



MAKING TRACKS

By

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Dedication: For Uncle Mike.

1950-2006

Little boys with little toys grow up to be big men with manly machines. We miss you every day. Index of Terms

Alpha Canis/Pater Canis - The male leader of a wolven (shapeshifting wolf) pack Alpha Matra/Matra Canis - The female leader of a wolven (shapeshifting wolf) pack Change - The act of shifting forms from human to animal Beta - The Alpha Canis' second in command. Often the wolven pack teacher/caretaker Bitten - Became a wolven/werewolf from a wolven/werewolf bite. Challenge - Contest or fight for a higher rank in the pack Dragonkind - Dragons Dueling Form - The half wolf/half man werewolf form used mainly for fighting Elder - Psychics whose job it is to protect and police the members of a particular psychic community. Empath - A type of psychic who is has the ability to feel the emotions of those around him/her Fairie - Pertaining to the fairy species Fairy - Any of the species of elves, dryads, sprites, brownies, and so on, who are vulnerable to iron Finder - A psychic with the ability to Find things, or people. Hell Hounds - Stray wolven running together without a territory of their own. Drifter werewolves Hunter- A psychic whose job it is to hunt supernatural creatures or monsters. They consider themselves above normal human law. All carry the last name Hunter. Pack - The wolven family unit. The family unit is made up of a male and female alpha leader pair and lesser member in a definite rank hierarchy. Packhome - The main residence for a wolven pack. Most often the alpha pair's home is large enough for

a large extended family. Packmembers are not required to live with their alpha's residence, but many choose to. Palestine - (pronounced Pal-e-steen) The County Seat for Anderson County, Texas. Mate-bond - The magical/psychic marriage of a wolver or wolver/psychic couple. Only the female of the pair can perform this bonding. Metaphysics/metaphysical - Supernatural or magical in nature Normals - Term for normal humans with no supernatural or psychic gifts Null - Less polite term for normal humans with no supernatural or psychic gifts Omega - The lowest ranking in a wolver pack Psychic - A type of magic user who does not need spells to perform their special magic. Most psychics wrongly believe that their gifts are mental abilities. Psychic Community - A unified group of psychics living in an area. Usually psychic communities are bound together through strong church ties, which regulate their lifestyle and rabid anti-supernatural beliefs. Supernaturals - Inclusive term for all the magical species, such as fairies, dragons, goblins, shapeshifters, witches, and so on. Territory - Wolver packs residing in the U.S. define their boundaries by county or the same equivalent. Wolver Council law states that no less than two pack-free territories must separate those ruled by a wolver pack. Wolver packs are identified by county/state. Warden - Protector of the Pack. Members of a pack whose job it is to protect and police the members. Were[s] - A crude term used by the wolver (shapeshifting wolves) for all other animal species who can change forms. Werewolf - An outlaw shapeshifting wolf. A derogatory term for a shapeshifting wolf Wolver - The proper term for a shapeshifting wolf Wolver Council - Managing body of wolver (shapeshifting wolves) who make sure that no pack, individual wolver, or outsider, endangers their species

Chapter One

Bailey Sparks gripped the bars of her cage and stared up at the man on the other side. She'd been pathetically easy to capture.

Her captor was out of place in the museum-quality study. Then again, the polished silver bars of her cage looked out of place, too. His dark hair was slicked back from a widow's peak and close-trimmed beard and mustache. The yellow eyes were cold and steady.

Thoughts of snakes and other cold-blooded things slithered through her mind. Bailey shivered. Senses, instincts that she should have been listening to all along, screamed a warning. *Run. Not human. Run.*

Not that she had anywhere to run, locked up in a huge silver cage.

"Now, little psychic." He cocked his head in a smooth swivel. "What brings a tasty morsel like you to my lair?"

A blur in her ethics? A desire to be more than a psychic compass? Fear of the supernatural? "Ummm."

She stalled, feeling incredibly small and stupid as he rested the ruby egg he'd been studying back on the stand. From its place among the other treasures on the mantle, a mysterious dark red fired from the depths of the ruby.

It would have been interesting to have been captured because of a magical artifact. Too bad the ruby's glowing could be explained by a small light bulb hidden in the stand.

Bailey swallowed the taste of primal fear as her captor glided to the cage. Fear was bad. These things, *supernatural things*, preyed on fear. And one thing Bailey Sparks had learned in the last two years was that she didn't like being prey.

Victim, prey, quarry, she refused to fall into that state of mind. Speaking of state of minds, what had made her think of doing something so dumb as appropriating lost treasures? She shied away from the word *stealing*. She wasn't a thief.

Well, not a very good one, anyway.

Thinking that she could use her Finding abilities for more than locating lost car keys and people was turning out to be a big mistake. In hindsight, that nice boring office clerk job she quit back in Savannah was starting to look better and better.

But the one time in two years that she had caved to the lure of a chocolate mint Blizzard, she

stumbled onto the local pack. Nothing killed a Blizzard craving faster than standing in the middle of a bunch of sweaty werewolves on their lunch break. Moving, and a stricter diet, were her only options. And fast.

Getting involved with werewolves again was definitely not on her list of things to do.

Lizard-man chuckled. The hissing sound sent more shudders skittering up her spine. She really wished her gifts included something to figure out what her captor was.

“Uh, look Mister. I usually don’t do stuff like this. You see ...”

He laughed again.

“You are cute, little psychic. All that curly hair and freckles.” His eyes gleamed yellow in the dim lamplight.

She heard him sniffing, sorting the scents in the air. Drat-it. It gave her the willies when they went all nonhuman like that.

The yellow eyes narrowed to slits.

“You smell like wolven, little psychic. Where is your pack? Who is in my territory?”

The growl wasn’t like anything she’d heard before. His blocky white teeth thinned to points. All of them, and not in the way the werewolves Changed.

Fear spiked through her. What had she gotten herself into this time?

The idea of moving to Alaska was looking better and better. At least she wouldn’t have to worry about vampires six months out of the year. But then, she’d never been bothered by vampires, just werewolves. Wolven. Uppity shapeshifters.

“I’m n-not part of a pack.” Bailey shrank back and pressed into the bars on the opposite side. Curse those werewolves and their super-healing blood for getting her into this mess. Mark especially. Tall, blond, and sexy, he was a complete pain in the rear. And a hound dog, to boot.

Dismissing her mind’s eye view of what she’d passed up two years ago, she tried to concentrate on the here and now. She didn’t need Mark’s protection. She needed protection *from* him. Before he got to Hinesville, Georgia to haul her back to Texas.

Her captor’s skin took on a different texture as he slithered around the cage faster than thought. Bailey gasped when the man’s, no, *the creature’s* hand shot out and snagged the messy knot atop her head.

He pressed close. There was none of the heat she associated with the wolven. He was cool. A vampire?

A fresh wave of terror spread through her.

“Not part of a pack?” he sneered. “Do not make me out a fool. There was a day that an innocent thing like you would have been tasty enough to appease my wrath.”

“I-Innocent?”

She’d just broken into his house and he thought she was innocent. There was that tasty comment again. “I’m not tasty. I didn’t even take a bath today.”

He did that horrible hissing laugh again.

The grip on her hair loosened and she pulled away to face him.

“Who are you? *What* are you?”

Devil-guy looked incredulous.

“You broke into my lair without knowing who I am? Did you not see the figures on my gate? The fanciful topiary?”

It was a testament to the last two years worth of weight training and aerobics that got her butt over the twelve-foot brick perimeter fence. She’d bumbled through the house, getting caught *after* she had the ornamental gem egg in hand.

“Decoration? It was pretty.” All that nifty Chinese dragon ironwork was sharp too. Though the bushes trimmed to portray various mythological creatures under dragon attack was eye-catching, if a bit gruesome.

His angled head shook side to side. Belief, then satisfaction, finally settled onto his sharp features. Spreading one arm wide, he dipped at the waist in a bow that was graceful in an oily

used-car salesman way.

“Well then fair maiden, introductions are in order. I am Dracen Pyre Smith. And you are in my lair.”

Bailey blinked. She really was a dolt. She’d spent too much time trying to ignore a childhood where mythology and biology class were one and the same. Pretending to be a normal *Homo sapiens*.

The memory of the fifth grade bio/mythology lesson as clear as the B minus her parents had freaked out over. Classification, *Draco sapiens*, intelligent lizard.

The psychics’ creed was basic. *Know thy enemy*. Then kill it before it can get you. *Draco sapiens* was reputed to be smart, but not creative. This was good news for Hunters, making the world safer one monster at a time, but apparently not for naming the young.

“Uh. Can I ask you one question?” He, it, inclined its head. The unnatural, eerie motion pushed some serious fight or flight instincts, heavy on the flight.

“What kind of dragon calls himself Smith?” * * * *

Mark Weis was in deep doo-doo. The knowledge that he’d defied Adam, his alpha, *his dad*, and left his territory for this sent a tremor through him. Wolven were pack creatures and homebodies. Disobedience went against his nature. He huffed out a sigh.

Leaving Miss Sunshine on her own for two years rankled his instincts, too. The thing was he just wasn’t ready to trade the freedom to enjoy a different woman any night of the week for a mate and a litter of fat pups.

Besides, *she’d* left him.

He had tracked her scent to the twelve-foot fence and found the rope and anchor. The scent trail led up the brick and over the sharp decorative iron spikes embedded in the concrete.

He shook his head, amazed. Not at the feat, but at the woman herself.

Bailey Sparks had gone from fearing anything non-human to antagonizing rich and powerful supernaturals. Though he supposed that most of the well-to-dos out here were normal humans with legit businesses.

Mack Spencer, Adam’s second in command, liked to say that wolven were elitists. Like Bailey, Mack was human and a psychic. Mark had never heard of another pack anywhere with humans in ranking positions.

This was the first time he’d traveled more than two hours from home. Considering the hours he’d driven from his hot and dry East Texas, this damp state of Georgia might have been on another planet.

Mark bent his legs and sprang upward, catching the top lip of the fence with his fingertips. Avoiding the spikes, he vaulted over, landing with all the supernatural stealth that was bred into him.

Ridiculous, boring, and black described the sweat suit he wore. Stupid and uncool as it was, the garment would help him blend into his surroundings. It’d also be fast to strip out of if he had to Change.

Bailey’s shock and desperation had long since faded from his tenuous connection to her. Usually, he couldn’t pick up anything except the occasional whisper of her strongest feelings. But he could track her.

Blood called to blood, and his psychic had plenty enough of his to forge a link.

At home in the gray shadows of the night, Mark lifted his nose and scented.

There she was. Bailey’s own special smell, mixed with the spicy odd scent of a psychic’s magic.

He followed the scent trail around to the back of the huge-ass house. The place had to be ten times bigger than his beloved Packhome. Scents of age, decayed and new wood, and plaster told him more about the history of the house than looking at it ever would.

What he could see of the fancy carved woodwork might make the house pretty in the daylight. Packhome was a rambling rustic log home. His packbrother Brandon would have a hey-day exploring a place like this. When he wasn’t being weird or doing the family thing, Brandon was into architect stuff and restoring old houses.

Mark froze as a small sound registered in his preternaturally sharp hearing. Deciding it was a

normal night sound, he continued on, willing his heart rate to go back to a normal level. Only a crazy idiot would chase a woman, who didn't want him, across four states.

Acting an idiot wasn't anything new for him, but this time he had the feeling that Bailey had bit off more trouble than she could swallow. Her distrust and fear had driven her to leave him. For a change, Mark listened to his instincts. Really listened.

It was either that, or his packbrothers would pound the daylight out of him for being so irritable. *Intervention, his ass.* It was just another reason for a rough and tumble. Convincing his mom's friend, Jax, to hack into Miss Sunshine's email had taken a little fast-talking and a free tune-up on the guy's junker.

Who knew gnomes were so handy with both computers and history? Or that they could be so touchy about yard gnome jokes?

He still couldn't believe she had bought that line that her *employer* was a history professor at some fancy college up north. Or that the ancient artifact called The Dragon's Egg belonged to the jerk off hiring Bailey to *return* it to him. ID could be forged, especially on the Internet. Even the name, M.C. Gill, gave Mark the creeps.

His Sunshine wasn't dumb. Had her paranoia of supernatural made her as crazy as the rest of her people? Mark hoped not.

Surely, she didn't believe that she could strike one in the name of psychics everywhere and the crazies would welcome her back with open arms. That same load of crap had driven Sunshine's cousin, Lawrence, bugfuck. The dude had had to be put down like a rabid animal before he hurt anyone else.

Once he'd figured out what Bailey was up to, Mark went straight home, packed a bag, and headed out. No thinking it over. Forget his pride. Forget her weird ideas about his kind. He'd shared his blood with her. With that act, he'd taken responsibility for her life.

Mark Weis didn't shirk responsibility.

He inhaled Bailey's apple-sweet scent through the French doors left ajar. His nose led the way.

The dry smell of reptile and preternatural magic pervaded the building, ruffling his hackles. The scent reminded him how far away from his territory he was. That here, he was the supernatural trespassing. At home, they killed trespassers like him.

He suppressed the growl that tickled in his throat. Feline odor, faint and fading, lingered in the air. Probably a pet long gone.

Mark Weis was an old hand at getting into trouble. Of all the pranks he'd played growing up, breaking and entering was a first. All of this sneaking around sucked. Subtlety had never been his game.

Neither he nor Miss Sunshine had any business playing cat-burglar. If

he managed to get out with all his body parts intact, he was going to drag her back to Packhome and keep her there. * * * * Mr. Smith, the dragon, tilted his head in a smooth swivel. The stillness while he listened was eerie.

What was happening? The words froze in Bailey's mouth as Mr. Smith's body followed the movement of his head and slithered out of the room. Okay, he walked. But the movement was demonic, creepy, and sent a major case of willies up her back.

Unintelligible syllables whispered back to her in the cage.

As soon as her captor left the room, Bailey reached for the cell phone hidden in her inside jacket pocket. The empty pocket made her slump against the bars.

Tears of frustration dampened her eyes. She wasn't the weepy sort, so they faded away just as fast, leaving the emotion behind without a release.

Gone. Who would she call for help anyway? Her Finder's business was Internetbased so that she could pick up and go at anytime. This was supposed to be her first big job. Something to be proud of.

Finding and returning something was one thing. Doing the actual theft was another. She

should have checked closer into her client's stolen artifact story. And his credentials.

Bailey jumped at a sudden crash. She pressed as close to the bars as possible, trying to see through dark hole of the doorway to the commotion elsewhere in the house. A distraction was good. A good five foot clearance around the cage made sure that she couldn't grab anything to use as a weapon or pry bar. She gave a futile shake of the bars. This was probably her only chance to escape.

The tinkling of breaking glass turned her attention to the curtained expanse covering the windows. A shadow darted from the window to the fireplace. And the mantle.

"Hey! Who are you?" Bailey rushed to the end of her cage. She *thought* what she saw was human. The shadow paused, its form warped somehow by the dark or her dirty eyeglasses. Either dragons didn't believe in lamps or they could see could see in the dark. "*What* are you?" The fighting rumbled closer through the house. Trashing things. Expensive things she'd seen as she'd followed her Finding to this room. The blurred shadow twitched in several directions at once then jumped back towards the window. "Wait! Let me out!" The curtains puffed and ebbed with the night air. Whoever, whatever was long gone.

High keening punctuated by grunts, crashes and bangs came from the next room. A large object flew through the shadowed doorway. Bailey ducked into the furthest corner.

The object--the *man*--crashed into the cage with a yelp. Not an ouch or a grunt. A canine yelp. His bright blond hair, a patch of sunlight in the dim room, drew her eyes. Unfurling himself from a tangle, he slid down the bars and jerked away from the metal with another nonhuman noise.

Yellow blond hair covered his eyes and cheekbones. His large hand rubbed over a rising rash on his neck. The bottom part of his head shaved close in an overgrown teenager's haircut. Or a man with incredibly bad taste.

The hair on Bailey's neck prickled. It couldn't be. He wouldn't. Bailey made a noise and he looked up, tossing his hair back as he turned his head.

Fine nostrils flared on straight, strong nose. Bright blue eyes met hers and narrowed. Oh, no. He would. She groaned. *As if her day couldn't get worse.*

Chapter Two

Mark Weis growled. Ignoring his stinging neck, he mentally catalogued the long wavy ropes of hair framing Bailey's too thin face. Her dark clothes were loose on her body, hiding the full curves that should be there.

"Woman, what the hell have you done to yourself?"

Was she eating? Was she ill? He could bite himself for waiting so long to get her.

"*What?*" Bailey shot a look behind him. "Mark! The dragon!"

The wolven rolled to his feet in a smooth movement. Keeping his hands loose and about waist high, he faced the dragon. Training and repetition made the fighting stance instinctive.

Mr. Smith stopped and curled a lip.

"And to think, I almost believed you, little psychic." His yellow gaze raked over Mark. "Once I feast on your bones wolf pup, I think I'll make soup of the woman."

Mark growled.

"Dude, let my female go and I'll let you live."

Mr. Smith hiss-laughed. He gestured at the cage.

"Silver cage, silver lock, silver key. Do your best wolf. You are about to die."

Mark hurled himself at the dragon, away from the danger of the silver cage. His hands Changed, lengthened into sharp claws.

Bailey knew his face would have changed too. Into the visage of a monster.

Smith also Changed. His skin became rough, hands also turning into claws. The dragon's human face flattened and stretched. His hair retracted into his pores, leaving a shadow of the widow's peak.

Bailey's stomach clenched with fear.

At the last possible moment, Mark twisted to the side. The dance-like movements were almost faster than her mind could process. With a swift, fierce grace, he grabbed the dragon's arm and flipped him over.

The dragon crashed into the fireplace with the force of a tornado. The huge marble mantle collapsed over Smith's head. Antique nick-knacks bounced and rolled over the floor. The dragon slumped, out cold.

"Ow, ow, ow."

Tossing a shiny ring from hand to hand, Mark rushed to the cage. Bailey met him at the door. Already fully human again, his handsome face drew down in serious concentration as he worked the key into the lock. It clicked open and he dropped it, wrenching the door open.

Bailey slipped through the opening. She strangled out a high-pitched *eep* as Mark grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder. Unable to resist, he grinned and slapped her wriggling butt with one hand.

"You jerk! Put me down!"

She bumped up and down as he darted for the nearest exit. The broken window with the billowing curtains. Spying one of those Shakespeare head statues, Mark scooped it up into the other hand. He slipped behind the curtain.

