wasn't willing to do that herself?

No matter what she'd done wrong in the past, she wasn't going to run from this.

The realization wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She wanted him, but on her terms, not the terms laid out by traditions that were no longer viable.

She glanced at the clock. Enough time to straighten herself up, wash, and be presentable for the meeting. Doing this wasn't going to be easy, but she could at least go

out with a smile. There was a good chance that she'd be verbally torn apart by the pack, if not physically, for what she was about to suggest.

Something moved across the yard, and Megan froze in place. A woman. One of the pack. It was too early for the meeting. What was she doing here?

*Shaun.*

Megan growled and headed for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaun lifted his head and listened. She was there, pacing across the floor in her room. Her steps were sharp. They rang out, making it clear where she was. Good. He'd taken a risk. It was paying off. He couldn't ask for more.

Well, maybe he could.

Right, a willing mate who would stand at his side to rule over the pack. Not going to happen, not as long as he wanted Megan. Maybe it would have been different if tradition allowed mates to live apart for a time.

His stomach growled. He still needed something to eat before the meeting. The last thing he needed was to growl in the wrong way in the middle of it all or lose his temper because his focus was off. Shaun sighed and grabbed the pancake mix and skillet, and started to fix himself something to eat.

Megan would need something to eat anyway. She'd barely had more than a cup of coffee. Maybe Ella would – No, maybe not.

The door creaked open. Ella, good timing.

"I was just thinking about you."

"Hmm, that's good to know."

*Shit, not Ella.*

"Gemma, what are you doing here?" He turned, barely sweeping the skillet from the heat in time. Starting a fire wasn't his idea of a good move. Not right now, at least.

"The meeting, remember?"

"You're early. And in the wrong place. The meeting's to take place in the barn. The house is private property. You don't walk into another female's home without permission."

"You do if you want to beat some sense into the pack alpha." Gemma let the door close behind her. "She's no good for you. You know that. She's not going to be the alpha you need."

"That's between Megan and me, no one else." His jaw clenched.

"No, that's where you're wrong. This involves the pack as a whole." Gemma's smile never touched her eyes. "She can't be the female alpha. You know that. I know that. Even she knows that. It's why she never stays here very long."

The urge to growl and force Gemma onto her back, baring her throat in submission, roared into life. *No. Not yet.* The meeting, he couldn't go into the meeting in a rage; it wouldn't work.

"Leave, Gemma. Now."

"Make me."

Shaun's throat tightened. "Did you just challenge me?"

"Yes." Gemma lifted up her chin and shifted her weight on the balls of her feet. "I did."

"Not here. Not in the farmhouse. Ella and Megan deserve some level of respect."

"You're weak." She turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Fuck, he didn't need this. Not today.

If he didn't follow her out there, then there would be hell to pay.

"I'm waiting," Gemma called from outside.

"Yeah, I bet she is," Megan snarled from the bottom of the stairs.

"Megan, no!"

"Yes. This one's mine."

\* \* \* \* \*

Megan growled, her jaw tight as she stalked out into the yard after the female shifter. Desire, she could smell it. It lingered in the air. All aimed at her man. Her mate, not this female's.

"Well, well. I wasn't expecting you to try and get in the middle of this."

"Back the fuck away from my mate!"

"Your mate?" The female's full lips twisted into a cold smile. "If Shaun was your mate, you'd stand by his side. Not run. Yet you've been running for how long now?"

Never before had Megan felt the urge to tear someone's throat out, let alone another shifter. Yet now she struggled to keep a grip on her temper. Her hands clenched. Teeth grinding. Muscles knotting across her shoulders as she watched her new enemy.

"I'm not running now. I'm here for him, with him. If you can't accept that, then fuck you, sideways, without lube."

The female took a step back, her eyes widening. "What the fuck!"

"You heard my mate, Gemma."

Gemma, yes, she knew that name. "Gemma Roberts? Three grades below me. Little Gemma?" Why did this not surprise her?

"Yes." Another step back with a visible flinch.

"What makes you think you can walk in here, disobey the alpha, and then try to take my mate? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"One who would make a better mate for Shaun than you."

"Don't you think that's his choice? Not yours. He's the alpha. Not you. He's in charge. Not you. See a pattern here, bitch?" The shift slowly moved through her body. Not a full one; a partial. Her nails first, changing into elongated claws with a dangerous edge. "Mess with my mate, and I'll fuck you up seven ways from hell. Get the picture? Or do I have to use smaller words so you'll understand?"

Gemma nodded. "No, I understand."

"Then fuck off. Get out of my sight. I don't want to see you again until the meeting, and if I find out you've been sniffing around my mate again, I'll rip your heart out and eat it before you've had time to die." She took a step forward and lifted her right hand, making sure that Gemma couldn't ignore the claws. "Fuck. Off. Bitch."

Gemma stumbled back, hitting the ground hard, her legs splayed. "I'm sorry. I just thought – You weren't here. You were never here and..."

"Go!" Her gaze narrowed as she watched Gemma scramble to her feet. The other woman didn't say another word. Not right now. Instead she turned and ran. Only when Gemma was gone did she shift back into full human form.

Her hands ached. The shift had been harder to control like this than she had expected it to be. *Fuck, no one ever warned me about partial shifts and anger.* Doing them whilst calm was one thing, almost easy, but angry – she'd almost lost control, and over what? A female trying to steal her mate?

"Gemma's a problem."

"No, Gemma was a problem. She won't be any longer. Not if she knows what's good for her." *Not if she wants to live.* The vehemence in her words shocked even Megan.

"The meeting, do you need to prepare for it?" Shaun touched her shoulder lightly. "You're shaking, Megan..."

Was she? She glanced down at her arms and frowned. "I...I didn't realize. Sorry, I guess..."

"Inside, sit down. You've never stood against another shifter before, have you?"

"Not since a fight when I was fifteen." Did a fight between a couple of teenagers matter or even count now? No, it didn't. Not like this. "Think I need a drink. A real drink, something with a kick."

"You can't, not with the meeting coming up. You're going to have to focus on what's going on."

"Fuck the meeting."

"I'd rather fuck you." He cupped her chin and brushed a soft kiss across her lips.

"If there's no time for me to have a drink, then you're going to have to wait for sex." She pulled away from the kiss despite the fact that her body wanted it. Craved it. "The meeting... They'll be here soon, won't they?"

"Yes, they will be." He sighed and wrapped one arm around her waist. "And we have to be ready to face them. Together."

Her inner walls tightened. Her clit ached. The smell of him, of herself, was all too much to be ignored. She glanced at her watch. They had time. Not much, but time.

"Still, maybe we have time for something..."

"Oh?" He nibbled along her neck, scraping his teeth over her pulse points. "Like what?"

Megan stepped back and looked around. They didn't have time for full sex. Not unless... What was it humans called it? "A quickie? Behind the house, away from the barn."

"Gemma will hear us. Smell us..."

"And I care, why?" *Screw Gemma. She's been warned. She interferes now and I'll knock her halfway across the county.*

Shaun grinned and laced his fingers in her hair before he tugged her away, along the side of the house, and out of the line of sight. She leaned into his touch, into his grip, knowing that she could lean on him. Trust him. He was strong. Stronger than she'd ever thought possible.

How could she have ever believed that she would be able to run from him?

Foolish.

Shaun pushed her against the wall. His free hand was in her jeans before she had the chance to make a sound. She whimpered and rested her hands against the wall,



bracing herself even as she felt her jeans pulled down, along with her panties, around her ankles.

"God, I—You're—We're really going to do this. Aren't we?"

"Yes." He leaned down and bit the back of her neck.

She groaned, arching against him. Her inner thighs slick with heat, need, and desire that had erupted into life with only a few brief touches. She'd never known it could be like this. Never even dreamed that he, or any male, could bring her body to life like this.

The head of his cock pressed between her slick, swollen lower lips. Fuck, she needed this.

"Tell me what you want, Megan."

"I want you."

"How?" His breath caressed the back of her neck, the head of his cock between her thighs, teasing her with a soft, light touch.

"I want you in me. Fuck me. God, please, just fuck me." She didn't scream, her plea a harsh, eager whisper.

He didn't wait. Shaun thrust into her body, filling her.

She groaned, rocking back against him. Her body slick, hungry as it clenched around him. She didn't care who heard her. Or what they might think. Her nails dug into the siding. She needed this. Wanted this.

"Yes, that's it. Move for me. Fuck back against me."

She had no other choice. Her body answered. Her mind had taken a vacation.

"Yes, that's it, my mate. Move. Let go. Let the walls down. Let it happen."

Megan's eyes closed. Waves of pleasure rippled through her body. Sweat beaded across her breasts. Her nipples scraped against her bra cups. Every touch forced her higher, deeper into the maelstrom of sheer pleasure that he'd trapped her into.

Hard and fast, without mercy, without thought, without care of who would hear them.

She couldn't stop it. She didn't want to stop it. Slick sounds filled the air, mingling with low groans, gasps, and the other sounds of their shared passion.

"I-I'm going to..."

"Let it happen," he growled.

Her pussy clenched, released, only to clench again. Each thrust forced her against the side of the house. His balls slapped against her body, hands tight in her hair, holding her in place. She didn't care. Why would she?

Megan tried to swallow the sounds, but her body wouldn't cooperate. Nothing she did seemed to work. She sobbed, the sob turning into a scream of pleasure even as she felt his cock swell and press against her inner walls. His growl merged with her cry as he thrust one last time into her body, filling her before they half collapsed to the ground in a sated heap.

## Chapter Eight

They'd barely cleaned up in time for the meeting, and if they still smelled of sex, he didn't care. Why would he? They were a mated pair. Sex was a normal part of a mating.

The barn had filled up. The male and female members of the pack had answered the call and traveled in from their homes scattered across a thirty-mile radius. Simon settled toward the back of the barn, and Ella leaned against one of the supports closer to the front. Pies, cakes, and other assorted pot dishes had been brought by the pack, a good cover should their gathering capture the attention of local law enforcement. Who'd question a friendly get-together?

Around here, no one.

Shaun took a deep breath and walked to the front of the gathering, his hand tightening on Megan's for a moment before he broke contact. The voices stilled as they realized he wasn't alone. Then the low hisses, the muttered comments as the other members of the pack realized who was with him.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice." Shaun took his place in front of them. "I know several of you changed already-arranged plans to be here."

Megan smiled and stood to one side. Close enough to be touched if need be, but still enough distance between them that they didn't look like young lovers.

"There have been complaints over the past few years about my lack of a mate. Those who knew me understood I was waiting for one female. Megan. You didn't understand what was going on, or why I had decided to wait, to hold out hope for her return."

More than a few of those gathered nodded or murmured something that he couldn't quite catch.

"I waited because it was the right thing to do. She's my mate. That's been confirmed today. Megan has accepted that she belongs with me as my mate, and the female alpha of this pack."

"About bloody time, Shaun!" someone called out from the back of the room. More than one male sighed in relief at the news, whilst several of the unmated females whimpered and looked away.

"Will she be staying home now or be pissing away her time in the cities?" An older female moved toward the head of the group.

"Fiona? You're Gemma's aunt, right? Well, I won't hide the fact that Megan has to return to the city for a short while, but there's a contract she's bound by and..."

"Yeah, we all know what Megan will do. She'll leave and never come back. Come on, Shaun. You know what she's like. She's playing you. Everyone here knows that, even if you refuse to see it." Fiona scowled and folded her arms beneath her breasts.

"What's to stop me from completing the contract and then working from home?" Megan moved toward Fiona, calm despite the confrontation with Gemma earlier.

"Pack law forbids..."

"No, pack tradition. Not law. Big-ass difference. There is no law that says the pack alphas have to be in the presence of the pack at all times."

"It's not done," Fiona protested.

"Like hell. I can name three packs within this state that either have only one alpha there, or the second alpha is only there part time because of work or other commitments. It's tradition that dictates that demand. Not law."

"It's the same thing."

"No, it's not." Megan didn't move. "You know it. I know it. Shaun knows it. No one has ever verbally questioned this before. The only reason you're doing so now is because you want your niece to have a chance with Shaun. I'm betting there's a similar reason for some of the others here today."

Shaun smiled and moved toward her, sliding one hand into hers. "Megan is my mate, and she has given her word in the form of a contract. If she'd signed a contract in the next county over, or even two, you'd have no problems. Think about that for a minute."

A ripple of voices, whispers and soft murmurs, moved through the assembled members of the pack.

"How do we know she'll come back?"

"Because I know my sister." Ella moved from the support post into their line of sight. "And I know Shaun."

"Ella, you don't have to do this."

"Yes, Megan, I do. There's not a member of this pack who doesn't know how I feel about Shaun. But I am a member of this pack. I'm going to do what I can to protect the pack. And that includes helping my sister keep her word. There's a contract. I've seen it. She'll be away for a month. One. Lousy. Month."

"A month where I'll be visiting her. On weekends. So it doesn't cause problems with her work. I'll be traveling into the city with her, leaving tomorrow and returning in four days' time."