"Be still, Sunshine. We've got to move fast. Scaly is about to wake up."

The statue made a good-sized hole in the window. Mark tossed Bailey into what he hoped was a glass-free part of the flowerbed. He jumped through and grabbed her up again in his arms.

Nose in the air, he ran for the clean, heavy scent of pine. He was a wolverine. If there was one place he could lose a dragon, it was in the woods.

Behind them, a sharp, wailing cry gained some serious bass. The crashing damage of a wrecking ball filled the night. Scaly was awake and after them big time.

The dragon, decked out in full Godzilla mode, hit the tree line, making matchsticks out of the pine. Mark clutched his precious burden against his chest and changed directions. The dragon screamed again then paused.

Oh, shit.

Mark ran faster. He pushed away the instinct to Change. To speed away on four feet. Bailey's safety came first.

The spitting roar of a mega-sized flamethrower decimated the path he'd veered from. Heat licked at his back making the silver burns on his neck and hands sting worse.

"Oh, my God. Fire!"

Bailey's breath brushed his ear at the dragon's shock and awe tactic.

"Duh! Dragon!"

He gasped the words out and slid down a shallow slope. Bailey tumbled out of his arms. Mark bounced up and tackled her, tossing the female back up on his shoulder.

He paused, listening to the dragon's struggles to fit through the maze of tree trunks.

Apparently, slime for brains was so intent on tearing after them that he forgot about Changing back into a human to follow.

Of all the supernaturals, Mark had heard that dragons were the most territorial. Until seeing the dragon toast the forest just now, he didn't think anyone beat wolverines.

Mark heaved a sigh. The heightening acrid stench of burning pine told him that fire had taken hold of the trees. Now they had a different kind of enemy after them. He grabbed Bailey and ran.

Bailey bounced up and down on her rescuer's shoulder and tried not to puke. Under her hands, the werewolf's sculpted muscles bunched and flowed with his movements.

A dragon. A real, live dragon was spitting fire at them. She swallowed and hung on to Mark tighter. The knot she'd secured on the top of her head finally lost enough pins that the mess unraveled and obscured what little vision she had as she bounced along.

He jumped and she steadied herself with her hands. Realizing she was groping his butt, Bailey tried for a less embarrassing handhold. God, but the memory of those tight cheeks bunching under her

hands would live in her fantasies forever. Other memories of him, just as vivid, replayed in her mind.

She focused on the dragon, Mr. Smith, instead. Her psychic Finding abilities came to her as easy as breathing. Plus she'd been around enough supernatural creatures that physical form did not confuse her.

Finding wasn't limited to what her external senses perceived. Her gift connected her with everything else. It was almost spiritual.

"Mark! He's moved." Bailey beat at the werewolf's shoulders until he grunted a response. Smoke burned her eyes and made her cough. "He's circling around to cut us off."

Mark stopped. He shifted, letting her slide down his body.

When Bailey's toes touched the ground, her entire body felt as heated as the fire behind them. Now was not the time for a quickie. She took a breath, and then coughed out a lungful of smoke.

"Where?"

Bailey pointed and waited while he lifted his head and inhaled. Mark's eyes narrowed and closed as he sorted through the scents. He sneezed and looked back down at her. Instead of scooping her back up, this time he took her hand and pulled her in another direction.

With the dark, the smoke, and the danger, she had no idea which way she was going. On her best days, she had the direction sense of a rock.

What good was a compass if you couldn't figure out how to use it? Usually she just focused on whatever she was looking for and found the most direct route to the object. That wouldn't work this time.

She'd seen werewolves, wolverines, at their worst. She knew that they could track, fight, and hunt better than anything else. Whatever his ulterior motives or sleazy dating practices, Bailey trusted Mark Weiss to find the best way out.

Chapter Three

Their new trail came out in another high-class backyard. This time the theme was tropical.

Mark alternately pulled and carried her under banana trees and through bamboo until they tripped into a wading pool. Moonlight washed over the pale planes of his features. The black sweat suit did a poor job of hiding his energetic personality.

On someone else black was tough and mysterious. On Mark, it was boring.

He grinned and pulled her back to her feet. He pointed in the air where the dragon circled the burning woods.

The faint sound of sirens rushing to put out the fire rode the night air. Too bad they couldn't do anything for the one he'd started in her blood.

"Mark. Thank you. I ..." *couldn't have escaped without you.*

Bailey froze under the intent, almost feral stare, in his not quite human eyes. She remembered why she'd escaped the pack to begin with and swallowed. She took a step backward.

"Uh."

The adrenaline hummed in Mark's body. The sweet apple scent and her soft round face drew him. Remembering how much lighter she felt in his arms made him want to hunt a deer or bag a burger. He wanted to feed her. To coax her close.

When she stepped away, the wolf inside him reacted. Mark snatched the female, *his female*, and pulled her against him. He buried his face and hands in her thick soft mass of hair and inhaled. Underneath the smoke was the exotic smell of an interested woman.

Not just any woman. Bailey Sparks was his favorite flavor. He wanted a taste.

Using the grip in her hair for leverage, Mark pulled her head back. The wolf scented. She wanted him. Her lips parted and her tongue peeked out to wet her lips.

He growled at the thought of another having her and bent to follow the path her tongue had taken.

Mine. Mine, mine, mine.

The kiss made her senses spin. Mark's mouth greeted hers with gentle licks and nibbles before

he swept inside. Bailey's body warmed with the fevered heat from Mark's body.

Her breasts ached and she gave in to the need to rub up against him. His mouth left hers to trail down her neck. His hands traveled down to cup her butt. He pulled her tight against the thick ridge that pressed into her belly.

Two long years of abstinence rushed through her veins. Her body ached with yearning that only he brought out. She rubbed against his thickness, wanting it deep inside.

Her hands slid under the heavy wet sweatshirt to caress the slick bumps and valleys of his belly and back. God the man was made for sin.

She needed ... she needed ...

Bailey pulled back with a desperate gulp of air.

"N-no."

She pushed at his chest, ignoring the whimper/growl of protest. Mark didn't scare her. What he made her feel did. It always had.

"Let go."

The heat of his body left her. He turned away and took several wet steps. His breath was as labored as hers. The bright color of his bowed head was a beacon in the night. His hands clenched and unclenched with the effort to regain control.

"Mark."

"Shhh. Not now." His voice was deeper, more gravelly.

She shivered in awareness.

He threw his head back, hair glowing faintly in the moonlight. He might have howled right then and looked right doing it. He took a deep breath instead.

Sharp and sudden, he shook his entire body like a dog. When he turned his intense stare back to her, Bailey almost ran.

The knowledge that running from any predator was stupid surfaced in her frazzled brain. Instead, she took the hand that he offered.

She'd escaped from his kind once before. She could do it again. The question was, did she want to?

Chapter Four

Mark let the scents of the restaurant's buffet absorb into him. The lure of the dessert bar behind him was sweet torture. He picked a medium sized piece of broccoli and dropped it on his plate. Next, he spooned some green and yellow beans on to the plate.

Jeesh, he hated goat food.

He was glad he had had the foresight to get a hotel room on the same street as Bailey's cheap rent-by-the-week motel room. Once she'd cleaned up he'd cleared her out of her room and deposited her in his. Only then did he take his turn cleaning up. There'd been a small amount of embarrassed talk before she fell into an exhausted sleep while he showered.

He'd pretended to be a gentleman and napped on the floor. No gentleman would have had the fantasies he'd indulged in. If Bailey had so much as spoke to him, he didn't think he'd be able to stop again.

He had to remember that she'd dumped him the first time around. She didn't do monsters.

With the minimum required grazing on his plate, Mark attacked the meats. He liked variety and piled on the sausages, steaks, and hamburger patties. A glance at Bailey picking her way through the salad bar made him add fish and a hunk of meatloaf too.

"You need more than that."

He slid an empty plate in front of Bailey and set the meat plate down and the saucer of veggies in front of his chair.

She looked as delicious as a tray of chocolate chip cookies in a form fitting sleeveless shirt and dark brown jeans. He especially liked all the polka dots, like candy sprinkles on her shirt. Her long curly hair was done up in that knot thing again that he wanted to pull out. The cute gold-rimmed glasses

perched on her freckled nose.

He remembered how much he liked tasting Bailey's freckles. Especially, the ones that dotted her full breasts.

"No, this is fine. I'm watching what I eat."

Mark grinned and nudged the meats over at her.

"I like watching what you eat, too. You need protein before you loose too much."

The fork full of green, purple, and orange vegetables stopped midair. She frowned.

"Don't try sweet-talking me with that garbage. I'm a psychic. We're all fat unless we're careful." She speared the fork in his direction. "I've lost a lot of weight buddy. I'll never loose enough to be trim, but at least I don't waddle anymore."

"Huh?" His brilliant blue eyes heated until they looked like the pilot light on a stove. "Babe, you never waddled and I'd never call those curves fat. Trust me, I looked."

"You are such a dog."

"Woof, woof."

Mark cut up a steak and scraped half onto her plate. She gave in and speared a piece on her fork. When the morsel came close to her pink pouty lips, Mark froze.

What the hell was he doing? Wolven didn't share food with just anyone, especially him. He wanted to snatch the meat back, just to prove his independence. He wanted to watch her eat more. Hell, he wanted to show her how much fun a can of whipped cream could be.

"Mmm. This was great." Bailey leaned back in her chair and patted her belly.

Sexual frustration gnawed at him. He was starving and the treat, Bailey, was just out of reach. The knot of hair on her head gave him all kinds of ideas as it sagged and spiraled strands escaped to taunt him. Loose and tangled across her naked body was his favorite hairstyle. His fingers itched to touch as he silently urged the mass to fall.

* * * *

"Would you like some hot rolls?"

A waitress with Bozo red hair pulled Bailey out of her food-induced haze of contentment. Bozo leaned in to fill Mark's empty tea glass, ogling the way he filled out the ridiculous loud parrot covered Hawaiian shirt. He actually made the awful thing look good.

"Hey! His tea didn't have sugar in it." Bailey stopped the woman and pointed to the pitcher. "The other waitress had a clear pitcher that matched the glass. Yours is brown."

Bailey remembered how particular Mark and his pack were about food. Petty, but she felt smug over pointing out the woman's faux pas.

Bozo the Waitress fluttered her eyes at Mark. He clutched his glass away and stared like the woman was about to poison him. Not that the waitress noticed. All Bozo had eyes for was the way Mark filled out the tacky shirt.

"Maybe you should just bring me some water."

He rolled the glass of ice between his hands, back and forth, drawing Bailey's attention to his reddened hands. She struggled with guilt over the injury and wanting to take his palms and tend to the silver burns. The slutty part of her wanted him to rub them over her body.

Finally, he set the glass down and smiled up at the purring waitress as she finally flounced away for the water glass. Young and sexy, Mark Weis looked very much the wolf in sheep's clothing.

She remembered how much younger than her that he was. She knew she looked younger than thirty-seven, but ten years was a pretty large age gap even if he always seemed to make her forget. There was more than the supernatural issue that made her say no to Mark.

Bailey wanted to hurl her lunch as the waitress sashayed away. Ms. Waitress was the same type he'd dated during her stay with the werewolves before. Tall, big-breasted women who wore a size zero jeans. Ugh. There was no way she could measure up, even if she wanted.

While he waited, Mark tapped his fork on the tabletop.

Bailey resisted the urge to snatch his silverware away and hurl the fork and spoon back at him.

"Look, Mark." Those intent eyes focused back on her. "Thanks again, for the save and for lunch,

but I've got to go."

He was a tempting no-no. Too supernatural, *too young*.

"No. You're staying with me, Sunshine."

"Here are your rolls, sugar."

The waitress set a glass of water and a basket of rolls down in front of Mark. She dropped a handful of packaged butter into the basket.

His nostrils flared once and he snatched the basket up and shoved it back at the waitress with the same expression as with the tea earlier. She had the look of a dieting woman trapped in a bakery down pat. Bailey didn't know if she was more surprised at him or the waitress.

"No. No rolls." He shoved Bailey's leftover plate with the packages of crackers at the waitress too. "Here you go. Thanks, anyway. Bye."

Bailey's mouth dropped.

"Are you okay?"

He stood and pulled his wallet out, dropping money on the table for a tip without counting it. He grabbed her hand and knocked over the water. She had barely enough time to grab her purse. "Yeah. I'm fine. Time to go." *

* * *

Mark didn't think he'd get out of the restaurant fast enough. He rethought his position on being able to do anything he wanted and realized that he needed to go home to Packhome. He had no business tempting himself with sweets. And sweet things like Bailey. He should be home, where his safety net lived.

A vague memory of the thing labeled as his father on his birth certificate surfaced. Fair-haired and light-eyed, *he* had been Garrick's favorite pet. Together the sadistic former Alpha and the thing Mark would never claim a relationship to had done horrible things, to both the pack and innocent humans.

Mark growled and shook the memory away. That thing was dead and *he* would never be like that.

His *real* father was his by adoption. Adam Weis was real in the way that counted. He'd saved what was left of their punk asses, five pathetic problem pups, and showed them what it was like to be a pack, a family. Diana, his mate, was an Earth Mother goddess who showed them what love was.

Miss Sunshine had way too much Earth Mother potential for his comfort.

"Mark! What is your problem?"

Bailey's slight resistance pulled him to a stop outside the restaurant. He inhaled the scents of exhaust from the street, people, and trees. The look on her face made him hunch his shoulders.

He wasn't a freak and he wasn't an invalid. His diet was a problem that could be worked around. He just had to maintain self-discipline and say no to the cookie. And the nookie.

"Nothing." "Nothing? You practically freaked out in there." "Freaked out?" He grinned and pulled the keys from his pocket. "Sunshine, freaking out for me would involve hair, teeth, and lots of screaming people." Mark used his keys to beep the car locks before opening the door for Bailey. She was a sweet ride, his Mustang. Sleek enough for sexy. Umph enough to kick ass. She was black and shiny as a vampire's soul and had seduced him at first sight. "I need to get my car." Mark shook his head at Bailey's complaint. First, if she had her own car, she'd be driving hell bent in the opposite direction as him. Second ... "Your car's a piece of junk, Sunshine. The engine is about to go. Trust me, I know cars." She flounced back in the seat, cute as can be. "Besides, that junker doesn't fit you at all."

Their stuff was in the trunk, or as much as he could stuff in there before lunch (when she'd been in the bathroom). He pulled out onto the highway and put the top down. Packhome called to his soul. With his prize beside him,

he gave into the compulsion at last.

Chapter Five

Bailey wanted to pull her hair out in frustration. She knew he'd crammed her stuff in the trunk. If Doofus thought he was going to drag her all the way back to Palestine, Texas, then he was wrong. She just had to be patient and not choke him to death first.

Mark turned the radio on to an alternative rock station and settled into driving out of town. His raw looking hands played the steering wheel like drums while he headbopped to the beat. He looked like an overgrown teenager. Too young, too supernatural for her.

She opened her mouth either to tell him to grow up or ask about his blistered skin when the decked out Hummer in the next lane veered into them. Bailey grabbed onto the dashboard.

Mark swerved, but she felt the jerk and crunch of the bumper anyway as the huge vehicle crowded them to the side of the road.

He pulled to a stop. Bailey half stood, watching as he vaulted over the windshield and onto the hood of his car to face whoever might climb out of that Hummer.

The passenger door opened on the opposite side. In the space between the open door and the windshield frame, the cylinder nose of a big military style gun pointed at them.

Bailey screamed for Mark and ducked. She thought she saw him dive to the side. Bullets sprayed the Mustang. Terror locked her in the tiny floorboard space.

Something hit the hood with a thud. Her first thought was, *grenade*.

In the sudden silence, the Hummer speed off.

Bailey wrenched off her seatbelt and climbed over the door. There was no way she was going to be around when a grenade went off. Her foot caught. She screamed again and went down, kicking for her freedom.

"Bailey! *Bailey!*" Mark climbed up her body, touching every curve on the path up. The touch tingled, turning her on, but she pushed at him.

"Run! Grenade!" Her hoarse cry was a gurgle with him on top of her.

His blue eyes caught and held hers. His fingers dug through the tangles in her hair.

"Shhh. 'S okay. A rock. Not a grenade. Was a rock."

His words sunk in and Bailey let out a breath. Mark settled into the curve of her body, little kisses and touches raining over her face and neck. Reeling from the attack and his touch, she held onto the awful parrot shirt. His touch calmed, bringing her back from the edge of hysteria.

"Why a rock?"

It was a stupid question. But it helped her focus on not stripping the ugly shirt off his back. His kind were practically indestructible. Her desire to check him for holes then roll naked over the asphalt with him was totally inappropriate.

What was it about werewolves that oozed sex?

Bailey shook her head to clear her senses. She pushed at his chest, relieved when he rolled away and half crawled to a big paper wrapped rock.

"Huh. Note." Mark's voice had that gravel quality again that she supposed meant either sex or Change. She also noticed that his vocabulary seemed to diminish when both occurrences came up.

"What does it say?"

He handed the note over.

You screwed up. Leave or die. Your choice.

"Isn't the note wrapped rock thing about a seven on the cheese scale?"

Mark didn't answer. She glanced over to where he'd leaned against the car. His eyes were closed. She scooted closer and saw where the loud shirt stuck to his torso. Red blood mixed with the bright blues and greens of the shirt turning it brown. Her own chest felt cool and damp. A touch assured her that the sleeveless shell was soaked in his blood.

"Mark?" Bailey laid her hand on his shoulder.

The darker blond fringe of his eyelashes flinched but all he did was whine a little. The sound was small, like a wounded animal might make. Or a seriously wounded werewolf.

She swallowed and shook him a little harder. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"Mark, don't do this to me. Don't you dare."

Think, think, think.

Bailey couldn't take him to the hospital. Werewolves and hospitals sounded like a bad combination. She had to get him somewhere safe.

The botched egg job came to mind. Would her mysterious employer have sent goons after her for not completing her mission? It wasn't like M.C. Gill had paid her up front. She was supposed to meet, and be paid in full, when she turned over the ruby egg to her employer. If he didn't show, she could have just sold the egg to someone else.

Did history professors even have goons? Maybe the academic field was more dangerous than she thought. Unless, M.C. Gill wasn't what he'd claimed at all.

Guilt swamped her. She'd been so desperate for the money to escape that she'd believed. No, to be honest, she just wanted to believe because it was easier.

She stood and pulled at Mark's shoulders. He didn't budge. An edge of franticness made her voice crack.

"Mark! You've got to help me. Come on, I need you to help."

He cracked his eyes and stared in the direction of her voice. His lips moved.

God, how much blood was there?

"Help?"

"Yes. I need your help. To get in the car."

Mark nodded. His head looked like it was going to fall off and roll under the Mustang. He managed a hand on the door and stood.

"Sunshine?"

"I'm right here."

Mark nodded and shuffled two steps before falling over into the back seat. She couldn't tell if it was on purpose or not. She prayed that he wasn't hurt more.

A trip to the trunk of the car yielded a couple of her shirts to press against the wounds. An afterthought made her grab the rock and note. She laid his hands over the wadded up bloody mess and urged him to hold on tight before she slid behind the wheel.

A frantic thirty minutes later, Bailey was in another hotel room. This one was awful, but the motel attendant had been Asian and intent on foreign soaps.

The tiny gray-haired man hadn't asked her why she was covered to her elbows in blood. He either didn't notice or didn't care that bullet holes riddled the front end of the car. He simply stated the price of the motel, took her credit card, and completed the transaction without missing his show.

Comforting? That depended on how she looked at it.

Mark laid spread eagled on the bed, where she'd coaxed him. She grabbed what she hoped were clean towels and an ice bucket of water. The Mustang glove box had a couple of knives buried under trash like women's underwear, condoms, insurance papers, and tire receipts. Well, the insurance papers and tire receipts weren't trash. But the red satin thong had wound up in the trash. So had the pen she used to remove the underwear from the glove box.

She washed the butterfly knife up for surgery and told her stomach to behave. The tweezers from her makeup case were also clean and sitting beside the knife and a tiny bottle of peroxide. A pair of long pointed pliers was a last addition just in case the bullets proved too much for her tweezers.

Stripping Mark down to his underwear, she found that he'd been hit four times. Two went through his body clean, shoulder and side. Two were lodged in his opposite shoulder and thigh. He had raw blisters on his hands and a rash on his neck. Probably from rubbing up against the silver cage last night.

Once she had him marginally clean, she leaned over to brush the long bangs away from his eyes.

"Mark, sugar." For some reason the waitress's appellation felt right. She'd never been one to use endearments before. "This is going to hurt like a bitch. Please, *please* don't turn into a werewolf and eat me."

He whined again.

Bailey took that as a good sign. Or not. He was in a lot of pain.

She picked up the knife and leaned over the shoulder wound. Her fingers shook as she probed for the bullet. Under her hand, he tensed and growled.

“Remember. You promised not to eat me.”

More blood ran down his shoulder onto the bed. She’d had to use the knife to make more room for the tweezers before she was able to grasp the bullet. The damned thing slipped three times before she gave up and reached for the pliers. In her hands, the big tool felt awkward.

The smell of oil drifted up to her nose. Even after wiping it down with soap and water, she knew the thing was still dirty. Praying that she didn’t do more harm to him than good, she used the pliers. The bullet came out with a reluctant sucking sound, making her stomach lurch in protest.

She poured the peroxide over the wound, pressing a folded washrag over it.

Mark’s pain glazed eyes met and held hers for a moment. She waited, hoping he understood that she didn’t to hurt him. Finally, after seconds that felt like forever, he closed his eyes. Bailey swallowed, prayed that he’d given over to the pain and just passed out.

The leg was just as gut wrenching and tedious as the shoulder. Finally, the bullet worked free and Bailey cleaned and bandaged that wound, too. That chore done, she went to the bathroom and heaved up her lunch.

* * * *

“So, boy. It’s about time you showed up.”

Sweat ran down Mark’s body as he turned toward the familiar voice. A thick yellow beard and mustache covered the bottom half of the damned man’s face. Blue eyes, that looked so much like his own, flickered to red. Red. Blue. Red. Blue.

As always, the monster towered over him.

It was both strange and not strange that he could differentiate the two colors so well here. In his natural human state, he was as color-blind as his wolf. Then again, Mark had never had trouble seeing the vibrant shades of the ethereal magical forests that the wolverine essence ran in.

Why should Hell be that much different?

Mark shook his head.

“I’m not staying. I don’t belong here.”

The monster, his father, laughed.

“Sure you do. You’re my get. Cargill through and through. Six generations of wild wolf in your veins, boy.”

His father’s face distorted with the Change, stretching out. Sharp teeth burst into his maw. His back bowed and the old, filthy denim shirt ripped, showing his hairy human back.

Skin split, shredded, and tore to reveal the monster inside. Huge batwings, or maybe dragon wings, unfurled behind the demon werewolf.

It, his father, looked down at him. The eyes were still the same, mocking Mark’s pitiful attempt to deny his heritage.

“No.” Mark shook. The fear made his knees weak. He wanted to hide, but stood his ground. “No! I’m a Weis.”

“Spray it with cologne and put a bow on it, boy. Dog shit is still just dog shit.”

“No! No! No!”

He backed away from the sweeping claws that reached out to catch him up. In the demon werewolf’s other claw was a handful of multi-colored ribbons. Every color of the rainbow to bind him to the past. To what he didn’t want to be. He struggled against the monster.

Marcus Alexander the Great Cargill, senior laughed with the same terrible tone that Mark’s grandfather, another evil Marcus, had used. Thinking that crazy bastard was probably here, too, made Mark fight harder.

“I’ve got you now. You can’t escape your heritage, Boy.”

Chapter Six

“Mark, wake up. I’ve got you.”

Bailey rubbed his arms with a gentle gliding motion, scared of jarring his injuries.

She thought werewolves were super-healing creatures that could shake off bullet wounds and keep on going. Her cousin Lawrence Daily had seemed to. But then, they hadn't shot Lawrence. Cold-cocked with a bat to the head, yes. She and the other women had only been thinking of finding the boy her cousin had kidnapped.

It had taken another wolverine to take down her insane cousin before he raped her and killed her best friend, Karen Ridley.

Karen was part of Mark's Pack. Since she hadn't spoken to her friend in the last two years of hiding, Bailey was holding out on calling for advice. Surely, the supernatural healing had to kick in soon. Worry and guilt over being the cause of his injury ate at her.

Maybe she should call. Or answer the phone next time it rang.

He was already hot to begin with. Now his temperature had risen to a level that would have boiled a normal human's brain. Bailey reached for the cell phone, her hand hovering while she debated.

He twisted and mumbled in his sleep. Disjointed phrases only told her that his nightmares were bad. Real bad.

"No! No! No!"

He jerked straight up in bed and grabbed her before she could dodge out of the way. A predatory growl rumbled in his chest as he twisted her underneath him.

"Mark!" Her choked gasp was cut off by the weight of him. He felt a lot heavier than he looked. The shoulder wounds broke open and seeped blood through the bandages. His blue eyes gleamed red.

The same senses that powered her Finder's abilities tingled. Magic? Psychic powers?

The only thing that mattered now was the fact that she had a delirious werewolf about to Change on top of her.

"You promised not to eat me. Do you hear? I'm not food."

Mark shook all over. His tawny skin flushed red. Growling, whimpering noises choked out of him as he jerked backwards in some kind of seizure.

Bailey tried to control her fear, not to smell like a victim, but this was *wrong*.

She'd seen wolverine Change before. She'd seen Mark's Change. It was weird, but fluid. Very fast. And relatively painless, they'd assured her. This was torture.

His hands curled into a caricature of a claw before the bones stretched, then compacted together.

She closed her eyes and held on. Warm, soft fur pushed out under her hands. She buried her face in the musky smell of it, aware of the spasming muscles underneath. Claws scrabbled without any strength against her belly for a second then went still. A hot, furry deadweight dropped then slid away.

Bailey took a breath, surprised to be alive and unhurt. She opened her eyes.

Under her hands, the yellow-blond wolf lay on his side. His eyes were closed, but his chest rose and fell with the open-mouthed pant of exhaustion. He didn't seem to recognize her presence.

Carefully, she let go of her handholds of fur and smoothed down his side. When he didn't object, she continued to pet him, awed at the wild beauty of the animal.

His ears pricked and she realized she'd been murmuring silly nonsense while she stroked the amazing fur.

"Mark? Are you in there?"

Not wanting to startle him, she kept her voice low. Mark whined and focused his bright blue eyes on her. Not wolf eyes, almost human ones with the ferocity of the wolf behind them. He whined again and licked the sides of his muzzle.

"Thirsty?"

Bailey slid off the bed. Her legs felt like gelatin as she made her way to the sink. Just twenty-four hours with Mark and her life had taken on the surreal quality of a *Brat* movie. Her emotions stretched tight with the need to cry or scream. Ranting wouldn't solve anything or make her life normal. Swallowing

the urge to freak, she filled a Styrofoam cup full of tap water.

Mark had never been so thankful. He lapped at the water and lay back down with a sigh. Changed into a wolf, he could feel the minor healing he'd gained.

He didn't remember much past vaulting over the windshield to the hood of his car. His only plan had been to keep Bailey safe. He remembered the slamming pain of being shot. The continued burning of his wounds and in his veins could only mean one thing. Silver.

The stuff was pure poison to his kind. Even the smallest bit of silver would dissolve in wolveren blood and weaken them. It didn't take much silver to kill a wolveren, or any *were*. Where a few lead bullets were painful, but not deadly, the same amount of silver would do the trick.

Mark had heard of resourceful Hunters who'd killed whole packs by poisoning the food or water with silver. The story was probably to scare wild pups into behaving. But still, he was amazed that he had been able to Change with silver bullets in his system.

Without a bit of fear, she came back to run her hands through his fur again. Mark thought that was pretty amazing, too. Just when he might have gathered the energy up to Change back, he fell asleep.

He woke again to the sexy scents of pizza and female. His ears perked forward. Bailey, delicious Bailey, stood over the little motel table with a half-eaten piece of pizza in her hand. He nearly swallowed his tongue.

"Hey, there. Sorry, I didn't wait for you."

She stuffed the piece in her mouth and grabbed a paper plate.

"Mrf-mmm-mrf-mmm."

His stomach growled with appreciation at the two huge slices she dropped onto the plate. Other parts of him thrummed with appreciation at her heart shaped butt as she bent over the table.

Oh, there is a God. Mark grinned, tongue lolling in pleasure. *And he loves me.*

Bailey turned back around, and nearly dropped the plate of pizza. A very human, very sexy, and mostly naked Mark watched her from the bed. He'd at least had the decency to pull the blanket over his assets.

His blue eyes were still the same. Hungry, predatory and fixed on her. Her breath stopped in the middle of a Little Red Riding Hood moment.

Oh, Mark what big presence you have there.

All the better to have hot naked sex with, my dear.

The inner dialogue was killing her.

"Um." She sucked in air. *Don't hyperventilate.* "I was going to tear it into pieces for you."

He grinned, making her stomach somersault. Nice strong white teeth for Red Riding Hood to admire.

"You can still do that if you want. I won't bite. Hard."

She snorted and moved to the bed, assessing his injuries.

"God, that is cheesier than the pizza."

"What?" His eyes widened in mock innocence. Lordy, the man knew his own charm. "I'm injured. After you feed me the pizza, can you give me my sponge bath?"

"Got some sleaze with your cheese, I see."

Little Red Riding Hood always won in the stories. She just needed to hold out against this Big Bad Wolf.

Mark took the pizza, downing half in one bite. It was pure Heaven. He closed his eyes and chewed shaking his head at her offer of a soda.

Feeling her gaze on him, Mark opened his eyes and returned her gaze.

Down boy, he told the wolf. Pizza should be enough. He didn't need to be leashed by her.

Bailey reminded him too much of his mom, Diana Weis. AKA, The Food Nazi.

To give his mom credit, she was the one who'd gotten him help for the ADHD. No medication was going to help him. His metabolism was too efficient.

Out of love, Diana had researched what foods aggravated his condition and planned daily

meals with his needs in mind.

He loved his mom. But God, six months without a pizza was too much. The sugar rationing was worse. Sometimes he still felt like a twelve-year-old kid.

"How long was I out?"

Bailey startled and flushed. She held one finger up while she swallowed. Her lips twitched while she watched him.

The wolf took that as a good sign. Mark decided it was trouble for him.

"Almost two full days."

He blinked, digesting that and doing some fast mental calculation. He'd been gone five days. His appetite disappeared. With a sinking feeling in his gut he laid back against the pillows. Once his pack, and his alphas, caught up with him, his freedom was over.

At that moment, his phone launched into the Spider-Man theme. He groaned and leaned in the direction of the sound. Bailey beat him to it and handed him the sleek calculator thin device.

"It rang while you were out of it. But I left it alone." He checked the number. Rick. The sinking feeling rose a few notches. His best friend was supposed to keep the heat off his back while Mark grabbed Bailey and headed home. No doubt Rick would try to get to him first with the heads up when his overprotective family decided to track him down.

"Dude." "Yo. *What are you up to*, man? I have covered all I ..." Mark froze as another, more serious tone came over the line. "I've got a fairy in a jar and a choke chain on Rick. Want to tell me what's going on?" "Uh ... Brandon?" "Talk fast. Dad and Bradley are still out of town. Ember is going to make my life hell if I don't let her out this pickle jar soon. Fairys are really big on payback, and it's never a good idea to piss off your house brownie. Mack, Chase, and Tank took Rice camping. And Mom's starting to worry about you."

Mark had never been close to Brandon, the crazy one. He'd respected Brandon's twin, Bradley with the respect given a dominant wolf, or older brother. Whatever Dad left, Bradley would finish off. He might be able to hide out at Mack's. Adam's human beta was a little more lenient than the others.

He looked over at Bailey. Her worry scented the air and made him want to curl around her. Whatever had shot him had to do with that antique paperweight she'd tried to lift. He couldn't head home until he was sure he didn't have a dragon or silver-toting mercenaries following his trail.

"I've got it handled." Brandon had a strange chuckle that was never fun. It grated in Mark's ear now. "Where are you in case we have to cart home the pieces?" Heat flared through Mark. "I said, I've got it handled. I'm not a pup. Go ahead and tell everyone. I'll deal with the fallout when I get home." The other end was silent long enough for him to check the phone display to make

sure he was still connected. "Karen says to tell Bailey 'hi.' " "Oh. Okay." Mark glanced at Bailey.

"Karen says hi." Karen was Diana's daughter and packsister to him. Growing up around psychics tended to take the surprise out of revelations. Bailey's eyes were wide as she tried to piece the conversation together from his end. Apparently, she'd been away from her own kind long enough to be surprised.

"Be careful, little brother. Call and I'll be there."

"What about ..."

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of everything on this end. You need any money?"

A different kind of warmth spread though Mark. No one, not even crazy Brandon usually treated him like an adult. And Brandon had called him *brother*. The day was getting stranger and stranger.

"Nah. I'm good." He might have to dip into his measly savings soon. He was a mechanic not a millionaire.

Brandon gave that weird laugh again.

"I'll make a deposit."

Chapter Seven

Mark closed the phone and closed his eyes while he digested what he'd done. Now he was officially AWOL. Brandon had said he'd take care of it, but Mark knew that in the end, if Adam demanded, the other wolf would give him up.

That was the way a pack worked. Somehow, the bone-deep fear of what Adam would do when his disobedience came to light wasn't there. Mark had made his decision to stay. He'd deal with it when he got home.

Oh, his dad wouldn't do anything like go werewolf and slice and dice on him.

Adam Weis wasn't Garrick Moser to torture and rape his pack members. But there would be a fitting punishment. Supernatural creatures, and wolveren especially, didn't do well without strict rules and a strong leader.

"Everything okay at home?"

Mark blinked and focused on his pretty psychic.

His? Yes, *his*, the wolf inside answered. The wolf couldn't be convinced that he didn't need a mate, so Mark didn't try. He ignored it to focus on the more pressing problem.

"Yeah. So, you want to tell me who you pissed off enough to shoot me with silver?"

Her eyes went wider than before and her mouth dropped. Her shock was a sharp spike in the air.

"Silver? Those were *silver* bullets?"

Mark lifted one side of his mouth in a non-smile. He showed the healing red of his hands.

"How do you think I got this?"

The silver cage. The silver keys.

"I'm so sorry."

She felt like a heel. He'd helped her escape and he got burned, and then shot.

"You don't have to do this. It's my problem." And it was. *Her* problem. He shouldn't even be here at all. Unfortunately, she couldn't dredge up the indignation over him butting into her business.

"Sunshine, I'm not going anywhere without you."

He started to move around on the bed, flinching with the movement, but obviously tired with staying in one place. He looked like the activity of changing forms several times in the last hour had taken a toll. Looking so much younger and innocent for the vulnerability reminded her that he was off limits.

"I'm tired." There was the faintest whine to the complaint. His wicked blue eyes melted into puppy dog eyes. "Sit with me while I rest?"

Uh-uh. No way with him naked in that bed, would Little Red Riding Hood just sit by him.

He cocked his head and looked even more pouty.

"What if I asked please? We feel better if someone we like is close."

"We?" She choked on the word, drawn to the bed despite her reservations. He liked her? "How close?"

Mark reached out, slowly as if not to startle her, and drew her down.

The blue of his eyes was wide and deep, like the sky. The color was drowning, like when you laid on your back on cloudless day and tried to take it all in. Her senses reeled and she felt as if she were falling.

"Touch."

Mark looked down at her. She really had fallen after all and he'd rolled half over her. He leaned down and she felt the warm wet of his tongue on her collarbone. His breath tingled over her skin.

"We need to touch. Share the magic that makes us what we are."

"B-But I'm not what you are."

He shifted just a little more over her.

Bailey couldn't quite figure out why she wasn't supposed to let him do that. That thought trailed off into nothing when he buried his face in the vee of her shirt.

He rolled the two-day growth of his cheeks against the swell of her breasts.

A little sound of pleasure strangled in her throat. She arched into the sensation.

"You've had my blood, Sunshine. You're a magic all on your own."

The mention of blood brought back the memory of her insane cousin Lawrence Daily shooting her knee and stomach. The passion cleared from her head a little. Mark's blood had kept her alive, brought her back from being nearly dead. Too bad wolveren transfusions were by ingestion only.

Her hands threaded through the satiny silk of his hair. He'd moved to cover her body with his. Only her clothes separated them. His warm nakedness made her want to run her hands down his body. Instead, she arched up against him.

She tightened her hold in his hair to keep from crossing the line of no return. Return from what? She just knew that psychics weren't supposed to be doing this with supernaturals. Magic and psychics weren't supposed to go hand in hand or whatever she was doing.

"I'm a psychic, not magical. Not what you are."