Megan's breath hitched, her gaze liquid. "You never—I mean, I didn't expect that."

He pulled her close, not caring what the pack felt about his actions. "You're my mate. I need to know everything about you, including your time in the city."

"But you hate the city."

"I can put up with it if it means getting to spend more time with you." He brushed his thumb over her cheek, lost in her gaze. "A couple of days here, a few there. Not so hard to deal with. And then you'll be home with me, where you belong."

\* \* \* \* \*

It had all been almost too easy. Megan sighed and looked out over the farm. The pack had broken up into small groups, talking, sharing their meal on spread blankets as if this were a normal picnic. Exactly the way it was supposed to look. So why did she feel as if something was wrong?

She was missing something.

She watched the gathering, the small groups that sat and ate in family units or couples. Whatever they were talking about, she didn't know, nor did she truly care. The words weren't important. It was how they acted...

Tension, a hunch, a sideways look, there had to be something that would warn her where the danger was coming from.

Stupid. She knew where it was coming from. Gemma. Gemma and her aunt.

No, too obvious.

She growled and turned away from the gathering. She needed to clear her head. As far as she knew, everything was fine. She was on edge, nothing more. The pressure of being announced as the new alpha. The way everyone was acting. It wasn't something she was used to dealing with.

"Megan?" he whispered and nuzzled against the back of her neck.

She tensed, then relaxed, taking a slow breath. "Sorry, I was — Never mind. You all right?"

"I'm fine, more worried about you. You've been very quiet since the meeting."

"I need to run. Hunt. Get this worked out of my system."

"Tense?"

"That's one way of putting it." The danger, whatever it was, wasn't coming from here. Not fully.

"Then I'll run with you." He wrapped his arms about her waist and pulled her in close. "I need a break as well."

"If we both leave, then the pack will..."

"Screw the pack," he growled, scraping his teeth over her neck. "I want to spend some time with my mate. Alone. Away from all of this."

Megan whimpered and closed her eyes. "Yes, please. God, I need to get away from this. Away from them." This is the reason she'd run. Not Shaun. The pack; the pressure from them, their expectations, it had all been too much, even back then. Now, older, wiser, and stronger, it was still harder than she had ever expected it to be.

They expected too much from her.

*Is it the pack or me?*

Megan sighed and leaned into his touch. At least Shaun was there for her. "When do we leave?"

"Soon. Let me talk to your sister first. She's going to have to hold things together for us when we leave. It's only fair that..."

"I'll be here; don't worry." She turned and nuzzled against his lips. "I'm not going anywhere. Trust me."

"I do. Trust you, I mean."

"Yes, but for how long?"

He smiled, claiming her lips, his tongue parting them with a firm caress. Her body tensed, then melted, eager for more. So much more than a single kiss. She arched against him, nipples hard and her inner walls liquid with a hunger that only he could

answer. Soon; he'd answer the hunger soon. When they were away from here. Away from the pack and the crowds.

He pulled away from the kiss and smiled before he turned and headed off in search of Ella.

Ella... She deserved better than this, but she couldn't have Shaun.

Without a word, she turned and walked away from the gathering. Shaun would find her. He'd follow her scent. Waiting would only make matters worse for her. The tension wasn't going away, her muscles now so tight that she felt she might snap in two.

Her clothes hit the ground, forgotten as she stepped away nude and uncaring of who might see her. Shifters saw one another naked during shifts, which killed the normal embarrassment that humans might endure. The shift hit with ease, though there was no denying the pain that ripped through her body as she changed into lupine form. She stretched out, arching her back as she rejoiced in the feeling of being a wolf once more. This is who she was.

*Catch. Hunt. Run.*

She glanced back over her shoulder. No sign of him. Not yet at least. He'd find her soon enough.

Megan loped away toward the tree line. If she'd shifted anywhere else, she'd have been wary of being seen by the wrong person. Not here. Here, she was safe.

Her paws ate up the ground beneath her feet as she ran across the open fields. *Hunt.* The wolf was right; she needed to hunt. Even if she only tracked down something small, like a rabbit. Well, there'd be something she could chase down in the trees. There always was.

Living in the city had deprived her of the chance to run and hunt, and she'd been spoiled with living out in the countryside. There wasn't anywhere to hunt or run in the city. New York had to be the worst, though she'd heard of packs that used Central Park.



The thought sat ill at ease with her. It was almost as if those who lived in such places gave in to the urban myths about their kind.

A werewolf in Central Park!

*Right, and I'm going to find a human, have sex with him, and bite him to turn him into a shifter.* The only way a bite worked to turn someone into a shifter was if they had the latent gene. In other words, carried shifter blood. This entire idea of biting someone to turn them into a shifter, or vampire, had caused more problems for their kind than anything else.

Every time someone caught wind of the shifters, the rumors started again. How they hunted down and ate children. Seduced innocent men and women in order to feed on them or curse them with a bestial existence.

Most werewolves stayed away from humans. They smelled wrong. Felines were another matter. They'd fuck anything given half the chance. The females often didn't have a choice, not with that itch they had to scratch. Bears were always afraid that they'd break a human. Foxes saw them as a game, something to play with. Of course, the humans only ever really thought about werewolves when they discussed shifters.

The last time a human had touched her, she'd...

A new scent caught her attention.

Wolf?

No, werewolf. Female.

Megan turned toward the scent...

Something barreled into her, knocking her to the ground. Teeth snapped at her flank. She growled, twisting, struggling to get away from her attacker. She didn't think. Didn't care who it was behind the attack. All that mattered right now was surviving the fight.

The ground tore up beneath their claws. The female snapped, growling as she darted forward and tried to latch onto Megan's throat. Pain lanced through her flank.

She howled and twisted, her teeth sinking into the fur-covered flesh of her attacker. She didn't know where, or who, but she tore at the captured flesh, cutting deep.

Blood filled her mouth.

The bitch howled in pain and tried to break free.

Megan snarled. She wasn't going to let go. Not now. Not when she had the female on the run. Whoever this was, she'd attacked the wrong wolf.

Another howl rang out.

*Shaun?*

She'd know that sound anywhere.

The bitch screamed and tried to get free from Megan's teeth. It didn't work.

Shaun growled, the order clear. *Let go of her.* No matter what Megan might feel, he was still the alpha and her mate. Still, it didn't stop her from getting one last snap in before she let go.

The bitch whimpered and tried to crawl away. She didn't get far. Shaun leaped across the clearing and pinned the female to the ground. His teeth snapped inches from the bitch's throat, the growl one that would have stopped any member of the pack in their tracks.

Megan hissed. Her left flank bled heavily. She blinked and looked down at the now-cowering female wolf.

*Gemma.*

Shaun growled and closed his teeth on Gemma's throat, forcing the female to bare her throat fully in the process.

Megan shifted back into human form and clamped her hand against her bleeding side. Spots danced across her vision. Her breath burned in her lungs. She took a step forward, but her knees threatened to give out.

*"You attacked my mate!"* Shaun's mental growl filled the air. *"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't rip your throat out."*

Gemma whimpered again but didn't move.

*"What the fuck did you think you were doing, Gemma?"*

Gemma didn't answer; she didn't even blink.

"She's not going to answer while you've got your teeth around her throat, Shaun." Megan's voice shook, and she frowned. Weak. She didn't want to appear weak in front of others. Weak meant that she was the prey, not the hunter.

Shaun released his grip on Gemma. Within an instant, the female shifted back into her human form, her body covered in scratches, maul marks, and bites.

*How many times did I bite her?*

Did that really matter right now? Megan tried to take a step closer, but her knees threatened to give way again. "Answer him, Gemma, before he decides that you're a risk to the pack and takes you out."

Gemma swallowed hard and tried to wet her lips. It didn't work. Her entire body shook. The scent of terror rose from her in a cloud of sweat, blood, and a hint of urine. "I...I wasn't thinking."

"Wrong answer. Try again."

"I'm not..."

Shaun's growl cut off Gemma's protest.

"Don't push him, Gemma. He's pissed. You know it. I know it." She pressed one hand against her side. At least that was one thing with shifters. They healed quickly. Within a few hours, there'd be nothing left but a few bruises.

"I...I wanted you—I mean Megan—out of the way." Gemma's gaze flashed between the wolf who stood over her and the woman who stood nearby. "I-I thought if I could run her off..."

Shaun growled again.

"Bad. Fucking. Move." Megan's hands clenched into fists. "I'm his mate. Got it, bitch!"

Shaun stepped back and shifted into human form. "You tried to kill my mate."

"Ye—No, I just wanted to chase her away."

Didn't she understand how a mating worked? "I didn't get a choice in this, Gemma. He picked me. I didn't pick him. Got it yet? He won't let me leave. I've been trying for years, and he's never given up on me, never stopped waiting for that one time I'd stop and finally accept him."

"I thought—My aunt said if you were chased away, he'd turn to someone else this time." Gemma gulped, her own wounds healing even as she spoke. "If you were gone..."

"I'd hunt her down and bring her back home where she belongs." Shaun's voice was ice, shards of ice that spat out across the clearing. "I'm not going to lose her. If I have to kill you or kill anyone else who tries to separate us, then so be it."

"Shaun."

"I'm going to tear your throat out and drag you back to the house, then dump you in front of your aunt before I kill her."

"Shaun..."

"You betrayed the pack. You betrayed everything we stand for. We do not attack our own." His hands shifted back into claw tipped monstrosities, his jaw lengthened, and the light of sanity faded from his eyes.

"Shaun, no!" Megan didn't hesitate. She dived for him, wrapping her arms about his waist as she tumbled him to the ground. "Don't do this. She's not worth it."

He struggled in her arms, but only for a moment.

"That's it. Relax. She's not going anywhere. She knows you can hunt her down. You're better than this. Breathe and let it go." She rubbed one hand along his back, massaging carefully.

Tense, so very tense, and with good reason.

"I wouldn't have killed her. Please. You have to believe me. I just wanted to scare her off. That's all."

"Shut. Up," Megan hissed over Shaun's shoulder.

Gemma flinched.

"She could have killed you." He finally spoke, not ranted or growled, but spoke. "I don't want to lose you."

"You're not going to." She relaxed her grip and rocked, holding him against her nude, slick form. "I'm not going to leave you."

"Promise me."

"I'm not leaving you, ever," she whispered against his ear.

Shaun wrapped his arms around her and sobbed...

## Chapter Nine

"I can't believe she did that."

"Gemma. God, it doesn't make sense."

"I knew she was infatuated with him, but to take it this far makes no sense. He'd chosen. Mated. Nothing can change that except the death of the mate. And everyone knows the remaining mate hunts down the killer. No matter who they are."

Shaun tried to shut it out. Their words. It didn't work.

"He should have killed her."

"No, he didn't have the right. Megan is still alive. Gemma was injured in the fight. It's all over and done with. If there is to be retribution, that's down to Megan, not Shaun." Simon's voice broke through the maelstrom of complaints. "If the two females want to sort things out later, then it will be done according to the laws of the pack."

"Traditions," Fiona snapped.

"What?"

"Megan made a big deal of it. They're traditions, not laws. If she can play that card, so can we."

"Game? Megan wasn't playing a game."

"That's enough." Shaun finally stood up. "You're lucky I don't have you expelled from the pack right now."

"What?" The color drained from Fiona's face.

"You told your niece what to do. Pushed her to do it. She made it clear she was acting on your orders." Shaun struggled to keep his temper under control.

"Gemma is her own woman."

"Gemma relies on you. There isn't a member of the pack who doesn't know that. You tell her to jump, she says how high and when do you want me to come back down. You told her what to do. How to do it. She's weak. Too weak to be an alpha. We know that. You know that. She's an omega at best."

"No. Don't you go talking about my Gemma like that. She's a good woman. Good wolf. She was doing the right thing. Th-that Megan, she's the problem. She's breaking tradition and..."

"Fine, if that's the problem, I can step down as alpha." Even as the words left his lips, a tension he hadn't even known was there eased from across his shoulders.

"What?" Simon growled from the doorway. "What the fuck did I just walk in on?"

Good, this would make it easier. With Simon as a witness to his initial decision, it would be harder for the pack to fight against it.

"You heard me. I'm stepping down. I don't want to be alpha. If you can't accept my choice of mate, then find someone else to lead. I'm out of this. You made this mess. You deal with it." His voice barely above a whisper. Cold and hard, without mercy or room to negotiate.

"You're insane. They'll never accept it." Simon settled into place near Fiona.

"Yes, they will. I'm not giving them another choice."

"You can't. You can't walk out on the pack because of me, Shaun." Megan moved behind him and placed one gentle hand on his arm.

"I'm not doing this because of you, Megan. They've brought this on themselves. They're not happy when I'm unmated, they protest when I take a mate; then two of the pack, if not more, plot to have my mate killed. I'm not the alpha to them. I'm a figurehead they like to push around." Anger bubbled into life, but he struggled to keep it under control. "No more. If they want someone else as the alpha, they've got their wish."

Megan's grip tightened on his arm. Every member of the pack within hearing distance turned to look at them. Silence settled on the assembled group.

Was he doing the right thing?

Yes. Deep within, he knew the answer was yes. They'd stifled him for too long.

"Shaun, think about this, please." Megan pleaded.

Simon frowned and moved away from Fiona. "Shaun, man, listen to me. This isn't worth throwing your life with the pack away. You've spent the last ten years building this pack up. Putting it back together. Now you're going to let them drive you away. This isn't like you."

Wasn't it?

"Simon, do you even know how I became alpha? Seventeen years old and the youngest alpha in the history of the pack."

"No, man. You know I moved in two years after that shit hit the fan."

"It's because no one else wanted the damn job. Not one of the males in the pack wanted the fuckin' headache of stepping up into the position and taking over. Not even your deceased mate, Fiona." He shot a cold look at the female. "He had the age, the rank, the strength, but no, he didn't want it. He was more interested in a few good beers at the end of the night and chasing any available female, especially if it meant not going home to face you."

Fiona snarled, "I told him to take his place at the head of the pack. He wouldn't listen. That killed him."



"No, getting behind the wheel of the truck with enough alcohol in his system to bring down the entire pack got him killed." Shaun shook his head. "If you hadn't been so damn power hungry, maybe he'd still be alive."

"How dare you!"

"Back the fuck down, now!" Simon snapped and turned his dark, intense gaze on the older woman. "Let him have his say. God alone knows that you've had yours. Behind his back, in huddled corners, whispers you've not had the courage to say to his face. Well now it's his turn."

*Thank you, man. I owe you.* No matter what, Simon had stood by him, even when his decisions hadn't been the best or well thought through.

"Out of all of you, only two members of the pack have stepped up to do their duty. Ella and Simon. If you would seek alphas, look to them. They are a hundred times better suited to lead the pack than I ever was."

Simon's jaw dropped. His eyes widened, hands clenched even as the color drained from his face. "No, hey, don't even—I'm not the alpha."

"You could be."

"And Ella?" Megan whispered, her hand still firm on his arm.

"Can you think of anyone better suited for the position of female alpha? She's selfless. Levelheaded. Calm. Focused. Even in the middle of all this mess, she's pushed her own desires to the back and done what was best for the pack." It was all so obvious now that he thought about it. Ella. Simon. Two steadfast, strong members of the pack.

"Shaun, I can't. I'm not—God, you're serious." Ella slipped through the pack, her eyes wide, lips trembling. "I'm not an alpha. Simon, please, tell him."

"Why? It wouldn't be the truth. You're shy but strong. I've seen how you pull the others in line given the chance. The way you've walked into the middle of an argument and put an end to it. Why else do you think they started to keep their grudges and discontent silent when you were around?" Shaun closed the distance between himself

and Ella and rested one hand on her shoulder. "Trust me on this even, if you don't trust yourself."

Was he doing the right thing? Ella's terror was clear across her face, her breath trembling through her body, as if she were facing a firing squad rather than the ultimate position for a female in the pack. Shaun's gaze narrowed. His gut twisted. Was he betraying the pack, Ella, or Megan?

*No. I'm not the right one to lead the pack. I've had to, but now it's time to live for me, not for them.*

Selfish. That's what his father would have called him. A selfish young cub who thought of nothing but himself. No, not selfish, not with what his mate was involved in. Perhaps he could find a way to help Megan with her work.

"Shaun, the pack needs time to think on this. Not just the pack, but Ella and Simon both. They're not mated, and to set up an unmated pair as the head of the pack is unheard of. But perhaps this is exactly what was needed." Megan sighed and looked over the pack. "Ella, Simon, if you would come with us? Please. I think there are matters we should discuss before this is put formally to the pack."

Relief washed through Shaun's being. At least Megan had an idea of what was needed, and she'd stepped up to take charge. No matter what she might think, Megan was alpha material. "Yes, Ella, Simon, I'd like to talk to you both. In the kitchen, unless you have a better idea, Ella?"

For several long minutes Ella didn't move. Then she nodded and took a deep breath. "All right, but no promises."

"None expected." If the pack didn't accept this, then it could tear them apart once and for all.

No, he had to believe this would work. Now that he'd given voice to the idea, he felt lighter. A hope he had not felt in a long time had returned to put a spring in his step. It wouldn't matter to the naysayers in the pack if Megan stayed at the farm or

worked in the city. They'd never accept her. And as for himself? He lived in a house that he shared with Simon. Sure, it had been his mother's, but was it home?

Simple answer...

No.

Simon lived there. Shaun existed there. Simon called it home. Shaun called it a place to crash. The only thing that had kept him here had been his hope that Megan would accept him. Now she'd done that, why stay?

The pack?

No, they didn't want him. Didn't need him. They needed someone they respected or would at least listen to. An alpha with the strength to face them down, tear out a throat or two if needed, and that male was Simon.

"All right. What the fuck's going on with you, Shaun?" Simon turned and faced him the moment they were safe away from prying eyes. "Me as alpha? Are you out of your mind? Why would they listen to me?"

"Because you'd tear them a new one if they didn't, which is exactly what they need." Shaun sat down at the kitchen table. "Sit down. Both of you."

Ella frowned but eased into one of the chairs, followed by Simon, Megan, and Shaun. The tension at the table was palpable. But he'd expected it. Especially with the events with Gemma and Fiona. God, those two would be a handful, but if he stayed as the alpha, he'd have them both killed. Or would do so himself. Not a good idea.

"Shaun, Megan, this is ridiculous. You can't expect us to take over."

"Why not, Ella? If not you and Simon, then who? Can you name another who would do the job without twisting it to suit their own needs?"

"I'm at a loss to understand the change myself, Shaun. I'm not complaining. Don't think that. I don't want to be the alpha. I'm more suited to time on my own, away from the politics of the pack. They pick and fight over anything that catches their attention." Simon protested, shaking his head.

"You just need to be firm with them, Megan. That's all. Stand up to them when they start on their fights. Shout over them, if need be. Shake one to the ground, by the throat if they refuse to listen. It's easy enough once you've made them realize you won't take their shit." Ella reached out across the table and took hold of her sister's hand.

Megan rubbed her temples with her free hand. "I'm confused about this entire situation. One minute he's telling me that the pack will accept it. Now..."

"I was lying to myself, love. We both know that. The way they haven't called for Gemma's death or expulsion from the pack shows that much. Shit, if they'd plotted to kill my mother, all hell would have broken loose."

Silence fell around the table.

Beyond the farmhouse, the rest of the pack waited for a decision. One that might be a first in the known history of the shifters, or if it had been done before that no one had seen fit to inform the local councils.

Shit, that was another problem. How did they present this to the council? Sure, the packs were entitled to rule themselves, but they still had to take part in the local council, to help prevent the humans from discovering their existence.

What had he started?

\* \* \* \* \*

Megan sighed and slipped her hand from beneath Ella's. Her side ached. The skin hot beneath her touch. Odd. It didn't make sense; werewolves healed quickly once they returned to human form.

What of Shaun? How could he do this to her? To them?

*What has he done? Given me – us – a chance at a real life? One away from the pack. Away from plots to have me killed and put another in my place? Is that really such a bad thing?*

No, of course not.

So, why was she upset? On the face of things, the change was a good idea. They could move, go wherever they wanted. Shit, with her line of work they could move as

often as they wanted. One city one month, a small town on the other side of the country the next. With her computer skills and ability to build custom security systems, they'd never lack for money. Or options. So why was she even remotely upset about this really?

He hadn't discussed this with her first. He just assumed she'd go along with his plan.

"All right, so maybe you're correct. They won't accept me, no matter what, because I left or didn't welcome your pursuit of me or the sky is the wrong shade of blue, but turn over leadership of the pack? Are you insane?" Megan met his gaze, searching for a trace of an answer, some level of understanding on what he was doing. She winced and moved a little in the chair. The bones were bruised, that's all. She was healing more slowly than she'd expected to. She'd be fine within a couple of hours.

When was the last time she'd fought in wolf form? Years. Even then it had been a brief scuffle. Nothing like this. She was overreacting, that's all. The pain, the burning in her side, was nothing.

Nothing...

"No, I'm not insane; I feel as though I'm thinking clearly for the first time in a lifetime. I took over the pack because I was pressured into it. They'd had a wonderful alpha, my father, and they assumed I'd be content to step up and take his place. None of his seconds wanted it. No, they'd become fat and lazy with my father in charge. So, what other choice was there? I had to take his position."

Sorrow, such sorrow in his voice. She'd never heard its like before. Why hadn't she heard this before? Then again, why would she have known? How old had she been when he'd taken over the pack? Still in high school. Two years before she'd graduated? Yes, that would be about right.

Sweat beaded across her brow, and she wiped it off, irritated. Why was she sweating? It wasn't that hot.

Water. She needed something to drink.

No, moving was a bad idea. Her legs didn't feel quite right. Tired. The shock from the attack. Yes, that made sense.

"I've done all I can for the pack. They'll no longer listen to me unless it suits their needs. So I'm done with them. Megan, this isn't about you, not fully. It's about the lack of respect. I'd have to fight my way through the entire pack in order to earn their respect again. They're not worth it." The relief in his voice told her far more than his words.

"I think I begin to understand." *Forgive me for thinking ill of him. Please. I never thought – never knew that this would be so hard on him.* Concentrating on his words took every ounce of effort she had. "I wasn't aware of what had happened. Or how the pack was run prior to finishing school. After you and I—the kiss—I left before I ever took part in pack affairs as anything but a child."

Shaun smiled, then turned his attention back to the others in the room. The lines, the small lines she'd always seen around his eyes or across his brow, had eased. Nonexistent compared to how they'd been before. Peaceful. No, not quite, but he was close to that. Content with his decision; yes, that made more sense.

"I'm asking a lot from both of you. The work. The responsibility. The way they will fight the change. They'll fight it all and you both, so if you turned me down and expected me to continue to run the pack, I'd understand and accept that. I'll find a way to bring them to heel and make sure they do not harm my mate again." Shaun looked back at Megan and smiled, though, for a moment, the lines returned around his eyes. "Megan, I know, will back me on this."

*Will I now?* Nice of him to ask her first, real bloody nice.

Her shoulders clenched, hands tightened into fists; he was at it again. Making decisions, announcements, without checking with her first. *He's used to doing this. He's been alpha.* That didn't help how she felt right now. He'd dropped her into the situation without asking her what she wanted.

Fuck, this was going to take some getting used to.

In more ways than one. Her stomach knotted, then settled again. When had she last had something to eat? She was light-headed and tired, that's all. God, once this was over, she'd sleep for a week.

Maybe not for the entire week, but bed would be her best friend. Bed, pillows, and Shaun. Sex. Lots of sex.

"Are you so sure she's willing to back you?" Simon grinned. "She doesn't look too happy right now. Come on, Shaun; you've got a lot to learn about females."

"What?"

Megan sighed. She didn't need this, not right now. "We'll talk about this later."

"No. If I've screwed up, better to know now before it goes any further."

"You're not going to let this drop, are you?"

"No."

"Fine, on your own head be it." He'd left her no choice, but she wasn't going to take the heat for this one. "You don't ask me what I want. You just do the alpha male thing and assume. Would it kill you to check what I want first? I mean, sure, out there it might have made you look a little weak. But here? Ten minutes, five maybe. A quiet talk in my room, then back down here to talk to Ella and Simon. Simple, isn't it? So why is it so hard for you to remember to do that?"

Shaun's jaw clenched, color raced across his cheeks, and he blanched as he shifted in his chair. "Oh—erm, fuck."

"Not right now, thanks."

Shaun's jaw dropped, Ella swallowed a laugh, and Simon made no attempt to hide his amusement.

"Now, for the record, yes, I think he's on the right track. I'd end up killing Gemma or Fiona if they tried anything like this again. I don't believe the pack would take that well, not after their lackluster response to Gemma's assault and Fiona's involvement in the situation." Megan frowned. Why hadn't they been upset about the attack?

"There are more than a few in the pack who believe Fiona should have been permitted to step up and lead the female members. When Gemma started to voice her interest in Shaun, well, more than one thought she should be the new alpha. Though, obviously, she doesn't have the temperament. She's too easily led. Anything Fiona wanted, Gemma would do." Ella leaned back in her chair, her eyes half closed as she spoke. "Fiona is the true danger. Gemma, a willing pawn."

"It wouldn't work without a male to back her, so who is it?"

"Shaun, why do you presume there's only one? Fiona has never been one to welcome company." Ella's smile never faltered.

There was nothing wrong with a male or female of the pack taking lovers instead of mates. It was simply a part of pack life. Occasionally, you even found a happily mated triad or quad. Lovers were a different matter. Because of the lack of permanent bond between those involved, the males were less willing to share their lover with another for the time they were keeping company. However, to use those lovers as a means to power, that was frowned on.

"Do they know about each other?" Shaun inquired.

"I doubt it. Our males tend not to be willing to share lovers, except in rare circumstances. She'll be doing something to cover the scent—what I'm not sure, but there are ways of doing it if you have the resources. It would need some looking into." Ella tapped one finger against her chin.