He was very happy to be between her legs and pressed against her. He tasted her skin once more while one of his hands played in the curls that escaped her topknot.

"The power all comes from the same place, sweet stuff. Psychics, witches, dragons, wolveren, vampires, whatever. That's why you taste so good."

She shoved at him hard. He didn't move.

"Taste? What am I, *food*?"

He licked at her skin again. She frowned, unsettled. She shoved and slapped at his shoulder. Mark made a slight noise, like she'd hurt him, and he moved away.

Remembering the wounds, she felt a little bad, but needed some air, needed to think. She moved off the bed, intent on reclaiming her personal space.

He looked at her, hungry. His look darkened and he growled. She could practically feel the heat of his frustration. Her own frustration mirrored his. Why did she want so badly what she shouldn't have?

Before Bailey had a chance to be frightened at the sudden shift in his mood, he slipped off the bed taking the blanket with him.

He headed for the door. The healing gunshots were raw and scabbed over, though he moved as if the pain were nothing.

"Where are you going?"

He didn't say anything, just grabbed the keys from the table. He yanked the door open and strode out.

Bailey jerked into motion and followed. She watched him pop the trunk using the key fob. He made a point of raising the top and locking the car.

She shrugged at his back. She'd been a little too busy to think of that. Without meeting her eyes, he brushed by her on his way back in the room. The bathroom door slammed with the force of his emotion. Bailey jumped at the sound and realized that not once through this ordeal had she been scared of Mark.

She'd been afraid *for* him, but never *of* him.

Chapter Eight

Bailey rubbed her arms and skittered her gaze around the auto parts parking lot again. She frowned as she was drawn back to his careful movements.

If possible, the man, werewolf, was even more sexy in a blue-collar worker way. There was a wide dress code for the term redneck. It was more of a mindset than what a person wore.

Mark put his own unique spin on it. His longish yellow-blond hair was pulled back under a bright red baseball cap turned backwards. The cap was emblazoned with a stereotypical suited wrench-toting gangster standing in front of a truck. The words Weis Guy Garage bracketed the logo top and bottom.

The tacky shirt *du jour* was, of all things, bright yellow with green tractors. Apparently, he couldn't find an eye-bleeding color in cargo pants. The multi-pocketed pants were a normal camo green. They didn't look very worn, but were grease-stained from previous car repair efforts.

He had grease on his hands and bare arms. A particularly cute line crossed his nose and cheek, adding to his rough appeal.

"Are you sure you're up to this? You've only been up since last night."

He growled from under the Mustang's hood, the only answer to anything that he'd given since she'd pushed away his kiss last night.

"And it can't be particularly safe working on the car in the auto parts parking lot."

It also seemed a kind of country bumpkin thing. Not that she was stuck up. It just seemed to her that a garage was better for this kind of work.

Her shoulders slumped. They certainly didn't have a garage here, did they?

The car had coughed and sputtered all the way to the hotel after the shooting. This morning the engine would not turn over without Mark fiddling around under the hood. The he'd driven straight to the nearest parts place.

Like a man, he was still in a huff over her rejection. She found it kind of odd that she just knew he didn't want to make them a target by staying at the hotel. Though, that was as obvious a deduction as finding herself in the fast food drive-through after hearing the rumble of his stomach.

She peered over his shoulder as he worked with a long tool that fit over the top of a bolt. Watching with fascination, she wished she knew something about fixing cars. Or even what the tools were called. Hammer, screwdriver, and pliers about covered the extent of her tool knowledge.

Until this moment, she'd always taken a perverse joy in messing with her mechanic. *What kind of car is it?* Why it's a blue car. *What's wrong with it?* It's broken.

Quick, deft movements of his wrist accompanied by the *click click click* brought the bolt out in barely any time at all. He began taking out another bolt that held in the part that a bullet had killed. It was like he was in tune with the car. A Zen kind of thing. He opened the hood and knew just what to do. It was like Mark was the Car Whisperer. And darn it, he was starting to rev her engine, too.

"You know, you're very good at that."

Mark grunted. It wasn't a growl. Bailey took that as a good sign.

"You know, you could probably do something like that for a living."

Mark fought the urge to roll his eyes at her attempts to draw him out. If she only knew. As it was, he was stalling going back into the store just to stay near Bailey. She smelled a lot better than the grease and exhaust scents of the car.

Bad, bad, bad.

He didn't want or need a mate. Passing on his bad blood and his defect to another generation wasn't an option. That kiss last night should be enough to make him run home screaming. So why wasn't he?

Every instinct he had told him that she was already his. All he had to do was reach out and take her.

His mind knew better than that. Hell, even his sperm donor of a father knew that the female's magic completed the mate-bond. And Bailey wasn't going to mate-bond with the likes of him or any supernatural. The wolf part of him just wanted her, period.

Not for the first time, the hazy feeling of a female cuddling him close teased at the edges of his memory. He let the memory distract him from the present.

His mother? He wasn't sure. She was a name on his birth certificate. The only memories he had to call mother were a faint but nice smell and a comforting voice. Where was she? Had the old bastard killed her? Did his mother just finally have enough of the violence and evil of Garrick's pack and the Cargills, and leave? Why did she leave her pup behind?

Who knew? It was enough that Adam and Diana wanted him. It had to be.

He felt her hand on his skin and kept himself from flinching. Funny, how Bailey's touch startled

him more than the pains in his chest, side, and thigh.

Most of the silver poisoning had run through his system. His veins didn't feel so much on fire. Every muscle ached and his head felt like cotton.

Unless she touched him. That was a different kind of fire. The heat of her touch burned in his groin and made him sweat with the need to touch her. His Sunshine was a craving that he wanted to explore with every one of his senses.

Shaking his head, he gathered up the tools to give back to the helpful clerk. He needed to get a grip and get Bailey Spark to safety. That made the car number one priority.

Thank God auto parts places were willing to loan tools or he'd be in deeper trouble than he already was. His poor mustang needed a garage bad.

Not only was Adam going to be pissed that he'd gone off, but Mark had a business of his own to run. Cars weren't going to fix themselves. Even with the two mechanics he'd hired to take up the slack, he had to get back to the shop.

He'd busted his ass making a good name for himself as a mechanic. He'd bought out a garage in Palestine a couple of years ago. Right after Bailey had lit out of town.

He owned his own business, like his dad, instead of being the pack screw-up. Or a shade-tree mechanic. He had even had some pretty cool cards printed up for Weis Guy Garage to pass around.

"Um. Look, Mark I really need to get my car. I have obligations here."

He could scent her agitation. Faintly, through the tie they shared, he could feel her need for freedom. The need to run free. He understood that. The same need was a part of his own nature. So was the instinct to protect her.

He hunched a shoulder in anticipation of her reaction and gathered up the tools. He avoided her eyes. His Sunshine had eyes that could pull the truth right out of his gut.

"Later. Stay by the car."

He growled the word, keeping a hold on distance that the wolf was scrabbling to close between them. Remember, she'd rejected him twice already since saving her from the dragon. She didn't want him anymore now that she did two years ago.

Jaws clenched, he stalked back into the auto parts store to return the tools. For a few minutes, at least, he'd be able to breathe without her scent taking over his senses.

Bailey pushed her glasses more firmly onto the bridge of her nose before pulling out the chopsticks she'd found in the glove box to hold her loose knot into place. She retwisted the mass onto the top of her head and jabbed the sticks home.

Dratted man. She *knew* he wasn't going to take her to her car. She didn't know why she knew. Except that Mark was a pain in the patoot, as usual.

Men were usually an enigma to her. Being a psychic had never given her an edge on the male of the species, and shouldn't now.

If he were older, she might be inclined to romantic fantasies. Last night's kiss was a blip of insanity. An absolutely amazing blip, but she had to face facts. He was hurt and wanted the comfort of his pack. He'd said as much last night. Which was where he should be in the first place. Home in Texas. So why was he in Georgia?

For her. That strange sense whispered. And there was no way he was going to leave without her.

Chapter Nine

Still, a small glow of anticipation warmed in Bailey's belly. An utterly ridiculous glow with no basis in reality. She was mousy, squinted without her glasses, and forty plus pounds overweight. She was too old for him. Ten years too many.

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

A middle-aged gentleman paused two parking spaces away. The lines of the gleaming silver Lexus were elegant and understated. He must have slipped by her while she was woolgathering. His blond hair and neatly trimmed beard went well with the dark blue suit. Very distinguished.

"Oh fine." She smiled, and then frowned. The man shrugged and opened his car door. He stopped with one foot in the car and turned back to her. "It's just that you look a bit lost, ma'am. Do you need a lift somewhere?" "No, I'm fine. I ..." Bailey cast a look into the wide window of the auto parts store. Mark was nowhere to be seen. She bit her lip. Coming to a decision, she pasted a bright smile on her face.

"Actually, I do need a ride. My car is over at Southern Shoals." *Bad Idea*, her common sense screamed. She told it to shut up. How else was she going to escape Mark? She wasn't going back to Texas. And the man looked decent enough. He beamed a generous smile back at her and gestured to the passenger side. "Well, milady. That is just my neck of the woods. My chariot awaits." As fast as possible, Bailey popped the trunk from the glove box button. The pitiful two bags and laptop case that were left of her belongings were simple to transfer to the backseat of the man's car. The sum of her life had been reduced to carry on luggage.

She settled into the pillow soft passenger seat, inhaling the expensive aroma of leather. Meeting his eyes, she smiled her thanks as he shut the door before returning to the driver's side. What a gentleman.

Though to give Mark credit, he did open doors, too. "I'm Marcus." Bailey reached out to shake his hand. His big hand swallowed hers. Perfect manicured nails added to his sophistication without being effeminate. "Bailey." Marcus smiled again and backed out of the parking spot. "Well then Miss Bailey, It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." She pointed out to her grumbling conscience how Marcus's neat mustache and beard bracketed his mouth. His very blue eyes, and expensive color coordinated suit made him trustworthy looking. Plus, his manners were above reproach.

"So Marcus, what is that you do?"

"I'm into acquisitions and investments."

She really didn't have a clue what that meant in the business world. In her previous life among the psychic community, Bailey had been a secretary for a computer company. In Savannah, she'd done the same. Filing, answering phones, and errand girl.

"That must be very challenging."

The blue of his eyes flickered with some hard emotion that was hard to read.

"I'm making it a family business. My son will be coming onboard soon."

"You must be very proud of him."

He snorted.

"The boy has no idea what he is capable of achieving. His talents are being wasted where he's at now."

Marcus turned and stared at Bailey. The smile started in blue eyes that hinted red and spread to the rest of his face. It wasn't friendly. His teeth were very white. Sharp canines, upper and lower filled his mouth.

"You're not human." Bailey's breath caught in her chest, lodged with rabbit fast beat of her heart. She jerked for the door latch, fumbling in the unfamiliar vehicle.

She wrestled the seatbelt off. Pulled the latch, to no avail.

Switching the door lock button manually yielded no results.

He chuckled. The evil rumble skittered up her spine. Instinctively, she homed her Finding abilities on Mark. He was still where she'd left him.

"You're not quite human yourself, Miss Sparks."

She gulped a breath of air and forced herself to calm down. Fear would only excite the thing into attacking.

Okay, she was locked in a car with a supernatural something. So it knew her name. Maybe she only thought she'd just given her first name.

"Um. I'm human."

He laughed that nerve-scratching chuckle again. She remembered, too late, that there were a

lot of supernatural things that classified humans as *Tastes Great*.

"In what way? You were born psychic to psychic parents and have ingested enough wolver blood to bind you to your wolf and his pack."

Werewolf.

Oh God Oh God O God. Bailey prayed and started scrabbling with the door handle again.

Flashbacks of her cousin Lawrence Changing and coming after her had Bailey slamming a fist against the window.

She would have grabbed the steering wheel. But, in an accident, Marcus the werewolf could take a heck of a lot more damage than her.

He reached one hand for her. She tried slapping him away.

Marcus growled. His hand raised and came at her backwards in a slap across one cheek. Her head bounced off the window hard enough that the glass should have shattered.

Bailey's vision blurred. She slouched against the seat, staring at the fuzzy image of her captor. A tickle of blood trailed down her cheek as she watched Marcus bring his knuckle to his mouth. His tongue cleaned the red smear away.

Panic clawed at her throat.

"Keep silent and do as I say. Or you will wish I'd killed you." His voice was calm and reasonable. Insanely reasonable.

"Who are you?"

The hand lashed out and connected with her temple, knocking her against the window again. Bailey huddled against the door. A small whimper escaped her stinging lip. The metallic taste of blood coating her tongue and the heavy scent of leather mixed with the fear that blanketed her.

"Quiet, bitch." Marcus's voice was a flat familiar drawl to her fading senses. "I can't believe that boy hasn't trained you better by now."

Chapter Ten

Mark walked out of the store, ticked at the auto parts chain in general. He finally had what he was looking for. Whoever heard of color-coding the aisle signs anyway?

Like he could find a yellow letter on a placard the same color depth as orange. They might as well have been invisible. To him it *was* invisible. He had to walk down every aisle until he found the fuses, hidden in an inside corner beside the reflectors.

Then he'd spent more time hunting through the packages until he realized they were out of the ones he wanted. He figured he'd hit a Mart store later and see what they had.

In the parking lot, the Mustang sat all by its lonesome. Mark glanced around the empty space. All he caught was a tantalizing wisp of Bailey's apple perfume. Another scent, familiar enough to catch his attention, teased at his memory. He shook his head.

Where was she?

The breeze brought another scent, other than that of exhaust, oil, hot pavement, and the overfull trash barrel. Mark lifted his head and let his nose give him a better picture than his eyes ever would.

The faint whiff of lizard and magic made him jerk and almost sneeze. He scanned the parking lot for one last hopeless glance of Bailey, in case she was hiding behind the other trash barrel. He pulled his keys out for a fast getaway.

Where iss my egg, wolf?

The question hissed in Mark's mind. He jumped and looked around, his nose automatically testing the air for direction. His ears, not as sharp as his wolf form, beat human senses any day. He reached for the door of his beloved black beauty when the huge ass lizard launched from the auto parts roof.

Holy Sh--!

Mark ducked as the creature landed on his car with a thunk. The car groaned in protest. He backed away. Fast. No way did he want to go round two with that thing.

Twice as big as a horse, the dragon crouched on the top of his Mustang. Silvery gray scales reminded him of swirling mist. Its front claws dug gouges into the hood. Its back claws clung to the trunk.

A distant part of his brain noted that it didn't crush the car like its size suggested it should. The rest of him was enraged.

"That's my car, Scaly!"

Thasss isss Mr. Sssmith to you, wolf.

"Yeah. Right."

What little fear Mark had dissolved under the painful sight of his car and the urge to find and protect Bailey. He pointed the ignition key at the hulking gray lizard.

"Get your scaly lizard ass off my car Godzilla or ..."

Or what, wolf?

"Or I'll have enough luggage for a safari."

Smith's red eyes narrowed. A thin line of drool escaped the dragon's mouth and pooled on the fender. Mark heard the faintest sizzle as the excess slid over the edge, leaving a scarred line behind.

"Hey! Pour some paint stripper on it while you're up there! Cut it out, dammit!"

My egg.

"I don't have your freakin' egg."

Perhapsss your mate ...

"Touch her and die." A little cheesey, Mark thought. "She doesn't have it, either. And she's not my mate."

The dragon made a growling noise like ripping metal.

Mark stood his ground as its long angular head stretched out nose to nose with him. The sharp crocodile teeth opened and snapped shut, blowing a metallic scent in his face.

Mark gave himself some major points for not flinching. He crossed his arms and slouched.

"So, how come no one in the store has called 911?"

The dragon blinked and moved its head up a little at his question.

Mark nodded, letting his bangs flop over his eyes. He kept a close hold on his smug feelings for regaining control of this little standoff. Part of him grieved for his precious Mustang, but he let it go for now.

"Dude, the invisibility rocks."

He was fishing, big time, and hoped the dragon didn't catch on.

Scaly puffed his impatience.

You would not understand the physssics.

Mark nodded.

"Okay. So, how come I can see you?"

Because I wisssh it, wolf.

Smith lifted one claw off of the car and flexed the deadly tipped finger digits.

Mark smelled the lie. He cocked his head, but didn't call the dragon on it since he couldn't produce the egg.

"Look. I really don't have it." Mark shrugged. He'd gotten a glance at the thing while Godzilla was throwing him around in the house. His memory was a lot better than everyone liked to think. And his focus was a hell of a lot better than it had been at twelve. "Geesh. It's not like that thing was real or anything. Just a big, glass paperweight."

His tact hadn't improved one bit.

The dragon roared. Mark stared down its maw of razor sharp teeth, ignoring the stinging spittle spattered his face and body. Apparently, dragons didn't have that punching bag shaped thing hanging down in the back of their throats.

He prepared to duck and run, or fight if need be.

Arms loose, Mark moved so that his feet were offset for balance and speed. He reached for the calm stored from years of practice.

The dragon pounced.

Mark shifted aside, moving to the rhythm of his heart. Slower than his supernatural speed, but faster than human. He attacked.

For the first time ever, facing a non-wolven opponent, Mark didn't pull the kick. His foot connected with the dragon's jaw with enough force to knock a human's head from his shoulders.

The dragon's head snaked like a bungee cord let loose, but stayed connected to the creature's neck.

Mark assessed his choices. The dragon had reach on him with its long neck. But its claws were deadly sharp. He guessed that they'd slice through tough wolven skin just fine.

Sharp teeth snapped at him again. Mark blocked against the side of its mouth, his opposite hand automatically coming up for a quick stiff fingered jab at the fist-sized eye.

It squealed, a nails on chalkboard sound, and jerked back. It scrabbled sideways to stay on top of the car.

Mark steadied himself, watching his opponent's next attack.

The dragon sucked in a breath. Mark cocked his head. His eyes widened with realization. He dodged to the side.

Fire shot in a burst over the parking lot. The heat singed his skin.

Mark rolled to his feet, mad as hell.

"Look! I told you, I don't have your stupid glass egg. Why don't you chase down the real thief?"

Smith paused.

Mark heard sirens in the distance. Great.

They couldn't see the dragon but they could see the fire and him dancing around the parking lot. Someone had probably called in a lunatic with a blowtorch.

"Dammit. Here come the police. Even your kind knows better than that."

Smith snarled, that ripping metal sound again, and launched into the air.

The egg, wolf. Or else.

Mark didn't need to know what else. Smith was a dragon. The lizard would eat him if he didn't come up with that egg.