"Witch?"

"Could be. The only one in town is Vera." Ella smiled, nodding half to herself. "She's a decent sort, so I can't see her being willing to sell the potions needed to cover a scent. However, she might have told Fiona about another witch. It's something to look into."

Witch potions. They weren't the only way, but other means would leave traces that were all too easy to spot. Vinegar, for one. The acrid smell would immediately alert a lupine shifter. No, a potion was the only viable option.



A witch would be the only one who could fully answer the question.

"Vera might be willing to help identify the potion, if we asked her. Especially as she wouldn't have sold it to Fiona in the first place. Yes, I think she'll help us investigate this matter." Shaun nodded.

"Gemma. She's the one behind the potion. I remember she had an interest in such things when she was still at school. Besides, hasn't she traveled a little?" Simon mused. "Cousins in the next state? Something like that?"

"Yes, I think so. That might be the answer. Shit, I wish we had more time. They'll be expecting an answer." Megan frowned. Was she missing anything else, a piece of the puzzle? Her head ached so deeply now that she was having problems thinking straight. Had she hit her head during the fight?

Not that it mattered right now.

Megan closed her eyes, focused her thoughts, then returned her attention to the those around the table.

She wouldn't know for certain what Fiona was up to until they had the answers about the potions. If Vera couldn't provide an answer, then she'd be able to suggest who they needed to talk to. Her head pounded. The pressure behind her eyes threatened to overwhelm her, but she didn't have time to feel sick.

"Yes, they will be expecting to hear from us, Megan. But we didn't tell them when they'd be told. Did we?" Shaun's smile darkened, his gaze narrowed on Megan for a moment. "You're looking tired. Screw them; they can wait. If it takes us an extra day or two to get to the bottom of this, then so be it. We take as long as we need to. This matter can't be left to rot any longer."

Megan hesitated. Was this really the best of moves? The pain in her head grew without warning, pressing down on the back of her eyes. "Why are we taking this effort? We're leaving, aren't we? No offense to Ella or Simon, but wouldn't this be something they deal with. Not us?" The moment she uttered the words, she regretted them. "Sorry, I'm being a bitch. I know."

"Isn't that the nature of the beast?" Ella smiled. "I know you didn't mean it. I understand you feel trapped. However, if we can get to the bottom of this, you'll be safe to visit home whenever you wish. I don't want to spend half my life looking over my shoulder, checking to see if Gemma or another of her ilk is trying to find you and kill you. Or that they're about to stab me in the back."

*This isn't like me. I'm not selfish, not like this, so what the fuck has gotten into me? What if they do come after Ella? She doesn't deserve that. She's done everything possible to try and help the pack and protect me, even from my own stupidity.*

Yes, there was that. If they'd come after her, why wouldn't they then try to kill Ella if she was now the threat to someone else taking over as female alpha. "I still shouldn't have—I spoke before I thought things through. Fuck. There are times. Times I don't think. I'm sorry. I've done so many stupid things recently. Betrayed you by not being here, by leaving, by being the one that Shaun wanted when—I'm sorry." The words stumbled from her lips.

Her stomach rolled.

"Megan? What's wrong?"

The world threatened to swim before her vision even as she pushed back from the table. She closed her eyes and lowered her head to the table.

Shaun's nostrils flared. "Poison!"

"What?" Ella pushed back from the table, her chair scraping across the floor.

"Check her side. Megan. Megan, open your eyes. Look at me!"

Her eyes were heavy, but she struggled to open them. The world swam before her, a mess of colors, a child's paint box tipped out and smeared into vaguely recognizable shapes.

"Get Vera now!"

## Chapter Ten

"How's she doing?" Shaun stood up as Vera walked into the kitchen. The witch wasn't much older than he was, perhaps thirty-five at most, but like most of his kind, he respected her. Witches were born with a talent, but it took years of training and dedication to turn that talent into something usable. That, if nothing else, had to be respected.

Of course, it didn't hurt that a witch was capable of killing a shifter. Or cursing them.

"She's tired but will heal." Vera set her bag down on the table. "She needs rest more than anything else and time for the antidote to work."

"So she was poisoned? God, I'd hoped I was wrong. Who could have..."

"The poison was in the wound. Even the healing your people experience in the shift from animal to human or back again wouldn't deal with poison."

"I don't understand. How could—Oh, fuck." Understanding that he'd tried to ignore hit him full force like a blow to the gut. "Gemma."

"The fight. Yes. The one, Gemma, would have dipped her claws into the poison. Once they hit the open wounds, Megan's blood was tainted." The dark-haired witch opened her bag for a moment and pulled out a small plastic container. "You'll need to

give her this tea three times a day. Don't let Ella touch it. It's something you'll need to prepare for her. It will restore her balance. Her stomach will be sensitive for a day or more, and she will only want to eat light things. If she were human I'd say stick to tea, chicken soup, and toast. As she's also a wolf, then she can do small amounts of rare steak. Nothing too hot. No spices. Let her guide you on this. Her body will tell her what she needs."

"If the fever returns?"

"Call me again. She might need a touch of magic to pull her through, but I doubt it will come to that. She's a strong woman."

He'd almost lost her. Dead before they'd had a chance to share a life together. Dead because of the jealousy of a female and her aunt.

"Who sold her the poison?"

"Sold it to Gemma? I've got a good idea, but that's something I need to deal with. It's against the codes we live by to sell poison like this. No, this was specially made, not a common poison. There was a magical touch to it, which is why you didn't smell it until it was almost too late. If Megan had been ill before or lacked the strength that is a part of who she is, she would have died."

Rage bubbled up from within. "I'll kill them both."

"You'd be within your rights to do so." She set the container on the table. "However, I don't want to be here when you do so. Those who weave magic must be neutral in such matters."

"Whatever your personal point of view might be?" Ella inquired as she stepped into the kitchen.

"Especially then." The witch turned to face Ella. "It's why such things as poisons crafted for shifters are forbidden. Love potions, scent covers, and more are against our codes. The only reason we will sell such is if the shifter requires it for work, which only applies to scent covers."

Like the sheriff hiding who he is to strangers passing through town.

"They wouldn't be able to sell it to hide lovers?" Ella pressed.

"No, of course not. There would have to be a good reason, and hiding lovers would not qualify as that. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"We believe that Fiona has been using scent masks to hide her lovers from each other."

"Ah." The witch nodded.

"You know something about this?" Shaun took a step closer.

"Know? Not exactly, but it fits with her visit to see me two years ago. She inquired about ways of hiding who had been to see her. I made it clear that I couldn't help her."

"How did she react to that?" *I'm going to kill her. Fucking kill her. Then stake her corpse out as a warning to the rest of the pack,* the wolf growled.

"She wasn't happy but didn't press matters."

It made sense. No shifter in their right mind fucked with a witch. Not unless they wanted to spend the rest of their days regretting it. A pissed-off witch was worse than facing a pack of fear-filled humans armed with the latest guns.

"Shaun, you'd have the right to call blood debt on them. We'd back you. You know that." Ella rested one hand on his shoulder. "She's my sister, but she's your mate. I want them dead. I want them dealt with. Yet that's now your right, not mine."

A right he wanted to exercise. Now.

"I need to see Megan before I make a decision. But either way, Fiona and Gemma need to be punished for this. Vera, if we need your testimony for the pack, will you give it? No personal feelings on what should happen. Nothing more than the truth of what it was that felled Megan." He glanced toward the stairs, his body itching with the need to be at the side of his mate. A mate he'd failed to protect not once, but twice now. Something that he wouldn't allow to happen again, not even if it meant the loss of his own life.

"I can do that."

"Thank you."

"You couldn't have expected this. No matter what you might think, Shaun. You don't have the gift of sight. You cannot know what lies and cruelty another is capable of until they show their hand. Trust me on this. Megan doesn't blame you. She knows this was not your doing." Vera's voice was soft, almost gentle, her words meant to heal or offer a thread of calm in the midst of the chaos that had claimed their lives.

It didn't help.

"I'll talk to Megan and then make my choice."

"Good. Go to her, but don't tire her out. She'll need to sleep if she's going to heal quickly."

"Thank you." Despite Vera's words, he knew the truth. He'd failed Megan. That wouldn't happen again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her head still ached, but at least she no longer wanted to gouge her eyes out. Vera's potions and spells had worked, at least so far. Her stomach no longer burned, her thoughts were clearer, and she was no longer soaked in sweat.

Poison. She'd known before Vera had confirmed it. What else could it be with how her body had reacted? But the fact that one or more of her own pack had been behind this attack and had used the coward's way out had left her sick far beyond the effects of the poison.

*He'll kill them, the bitch snarled in triumph. They deserve to die for what they've done. It's the only way.*

Well, maybe. There was another option. Banishment from the pack. Either way the pack would be in uproar. If the two traitors had supporters, this would be when they would make their move. But if they were right, and Fiona had gained support through

lovers, the revelation to each male that he wasn't the only one would upset things for the scheming female.

It could still go wrong.

Steps outside of her room. By the tread she knew, before he opened the door, that it had to be Shaun. At once she tried to sit up, but her arms refused to let her move and she semicollapsed back onto the pillows even as he pushed open the door.

"Megan?"

"I'm awake."

He edged into the room, his gaze wary. "I'm sorry."

"For what? You didn't do this to me." *Men.*

"I'm your mate. I should have prevented this."

"How? Can you see into the future? No, of course not. You're a shifter, not a witch." Strangling him would take too much energy right now. Still, she could shoot him a hard look. Maybe.

"I still should have—You're my mate. It's my duty to keep you safe. I failed. There's nothing you can say that will change how I feel about this, so save your strength, love."

*Men. Stubborn. Ignorant. Stupid...*

Yet she loved him for it. All his faults. His blind spots. Even his stubborn streak.

Love. Was it really love or just the need of the mating bond?

Did it matter? He loved her, or else the guilt, the sense of failure in his words, in the way he looked at her, wouldn't have been there.

Shaun took one hand gently in his. "She said you'd be fine. After you've rested, that is. That you'd need to sleep a lot to heal from the strain that you've been through. Is there anything you need?"

*My health back in one piece so I can deal with the bitches myself?* No, that wasn't something he could give her. Vera had made it all very clear; she had to rest and wait

for her body to recover. It didn't stop her from wanting to shift and tear the two females apart.

"What I need, I can't have, so I'm fine." *Liar.*

"Hmm, why don't I believe you?" He settled down on the edge of the bed. "Well, I guess you can't really do anything right now except sit, wait, and heal. That has to be frustrating."

"In more ways than one," she mumbled and let her gaze linger on his chest. *Kiss me, hold me, touch me...*

No, she wasn't strong enough for this. Not by a long shot. Still, it didn't stop her from wanting something more than his company. Mates. She'd heard that mates were more sexual, that the bond between them was something so deep that even being in the presence of your mate would set one or both partners sexually on edge.

She'd never believed it.

Now she had no choice but to accept it. Her body tingled. Nipples hard as they pressed against her bra cups. She took a deep breath and tried to focus past her growing desires. She wasn't in a fit state for this. Shit, she was barely strong enough to sit up in bed.

"There'll be time for us soon enough. If you want, I can bring you something to eat?"

*Raw meat. Steak!*

Would she be able to eat that? It was a long shot with how her stomach felt before they'd brought her to her room. Before the witch had worked her magic and settled her into the bed. At least Vera had made it to the farm quickly. A thought flashed through her mind.

"Does the pack know what happened here?"

"No, they don't. Vera wouldn't have told them, so all they know is that the witch was summoned and nothing more. We thought it would be safer that way."



Megan nodded and closed her eyes. Tired. So very tired. Her body was bone weary, and there was nothing she could do about it.

"Sleep, my love." He reached out, tracing her cheek with one hand. "Sleep. There'll be time enough to deal with this when you're fit."

"A short nap. That's all I need," she mumbled, caught in that stage between sleep and wakefulness.

Shaun stood up, cupping her cheek before he leaned down and pressed his lips lightly against hers. Soft waves of pleasure rippled through her body. A low moan caught in the back of her throat. This was what she needed. His touch. Their shared pleasure. Not confined to a bed. Resting. Sleeping. Helpless.

She needed him.

Her body, however, had other ideas.

## Chapter Eleven

"How's she doing?" Simon pressed a mug of coffee into Shaun's hands.

"Tired, pale, but she's recovering." He smiled, and for the first time since Megan had collapsed, the smile wasn't forced. She was recovered enough to be aroused, which has to be a good sign.

"The pack has settled down and returned home for the night. They'll be returning tomorrow. That's all the time I've been able to buy us right now." Simon poured a second mug of coffee and leaned against the counter.

"It will be enough." It had to be enough. Facing down the pack—God, it was almost as if he'd been facing down the pack for the last two days. Eating, sleeping, and breathing the pressure of the pack.

*The pack has to be faced. The traitors dealt with.*

Only then could Simon and Ella take control of the pack; that's if they were willing to do it.

"Have you and Ella discussed the original plan?"

"Leadership?"

"Yeah."