Chapter Eleven

Bailey didn't remember getting on the roller coaster with the marching band.

The churning in her stomach rose and ebbed with the pounding in her head. She groaned and peeled her eyelids open, promptly regretting the action. Light stabbed at her brain and she closed them again.

Yapping woke Bailey again. Finally, her eyes focused on a fuzzy puppy. Tongue lolling out one side, it stared at her with curious blue eyes. The puppy yapped a couple of encouraging barks and perked its pointed ears in her direction.

Bailey struggled to sit up. She was on a damp concrete floor of what looked like a basement. The smell of moldy rot pervaded the room, adding another layer to the nausea that seemed to ride her like waves in the ocean.

No puking. She swallowed hard. Right.

She had no idea where her glasses were. Her eyesight wasn't great, but she could do without them.

Feeling the tug at her neck, Bailey encountered a chain collar. A padlock through the links kept her from prying it off. A heavy-duty dog's cable ran from the collar to an eyebolt embedded in the concrete.

Bailey slumped. She sure had gotten herself into a mess this time. First the dragon and the cage. Now a werewolf had her staked out on a lead in his basement.

She eyed the puppy again.

It, no *he*, was just entering the gangly stage of all legs and feet. He was about the size of a

medium sized dog and still growing. The puppy's coloring was a yellow gold that made her take a closer look.

Even with her not-so-great eyesight she was shocked.

Intelligent blue eyes stared back at her. She forgot all about the nausea and her headache.

"You're a wolf."

A werewolf puppy. He wagged his tail at her hoarse tone and bounced to his feet.

Both thinking and following the movement made her head spin. Werewolves were supposed to Change at puberty, but this little guy couldn't be very old at all.

The puppy sneezed mid-bounce and lost his balance. His gaze darted around as if looking for the culprit who'd pushed him over. Bailey smiled.

"*Runt!*"

Marcus's voice bellowed down the stairway. Bailey's gut clenched. The puppy flattened himself on the concrete. She thought she heard a thin whimper from the quivering creature.

"*Runt! Get your ass up here now.*"

The puppy, now named Runt, got to his feet. He glanced at the stairway then into Bailey's eyes. She made a shooing motion when what she wanted to do was hide him behind her.

Runt darted to a corner and came back dragging a ratty blanket in his mouth and dropped it beside her. He dodged when she reached to touch his fur.

Marcus bellowed again. The puppy ran full tilt to the stairs and clambered up, leaving her alone with the smell of the basement.

Bailey's eyes caught on the wall directly opposite. Animal skins, dried and stretched, were mounted in a grisly display. She recognized some, black panther, tiger, *wolf*. Others were not so easily identifiable. Along the beams, more trophies than she could make out seemed to cry out silently. Warning her.

One thing she was certain of, and not because of some psychic power. Those pelts weren't from normal animals and the dark stains and gouges in the concrete weren't from Marcus working on his outboard motor.

* * * * Mark sucked in a breath of air

and glanced at the glass front of the auto parts store. The sales clerk, a college age male with the personality of rising management, stared back at him. The clerk's mouth was a thin hard line. Approaching sirens and the bellow of a fire truck clenched at Mark's gut. The damn dragon was going to get him arrested for arson.

How ironic was that?

Mark headed for his poor car as the clerk disappeared. Probably to make sure the police knew which direction he went.

The Mustang didn't want to turn over. Poor baby. He'd give just about anything for his garage so he could fix her up. Muttering apologies to the abused vehicle he tried again.

He snarled at the rap on the window. His eyes narrowed at the sales clerk in his preppy polo shirt and slacks uniform.

Mark's packbrother, Rick, had once told him that the Auto uniform shirt was bright orange. To him, orange was just another flat shade.

He pressed a button on the door and the window zipped down.

"Yeah?"

By the scent, Mark could tell the clerk was scared spitless. But the guy held it together well. Sirens blared closer.

"I saw the dragon."

Mark's eyes narrowed. His lip curled just a bit in challenge. The clerk, whose name tag read Hamilton, lifted his chin. The scent of fear washed off of him and into the car.

"And I know what you are." Hamilton held out a VCR tape. "Take it. It's the only copy of the security tape."

Mark put the Mustang in reverse and snagged the tape. The sirens were close. He had to leave. Now.

“Wait!” Hamilton chose that moment to grip the doorframe.

The sirens were just this side of painful to Mark’s sensitive wolverine hearing. Police cars flashed by the store, continuing on their race to where ever they were headed. The fire truck’s horn drowned out Hamilton’s voice.

He stared at the clerk, willing his heart to slow.

They weren’t after him. The realization sunk in slowly.

Jeez, his ears were never going to stop ringing. Mark shook his head almost laughing at ridiculousness of it all. He wanted to run. Bailey would laugh her butt off when he told her.

“I mean it. Take the tape and forget you ever saw me.” Hamilton’s voice penetrated the overwhelming relief.

Mark blinked in confusion, and then stared at the man. The elusive scent of a psychic working his own brand of magic teased his nose.

Dealing with Bailey, he’d figured out that most psychics were a paranoid, rabid lot. He didn’t know what gifts Hamilton the auto parts clerk had, but the guy was an idiot if he was trying Jedi mind tricks out on a wolverine. Being at the top of the supernatural food chain meant dragons, wolverines, and vampires didn’t fall for the woo-doo shit that much.

Even stupider, Hamilton here thought the more juice he put into his act, whatever he was trying would eventually work. It just dumped more psychic scent into the air.

With a dragon on the loose, and the brief scent of werewolf he’d caught earlier, this guy was practically a steak being waved around. A big juicy psychic steak that practically screamed, *come and get me*.

The werewolf presence unsettled Mark.

Bailey had run off again. That dragon thought he had its stupid fake ruby paperweight souvenir. Someone with silver bullets wanted him dead. He felt like his list wasn’t complete. He was definitely missing something here.

Mark frowned at the clerk and snatched the guy’s shirt when he would have moved away. Sometimes instinct was just a pain in the butt.

“Wait a minute.”

Ignoring the psychic’s various threats and prying at his fingers, Mark dug in the catch-all box between the bucket seats. He grabbed one of his business cards for Weis Guy Garage.

He shoved the card at the clerk. When the man didn’t take the card, Mark growled.

“Take it.”

Hamilton complied. Mark held on to the man just a moment longer. “Call my cell if you have any problems.”

What was he doing?

Mark felt like beating his head against the steering wheel. He was becoming his dad, that’s what.

Adam always listened to his instincts. His dad had an overwhelming compulsion to protect every psychic that blew in the pack’s direction. Even when it would be better to chase them out or let the vamps have them, Adam watched over the few potential psychics in and around their territory, protecting the ungrateful wretches.

All because psychics were the only ones that could be infected with the viruses that changed them from pretending to be human, to wolverine or vampire.

Stupid, stupid instinct.

He gave Hamilton the psychic a small shake, for the inconvenience.

“Got it?”

The psychic nodded.

Mark let him go. The need to find Bailey was building, his indicator that she was neck deep again. His stomach knotted as he pulled away, sparing a single glance at the bemused sales clerk staring

at the business card.

Psychics sure were a lot of trouble.

Chapter Twelve

Mark ignored the throbbing in his shoulder and side and drove, trying to focus on where she was. Her presence slipped in and out until the wispy feeling disappeared, leaving him distracted and aggravated.

Driving out to Southern Shoals only proved his fears. Her car was exactly where she'd left it. Knowing Bailey, her first instinct would be to regain her independence, her means of travel.

Unfortunately, Jax the gnome wouldn't be able to use his computer skills to provide him with an address this time. Mark was on his own. He could handle it.

His cell phone rang during a combination meal break and think session. He swallowed a mouthful of burger.

"Lo?"

"Where are you little brother?"

Mark had to admit, Brandon's brotherly affection was starting to freak him out just a bit.

"Lunch."

Silence stretched out on the line long enough for him to check the cell phone connection.

"Okay. Fine. I lost her."

"I don't think you lose women. They run off."

Mark was about to respond when his adopted sister, Brandon's mate, came on the line.

"What did you do this time, Mark? Where's Bailey?"

Classic bossy older sister. He couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"Look--"

"I mean it. You better not hurt Bai--"

The phone changed hands again and Brandon was back.

"Hold on." There was a muffled pause that worried him. When he came back on the phone, Brandon's voice was low.

"Be careful, little brother."

"Brandon ..."

"No, listen. Mack had a vision. A bad one. He's out cold."

Mack's psychic powers sucked. Mark never blamed the Pack Beta for wanting to take the chance on a painful death for the opportunity to trade off visions of other people's impending death. Only, Adam and his protective instincts had forbidden anyone to help Mack on his quest to become wolveren and ditching the awful visions.

"Is Dad with him? Does Mack know who it is?"

The silence was painful.

"Dad's on his way. I can feel through the pack link that things are going rough for you."

Unease raised the hackles on the back of Mark's neck. He'd known Brandon his whole life and seen the other wolf rise from omega to Don't Screw with Me. Brandon didn't evade, he either disappeared or told it straight.

What if it was Bailey? Would he get to her in time?

He needed to be gone, to find her now.

"Who is it?"

"Chase is on his way. Just hang on. His plane should land in Savannah in an hour."

Mark's chest tightened. They were sending a warden out to fix things.

He'd just found Bailey again. Sure, she was a pain, but he liked her that way.

Brandon and Chase were both wardens. Their job was to protect the Pack, not butt their noses into his business.

"No. I can handle it, okay?"

"Mark"

He heard the worry in Brandon's voice. Slowly, he folded the phone shut on whatever Brandon was saying.

They'd never trust him. In the pack's eyes, he'd always be the screw-up. In some ways they trusted him less than the omega.

Hot anger, that he usually kept leashed with a carefree attitude, burned through him.

The pack didn't trust him to take care of his woman?

Screw them. Bailey was his responsibility. She was bound to his blood, mate to his wolf.

Hunger forgotten, he shoved the rest of his burger back in the bag for later.

Chase might be on his way, but Mark had no intention of letting the other wolf near his female. By force of will, he'd follow his own blood link back to her before anything happened to her. Then, come hell or high water, he'd finish what they had started in the motel. Bailey Sparks was his and it was about time he did something about it. The wolf inside howled its agreement. He

was about to claim his mate. * * * *

Chase hunched over and climbed out of the ridiculously small plane. He squinted over the hot tarmac of the private airfield. At his feet, the ancient military green duffel bag and scarred leather jacket sat where he had dropped them.

He drew in lungfuls of petroleum and woods scents deep into his lungs to dispel the sardine can feel of the plane. The credit card sized cell phone hummed at his waist, a top of the line gadget at odds with his scruffy appearance.

Slipping the sleek black top open, he gave a half smile at Tank's retentive tendencies. They'd been buds for a long time. Long before the pack, they'd been friends in another life before they'd been bitten.

He wasn't much for sentiment, but Tank, as black as Chase was white-skinned, was his brother inside where it counted. This trip would be the furthest away they'd been in more than twenty years. The only others he allowed to hound him like Tank were his Alphas, Adam and Diana.

"You're going to turn into an old woman, nagging all the time."

"You need to move fast. The boy has turned off his phone."

Chase picked the duffel back up and slung it crossways over his shoulder. In deference to the muggy heat, he left the leather jacket on the body of the bag and started off toward the low office building. A couple of mid-sized cars were parked in front. One had a sticker for a rental place in the back windshield.

"Ya think maybe he turned it off because you guys were nagging him to death?"

A figure stepped out under the porch overhang. The scent of wolf, not his pack, was strong here. He reminded himself that this wasn't his territory. The effort on his part to keep his hackles down was enough to make his teeth grind.

"Jesus, Tank. He's not a kid. Let him have his nuts for a change."

Tank's patient silence made Chase growl into the phone. Finally, Tank sighed. His friend's deep voice soothed some of the agitation in him.

"Things are not as simple as that. Mack believes that Mark was the victim in his vision. The boy is by no means predictable."

"Yeah, yeah. And if he's doped up on a sugar rush, he'll be hard as hell to deal with."

"Exactly."

Chase slid his thumb over the slick surface of the phone, quelling the urge to hang up. He recognized the real reason for his agitation.

Wolven weren't the rampaging monsters that movies made them out to be. They were territorial homebodies.

He resented the hell out of having to travel across two states to drag back a grown man who just needed a little space to get his shit together. But Mark Weis was his pack and if the kid needed him to watch his back, Chase would be there for him.

“Okay. Whatever.” He tried for a lighter tone, though Tank knew him well enough to guess at his thoughts. “You could have gotten me a better ride than one of these soccer-mom mobiles.”

“The rental company did not have any motorcycles.”

Chase grinned. He’d just bet his bud asked for one, too. That took some of the sting of his separation anxiety away.

Jesus. Bad-ass and warden of the pack with the worst reputation in the US, and he was having separation anxiety like a kid at his first day of day-care. Chase shouldered the duffel, said his good-byes, and went to play nice with the local wolf.

Chapter Thirteen

Bailey jerked awake, gasping in total shock at the cold water that sluiced over her. She coughed and sputtered. Finally, she managed to focus on the tall, suit-clad man, no *monster*, standing in front of her.

He let go of the bucket and she jumped again at the metallic clang when it hit the concrete floor.

Marcus smiled. Cold, efficient. A killer’s smile.

“Now that you are awake, I need to go over a few details with you.”

A sarcastic comment crouched on her tongue, ready to escape, but she held it. Adding to what was, no doubt, a concussion wouldn’t help her escape. She nodded.

Marcus crouched in front of her, resting his elbows on his knees. His fingers steepled under the neatly trimmed blond beard.

How had she even thought he was a gentleman?

“First, I need to know where you hid the dragon’s egg.” He made a circular motion with one hand. “You may speak.”

How dare he? She narrowed her eyes.

“I didn’t take it.”

His lips firmed into a line of displeasure.

“You do not have it. What in the hell were you bungling around in the creature’s lair if you didn’t even bother to take it?”

Marcus grasped the cable where it attached to the collar. The vicious shake made the world spin in a nauseating whirl. Bailey gasped for air, prying at the chain collar around her neck. He dropped her back onto the concrete. Bailey stared at him, thinking furiously.

“I-I mailed it to a P.O. Box for safekeeping.”

The hand was just as hard on her opposite cheek. Pain exploded in her skull from the contact. The floor just as unforgiving as the window of the Lexus had been.

Bailey whimpered and curled into a fetal position as the nausea overtook her again.

“I can scent the lie before you even speak it. Do not try it again, bitch.”

He stood up, dusted his hands together and paused. Then he bent, grabbing up the blanket the puppy had brought her. Marcus’s mouth flattened again.

“Runt!”

The puppy crawled out from behind a stack of boxes. Marcus’s baleful gaze zeroed in on Runt. The puppy’s tail curled up under his body as he practically crabwalked to Marcus’s feet in obeisance.

Bailey wanted to shout at Marcus to leave him alone.

“Since you feel like being so generous, you can keep sleeping on the concrete. That kind of weakness will get you killed. Tonight it will get you an empty stomach.”

Runt whined.

Marcus snarled.

The vicious sound silenced the quivering puppy.

Bailey closed her eyes. She clenched her fingers against the need to reach out for Runt and pull him close.

After a moment, Marcus's presence faded from her senses. As silent as he'd arrived, the werewolf disappeared. At the top of the landing, the lock clicked into place.

Bailey let out her breath.

"Come here, baby," she crooned in a soft voice in Runt's direction, praying the werewolf wasn't close enough to hear.

The puppy stayed where he was, flattened on the concrete and shaking in fear.

The blue eyes so oddly human in the animal face wrenched at her heart. Bailey patted the floor next to her.

"It's okay. I won't hurt you."

Bailey had never considered herself very maternal. Something about calling his own offspring Runt, and Marcus's treatment of the puppy fired up some near violent emotions inside her. He was a baby, a child that should be protected.

She had no doubt that the werewolf had sired the puppy. That mass of bright blond hair and that vibrant blue shade of eyes were distinctive.

A cold nose and the tentative swipe of Runt's tongue got her attention. Through sheer effort of will, Bailey sat back up without hurling the bile in her stomach. She mumbled quiet nonsense at the wary puppy.

Every so often, he would duck his head and glance in the direction of the stairs and landing. He crawled closer, laying his chin on her thigh.

Bailey took the invitation to run her fingers over the soft fur, letting the puppy settle. Finally, he gave a huge sigh and relaxed. His eyes closed. Bailey's heart turned over.

"Where is your mama?" The puppy's ears twitched at her soft question.

What mother would leave her baby in the clutches of that thing?

Again, she wondered how Runt was in wolf form long before puberty. Her friend Karen specifically told her that the wolven, werewolf, gene didn't kick in until then.

Even the wolven boy, Rice, who'd bitten Bailey's insane cousin, Lawrence, had had to be in the early stages of puberty for his bite to infect.

Thoughts of the past nightmare blended with the present. Her cousin Lawrence who she'd played with as a child, on the hillside, firing at her and Karen. The pain of the bullet shattering her knee. She closed her eyes against the memory of the bullet lodged in her stomach. Her breath caught as Lawrence Changing into the half-man, half-wolf monster came to life behind her eyelids, chasing them across the drive.

The wolves broke from the tree line, Changing into the same creatures that Lawrence had become. Mark and his pack circling the werewolf. Blood, fur, and teeth as Lawrence fought Karen's mate. The last glimpse of the torn and broken werewolf body before Mark blocked her vision. The mountain of blond, furry, territorial wolven had both frightened and made her feel safe. Mark made her emotions ping from one extreme to the other.

Bailey sucked in a breath, opening her eyes to banish the past where it belonged. Her gaze traveled over the horrifying trophies mounted on the crossbeams.

Had Marcus hunted his fellow supernatural creatures down all by himself? Or did he have help? She shuddered. The involuntary movement sent bile creeping up her esophagus before she controlled the urge to retch.

Was Mark looking for her? Her head felt like it was going to roll off of her shoulders. So many unanswered questions swirled in her mind, mixing with the pain and self-recrimination. *Why, oh why, had she decided to get in the car with Marcus? Why had getting her car back been so damn important?*

Her stomach cramped and her eyes swam. She figured that she should probably be in the hospital. Cold as the floor was, she stretched out, mindful of the sleeping wolf puppy.

He snuggled closer and whimpered in his sleep.

Bailey gave his ears one more light rub before she let the blurry feeling overtake her. "Don't

worry, baby. Mark will find us.” * * * *

Bailey woke, disoriented as the puppy scampered out of sight. Time had lost relevance and she didn't really know how long she'd been chained in the basement. It could have been hours or days. She was sure she'd go insane or die in a week. The world blurred.