"We discussed it a little, enough to know we're willing to try. Not as a mated couple, though. Neither of us is ready for that, not with each other at least. Don't get me wrong. I like Ella. Shit, I respect the hell out of her, but I think of her as a sister, not a mate."

"You have someone in mind?"

"No. Hell, if I had a choice in this, I'd leave the running of the pack in the hands of someone else."

"So you're a very reluctant alpha?" Shaun couldn't help but smile.

"Something like that." Simon closed his eyes for a moment. "Still, it's for the best. They won't listen to you. They'll have no choice but to listen to me. If they don't, well, it won't be the first time I've had to take one of them out behind the back of the woodshed."

Shaun laughed and set the coffee mug down. "Good. I knew you were the man for the job. I've always known."

"So, why didn't you say something?"

"Didn't want you to get a swelled head. You're hard enough to live with as it is."

"Point." Simon nodded.

"Ella's not going to back down to you if she believes you're wrong." Shaun paused to think over what he knew of the pack. Of the way they reacted. "After Fiona and Gemma are gone, you shouldn't have too many problems. Except for the old-timers getting pissed off at the change. Not sticking to tradition isn't going to go down well with them. Oh well. They can live with it."

"Or try to take over as pack alpha." Simon's voice became cold. "They can try. They'll fail. I'll make certain of that."

Shaun's gaze narrowed as he opened his eyes. "I've never heard you like this before. Almost bloodthirsty."

"Yeah, well, I might be doing this against my better judgment, but I'm going to do it right. So if you want to change your mind, then now would be the time to do so. 'Cause, man, if I'm doing this, I'm not backing down. Got it?"

Pride surged through Shaun's chest. Simon had changed in front of him. His shoulders pushed back, jaw tight, head held high. The boy he'd known as his cousin had become a man. A true alpha. He could protest it all he wanted. Shaun knew better.

"You'll do well, Simon. I have faith in you."

"Good, because you owe me a crate of beer for this mess. And I'm not talking about the cheap stuff. That microbrewery you introduced me to last year. Fuck. What was the damn name?" Simon frowned and drained his coffee. "Well, you know what I'm after, so pay up. You've got a month to get it to me."

"Deal." A crate was a cheap price for what Simon was taking over. "Ella, she's going to have her own price?"

"Yeah, she is, but she'll take that up with Megan when your mate is feeling a little better. Sister stuff, you feel me?"

"Yeah, I feel you."

A crack of lightning split the night air. Thunder rumbled through the darkness. He counted to three beneath his breath; then he heard it. The hard *rat-a-tat-tat* of rain against the windows.

"We won't get anything else sorted out tonight." Simon rolled his shoulders. "And I'm guessing that I'm staying."

"It would be easier for us all if you did. You and Ella have a lot to work out. Not only that, but if Megan takes a turn for the worse and someone has to go out to get Vera for whatever reason, I wouldn't want to leave her on her own."

Simon nodded but said nothing more.

So many changes. All of them for the better. If he was right, the pack would fight tooth and nail about the change and then accept it. What happened after that was anyone's guess.

A pity he wouldn't be around to see it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shaun?" Megan murmured as she opened her eyes. No. He wasn't there. The lingering remains of his scent told her he'd probably left not long after she'd passed out. She'd been asleep for a couple of hours, from the way the scent had partially faded.

Her stomach growled.

Fine. She still needed food, and staying in bed wasn't going to change that.

Even as Megan sat up, she knew things had changed, and for the better. Her limbs didn't tremble. Her vision was steady. Her sense of balance had returned to normal. Whatever the witch had given her, it had worked.

She pulled on a robe and headed for the door.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Ella pushed open the door and leaned against the frame.

"Erm, getting something to eat?"

"Sit your ass back down before that mate of yours finds out what you're doing. He'll have a fit if he sees that you're out of bed."

Megan swore beneath her breath but clambered back under the covers. "Am I to stay here until I rot?"

"A couple of hours, not even a full day, is not going to do you any harm. Stop the bitching and sit down," Ella growled.

"Damn, are you sure you're the younger sister, not the older?" Megan tugged the comforter back in place. "Fine, I'll stay in bed for a little longer." *An hour, two at most, then I'm getting up!*

"You can get out of bed to use the bathroom, nothing more."

"And food?"

"What do you want?"

*Meat!* "Steak, beef, bleeding, still moving would be better."

"Okay, we have some in the fridge. Drink?"

"Juice. Milk. Tea, maybe?"

"Milk." Ella nodded, her gaze thoughtful. "Be best for you. If your stomach is still a little unsettled, then the milk might help."

"Fine, but cold. None of this 'warm milk to put me back to sleep' crap."

"Would I do that?"

"In a heartbeat, so don't even go there."

Ella's laugh lightened the air, even as the thunderstorm broke overhead. "Fine, no warm milk. Now stay in bed; I'll be back shortly with your meal."

Yeah, and she was going to creep out of bed, if only to go to the bathroom the minute that door was closed. "Sure, I'll be good. Trust me." She nearly choked on the "I'll be good" part.

"Right, uh-huh, fine." Ella turned and headed out of the room.

Megan didn't even wait until the door had fully closed before she slipped out of the bed and darted for the bathroom. By the time she returned to her bed, she felt a hundred times better. Her balance was back to normal, and the idea of being kept in bed even for one more hour sat ill with her.

Still, she'd wait.

For now at least, but if Ella took more than thirty minutes, that was it.

The smell of steak being cooked drifted up through the house. Her stomach growled, eager to taste the meat that her sister was preparing. Her hands clenched with the need to eat. Now.

The storm now raged overhead, pounding rain down against the windows and roof alike. The pack. They must have left, returned to their homes, with the change in weather and her illness. It was the only thing that made sense.

Illness indeed. She was poisoned!

Well, that would be dealt with later as well. Arguing with herself over something she could do nothing about was as pointless as Shaun taking the blame for the entire situation.

Footsteps on the stairs caught her attention, and with the approaching visitor came the tantalizing smell of hot, fresh steak. Her mouth watered, and she sat up, propping the pillows behind her.

"Ella said you were awake and hungry." Shaun carried the tray of unseasoned food into the room. "I cooked it myself. Don't get too used to this, and steak is about as complicated as I get, but..."

"Thank you." He'd cooked? Shaun? *Err, yeah, isn't that what he just said? Get over it already.* "It smells good."

He grinned and semiblushed as he set the tray down across her lap. "You look a little better."

"Feel better as well. Sorry about passing out on you earlier." She reached for the tray and tugged it closer.

"It's still alive."

"Good." She cut into the steak and smiled. "I'll be fine, you know that."

"I know, but I can still worry about you. It's a part of the package."

"Hmm, I didn't know this was a package deal. Tell me more." She took a bite and nearly melted. Maybe it was how hungry she'd been. Or the fact that Shaun had cooked for her? Whatever it was, she'd never tasted a steak this good before.

"I get to watch out for you for the rest of your life."

"Hmm, I already know about that part. What about the rest?"

"I'm getting there. Patience." He smiled and tucked one strand of her hair back behind an ear. "Of course, I'll have to find a way to keep you under control."

"Who under control? After everything that's happened, I would have thought you're the one who needs to be kept under control."

"Oh, is that so? And who do you think has the ability to keep me under control?" A low, warning growl rang through his words.

"That would be me." She took another bite from the steak and closed her eyes, savoring the taste.

"Well now, that's something you and I need to discuss when you're back on your feet. There can only be one head of the household. Traditionally, that's the male's role."

"Well, we've been throwing out other traditions, why not this one?" She relaxed, her stomach content now that she was finally enjoying a meal. "The storm, is it in for the night?"

"Looks like it, but that's just as well. It will give us a little longer to sort things out. And we do have to figure out what we're going to do. The pack — Simon is going to face them down, but we have to be ready to stand with him."

"And Ella?"

"They've discussed this, and they're willing to rule the pack together as a nonmated couple. They know that's going to be difficult, but they've made their decision."

Relief washed through her. "Good. I was a little worried about that."

He nodded and settled down on the edge of the bed. "I can understand that. Now. What do we do with Fiona and Gemma?"

Her shoulders knotted. "Banishment?"

"Is that really what you want?"

"No, but it's the civilized answer."

"Civilized is overrated."



Right now she couldn't agree more. The urge to track the two females down, tear their throats open, and watch their blood spill into the damp earth was almost overwhelming. The human side of her balked at the idea only for a moment, then joined her beast side in demanding the death of the two females. Wonderful. If she couldn't find a way to keep that urge under control, she'd attack the females the first time she came into contact with them.

"Maybe so, but I'd regret killing them sooner or later." *Sure, keep thinking that.*  
"Formal hearing? Or do we just announce the banishment?"

"Ah, now that part isn't up to us. If Ella and Simon are taking over, then how it's done is down to them, not us. We can't have it both ways. Either we give up on the position in the pack and hand that over to the new leaders, or we continue and deal with it ourselves." Shaun reached out and brushed his fingers over her cheek. "Eat up. It's going cold."

Her cheeks colored. "Sorry, I got distracted."

*More than distracted.* His scent. His touch. Her body ached for more than a brief caress. The need for food had become second place.

"You still look hungry."

"Not for food, though."

"Hmm, you coming on to me, Megan?" He cupped her cheek. "That line was a little lame."

"It worked, though, didn't it?" She glanced down at the growing bulge in his pants.

He picked up the tray and set it down on the bedside cabinet. "I'm not denying that."

"Good, then hopefully you're going to do something about it. Or should I just take care of myself?" Megan grinned and swept the tip of her tongue over her lips.

His cock twitched within his pants. "I could always stop you. If you tried to play with yourself, I could order you to stop."

"I don't take orders. You know that."

"Ah, but you're supposed to."

"Don't hold your breath on that one." She flashed a grin and pulled back the covers. "I've never been the 'roll over and bare my throat' type. If you think that's going to change, then you're insane."

"Sanity is overrated."

Megan reached up and wrapped her arms around him, pulling Shaun close. Her lips claimed his, silencing any further conversation about who was supposed to be submissive and who wasn't. That could be argued later, if there was anything left to fight about.

Shaun groaned and pressed close, his tongue parting her lips with a firm press. Her nipples hardened beneath the nightdress that she'd worn for decency's sake when Vera had arrived. Now it was too much. Her skin burned with the need to be stripped of her clothing and the hunger to feel his naked flesh against hers.

His tongue dueled with hers. She whimpered; her grasp tightened about him as she melted beneath his kiss.

"Yes, move for me, my mate." He broke the kiss and looked down into her eyes.

"You're wearing too much, lover." She reached for the back of his T-shirt, tugging at it. "Take it off. Take it all off, now."

Shaun eased back away from the bed and smiled. Without a word, he pulled the T-shirt off and tossed it aside, and then reached for Megan once more.

"No, I said all of it." She pressed one hand against his chest.

"Stubborn female."

"That I am." She smiled, watching him.

He nodded and stepped back, his hands settling on the button of his jeans. "Well, if my mate wants a striptease, then that's what she'll get."

She hadn't asked for that, but she wasn't about to complain either. A low, pleased growl spilled from her lips. Heat played between her thighs as she watched him.

The button opened beneath his fingers. A small tuft of hair now visible to her gaze. Her fingers itched with the need to reach out and touch him, but she prevented it. She'd sit and watch him and enjoy every moment.

"Quickly or slowly, lover?"

"Slowly," she whispered. "Very slowly."

"Ah, playful, are you?"

"Very." She swallowed hard, her gaze fixed on her mate.

Shaun rolled his hips, the firm outline of his cock clearly seen beneath his jeans. Slowly, he tugged at his fly, easing it down until she could see that he wore nothing beneath it. She wasn't even sure where the jeans had come from, unless Simon had brought him fresh clothing before the meeting.

Not that it mattered, not right now at least.

The head of his cock peeked out from his jeans even as he turned, putting his back to her. She wanted to protest, but the taut curves of his buttocks silenced her complaint. Tight, tanned, and muscled, she delighted in the sight of them and scraped her teeth over her bottom lip.

Her hands tightened on the bedding beneath her. Sweat beaded across her brow, her heart racing as she watched him slowly slip his jeans from his body.

"Do you need more?"

"What I need is you. Now. In bed. Fucking me."

"Your wish is my command." He turned, facing her once more.

His cock, thick, hard, and ready, jutted out from his groin. The head glistened with precum. She wanted that. Now. His cock in her mouth; the taste of his arousal on

her tongue. The minute he sat down on the bed, she eased to the floor, kneeling at his feet. He growled in pleasure and pulled at her nightgown, tugging it over her head.

"What are you... Oh God!" He gasped as she closed her lips around the head of his cock. "Yes!"

She purred into his cock, teasing him with the sensual play of vibrations through his thick erection. Precum. She could taste it. Not only taste it, but delighted in it. She wrapped one hand around the base of his cock, squeezing, releasing, only to squeeze again.

He moaned. A deep rock played through his hips. She reached beneath him and cupped his balls, smiling in delight as he pressed into her touch. His balls tightened beneath her caress. Slowly, an inch at a time, she edged down the length of his cock, taking it deeper into her mouth.

"Fuck!"

Not yet. Not until he begged for it. She smiled around his cock and massaged his balls. They tightened beneath her touch. The taste of his arousal grew with each passing moment. She eased back, licking, sucking; as she did so, his cock pulsed in her hand. Soon. He'd be ready soon enough.

Her inner walls clenched. Liquid heat coated them. Her clit ached for his touch. She had to keep her need under control, at least until she knew he wouldn't wait, wouldn't hold back, and would fuck her hard, deep, and without mercy.

She licked over the head of his cock, teasing him. His cock twitched in her grasp.

He slid one hand into her hair, fisting it. She groaned into his trapped erection. Her hands worked slowly on his cock. Soon, so very soon. She could taste his need. His hunger. A hunger matched by the heat between her thighs. *Now, please, now.*

No, he wasn't ready. He wasn't ready to beg. To plead with her. He would be soon, a few more moments. Each touch of her tongue forced a new groan into life from her mate. His balls tightened in her hands. He rolled, thrusting into her mouth, his hand tight in her hair.

"God, that feels so good." His hand tightened, then released in her hair, matching her own patterns on his cock. "Yes — please — yes!"

She swallowed hard, then took him fully into her mouth, her lips touching the base of his cock. Her tongue wrapped around his cock, massaging, teasing as she worked him with her lips and tongue. His grip tightened. He sobbed, arching into her mouth.

*Yes, that's it!*

"I need you!"

Megan smiled and licked, slowly, along the length of his cock as she pulled back. "Do you? I thought we could play for a little longer."

"No. I need you now."

"What do you say then?"

He growled and used his grip in her hair to pull her to her feet. "I said now, my mate. I mean now."

She arched in his grip but didn't fight it as he tugged her onto the bed, parting her thighs, his gaze locked with hers. "Hmm, you're in a very strange mood, aren't you?"

"Hungry."

"There's some steak left."

"For you."

"Ah, then you'd better do something about it." She reached for him, guiding him between her thighs. Her inner walls clenched. Her body wet and ready for him. "I want you. I've always wanted you."

*I almost waited too long for you. I know that, forgive me...* She wanted to scream the words at him, but it was too late. His lips covered hers. She arched fully into his touch, wrapping her legs around his hips.

"Tell me how you want me."

"Hard, fast, and deep."

He thrust into her, burying deep within her walls. One hand tightened in her hair, tipping her head back until her throat was bared. She groaned; her legs wrapped tight about his body as she moved beneath him. Her nails scratched at his back, his shoulders; this wasn't enough. Not yet.

His chest hair tickled her nipples. Her thighs tightened around his body. She pressed her heels against his buttocks, lifting herself to meet each thrust. Sweat beaded across her breasts and belly.

She could still taste him in her mouth. The heady, delicious taste of his arousal. It filled her senses even as he filled her. She didn't close her eyes. Not this time. She wanted to see it, see it all as the pleasure took control of his body.

Not just his, but hers as well.

She needed to witness it, pain and pleasure combined.

The thought frightened her and delighted her.

"Who are you?"

"Yours. I'm your mate."

"Yes."

"Mark me. Claim me," she sobbed, his thrusts filling her. The slick sound of their shared passion filled the air. "Please, claim me."

His teeth scraped over her throat. She whimpered, trembling beneath his touch. *Yes, God yes!* This is what she wanted, what she needed. He'd bitten her once before, the nip on the back of her neck the first time they'd been together, but this was different.

His cock swelled within her walls. Pressure built within her body. She groaned, her nails digging deep into his back, scoring at his shoulders as she moved beneath him. This was where she belonged. His. His mate, his partner in life, and his lover.

"You want this?"

"Yes."

"You need this?" he growled against her throat. "Tell me you need this; tell me why you need me to do this."

Did she have the strength to answer him, to tell him the truth, all of it?

Yes, oh God, yes, she did.

"I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to run from you, from what we are together. Given the choice, without the claiming, without the mark, I'll give in to my fear one day and run. I don't want that tempting me. If I surrender as your mate, that won't be an option." *Surrender, accept, not submit. Does he understand that?* She had to be sure that he did. "Never submit. Surrender to you, accept you, and be with you for the rest of my life. Can you accept that?"

His answer was a simple one. He leaned closer and scraped his teeth over her throat.

She whimpered, tingles of delight working through her body. *Yes, please, do it!*

His teeth fastened on her throat, a tight ripple of delight played through her body, and she moaned, trembling at his touch.

Shaun's growl filled the air, his cock pulsed within her body, and for a moment neither of them moved. She lay there, her chin lifted, his teeth closed on her throat. Locked in his embrace. Her nails dug into his back. If there had been a way to do it, she'd have sunk her teeth into his throat, but all she had were her nails at this angle.

They were enough, by the way he reacted.

His hips moved, hers rolled; together they moved as one, joined in body and soul alike.

Was it enough?

It had to be.

He lifted up, his hands pressed down on the bed, on either side of her body. Each new thrust threatened to lift her from the bed. She sobbed in sheer delight, her nails scraping furrows down the length of his back.

"Yes!" he growled.

Her throat tightened. Her mind screamed, Yes. Her heart declared her his. Nothing else mattered but this moment. Nothing but the pleasure that rolled through her body, and it would not be ignored...



## Chapter Twelve

Shaun leaned against the door frame, watching the first touches of the sun as it crept above the horizon. Peaceful. For the first time in years, he felt truly at peace. More so than when she'd first accepted him as her mate.

Submission? No, not that, not from Megan. But an acceptance of who she was with him. What they had together. That was enough. For now at least. And perhaps there would be times when she'd explore being submissive with him, though he wasn't about to hold his breath on that one. Not when he'd found a mate with a strength of will and purpose to match his own.

There was only one thing left to deal with before they made their way to the city.

Judgment.

The females. They had to be taken care.

*Hunt. Rip. Tear.* His wolf, his beast, growled his need deep within. It would have been so easy, so very easy to shift into wolf form and hunt them down.

It wouldn't be long before the rest of the pack arrived. The meeting had been brought forward, better to get it over and done with.

Megan had slept well, the last traces of the poison long gone from her system. At least their ability to shift shape had helped with her ability to recover. Vera's aid had

made certain she'd recover quickly, and the events of the previous night had shown how quickly she had done so.

His back still burned from the passage of her nails. He was lucky to have such a female in his life. Her strength and beauty – what would he have done if the poison had worked?

No, he couldn't afford to think like that. He wouldn't be able to focus during the meeting.

And he needed that focus; they all did, if this was to be handled without dissolving into the bloody fight that his wolf wanted it to be. Instincts weren't always easy to cope with. Especially in matters of the heart or in pride.

He glanced back at the stairs. The sound of the shower reached his ears. His mate would be there. Nude. Beneath the water.

His cock thickened beneath his jeans. Naked. Ready.

He turned and took a step toward the bottom of the stairs. It would be so easy, so very easy to go and join her.

No, they didn't have time. Not with the meeting so close. Better that neither of them smelled of sex when they faced the pack.

Still, the thought was tempting.

He walked back to his place in the doorway and looked out into the early dawn. There was no denying the beauty of the morning. There would be many more such mornings he would be able to share with Megan, once this business was over and done with.

The first vehicle drove toward the farmhouse.

It was time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Megan stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel tightly around her body, adding another for her hair before she checked the time. She didn't have long to spare. The meeting would begin soon.

It didn't take long to dry off and pull on her jeans and a clean flannel shirt, but her hair was another matter. It didn't want to be brushed out. It snagged and tangled on the brush. She cursed beneath her breath and glanced at the mirror.

Her hand was trembling.

Odd.

The poison? Or just nerves about the meeting? She frowned and tugged the brush through her hair again, trying to ignore the sharp points of pain that lanced across her scalp. It wasn't going to beat her. Not the knots in her hair or her nerves. There was nothing to be nervous about. Not with her family at her side or her mate standing with her.

Yet her stomach knotted, swirled, then knotted again.

She wasn't a coward, so why did she feel like one?

She'd faced death once already; that would be enough to frighten anyone.

It wouldn't happen again.

No, it wouldn't. Vera would be there as well. If any member of the pack attempted to use magic against her or against Shaun, Vera would counter it. They couldn't even protest at Vera's presence, as she was here to testify.

It wouldn't prevent someone from voicing a complaint or suggesting her words had been bought and paid for.

No, she didn't have time to think about those doubts, not now at least.

The sound of the first car pulling in caught her attention. She frowned and tugged the brush through her hair one last time before she braided it and headed into her bedroom. She was as ready as she'd ever be.

Shoes. Where were her shoes?

She was fussing over small matters. Stupid, and she knew it. She had to remain calm. Breathe, focus, and don't let them get to her; she understood that, and yet she was still trembling.

Megan looked back over her room and then walked down into the kitchen. Shaun turned and smiled as she entered.

"I thought about joining you, in the shower I mean."

Heat rushed across her cheeks. "I don't think that would have been a good idea, not with the meeting."

At least he'd thought that through. She wasn't certain she'd have been able to do the same thing if he'd walked in and joined her in the shower. Even the thought left her panties moist.

"No, but you like the idea."

Not for the first time in her life did she curse the hypersensitive sense of smell that came with being a shifter. "Well, it is something that—Never mind. There'll be time enough for that later. Did I hear the first car arrive?"

"Yes, and it looks like there is another pulling in now." Shaun turned and frowned. "Fiona and Gemma."

"Already?"

"I had hoped they'd be amongst the last to arrive, but it would appear otherwise. They're not alone either."

"Who's with them?"

"A male, one I don't recognize."

"Oh." That didn't sound good. "How can it be someone you don't know? I thought you knew all the males in the pack."

"I do. This one isn't pack. Not good. Not good at all. This is a pack meeting. Outsiders aren't welcome, except by invitation from the pack leaders. If they believed

he could stand witness for them, they should have requested dispensation." His voice was little more than a low, deep growl.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. "Shaun, where's Simon?"

"My cousin? He's in the barn with Ella. I think they're making sure it's set up. For the meeting, that is. Shit, I can't exactly go over to talk to them. Not with Gemma out there."

"You don't have to. There's a phone. Dad had one put in the year he died." It had saved many a madcap dash across the yard in the rain when he'd been working on something. "Same number, except exchange the last four for a three."

"Got it." He punched the number in and waited for an answer. It didn't take long. Once Simon had answered on the other side, Shaun quickly filled him in on the problem, then hung up. "They're on their way back."

"Good." Better to be prepared. "More cars. We don't have much time left."

"We have enough."

"I hope so." Coffee, a piece of toast, something, she needed something before they faced the pack for the second time in two days. "Has anyone eaten?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because we've all been busy, that's why not," Ella announced as she walked back into the kitchen. "Coffee's on. That's it. There's yogurt in the fridge. Milk. Cheese. You've got time for a quick snack. A sandwich. There's some roast beef in the bottom of the fridge, if you need some meat."

It was better than nothing. "Sorry, if I hadn't been so ill – I should have been down here, helping."

"No, you were sick, even if you were well enough to fuck your mate last night." Ella faltered the minute she had spoken. "Shit, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. The new mate bonds are powerful and..."

"There's nothing to forgive. Our enemies are out there, not in here. So I'm sorry for not coming down earlier; there were things to do, and I should have been here, helping out. But I'm here now."

Ella's jaw dropped. "Did you just apologize to me?"

"Yes."

"Someone mark the calendar. I can't remember the last time that happened."

Megan blushed and shifted her weight on the balls of her feet. Had she really been that cold? That callous? Yes, in all honesty she knew the answer and hated herself for it. In running from the pack, from Shaun, she'd also run from Ella. From her family and ever being able to accept that Ella was right, even once.

"Well, you might hear it again. In days to come. But not right now. Not with the work at hand." She turned her attention to the contents of the fridge. If she didn't eat soon enough, then she'd pay for it. Especially with the stress they were about to face. It didn't take long to make a sandwich, and only then did she turn her attention back to the others in the room. "Sorry, I need to eat. I think that poison..."

"You don't need to make excuses, my mate. Is that understood?" Shaun cleared the distance between them and let his hand rest on the back of her neck. His grip firm, not one to be questioned with. "Eat and heal. You still have a ways to go before you are fully returned to normal."

She wasn't about to argue with him. Not this time, at least.

Her response was wordless as she bit into the sandwich and settled down at the kitchen table, knowing they had very little time left. A matter of minutes at best.

"Vera, has she arrived yet?" Ella poured herself a cup of coffee.

"I think I hear a car now." Simon moved to the window. "Yes, that's her. Shaun, what about the male? The one who's not pack. What's to be done about him?"

"He's not permitted in the meeting. They're not going to pull this one over on us. I know Fiona. She'll try to quote some tradition that no one else remembers and use it as a way to bring the male in." Shaun spoke calmly.

"There's something familiar about his scent, I caught it when we were walking back in from the barn. I know him from somewhere. Not pack, no, but not one of the other packs in the area either. A loner, maybe."