No. The puppy was returning from wherever he'd hidden. The little guy had a darn good radar for Marcus's intermittent and violent visits.

The werewolf still thought she had the egg. And he meant to pry the information from her. She didn't dare ask the sadistic werewolf for anything to eat or drink.

Runt, how she hated that name, dropped something and bumped her leg. He brought her various things, his toys, when Marcus wasn't looking. Always, the puppy confiscated his broken and worn-out treasures before Marcus returned.

Bailey blinked and gave a vague wave. Sitting up made her head swim and her stomach rebel. She couldn't toss another raveled tennis ball or hide another stick behind her back.

“Sit down, sweetie. I'll play later.” Her throat felt like it was lined in gravel. Her tongue tried to stick to the roof of her mouth.

Runt whimpered and pushed the object at her, insistent.

“Fine.” She grabbed the blunt object, feeling the smooth ridges of a plastic bottle. No label hampered the vision of clear liquid in clear bottle.

Water! Her hands shook as she steadied the precious gift against her breast. Weak fingers protested as she twisted off the lid.

“Thank you.”

Bailey didn't care that the lid was chewed and covered with wolf puppy slobber.

Water never tasted so good. * * * *

Runt watched
the
female
open
and
pour
the
water
down
her
throat
while
keepin
g his
ears
perked
for the
alpha.
Not for
the first
time,
he
wished
that he
had the
long
paws

that the female and the alpha had. Then he could help her get away before the alpha killed her.

Runt didn't want that to happen. He liked the way the female smelled under the hurt and dirt

scents. She rubbed his ears with her long paws and made little noises that made him feel better inside. Memories of the she-wolf that had birthed, nursed, and protected him before the alpha found them teased at him.

He didn't worry that the alpha would find his scent on the female. Runt lived down here in the hole under the alpha's den. His scent was all over the place.

He did worry about his alpha finding evidence of his helping her. He had to get the water bottle out fast. He watched her lay back down and offered her what solace he could by licking her hands and arms. She didn't like for him to lick her face, though she needed the blood cleaned away.

"Mark, where are you?"

Runt stopped the tricky business of capturing the empty bottle with his mouth and pricked his ears at her words. He could understand human talk fine. His mouth and tongue just weren't right for speaking it. He'd tried.

His new female friend talked a lot about Mark. Especially, while she slept. Her mate? He didn't know much about mates, except that his instinct told him that they were supposed to be together.

Runt sat to think. He scratched at a tickle under one ear.

He didn't want to give his new friend up just yet. But he also didn't want her to be another skin on the alpha's trophy wall. Or another nightmare.

The alpha did terrible things to both male and females before he killed them. Their screams and cries kept Runt awake for at least two or three full moons afterwards.

He sneezed and shook his whole body, his mind made up. He grabbed the bottle top between his teeth and started for his hidden door to the outside. Up at the top of the pile of stuff the alpha didn't want was a place just big enough for him to wiggle through.

Sometimes the screams of the alpha's prey were too much for him to hear and he had to get away. Lots of times he thought about never coming back. What the alpha would do if he did not return scared him more. So, Runt always came back.

Runt's friend needed help he couldn't give. She needed her mate. He just hoped the other scent he'd picked up from her clothes belonged to her Mark. * *

* * Mark threw the cheeseburger wrapper in the backseat with its four predecessors and finished slurping up the remains of the thirty-two ounce chocolate shake. He hadn't felt a sugar and grease surge like this in years. He felt invincible. Like taking on Superman. Well, maybe not Superman, but whoever had nabbed Bailey.

He had to eat and had run through the nearest drive-through for a quick meal while he thought about his next move. Mark drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He tried to stretch his legs in the cramped confines of the car.

Bailey wasn't at her car, which was still sitting in a park-side lot. Hopefully, it wouldn't be towed away anytime soon.

Not that he cared. She was going back to Texas with him. No doubt about that. Since he didn't want to risk another run-in with Smith the Scaly, he high-tailed it out of there as soon as he confirmed that she wasn't in the area.

He tried to focus on the psychic bond that had led him to her on his way to Georgia while the cheeseburgers and ice cream churned in his stomach. She was hurt. He was pretty sure of that. Mark ground his teeth and slowed to read the road sign. Damn signs were too small in this state.

A pickup truck laid on its horn and swerved around him. Fury made him step on the gas for a moment to catch up.

What the hell was he doing? Playing road rage?

He needed to find Bailey. But how? He had to figure this out by himself.

All his life he'd been taken care of. Before Adam, it was Bradley that had watched over him. His alphas made sure he had a place to go at night. That he ate right. He'd never accomplished anything important on his own.

The lingering smell of the burgers and the shake made him queasy. Damn. He'd already fucked

up and the false energy was making him claustrophobic and his mood edgy. He rubbed up his face, running his fingers through his hair. The gesture was one he had adopted from his dad.

It was time for him to grow up.

For a change, someone else was depending on him. The thought terrified and exhilarated him. He needed to run.

Mark headed back to the motel. Maybe there would be a room vacant.

Centering himself, Mark thought about the blood-bond he shared with Bailey. She'd had a lot of his blood when old Lawrence the sicko psychic shot her.

Her cousin had ripped apart one knee, shot through one of her shoulders, and lodged a bullet in her abdomen. Mark had been more than happy to finally watch Brandon tear the newly Changed werewolf into hamburger meat.

His packbrother had used his own blood-bond with Karen to find where the females had tracked Lawrence to his hideout. The crazy was keeping the pup, Rice, hostage to lure Karen out. The pack arrived just in time to herd the newly Changed werewolf away from the females and into a Challenge circle. After that, Lawrence Dailey was just so much dog food.

Mark had no love for those who would hurt innocents. He'd seen it too many times growing up, before Adam came and rescued them.

The image of the monster that had spawned him surfaced briefly in his mind.

Mark shook his head and parked in the motel lot. *He* was nothing like that.

Lots of people had blond hair and blue eyes like him. That was it.

Adam Weis was his role model. *Adam* was his dad.

The sugar rush bottomed out, leaving him feeling hollow and slow. Mark was shaking by the time he paid for the room and got his key. He threw everything on the bed and locked the car, taking only the empty waterproof backpack he stowed his stuff in on a run.

* * * *

Finding a wooded area wasn't so hard. Finding a dry, un-swampy wooded area so near the coast wasn't so simple. Mark stripped down, ignoring the attacking mosquitoes in the near dark.

His hypersensitive skin relished the rush of the breeze in his naked state. His hands, his whole body shook with the need to Change. He swallowed and let it come.

Pain and pleasure flowed through him as his form stretched and contorted. Adrenaline and endorphins rushed through his system, easing the way of the Change. The brief sharp flash of pain in his mouth as the wolf's teeth exploded through his gums with the sharp jab of needles. Fur tickled along his body. He sucked in a breath and fell on all four feet. Lifting his pale muzzle up, he howled his intent to the treetops.

It was time to hunt.

First he ran. He ran for the joy of it. For the rush.

A rabbit flushed out of hiding distracted him. Mark, the hungry wolf, was on its fuzzy tail. The rabbit dodged and back trailed, but it was no match for the wolf's superior senses. There was no mere rabbit that could outwit this wolf.

Snatching his prey between his teeth, Mark stopped. A quick, practiced movement snapped the rabbit's neck. There was no joy in killing the creature. Only the anticipation of a much-needed meal. Fast food in a different kind of wrapper.

He dined on the rabbit and felt better. Clearer.

Mark gave an all body shake and remembered his task. He chided himself about letting the rabbit distract him, but he'd needed the protein to counteract the sugarfest he'd indulged in earlier.

Testing the wind with his nose, Mark catalogued his surroundings. He wasn't in the swampy woods around the military base. This area didn't smell so much of man and gun oil. He knew he wouldn't find Bailey nearby anyway.

The human part of him wanted to blame the dragon. The wolf believed that another had taken his female.

Who then? Mark rationalized.

Someone you know. The wolf's instincts told him.

Mark shook his head hard enough for his ears to flap.

He didn't let the wolf control him. He controlled the wolf.

Obviously, since he didn't live around here, he didn't know who took her. Not counting the dragon, he knew only the few people he'd come into contact with. Motel employees, restaurant servers, and one auto parts clerk. And the auto parts clerk had been waiting on him during Bailey's disappearance.

He focused on the one tie he had to her, *his blood*, and started moving.

Instead of over thinking, he let the blood tie dictate his direction the same way he did when practicing his martial arts katas.

No thinking, just focus. Go where the movement leads.

Chapter Fourteen

Mark twitched awake. Smells of breakfast and car exhaust rode the air. The bright morning light and his stomach told him it was time to be up and moving from under the bush he'd taken for a rest stop. His shelter edged the sidewalk bordering a parking lot he'd have to cross to start his hunt for Bailey again.

He'd searched all over the small military town of Hinesville last night, with no sign of his mate. He did, however keep roaming one particular neighborhood. The wolf believed she was near there, though he couldn't find any scent spoor to prove it.

Keeping his head low, he gave the humans on the sidewalk a wide clearance.

"Puppy!"

Mark froze at the little-girl voice and watched the sprite launch herself at him. Dark curls and little arms, like Jolie, Brandon's and Karen's youngest, wrapped around his neck. He waited while she batted at his ears and chattered against his neck. A sharp gasp made him glance at the restaurant's door.

"Mommy! Daddy! Lookit the puppy!"

Her parents looked horrified. Mark smelled and saw the blatant fear on the female's face for her baby. She jerked forward only to be stopped by her mate, er, husband.

"Carla, don't spook him."

The man took a couple of careful steps toward him. Mark approved of the man's concern. He didn't think he'd want his pup to be hanging all over some stray either.

The little girl's hands stuck in his fur, her little grip strong when she pulled and bounced against him. Mark sat. He smelled grape jelly. God, he liked grape jelly.

Though he should worm his way out of her grasp and get back to the hunt, he couldn't resist the sweet little girl noises. A pang of homesickness wound around his heart for his pack. Only the need to find Bailey kept him in this town.

When the little girl pried her fingers out of his ruff to whap at his nose, he took the opportunity to swipe at her hands with his tongue. Her plump cheeks were dusted with crumbs and smears of sweet jelly.

She giggled, a happy noise that made his tail dust the sidewalk.

Yep, grape jelly. Delicious.

He kept an eye on the approaching man. Daddy looked none too happy at seeing a Mark slobbering all over his baby.

"Oh, be careful Don. It's a big dog." The female's fear was strong in the air, making Mark feel a little like, well, *a dog*. *"Tansy, let go of the doggie and go to Daddy."*

The little girl tightened her grip in his fur.

"No. Mine doggie." She batted at his ears and placed a big ol' sloppy kiss on his nose. Mark's heart turned over. The man's scent was more alarmed and aggressive, though.

Oh, well. Mark decided. *Playtime's over.*

He stood up on all fours, ignoring the female's second gasp of fear, and walked little Tansy to her

Daddy. He waited while the man carefully bent to pry the little girl off.

"No, Daddy! *Mine* Doggie! *Mine!*"

Mark watched her wriggle and squirm while the man passed her to her mother. Watching the woman clutch little Tansy to her breast and press kisses to the head of fine baby curls fascinated him. Reminded him of his adopted mother's open affection. Only Diana wouldn't have waited for her baby's safe rescue. She'd waded in, ready to draw blood in her child's defense.

The lady dropped down to the bench and held on to her daughter while rummaging in one of those silly bags Karen hauled around with her kids' stuff in it. Wipes in hand, the mother started cleaning grape jelly and wolf saliva off her little one.

Mark wondered what was wrong with him that his birth mother hadn't stayed to fight for him. Or run off with him to protect him.

"Don! Get away from that thing. It could be rabid for all you know."

Mark shifted his gaze from the female's disgust to the man.

"You're not rabid. Are you, boy?"

He leaned away from the man's touch. Letting a human pup maul him was one thing. Being treated like a dog by a grown one was another.

Don, the human, turned to his wife.

"Calm down, Carla. He's not just some stray. Look at him."

Don waved a hand in Mark's direction. He didn't know why he was still hanging around. He had to find Bailey. Don looked back down at him and stretched out his hand again.

"He's some kind of husky mix, I think."

Mark gave the hand an obliging sniff and decided that this was a little like a highway accident you just had to slow down for. Yeah. You needed to leave the area, but what if you missed something morbid?

"Let's take him home."

Don looked and smelled all excited at the prospect of a new pet. His wife was horrified.

"Absolutely not." She tried a different tact while Tansy whined in her arms for her doggie.

"You said he doesn't look like a stray. That's dog knapping."

Mark took matters into his own hands, *paws* that is. He ran.

One block down, Mark dodged behind a dumpster. He peered out to watch disappointed Don pull out of the parking lot in his minivan. Too bad for him.

Mark wasn't too keen on the whole collar and fenced in yard thing.

Back in high school, Brandon had refused to Change back into human for the longest. He remembered that his packbrother had had real issues adjusting after the old pack alpha, Garrick, had been killed.

At twelve, Mark hadn't had a lot of mercy for his packbrother. He'd had problems of his own. Plus, he didn't like to remember the times Garrick's beta had dragged him along for a lesson in survival of the fittest.

Mark's stomach churned even now when he remembered what Garrick, and the monster who was pack beta, had done to Brandon and others who'd crossed their path.

The beta was the alpha's right hand wolf. He was the caretaker of the pack. Mack Spencer was Adam's perfect beta. The human psychic had taught them about compassion and still didn't take shit from them.

Not so, the monster who'd stood as Garrick Moser's beta. Marcus Cargill had been one evil son of a bitch.

* * * *

Mark paused in his umpteenth search of the neighborhood and cocked his ears.

She was close. The wolf part of him was certain.

He heard something. He trusted his nose and ears more than his eyes, but was a little leery of the wolf's instincts. Wolves were wild animals that could turn dangerous if not treated with respect and caution.

Mark didn't trust the wolf in himself any more than he did a wild one. His own senses were already faulty for one of his kind.

Shadows could play awful tricks on the colorblind. It messed with him less than his brothers since he didn't live half his life with color and half without like the rest of his kind. It was a blast hiding stuff from them before they remembered to scent it out.

His ears caught the slight noise again. This time his nose sorted a new smell to associate with it. The scent was human, though something felt off. After a moment, he sorted out the blendable- no *blurry*, clothes and a facemask. Either weird ability, or technology, the world around Mark's stalker seemed to bend so that his eyes didn't want to track the blurred shape.

Mark was fascinated with the guy as the guy tracked his paw prints in the dirt. He wasn't particularly alarmed but had to give blendy guy points for covering the important bases.

Whatever the guy had sprayed on himself definitely masked his natural scent. The new odor still stood out as a freaky faint reek that did not match anything else Mark had ever smelled. It was a scent all on its own and pointed out blendy guy as easily as if he hadn't gone to the trouble.

Mark's tracks were all over the place due to his crossing and recrossing this area all night. Like before, he chose a bush under which to take cover.

This bush was a little uncomfortable with spiked leaves and the pine bark mulch that poked his belly and made him want to sneeze. He'd smell like a pine tree car freshener when he left.

Unfortunately, his stalker wasn't really up on his tracking skills and he wasn't too quiet either. Mark yawned and rubbed his nose on his shoulder to stifle an oncoming sneeze. All he had to do was wait until this guy gave up and left.

With eerie accuracy, the gray stalker traced a path past the bush. Mark caught a whiff of silver and nearly choked in shock. He stayed very still, watching as the man turned and brought the gun to bear on him. Okay, it was a little off the mark, but Mark wasn't sticking around to be shot again.

He bunched his shoulders, bared his teeth, and froze.

A yapping scrap of fur shot out the shadows, latching onto the psychic's pants leg. The blurry ability failed and camouflage came into focus.

Oh, yeah. Mark knew the man for what he was now.

He burst out of the bush's protection as the butt of the gun came down on the pup. The little guy yelped and rolled away.

Mark growled and jumped onto the man's chest, snapping and barking in the psychic's face for effect as they went down. Arms flailed and the gun dropped. The boom of the discharge hurt Mark's ears.

"Monster!" The man yelled, his voice muffled behind the mask.

The scent of silver was still strong on the man. Mark jumped back. He didn't want to hurt the guy, just get away.

"Go back to Hell, where you belong!"

The psychic reached for one of the bulging pockets.

They were easier to see now that Mark had literally run over the man.

A glance showed the pup struggling with the gun, dragging the weapon out of reach. Mark ran and snatched the big pup up by the scruff.

He gave the kid a shake to dislodge the gun and ran.

Behind them, a handgun went off, singing his fur with the faint scent of silver and speeding him on. * * * *

Usually, calling a kid a pup was figurative. Woven didn't change until puberty and were about the size

of full-grown natural wolves. Mark, being a

full-grown woven, was about the size of a St.

Bernard, only leaner. No wonder little Tansy's

parents were concerned.

The pup was exactly that, a puppy about the size of a spaniel. He stayed quiet, hanging in Mark's teeth. The little one's tail was tucked up, like it was supposed to be, and he waited for the wild ride to end.

Mark dodged through backyards and alleys until the psychic's yelling was lost behind them. He headed for the wooded area where he'd hidden his clothes.

Dropping the little guy close to his backpack, Mark snuffled him. The pup fell over, belly side up, tail still tucked. A familiar scent teased at Mark's memory, but he was sure he hadn't met anything like the puppy before.

Inspection over, he gave the little one a couple of reassuring licks and flopped down to rest before returning to his own hunt. Big mistake.

The pup jumped up and started climbing all over him. He tried ignoring the submissive licking at his mouth. Then the pup started with the bouncing.

He caved and fell in with wrestling, remembering how Adam would roll on the floor with them for hours. Okay, his dad still did.

Mark pinned the kid, then let the little guy win one round. He bounced and tugged victoriously at Mark's ruff and tail.

Where was Bailey? She'd felt so close before that psychic showed up. Then he'd had to get the pup to safety. Her loss was a knot in his stomach that wouldn't go away until she was safe under his protection again.

Mark shook the pup off his back and stood on all fours. As cool as goofing around with the kid was, he needed more information about the blood-bond. Then he needed to search that alley again.

Bailey wasn't safe. She needed him.

He embraced the Change. Muscles contracted and popped, painfully and gloriously. Hair retracted in a sensual glide. His back arched as he was pulled to his feet and stretched in his human form.