"Might well be." Shaun frowned and looked back out the window. "All right, it's about time we headed over there. Most of the pack has arrived, by the looks of things."

## Chapter Thirteen

Shaun slipped his hand into Megan's and smiled. Her hand was sweaty, and she flashed a nervous smile his way.

"Trust me, it will be fine. You know that." He leaned in and brushed a kiss across her lips. "We've got one last meeting to go through, and then it will all be over."

Megan leaned into him as they walked into the barn to face the waiting members of the pack. It wasn't going to be easy, no matter what he told Megan, and he doubted that she'd believed him either. Still, it had to be done.

"So why the second meeting, Shaun? Haven't you got what you wanted with that damn mate of yours?" Fiona called out even as they walked into the barn. "Bad enough you assault my niece, now you call a second meeting as well. Gemma had to..."

"Silence. Now!" His growl split the air. "Speak again, either you or your fuckin' niece, and it will be the last thing you ever do!"

Fiona flinched.

"You!" Shaun pointed at the male who wasn't a member of the pack. "Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing here?"

"Brian Jakes and..."

"You're not pack."



"No, I'm not but..."

"Get out." Shaun took a step toward him. "You're not pack; you're not welcome here."

"Gemma asked me to..."

"Gemma is not alpha."

"But Fiona—Shit, that lying bitch!"

Shaun closed his hand on the man's throat and yanked him out into the walkway through the barn. "Fiona is not an alpha. Gemma is not an alpha. And you're lucky to be alive, lone wolf! Get out before I tear your throat out." He tossed the male, full force, toward the entrance to the barn.

Brian tumbled and rolled, coming up to his feet. "Fiona, you better keep your distance from me, bitch! I'll get you for this one. You hear me, bitch?"

Simon growled and stalked his way across the entrance of the barn. "Fiona is still pack. Threaten one of us, you threaten all of us, loner. Get the fuck out of here!"

Brian stood for a moment, then shifted, leaving his clothes in a pile on the ground before he sprinted away, his paws eating up the ground as he vanished outside the barn.

"What did you promise him, Fiona? Leadership of the pack, at Gemma's side, if he helped you with a small problem? Was that it? Surely even you're not that stupid."

"I told her that it wouldn't happen, but she made it clear if I tried to tell Brian that she'd turn me out." Gemma's voice shook.

"Do you really think that I'd believe you, Gemma, after you poisoned my mate in a fight?"

Gemma blanched. "B-but I'm telling the truth."

"Like hell you are. I can smell it from here. We all can. You're a lying, two-faced bitch. Just like your aunt," Simon snarled and turned the full force of his attention on Gemma.

"What gives you the right to talk to me like that?" Gemma blinked. "You're not the alpha!"

"If I were, would you be trying to get into my bed as well? You've been wanting to get into Shaun's bed for the past couple of years. We all know why. Because he's alpha, and no other damn reason. You don't love him. You've never loved him. So shut up, now!"

Was that all he was going to say to them? Shut up? Was that the answer for the assault on his mate? The betrayal of the pack?

No, of course not.

"Gemma, Fiona, stand in front of the pack and be ready to answer. Your future with this pack depends on your answers."

Neither female moved.

"Now, or you'll be dragged there." Ella moved to stand behind the two females. "And I'll be more than happy to drag you there myself."

*Well now, I wasn't expecting that.*

It made sense; her family had been injured. Ella might not be the oldest in the family, but she still had every right to be pissed off.

It worked. Fiona and Gemma didn't hesitate a second time. They walked to the head of the group and waited. Trembling.

"You're charged with betraying the pack. Using poison against a pack member."

"I did no such thing. Whoever claims I did is lying. I challenge you to prove it!" Gemma took a step forward. "If my aunt took part in a poisoning, then she did so without my knowledge. I swear it."

Odd. She was telling the truth. How could that be?

No hint of a lie touched the air. No taint of fear-touched sweat reached his nostrils, and Shaun knew he wasn't the only one to pick up on that.

"Check her nails." Vera made her way from the back of the barn.

"Gemma, show me your hands." Shaun held out one of his so he could check.

"What's she doing here? She's not a member of the pack!"

"Fiona, speak again without permission, and it will be the last thing you ever do," Ella snarled. "Gemma, show him your nails, now."

Gemma scowled but held out her hands.

"Nail polish, so?" Shaun frowned and peered at the woman's nails.

"Poison-infused nail polish. Old trick. Used to be a common one that prostitutes used to defend themselves." Vera smiled and took hold of Gemma's hands. "You've been drinking a lot of pomegranate juice recently, haven't you?"

"Yes..."

"Antidote, to prevent you from becoming ill from an accidental scratch."

"Hold on, how did she know that Megan wouldn't drink the same thing?" Shaun's gaze was now fixed on Fiona.

"She'd know because Gemma and I went to the same swim coach, and she knows I'm allergic to it. She saw what happened when I drank it as a kid that time at the swim meet. We daren't even have any in the house." Ella's fists clenched.

The pieces fell into place. That something as simple as a natural juice as an antidote for a poison amazed and delighted Shaun, but it explained why Ella had been told not to handle the antidote that had been given to Megan.

Fiona took a step back, her face pale and drawn.

"Don't move, bitch!" Ella snarled.

"Why, so you can rip me apart? Not happening. I'm not..."

The blow came without further warning. Ella shifted instantly, her clothes left behind as she landed with both paws on Fiona's back. Teeth closed around the back of Fiona's neck.

"No!" Megan screamed. "Let her go! She's not worth it!"

Ella's snarl filled the air.

"Ella, let her go!" Simon rested his hand on the scruff of Ella's neck. "Get off her. She's going to be dealt with. Not this way, though. Not this way. Let her go before you regret it. You have to let this be handled another way. Come on, calm down. It has to be done the right way."

Ella looked up, her gaze filled with rage.

"Don't destroy yourself for someone like this." Megan edged forward, her voice soft as she reached out for her sister. "Please, let her go."

Slowly, uncertain, Ella released her grasp on the back of Fiona's neck.

"Shift. You can't stay in wolf form when you're angry. It's too dangerous. You'll lose yourself. Come back to us." Megan's voice remained calm, pleading.

They all knew the danger. It was drummed into them over the years. From the first time they shifted. Never shift in anger. Never let the darkness take control when in animal form, lest they lose themselves in that form forever.

Fiona whimpered, blood seeping from the wounds on the back of her neck. No one moved toward her.

"Shift, Ella, now," Simon snapped, the order clear.

Ella, trembling and nude, shifted back into human form even as Megan wrapped a blanket around her from the pile kept in the barn for emergencies.

"Kill her!"

"Banish them both!"

"Get them out of here!"

The cries of the pack for justice merged into a near-deafening roar.

Shaun took a deep breath and waited for a moment, a gap in the noise before he cried out, his voice splitting through the air, "Silence!"

As one, the pack flinched.

"Better. We're not animals. We will not act like animals. Doing so would feed into the legends about our kind, and we will not do that." Shaun watched as the gathered

members of the pack slowly calmed down and turned their attention toward him. "This matter must be dealt with correctly."

"You're alpha. Pronounce judgment!" one male called out from the back of the barn.

"If I were alpha, then I'd do just that."

A stunned silence settled over those in the barn even as Simon and Ella moved to stand at his left, Megan at his right.

"We've discussed this long and hard, and you're all aware of the fact I was talking about standing aside. No doubt most of you shrugged that off as the ravings of a male upset with the attack on his female. Well, you were wrong." He glanced over those in the barn; most stared back at him in shock. One or two shook their heads, mumbling beneath their breath. "Simon and Ella are the new pack alphas."

"You can't. They're not mated," Gemma protested.

"Tradition, not law, states that the alpha leaders of the pack must be mated. We've cast aside enough traditions in the past few days, what's one more? Especially when it is for the good of the pack."

A female in the gathered pack began to protest.

"No, hear me out. It is for the good of the pack. You dislike my decisions, my rulings, and even my choice of mate. Why should I stay? Would you ever accept Megan as my mate? I think not. No, I know you wouldn't. There would be constant whispers against her. Doubting my judgment. Even my sanity. No, that would tear the pack apart from within."

Megan slipped one hand into his, squeezing lightly. This was the right choice. It had to be done if they were to stand a chance of surviving; the stress of the pack and the constant attacks would destroy them. Perhaps that was being selfish; he didn't care. He wasn't going to put Megan at risk for the sake of a pack that had defied him. Either to his face or behind his back.

"Shaun, you don't know what you're asking us to accept here." A middle-aged male stepped forward, his voice grave. "We've come to understand you as our alpha, even if we don't agree with your every move. Your choice of mate is upsetting, but we can live with it and..."

"There's the problem, you can live with it. Not embrace, rejoice, or welcome the new female alpha, merely live with it. No, I'm not going to live that way, nor should you have to."

"What do you mean?"

"Harvey, isn't it?"

The middle-aged man nodded.

"Harvey, think about this, the rest of you as well. If given the choice of an alpha you merely put up with or one you can respect and follow, which would you choose?"

"You already know the answer to that one. One we can respect and follow. Ah, I see—you already know we respect Ella and Simon."

Shaun nodded, knowing full well he'd trapped the pack with their own admission. Even though only Harvey had stepped forward to speak, it was obvious from looks and low whispers shared between the members of the pack that they did, indeed, all respect Ella and Simon.

"My mate and I will leave. She still has her contract to complete. What we'll do after that, I don't know yet. Maybe we'll travel." *Maybe we'll even start a new pack, one that will respect us both.* Fuck, how he wanted to tell them that, but somehow he doubted that was in the cards; having run one pack, he had no desire to run a second.

"Ella and Simon are fine with this?"

"Yes, we are," Simon answered before Shaun could do so. "Sure, it's a mad idea, and I'll have to tumble a couple of you to the ground before everything settles into place. I don't have a problem doing that. Ella is already respected and feared by the

females in the pack, so again there shouldn't be a problem." He bared his teeth in warning, a low, rumbling growl sounding from the back of his throat.

"Then it's settled. I renounce my place as pack alpha and resign in favor of Simon."

"I renounced my place as pack female alpha and resign in favor of my beloved sister, Ella." Megan squeezed Shaun's hand as she spoke.

"Accepted," Ella and Simon spoke as one.

"First act of business. Gemma, Fiona, you've betrayed the pack. As such, you're banished from the pack and our lands. You have twenty-four hours to leave our territory. The house sale can be handled via a third party. If you're still here after the time limit is up, you'll be hunted. Is that clear?"

The two females nodded, the color stripped from their faces.

"Twenty-four hours isn't a long time. I'm not sure we can arrange everything in time." Fiona nibbled on her bottom lip.

"You don't have a choice," Simon growled and folded his arms across his chest. "If you want to piss me off, go ahead. You'll get ten minutes' head start, and then I come after you, so it's your choice. Ten minutes or twenty-four hours?"

Fiona and Gemma didn't say another word. Without even an exchanged glance, they turned and hurried out of the barn.

It was over.

## Chapter Fourteen

Megan leaned against him and sighed. This is where she belonged, in his arms. Safe from the rest of the world. The meeting had ended well enough from what they had been told, though the pack had shut them out. Only Simon and Ella had made any attempt to make them feel welcome, but she'd expected nothing less. Once they were no longer pack members, they'd left the barn, along with Vera.

It still hurt.

She didn't understand it. She'd never truly been a member of the pack, and yet now it hurt to be shut out by them. Had they made the right choice?

One look at Shaun told her that yes, they had.

"Your plane leaves when?"

"Another five hours. I have to be at the airport in three hours' time." A forty-minute drive to the airport, if that, and then she'd be on her way. Everything was packed. All she had to do was leave Shaun behind.

Only for a short time, though.

He'd follow within a week, ten days at most. Still, it was a long time to be apart. Bullshit, she'd barely even notice the time. He'd be with her soon enough. Why was she being such a fool?



A fool... Was she being a fool?

*I'm in love...*

Her stomach knotted. She swallowed hard and tried not to think about that. Love was a powerful emotion. One known to strip the common sense from a female.

*But it's true, I love him. I really love him.*

A love he shared, or he wouldn't have given up the leadership of the pack to be with her. No greater demonstration of love could there be for a male shifter than to step aside, relinquish control of the pack, and decide to be with a female instead.

*I'm lucky, far more than any female has ever been.*

How many would give up an alpha position for a female? Not many. In fact, she'd never heard of it happening before. Not even in legend.

Had they started a new story then? Yes, a new legend amongst the shifters, one of love—a love powerful enough to cast aside tradition.

She knew the thought was pure vanity. Legend indeed. Still, it appealed to her even as she cast the idea aside.

"And what should we do with our last few hours together?"

"Hunt." She turned to look at him. "Our last one was disturbed. Why not take the moment while the pack sorts out their remaining issues?"

Shaun smiled and glanced back at the barn. Although the main meeting was over, the pack members still lingered within the building. There would be a dozen minor details to go through before they'd finally leave the confines of the barn.

"They've not banished us from pack lands."

"Nor will they. We'll be tolerated when we come home to visit friends and family." She smiled, the tension no longer a permanent fixture across her shoulders. "We can run together, hunt for now, but only because we have been of service to the pack."

"Not a true hunt. No game can we take, not on pack lands," he mused.

"That depends on what game you're hunting. I wasn't thinking of traditional game."

"Oh?"

"Hunt me." She moved away from him with a silent grace. "If you catch me, you can have me."

"Ah, but I already have you."

"Not like this. Catch me this time, and I'll be submissive, once and once only." Her heart raced even as she uttered the words. "I'll be the traditional, eager, submissive wolf bitch to her mate, but only if you can catch me and pin me."

His eyes widened, a low, pleased growl filled the air. "Go. You have five minutes; then I'm coming after you."

She turned, dropping clothing as she did so, the change hitting her hard and fast. Perhaps he'd catch her, perhaps not, but the chase—oh yes, the chase would be one she would always remember. Her paws hit the ground, as did her clothes. This would be their last moment of fun, a chance to run and play before work claimed her. The stress of the move and so much more besides.

Megan pushed all thoughts of that aside. She glanced back, once, over her shoulder in time to see him standing there, nude and glorious as a man before the shift also hit him. The trees. If she could reach the trees, then it would be easier to hide from him.

Hide. Is that what she would do, simply hide? No, not this time. If this was to be their last true moment of freedom, of natural fun, hunting, running through the trees, then she would make the most of it. If a chance arose where she could turn on him, try to attack and pin him, then she'd take it.

Too much time. She was wasting too much time in allowing herself to be distracted by her own thoughts. Run. This was a hunt. She had to treat it as a hunt. She was prey. Not the hunter.

How much time had passed?

She didn't know.

He'd be moving toward her soon enough, if he wasn't already on her tail. She didn't even dare stop to look back over her shoulder. If he was coming for her, she'd be a fool to hesitate, to risk being caught.

*I want to be caught.*

A smile played across her lips, her tongue flopping out of the side of her mouth as she ran. Not yet. Maybe later. The fresh scent of the trees filled her nostrils. Here she was alive, free, and both halves of her soul were united. She was herself.

She ran through the trees, catching scents here and there, but nothing that hinted of her mate coming for her. He was smart. He'd be careful in hunting her. Making certain that she'd not catch a hint of him on the breeze. That limited where he'd come from. He'd have to be circling her...

She was going the wrong way.

She stopped in her tracks and turned. She had to go north; she'd have a better chance of staying ahead of him that way. Silence, not even birds. He was close; he had to be...

He bowled into her from the left, forcing her to stumble to the ground. She rolled, snapping at thin air. He'd moved before she had a chance to defend herself. Suddenly, this was real. No longer a game. He wasn't the enemy. She was certain of that. His scent was unmistakable.

Still, there was something dangerous about this game.

He was truly hunting her. Not playing. Hunting.

She twisted, trying to avoid a snap at her haunches as he forged south. Why south? What had he planned? Whatever it was, she wasn't going down easily. If at all. She growled and watched him, her body tense, looking for that moment, that one brief chance where she could get past him.

It never came.

He launched at her and knocked her back to the ground. She whimpered and tried to come back up to her feet again. He didn't let it happen. Each time she tried, he knocked her back down until she lay there, semisprawled, panting for breath. She whined, trying to get him to back off for a minute, but he didn't. He darted forward, nipping at the air in front of her nose.

She whimpered and edged back on her belly. What was he doing? Why hadn't he tried to bite the back of her neck yet? Or cover her? Did he want her to change? She wasn't sure. She backed away on her belly, whimpering. She'd never seen him like this before.

Intense.

Deadly.

His amber eyes glowed, his gaze fixed on her, and yet there was something else in the way he looked at her. A hunger, a delicious hunger that turned her insides liquid.

Shaun moved, slowly, stalking her, though she didn't move. He circled her, his steps deliberate as he did so. She didn't dare move. Not yet.

He covered her, his body pressed against hers, both still in wolf form. She whimpered, lifting her hips, shifting shape as she did so. Knowing, without asking him, that he'd change at the same time, and he did so.

Nude. Hungry. Trembling. She pressed her hands against the damp earth. Dirt dug its way beneath her nails. She was an animal, in human form. A beast. Yet she didn't care. Not anymore. All she wanted, all she needed, was him. His touch. The feel of his cock pressed between her thighs.

His teeth scraped over the back of her neck, warning her to stay put, keeping her in place against the ground.

She lifted her hips, pleading with him. His cock brushed over her nether lips. The scent of her arousal filled the air, mingling with his, with his and the sweet perfume of the forest.

Shaun didn't speak. He didn't growl. He didn't whimper. He waited, silent, unmoving, his teeth touching the back of her neck. Waiting, waiting for something, but what?

*My submission. My promised submission.*

"Yours. I'm yours."

He didn't move. It wasn't enough. God, what was she missing here?

"I'm yours, submissive and willing. I submit. Do you hear me, I submit to you, Shaun."

He still didn't move.

*Why? I've submitted. Please, I've submitted.*

"Shaun, I'm yours. I'm not fighting. I'm not running away. I'm yours, now and always. I'm submissive to you in this moment, as I promised. I'm begging you, fuck me. Don't leave me like this." She tried to look back over her shoulder at him, but the grip on her neck prevented that.

She couldn't move, not with the way his teeth pressed a little deeper into the back of her neck. She was trapped. Helpless. If she displeased him, then he could easily shift and end her life and bite fully into her neck.

No, that wouldn't happen. They were mates. She loved him. He loved her.

Yet the thought sent a shiver of fear and delight through her being.

"Do with me as you wish, my mate. I'm yours."

He thrust forward, filling her, his teeth still gripping the back of her neck, his cock deep within her body, giving her no ability to move. Her nails dug deeper into the loam. She whimpered, unable to even lift her hips farther for him with the way he now held her to the earth.

His balls slapped against her body. Her inner walls slick and eager as she welcomed him, welcomed each and every wordless thrust. Pain. God, it hurt the way he bit the back of her neck, and for a moment she wondered if he would draw blood.

The pressure on her back eased up, and the grip of his teeth vanished as he settled himself on his knees behind her. He grasped her hips, pulling her up from the earth. She whimpered with the painful hold but didn't fight him. There'd be bruises when they'd finished, but she didn't care.

"God, yes!" Each thrust threatened to send her down to her belly. Her pussy clenched on his cock; her clit throbbed. Her breasts swayed with each new sensual assault on her body. Her thighs tightened, muscles taut, her shoulders locked as she tried to hold position for him.

A loud *slap* rang through the trees; pain and pleasure merged beneath the harsh caress of his hand against her ass. Her intimate walls tightened around his cock. Her clit throbbed, aching for his touch.

Almost as if he sensed what she wanted, Shaun eased one hand from her hip and brought it between her thighs. His thumb played over her clit. His light caress sent flashes of pleasure through her body. Each touch echoed through her core. Her cunt tightened, rippled, released, then tightened once more on his thick erection.

Tears burned in her eyes, slipping down over her cheeks. Salt touched her lips. She moaned, pressing back against his touch. She couldn't fight him. Didn't want to fight him. Or how he now used her now, touched her and filled her.

"You're mine, Megan. Now and always."

"Yes!"

"I'm never going to let you go!"

"Keep me. Hold me!" she cried out, pressing into him. Each time he filled her, she cried out with joy. The sound of his balls slapping against her plump, slick nether lips echoed through the clearing.

They were human.

They were beasts.

Lovers, mated, joined in heart and soul.

Her heart sang with pure joy. His fingers played over her clit, teasing it, his free hand slapping down against her ass, only the strength in his thighs kept him from falling onto her, but even she could feel the tremble in his limbs.

It was taxing. For both of them. Yet neither of them cared. Not right now at least.

She bucked back against him, feeling the pleasure build with each passing moment. She couldn't think straight.

Pain. Pleasure. Pressure. It combined into one beautiful, thought-stealing wave that rippled through her body. She gasped, arching, her arms locking. Her eyes closed. She sobbed. She couldn't hold it. She didn't want to hold it.

He wasn't ready; she could tell. His breathing was ragged but not out of control. Not yet at least. She groaned, struggling to keep control of her body. Wait. All she had to do was wait.

Just a little longer.

Her inner walls protested under the strain. Liquid heat coated her being. Her teeth grazed her bottom lip. Her pulse raced. Jaw tightened. She sobbed out, arching with each thrust.

"Please. I can't hold it any longer. I have to come."

"Then let it happen." He reached down and brushed one finger down the length of her spine.

She shivered in delight but struggled to keep a tight rein on her reactions. She wanted to hold on. To wait until he was ready. What was so bad about that?

"Don't hold back. Let it happen. Give in to it, my mate."

Her inner walls rippled again. She sobbed out, arching against him, unable to hold back any longer.

"Yes!" he growled behind her. His cock thickened, his thrusts became wild, out of control as he fucked into her again and again.

Close, so very close.

"Please, come for me! I need it. I need you." How she managed to get the words out right now, she didn't know.

"You're mine," he snarled, thrusting forward once more.

Megan cried out, forced back to her belly on the ground. The brutality and beauty of what they shared was something no human could ever understand. This was nature. Sex. Claiming. Passion. Pain and pleasure. There was nothing like it in the human world, and not for the first time she cried for the sheer joy of being who and what she was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shaun pulled his naked mate into his arms and stared up through the canopy. Clouds chased across the sky, pure white that showed no hint of rain. The natural background noise returned to the forest. Birds sang. In the distance, he could hear larger animals moving through the undergrowth. Somewhere beyond all that were the sounds of the farm.

The meeting would be over now, and they were running out of time.

He didn't want to move. He didn't want this to end yet.

He closed his eyes. If she missed her flight, he'd never hear the end of it. Yet it would mean letting go of her. At least for a short time.

"Megan." He leaned in and pressed a light kiss to her lips. "We need to move; you're going to be late."

She groaned and curled into his arms.

This wasn't making things easy.

"Your plane. You don't want to miss it."



Megan growled and opened her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Time we got back to the farm. You've got a plane to catch."

Megan rolled out of his arms and shifted, lifting her head, arching her back as she howled. Sorrow, pain, and regret filled the air in that single sound.

"We'll be together again soon. Trust me on this one."

She looked back at him, hurt clear in her eyes.

*Beautiful. Wolf or human, she's beautiful.*

All he wanted to do was hold her and tell her it would be all right. Words wouldn't help this time. He knew that, even without asking.

Shaun shifted and headed back toward the farmhouse, knowing she'd follow him. She had to. They had to make it back to the farm in time. In human form, it would have been easier to discuss this with her. Except they didn't have time. Not now.

Later. There was always later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Megan sat down in her assigned seat and tried not to cry. He hadn't even driven out to the airport with her. Well, of course, it wouldn't have made sense if he had. He'd have had to follow in his car, so they could have spent maybe thirty minutes together before she'd had to go through security.

It wouldn't have been worth it.

*Yes. God, yes it would. I'd have done it for him,* the bitch growled.

Men. They were all the same.

*That's not fair. He's a good man. A good mate.*

So why was she so pissed off by his choice?

*I don't want to leave him; that's all it is. I need him.*

Was that such a bad thing? They were mates, and she didn't want to be dependent. She wasn't like that. She'd spent the best part of the last ten years of her life

trying to find a way of being independent and now...she was the exact opposite. She needed to feel his touch. Lean into him. Walk with him. Talk with him.

*A week, ten days at most. Nothing more than that.*

She glanced at her watch. Another ten minutes of boarding? She wanted to be gone, out of here; the quicker she made it back to the city, the sooner she'd lose track of time, and then he'd be with her.

Megan closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair. They'd be in the air soon. Focus on something else. On the work that waited for her.

It didn't work.

A drink, maybe she needed a drink?

Someone thumped down into the chair next to her, and she tensed. The last thing she needed was someone who wanted to chat. Well, maybe whoever it was would stay silent?

A familiar scent taunted her nose.

*No, it can't be.*

She opened her eyes and turned. Her jaw tightened, then dropped. Her throat half closed as she struggled to find the right words. "How..."

"I gave it some thought and realized I didn't want to be without you. Not even for a day. So here I am."

Shaun. On the plane. Next to her. Now!

"I don't under—I thought. God." Thought. She wasn't capable of thought right now. He was here...

*Of course he's here. Where else would he be?*

"Take a deep breath." He reached out and cupped her chin, brushing his thumb over her cheek. "I'm right here, where I belong, with you."

There was only one answer to that.

She leaned over; his eyes locked with hers. His lips parted. A soft smile gleamed within his eyes. Woodland, earth and musk, pure male musk.

Whatever problems she had with talking right now didn't matter. They didn't need words. Not anymore.

Her lips covered his. With a touch of her tongue, his lips parted fully beneath hers. His hand slipped into her hair, and the background noise of the plane faded into the backdrop, where it belonged...

 THE END 

## **Terri Pray**

Terri Pray is a stay-at-home wife and mother who is slowly exploring a dream to become a recognized writer.

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