Mark sucked in a breath and let it out slowly.

His eyes caught on the subdued puppy at his feet. The poor little guy quivered and gave off the scent of unease. Mark crouched down.

"Hey, sport." He held out his fingers so that the pup could tell that he was still the same and gave the little head a scratch. "Where's your family? Huh?"

The puppy yipped once and crawled in an uncomfortable hunch to sit on his feet. Mark scooped the little guy up against his bare chest and sat to dig in the backpack for a granola bar.

"None of that. I'm not the bogeyman. Just one tired dude."

He went ahead and gave the granola bar to the pup while he toyed with his cell phone. His mind wasn't on food.

Mark figured Chase would show up sometime soon. He had to have Bailey found and under his protection by then. It was the wolf's demand, something born of the bloodbond, and instinct. One Mark didn't feel like fighting anymore.

He'd been attacked twice by silver. Three times if he counted being thrown up against the dragon's silver cage. He didn't, so the attacks were down to two.

Given how rabid psychics could be about supernaturals, he figured they'd gotten wind of his arrival and were taking steps to make sure he didn't stay in town.

That had to be a monumental task with Fort Stewart Army base smack in the middle of town.

He flipped the phone open and speed dialed the only one who wouldn't order him home.

"It's about time you called back." Brandon's voice was soft on the other end.

"Yeah. I've been kinda busy."

"Chase make it there yet?"

Mark made a growl/whine of protest. The pup snuggled closer and grew lax in his grip.

"I don't want his help." Mark paused. He stroked the sleeping puppy's head. "I need to do this myself."

"It's not as easy as that. Mack had a vision. You need Chase for protection."

Mark growled. The puppy jerked in his sleep but he soothed it away.

"No. Listen, I need to know about the blood-bond. You found Karen with it. I think Dad's used it to find Mom."

Brandon was quiet. Mark heard the soft creak of the rocking chair on his packbrother's front porch and felt a wave of homesickness. Brandon's voice was quieter, but no less discernable to Mark's ears.

"Dad can't find Mom as easily as I can find Karen. There are too many different bloods from different wolvies in Mom."

Awkward. Was all that Mark could think. He'd rather rip someone's throat out than let them give Bailey their blood. She was *his* responsibility.

"Bailey hasn't had anyone else than me. So, why can't I find her?"

Getting Brandon to talk on any subject was like pulling teeth. While his packbrother had felt pretty chatty lately, he was still stalling. Only the creak-creak of the rocker came over the line.

"Why can't I find her?"

"Because you don't trust the wolf."

Mark snorted.

"I Change all the time. And I can track better than any of you yahoos."

"You still don't trust your instincts. You're afraid of the past."

Mark nearly hung up. Anger flared though him.

"I'm not afraid of anything. Much less anything you throw at me."

Brandon's weird laugh cut him off.

"That's exactly what I mean. If you don't want counseling talk, don't ask questions that have counseling answers."

"That's a bunch of crap. I don't need counseling."

"We all needed counseling. I'm just the only one who couldn't survive without it. Doesn't mean you still don't need it."

That made Mark freeze. He sooo did not want to open this can of worms.

"You had counseling? For ... what happened?"

"Yeah." That one word had a world of pain in it.

"Okay. Uh. That doesn't mean I need it."

"Think about it. If you let the wolf out. I mean really out, to do what he wants. Do you think it's going to hurt people?"

Mark swallowed. He stayed quiet, rubbing at the pup's ears, thankful for the comforting touch. Brandon waited, and then kept on in that quiet relentless tone. He suddenly wished his packbrother would shut up.

"The wolf isn't a separate part of us. It's half of the whole. You don't turn into an animal when you Change. You *are* the wolf. The wolf is you when you are human."

Mark swallowed. The puppy squirmed a bit and he loosened his grip, settling the sleeping guy across his lap.

"Your counselor tell you all that? He knew what you are?"

"Not exactly in those words. And no, he just knows what I survived."

"I'm sorry."

More silence. This was becoming tiresome, yet Mark didn't want to let go of the tenuous link they'd forged. He and Brandon had never been close.

"For what?"

"For ... what Garrick and ..." He couldn't even say Marcus Cargill's name much less call him his father. "What Garrick did."

"It wasn't your fault. You were a pup, a child who couldn't even Change yet."

"Maybe, I coulda' done something. I don't know ... just something."

"You did. You screamed and fought until Marcus knocked you out. Bradley took you and the

others away to hide.”

“We should have”

Mark hated emotional shit. He remembered that day. His chest hurt. His eyes burned. Guilt weighted down his gut.

Brandon cut him off.

“You *are not* a monster. Now, go get your mate, wolf.”

Brandon hung up before Mark could say more. That he didn’t have a mate.

The sentiment felt like a lie. She’d have to complete the mate-bond for them to have a proper mate’s link. But she felt like she belonged to him.

Though he felt lighter that Brandon didn’t blame him, he blamed himself. He had lived under Marcus’s cruel thumb. He knew how the bastard was.

There should have been something he could have done to stop the torture instead of hiding behind Bradley and Karen. He hadn’t even been there when Adam killed them all.

The puppy slept on, oblivious to the turmoil raging inside his new friend.

Chapter Fifteen

“*Runt!*”

Marcus Cargill stomped through his suite, kicking yesterday’s clothes out of the way.

Where was that bitch he’d hired to clean up this mess? Where was that pup?

He needed to send a message to his associates soon about the egg’s acquisition.

“*Runt!*”

He fumed when the pup didn’t appear as usual. The half-breed was as lazy as any other he’d bred so far.

Except for the first born. That one had potential. He’d even named the boy after himself.

Marcus stopped to eye his appearance in the mirror and smiled. He was still a damn fine specimen of his species, whichever form he wore. The buzzing cell phone on his Civil War era dresser distracted him.

“Cargill here.”

“Do you have the goods, then?”

Marcus’s brows drew together at his associate’s inquiry.

“Of course I have it. I’ve always pulled through before, haven’t I? Trust me.”

“I do not trust anyone with a half million on the table.”

“I said I’d have that damn dragon egg for you. Just make sure you have the money. Human money. It spends better than fairy gold.”

Marcus snapped the cell together and made an attempt to leash the burning rage from the fairy’s insinuation. No one called Marcus Cargill’s competence into question.

No one! He heaved the cell phone across the room.

The phone shattered into pieces against the fine silk wallpaper. He followed its path with decisive steps.

“Stupid piece of junk phone. Nothing lasts anymore,” he muttered while picking through the remains for the SIM card. He needed to keep the same phone number for his business dealings.

The same fit of fury burned in the pit of his stomach. He slipped the tiny card into his pocket and headed for the stairs. His pup was probably down in the basement coddling the bitch again. The whelp was too slow in his lessons.

His knuckles cracked under the pressure of his
opposite hand. It was time he got some answers out of Bailey

Sparks, psychic Finder. * * * *

Bailey huddled as close to the wall as she could. Rocking back and forth kept her from screaming or crying, long after the werewolf left her alone again. She held on to a thread of sanity.

She thought she knew what, who, the monsters were.

She’d been brought up in a decent middle class home as the psychic progeny of two psychic

parents. Her family, her *religion*, taught her to avoid all contact with the evil supernatural creatures that roamed unchecked. A good psychic would defend herself with force against their presence.

She sucked in a shaky breath.

Marcus, whatever his last name, was a real monster. He was a Silence of the Lambs kind of evil that shadowed your soul with nightmares for the rest of your life.

She'd been so wrong, thinking she could dance at the edges of their world and survive.

Hadn't she seen that pack of werewolves practically eat Lawrence? Hadn't Lawrence tried to rape and kill her as soon as he Changed into one of them?

She sucked in another shuddering breath and tightened her grip on her knees.

She forced herself to be still. To think. To be rational.

Lawrence had already been trying to kill Karen, and Bailey by association.

She'd only survived the bullet wounds because of Mark's blood. His pack had killed Lawrence because of his own evil actions. They'd given him his just reward.

Marcus was a sociopath, not because he was a werewolf, but because he enjoyed every moment of causing another torment. Every twisted deed he'd quietly described to her as he crouched down to eye level, just to make sure she understood.

He made sure she grasped the meaning of every detail of what the poor creatures mounted on the basement walls and beams went through. Every rape, every disembowelment. Every torture.

How the cougar fought being skinned alive. Even the mundane creatures, suffered no less. The female wolf's story, her hide mounted by the steps, made Bailey want to wretch in sympathy.

The horrible scenes Marcus painted with his words replayed over and over in her head. The things he told her that he'd do if she didn't tell him where the egg was. Bailey shook her head in denial. She had to get away. She couldn't let him do those things to her.

Her arms and neck ached from pulling on the chain. Her fingertips were bloody from prying at the loops and lock on the collar. Her head hurt from his words and her injuries.

She *needed* Mark.

Sweet, goofy, Mark, who was nothing like Marcus.

Mark, who became a lethal seven-foot creature with blade-like claws. His teeth were sharp vicious weapons as long as her fingers. Underneath all that yellow hair and scary front was still the same goof that had picked and agitated her through her recovery.

Bailey prayed. She prayed as hard as she could that Mark was stubborn enough to hunt her down. That she hadn't finally driven him away.

God, she needed him to hold her. Then she prayed that Runt stayed put, wherever he'd decided to hole up.

Chapter Sixteen

The pup lay on the bed, asleep, while Mark paced the motel room.

His instincts said that he needed to go check that neighborhood again. His intellect said he'd checked until there was nothing left to check. Then there was the pup, whose parents might or might not be looking for him.

Mark thought not, because the little guy was so thin. Then there was the fact that he was obviously a genetic aberration.

Being born in wolf form would definitely pose some major problems. If the pup's parents were anything like what Mark and his packbrothers survived, then he was better off scavenging out of trashcans.

He shuddered.

The thought of another child at Marcus Cargill's, or any of the old pack's, mercy was chilling. Especially, one who didn't meet Marcus's idea of what an heir should be.

Mark had learned early to never, *ever*, mention his colorblindness.

He could still see the bastard drowning his mistress's newborn. The pretty woman beat on the bathroom door, screaming at Marcus to give her the baby. Crying, begging for him to open the door.

Mark remembered that he was nearly six and the lady had been nice. He'd liked her a lot. She'd promised to make him a birthday cake with that many trucks on the top.

Instead, Marcus gave him a lesson in the survival of the fittest. Mark's baby brother had been born all the way blind.

The mistress disappeared that night. Mark learned to keep his distance from any of the other women Marcus brought home. And nobody, except Rick, who was kind of an aberration himself, knew that Mark was colorblind. And he intended to keep it that way.

He shouldn't worry though. Adam and Mack took care of the bad guys, and Tank and Chase helped with routing out the rest of Garrick's old allies.

The one great comfort was that Marcus Cargill was dead and roasting in Hell, where he belonged.

From the bed, the puppy whimpered in his sleep, catching Mark's attention. He slid in beside the little one, offering the comfort of one of their kind. There was a special peace sharing the scent and energy of another wolverine. A little pointed ear flicked, then the puppy sighed, unconsciously accepting what the Mark offered and slipped deeper into sleep.

If only he could really communicate with the pup, he might get some answers about that neighborhood. If the pup saw anything suspicious or

Mark shook his head. The pup couldn't be more than a couple of years old.

He remembered the little guy's attempt to move the rifle, and he revised his count to maybe five or six.

Stroking the soft fuzz on the pup's head, he wondered what his brother would have been like if Marcus hadn't drowned him. Would they have been pals? * * * * A sharp nudge on Mark's shoulder brought him instantly awake. He blinked at the bright color that always startled him in the Magic Forest. His dad, Adam, called it an ethereal plane or something like that. That explanation had always been a little too complicated for Mark. This was the special place he came to run. Here he was a wolf who could see color. In the real world, he was a man who saw shades of one bland noncolor. Magic.

What is this place? What happened to me?

Mark focused on the human child beside him, clutching the yellow gold of his fur. Frightened blue eyes stared at him from under a mop of hair the same color as his fur. Mark cocked his head, thinking.

Pup?

The little boy nodded and buried himself closer.

Mark resisted the urge to get up and start moving. Here, his pack would find him fast. They were all connected. Even his mom had a presence. Only she, like the pup, had a human form here.

I am Runt.

Mark had to chuckle.

Well, you are a little small.

No. I am called Runt.

Mark didn't really like the name. It fell in with his theory about the kid's parents.

Maybe it was just him, but no decent parent would name their offspring with an insult. He gave the kid an affectionate snuffle and a swipe of his tongue across one too thin cheek.

Mark Weis, at your service.

Runt leaned back on his knees, sitting like the wolf he was. His eyes were wide and round with surprise.

The lady's Mark?

He jumped to his feet, dislodging the boy from his squat.

Lady? Pretty, with long curly hair? Smells like apples?

The kid floundered a bit, with his arms and legs. He untangled himself and stretched into a sprawl, nodding at Mark.

Yes, she smells sweet. I don't like rolling in the car wash to get rid of her scent, but it

makes the alpha mad when he smells prey outside the basement.

Prey! Where? What basement? Mark's heart raced. He stood over the boy/pup, not realizing his sudden aggressive stance until the kid started to curl up.

The scared whimper was like a kick in the gut. That was no way to treat a child. Mark gave himself an all over body shake, physically throwing off the attitude. Then he nudged Runt with his nose, licking the boy's smooth exposed neck and cheek to reassure him.

It's okay. I won't hurt you. I just need to know where to find her.

Runt nodded and threw his arms around Mark's neck, burying his face. Once again, the longing for his pack overwhelmed him.

Not far from where I found you. I was going back when I saw the human with his gun. They've been hunting the alpha for months.

Mark heard the howling of the pack. He stiffened with alarm.

He was already dodging Adam's phone calls. He hadn't even checked his voice mail. Here he wouldn't be able to claim that he didn't get the message.

Brandon couldn't cover for him any longer. Once the pack had him cornered, he'd have to choose between his alpha's edicts or saving Bailey.

Mom had once said something about retreat being the better part of valor. At fifteen, Mark didn't think being a chicken had anything to do with valor or being cool. Suddenly, it was all about protecting your ass to fight another day.

Time to head out.

He gently grasped Runt's arm in his mouth. Since the kid was in a human form, and naked at that, he couldn't just snatch him up again. Runt balanced for about a second on his feet and crumpled.

This looks a lot easier when you do it.

Yep. He ducked his head under the boy's arm. Unease skittered along his spine as the howling calls came closer. *Climb up and hold on tight.*

Who are they?

Runt's hold was awkward, but as firm as it was going to get. He leapt into a run, praying the kid held on. He had to get away, and then concentrate on returning to his real body.

My pack. My alpha.

Oh. Run fast.

Runt's acceptance told Mark too much.

The boy should have questioned his eagerness to get away from the pack.

Part of Mark questioned his own actions. Guilt nipped at his heels for being a bad role model for the kid. He promised himself that he'd make things right with Adam.

For now, he had to get Runt to lead him to his woman.

Chapter Seventeen

In the form of a huge blond wolf, Chase sniffed the sidewalk and alley surrounding the closed diner. The town was not awake yet.

He'd only been looking for his missing pack member for a few hours, but Mark's scent spoor was all over town. The scent was strong and crisscrossed over a good bit of the residential areas. If the boy was still on foot, and wary, Chase would either run into him accidentally or pass him without knowing it.

Since the first plan pretty much sucked, Chase figured he'd try a different one.

Mark was a kid who liked his creature comforts.

Instead of trying to track on foot, Chase would pin the kid down at whatever motel he was holed up in. He'd piece together Mark's side of the story, and then get some decent sleep on a bed.

He and Tank had done their share of sleeping at rest stops and alleys during the first few years--after they were bitten and Changed.

The human life that had been taken away from him was too far in the past to dwell on now. He had a pack and a home with one of those Sleep Number beds. He'd make do with a motel, a

beer and pizza, and a chunk of Mark's hide for the inconvenience.

Chase's mouth pulled back into a wolfish grin, remembering the honey and flowers accent of the southern bell behind the counter of the gas station where he'd bought a cherry Slurpee. She'd been a sweet thang.

Yeah. After Mark was taken care of, Chase was going to find out how tasty Georgia Peaches really were. * * * Mark stood over Runt while they watched the silver Lexus pull away. He didn't get a clear view of the pup's alpha or a good whiff of the male's scent. Which was weird, since there should be more than the just the pup's scent lingering around the property.

His main priority right now was keeping an eye out for more gun-toting psychics and staying hidden. He felt that Bailey was hurt and needed him. The tug that originally kept him canvassing this neighborhood of old two story houses was stronger.

With the car gone, he pulled in a deep breath to calm his jittery, hyped-up nerves. He centered his focus. Getting Bailey back safe was his goal. Without remaining calm, he'd probably try pulling the building down board-by-board.

Six raspberry filled donuts for breakfast hadn't been a good idea after all.

He remembered Diana's voice in the back of his mind.

Red, yellow, and blue food dyes are bad for you. With that much sugar, you might as well have taken speed.

Mark growled softly. He was an adult. He'd eat whatever damn thing he wanted to.

Runt's soft woof brought him back from his spaced musing.

His thoughts trailed to the vaguely familiar scent that drifted on the wind. The werewolf in the Lexus, probably. Runt's scent was more muddled by his infatuation with rolling in random scents. Especially the chemical laden carwash they'd passed on the way here.

He jerked back to the present. *Double-damn.*

He made a mental note to find a steak place when this was over and put some protein back in his body.

Following after Runt's skinny form, they wormed behind a woodpile in the back of the house. Not an easy feat for a St. Bernard-sized wolf.

The broken vent was big enough for Runt to squeeze through. The rusted metal cover lay half buried in the dirt at his feet.

Mark stuck his nose inside, pushing past a heavy cloth.

He immediately jerked back. His tail tucked down. He rammed back into the woodpile, heart hammering.

The remembered scents of blood, death, and old sex were real in the basement. The cloth and Mark's own preoccupation had kept him from noticing it before.

Voices from the past writhed through his memory.

Watch and learn boy ... please don't hurt my baby! No! No! Don't touch me!
Ahhheeeiii!

Runt yapped several times, pulling him from the screaming horror.

He shook his head to clear it. Focus on the problem.

Bailey was down there in that place of pain and misery.

Mark attacked the hole in the wall. The wood gave easily under his big, supernaturally strong wolveren paws. When the hole was wide enough, he pushed the rest of the way inside and dropped with a crash onto the boxes stacked underneath. The junk paused his fall, then gave and he fell to the ground.

Mark grunted and rolled to his feet. He wuffed at Runt to quiet the kid's incessant yapping. The smell of the place caught in the back of his throat, making him use his faulty eyes to find what he needed.

Bailey's form huddled in the center of the floor.

He deliberately didn't look at the physical evidence of the story his nose told him. The skins, the

gouges on the floor ... the story was the same as he remembered. Mark forced the knowledge away as he hurried to Bailey. His sweet, funny, brave Bailey.

“Oh, God. No!” She jerked away from his approach.

Blinking, Mark realized that she probably didn’t recognize him in his full wolf form. The horror on her face as he Changed back to human twisted in his stomach, reminding him more than ever that Brandon had been wrong.

They *were* monsters. And he was the devil’s spawn.

“Bailey.”

Mark crouched low to eye level. She’d have to deal with his being naked.

He’d purposely left his clothes at the motel for speed, though some duds would be handy if he had to carry her out. He reached out and she slapped at him, her head swinging wildly side to side.

“No. No, no, no! I won’t tell you where it is. I don’t know, damn you!” Mark reached around the tangled chain and grabbed her bruised and battered cheeks between his palms. He forced her to face him. A surge of fresh fury flared through him. The bastard was going to die for this. “Sunshine, it’s me. *Mark*.” She stilled and peeled her eyelids up with reluctance. The bruising over one eye

kept her from opening the left lid fully. Her beautiful skin was mottled and bruised, her eyes wide and dilated. The fury solidified, a cold demand for justice that froze the fear. Transforming it.

He kept his voice low and soft, as if she were a skittish animal about to flee. “See? It’s me. Your favorite jerk.” Bailey’s breath caught on a sob. She flung herself against his chest. The chain bit into his skin as he allowed her just a moment to let go. Then she pulled back. Her delicate hands ran over his bare chest.

He stopped the movement before something very visible started moving on its own. Even now, Bailey had that kind of effect on him. Dead and in his grave, maybe he’d stop wanting her. He doubted it.

Her good eye stared down then up at his face. “You’re naked.” Mark frowned and focused on the task at hand. The cheap lock twisted off as easy

in his hand as all the poor locks he’d demolished in high school after forgetting the combination.

He carefully removed the chain collar and flung the foul thing away. The marks on her face, the chain linked shadowing around her neck kept adding

to the cold fury in his chest. Every hair on his body seemed to stand at attention. Mark was going to enjoy taking the bastard apart bite by bite. “Okay, Cupcake. Let’s get you on your feet.” He helped her up, steadying her

with both hands. “Can you stand okay? We’ve got to get gone fast, babe.”

He couldn’t seem to stop babbling now that he had her. The babbling helped to block out the jittery knowledge of his surroundings at the edges of his mind. A big something he was purposefully not acknowledging to stay sane.

He took a breath and regretted it instantly. Death and pain lingered on his tongue. Bailey tottered on her feet. Mark balanced her, realizing that she wasn’t going to

make it out on her own power. He glanced down at Runt. “She can’t make it back out the hole. You lead the way, buddy.”

* * * * Runt wagged his tail at Mark’s trust in him to lead.

He’d been worried at first. Sick fear rolled off Mark from the moment the grown up had jumped down into the basement. Mark was the bravest man or wolf he’d ever met.

The basement was a bad place. Runt had lived down here a long time. He hated it. When he was by himself, he could still hear the screams. The bad smell stayed in his nose and stuck to his fur. That was why he rolled in the soapy puddles and stuff.

The grown-up was still afraid. The fear scent kept rolling off him into the air, but he was still doing what he came to do.

Last night, Mark had given him his only wish. Runt wanted to be a human.

Waking up in the dream forest in a human body was the most amazing thing that had ever

happened to him. He'd been able to talk human words with his mouth. Almost stand on his two human feet. That would take practice. And he'd had hands. With fingers. In that dream place, he'd be able to pick things up without using his mouth. It was his secret wish come true.

Now he had one more. Runt wanted to stay with Mark and Bailey.

He darted up the stairs, checking to see that the little swinging door wasn't blocked. Alpha did that sometimes to punish him. Much better than a kick. Runt could always slip out the hole in the back if he needed to get away.

He ran over the kitchen floor, nearly sliding once, and listened at the hall to make sure the alpha was still out. He barked to let Mark know the way was clear and waited while the grown-up shouldered through the door.

"Wait!" Bailey stopped their progress. "Go back. We need to get something."

"Whatever it is. I'll buy you a new one." Mark's voice sounded deep and rough like his alpha's did before he Changed.

She snagged the doorframe and held on. Runt saw that she looked worse in the bright kitchen light than in the dim downstairs.

A bad feeling started in his stomach like the time he'd eaten rotten meat.

She pointed back inside.

"Get that one off the wall."

"It's a dead thing, Sunshine. We can't help them now."

"We have to take that one. There where the wall is scratched."

Runt could almost feel the awful shiver Mark wanted to make as he leaned back in and jerked the wolf pelt off the wall.

He stared at them, almost forgetting his job as watchdog. He'd tried for a long time to reach that skin. Bailey, his friend, just looked down at him and smiled while Mark tried to roll it up. The terrible feeling in his stomach eased up a little.

She knew.

* * * Mark set Bailey down in the kitchen and handed her the wolf pelt. He didn't like touching it. Too many memories bombarded him. Trapped him in the past.

He blew a breath out and looked around, finding the gas stove. Impulsively, he strode to the sink and started rummaging underneath. When he didn't find what he was looking for there, he ransacked the pantry, finding bottles of aged whiskey and bourbon.

They'd done this before, him and Rick. He could do it again.

The gas station fire that was supposed to kill Garrick had been Rick's job. Mark's was to take out the lair. He'd made sure he got the old man's lair, too. Two for the price of one.

No. Too many had paid the price. And too many more because ...

Mark clutched the bottles. He had a job to do and the tools to do it.

Whiskey and bourbon. He'd used those before. His mind spun.

He squashed down the revelation before it surfaced.

Don't think. Just do it. Again.

Bailey's voice buzzed in the background. He didn't understand or hear. He concentrated on the job.

Molotov Cocktails, four of them, two whiskey, two bourbon. He unscrewed the caps and ripped dishrags, stuffing them down the neck.

Gas stove. Like before. Nothing like a gas stove.

He remembered being told as a boy watching *him* punish a pack member by holding the screaming male's hand over the gas flame.

See, boy? The uses are endless.

Mark twisted the knob and watched the clean blue flame poof into a circle. He took a breath and jerked his gaze away, pushing aside the female's intrusion.

When you do a job, see it to the end. His dad, *his real dad*, Adam Weis, told him that. *See it*

though to the end.

The newspaper from the table, opened to the sports section, was normal. Like before, he took the paper that once would have gotten him beaten bloody for touching. Twisted, the paper made the best torch.

One. Two. Three. Four. The bottles burned merrily as he tossed them down the stairs into Hell.

The explosions screamed in his ear. Ghosts from the past, making their torment known. Mark brushed them aside to finish.

The gas stove was the best. Nothing like gas for finishing the job.

He had to move fast now, before the fire department came. Someone always called the fire department.

He blew out the flame, and then turned each knob, blowing out the flame before it caught. He was quick and careful this time. Last time he nearly burned off his face.

The female and the pup watched him with strange looks. The pup at least didn't look horrified. Oh, well.

Mark caught up his female in his arms to leave. *Bailey*, he reminded himself.

In the hallway, the pup started yapping again. He stopped while the little one

pulled over a coat rack, dragging a long coat to him. The scent repelled him.

Mark stepped away from it and turned to leave out the front door. *

* * * Bailey grabbed two handfuls of yellow blond hair and did the same thing for Mark that he'd done for her. Only they didn't have time for him to fall apart. Marcus could come back any minute now and the house would explode soon.

Mark had kicked off the valve on at least one gas heater, besides the kitchen.

Now, she had to get him back from wherever he'd spaced out to.

"Look at me! Put the damn coat on! The police will get you for indecent exposure."

She shook the fistfuls of hair and head, getting some life back in his beautiful blue eyes. She wriggled out of his grasp, letting go to get the rejected garment.

"Put the coat on. Let's go."

"It smells like ..."

He sounded lost, faraway, almost like a shock victim.

She deliberately started to wrestle the sleeves on his unresisting arm.

"Shhh. Get a grip." He lifted an arm and stared down at Runt. "*Come on*, big guy."

Finally, Mark shook himself and finished putting on the coat. He grabbed her up and started off in another direction.

"Mark! We've got to get out! The house is going to explode!"

"Side door." He explained in that growly voice. "Don't want to be seen."

He settled for a side window and broke the panes out through the drapes.

With one quick jerk, he pulled the drapes and rod down and tossed them out, too. Bailey followed, landing on top of the drapes. Then she watched her crazy wolven toss the puppy through the window. Mark leapt last.

"What about the alarm?"

Mark shook his head. She didn't get to her feet good before he had her scooped up again.

"He won't have them."

"But ..."

Mark started running as if Hell were at his feet. His answer lost in the dash.

The explosion came, and it was. Fiery debris rained down around their escape.

Bailey didn't know how many people in this neighborhood saw their flight. It was the time of day most people were at work and kids at school. She hoped they were all well and at their desks today.

Finally, Mark stopped in an alley and ripped the coat from his body. He shoved the offensive garment in the closest trashcan. She still couldn't read him in his shellshocked state. He was functioning,

alert, able to do what needed to be done. He was in a reaction mode.

He threw his head back and stretched.

Watching him suck in a deep breath, Bailey thought he was going to howl. Realizing his real intent, she grabbed his arm, shaking it for his attention. If he Changed, she wouldn't be talking to him at all.

The glazed blue eyes focused on her. Raw pain filled them, making her want to hold him close.

Runt huddled at his feet as if sensing whatever had broken inside the older wolver.

She grasped the first thing that came to mind.

"Why wouldn't he have an alarm? There were a lot of antiques in there."

Mark shook his head. He pulled his arm free.

"He never did."

The Change was fast, not the agonizing slow transformation she'd witnessed after he'd been shot.

Mark's muscles rippled under his skin, stretching, knotting, and smoothing into place. Fur cascaded over his body in a waterfall. His face elongated, teeth bursting into place. He dropped to all fours and a huge wolf stood in the man's place.

The puppy barked. Mark walked over and snuffled him over. The big wolf looked straight at her with Mark's pain filled eyes, full of something so horrible he couldn't bear. Something she couldn't possibly understand. Unconsciously, she gripped the wolf skin in her grip. Bailey realized that she'd kept a tight hold on the pelt the whole way. She hoped

they didn't have much further to go. She especially hoped that they could cover their tracks after they got to wherever Mark was leading them. Marcus was going to be one pissed werewolf once he realized that not only was his dragon egg Finder gone, but his house was a pile of used matchsticks.

Chapter Eighteen

Bailey gripped the stiff, heavy fur on Mark's neck for support as they straggled into a motel parking lot. Runt dangled from his mouth. She'd suggested once to let the puppy run.

What she didn't say was that Runt obviously had more energy left than Mark. She also didn't say that he, Mark, looked dead on all four feet. He ignored her suggestion and doggedly pushed them to their destination.

Just as she questioned how to open the motel room door without a keycard, the door swung open. A big man, bigger than Mark as a human, stood in the way.

His blond hair was more gold than yellow, falling over his spectacular tee-shirted chest, nearly to his waist. Jeans worn nearly white clung to his hips and legs.

She absolutely refused to dwell on what else they managed to cling, too.

"Smile, Miss Bailey. The cavalry is here."

She blinked at the stranger's greeting and was pulled forward by her grasp of Mark's fur. His token growl at the man, wolver, was ignored. The door shut behind them with a click. Finally, she remembered the stranger from her brief stay with the pack.

Bailey wanted only to bathe and fall into bed. Letting go of Mark, she crossed her arms over her chest, meeting Mr. Blond and Self-Assured eye to eye. His eyes were also a different shade of blue than Mark's.

"Cavalry? You're a little late for that. Besides, Mark had it all under control."

She tossed the last over her shoulder before heading to the bathroom, catching the movement of Mark's Change out of the corner of her eye.

He gasped, as if coming up for air. Bailey turned around, alarmed.

The blond Adonis studied Mark with stern curiosity.

"How many times have you Changed in the last twenty-four hours?"

Mark shrugged. He looked a little less spaced, but withdrawn.

He bent to pick up Runt, holding the quiet puppy to his chest, and walked to the bed. His clothes were a bright, wadded pile.

Depositing Runt on the comforter, he put the ugly rainbow colored parrot and tikki torch shirt on, leaving the buttons undone. She stared at him in fascination. His cargo pants were bright yellow. Slip on orange and blue water shoes completed his ensemble.

How could anyone have so little fashion sense? And oddly, the awful combination was just Mark.

"I dunno. Ten minutes to do your business, Bailey. Then we go."

She tried to run her fingers through her tangled hair, and then stopped. Mark had Runt in his arms again, nearly cuddled under his open shirt. She remembered what he'd said about them touching each other for comfort.

Jealousy that he'd picked the puppy rather than her to cuddle with flared irrationally in her. She pushed the ridiculous notion away. Runt needed the contact just as much as Mark.

She started to argue in favor of her bath and bed, but remembered Marcus and nodded. When she came out of the bathroom a few minutes later and paused to look at the room, the new guy nodded at the door.

"Got everything packed in the rental. I'll drive since it's my insurance."

Mark didn't argue. He trailed one hand over the beat up Mustang's hood, stopped and pulled his keys from his hip pocket.

Balancing Runt in his arms, unclipped the key and the alarm unit from the main ring. With a press of the button, the alarm chirped off. Mark opened the door and dropped the key on the driver's side seat. He closed the door gently and walked around to the rental.

Purposely, Bailey slipped in the backseat before Mark could. The side behind the driver was filled with the luggage from his beloved Mustang. He would need to be as close to his packbrother as possible.

Everyone inside and the doors shut, Bailey could feel the space of the car closing in on her. She smelled the basement Mark had rescued her from. Realizing that the smell came from her, she rolled the window down. She wondered what the golden haired wolver's name was, but didn't have the energy to ask. Bailey stifled a half-hysterical laugh. They sure went through a lot of cars, didn't they? * * * *

Bailey slapped her palms against the clear glass wall, yelling at her people to open the door. Behind her, Marcus was coming. She didn't dare look behind, but she knew that the werewolf was near.

On the other side of the clear wall, generations of psychics stood with their arms crossed.

Some, like her parents wore modern going to church clothes. A Ward and June Cleaver type stared at her. The woman's blind white eyes and the pot roast in her hands should have been out of place, but they weren't.

A woman in a gingham dress and her cowboy man showed her no sympathy. Even the medieval couple and all the others from different eras and generations coldly watched her. Judged her. And found her guilty.

As one, her psychic ancestors turned around, giving her their backs.

Bailey beat on the wall.

"You can't cast me out for helping my friend!"

"Traitor!" Her ancestors answered without turning back.

"It's not right! You can't just kill people for being different."

"Monsters are not people." The collective voices vibrated the glass wall under her hands.

"Monster breeder. Monster, monster, monster."

"Karen isn't a monster! She's a psychic and my friend. You're wrong!"

June Cleaver turned around and walked to the glass wall. Sweet and proper, June was the

perfect old-fashioned wife and mother. Her white eyes met Bailey's. No welcoming smile graced her pretty features. Bailey's stomach growled at the pot roast's delicious smell. Maybe June would be more reasonable to her pleading and let her inside. "I couldn't let them hurt Karen just because her family is wolverines. Lawrence *shot* her. My own cousin shot me. We would have died without taking wolverine blood." All Bailey wanted was to go home. To feel safe and loved again. Why wouldn't they understand? She was still the same person she was before.

Her psychic reading might be Changed by supernatural blood, but she was still the same inside. She was being punished for doing the *right* thing. June shook her head and tsked. A blood red tear ran from one sightless eye. "First a traitor. Now a monster. Our daughter, Bailey Sparks dead." June turned around and walked back to the other ancestors. Her voice floated back on a pot roast scented breeze. "No!" Bailey beat on the wall until her palms screamed in pain. "Monster, do not seek us out. You are dead to us. Dead, dead, dead." "I'm not dead. I want to go home!" June dropped the pot roast and the world exploded.

* * * * Bailey jerked awake. Her heart slammed against her chest as her frantic gaze darted around the inside of the car. The world was still intact. Marcus was nowhere in sight and they were at a hotel. A decent hotel, not one of the cheap roach motels she and Mark been staying in to conserve money.

Laying her head back against the seat, Bailey closed her eyes, trying to forget the dream. Grief and loss welled up inside her. Until now, just knowing she'd done the right thing had helped Bailey deal with her people's rejection.

She'd given up everything to warn Karen. To make sure that the elder's plan to kill her friend failed.

Absently, she lifted a hand to pet Runt. The puppy straddled the space between the front seats and her knee. His little body quivered with happy energy as he bounced between her and Mark. It was the resilience of youth, she supposed, to be able to enjoy the moment while on the run from the Jeffery Dahmer of werewolves.

Mark's very quietness made her crack an eye to see him staring out the passenger's window, lost in his own thoughts. Her head pounded and the stench clinging to her of Marcus' basement was making her nauseous again. Or it could be the concussion. Mark's wolverine friend stuck his head in the open driver's side window and winked at her. She blinked gritty eyes while he waved two key cards to everyone in general. "Adjoining rooms." He grinned, a perfect sexy smile that all of their kind seemed

to have. "Me and sweetness here can take one. You and Short-stuff can take the other." Mark growled. "They're both mine, Chase. Don't forget it."

His eyes focused and narrowed on his packbrother. The air in the car tensed as the males met eye to eye.

Bailey's jaw dropped. She was stunned to silence at the declaration.

Runt scrambled from Mark's lap into the back seat and into hers. His tail tucked under, nose buried in the crook of Bailey's encircling arms. As if she could protect him if this battle of the wills turned into a battle in truth.

The contest ended in an anticlimactic nothing. No teeth, fur, or fighting. Chase pulled out of the window and headed to the back of the car. The car beeped and the trunk released with a clunk.

She barely heard the older werewolf mutter something about a pizza and a real bed. Mark slipped out of the car and opened her door before she dared to say anything.

Frankly, she was too tired to do more than be shocked and stare anyway. A glance at Chase revealed that he was more thoughtful than bothered over Mark's territorial streak.

He nodded at her over the green duffel but the friendly leer was gone. Runt wriggled down to bounce and weave around their feet.

Their rooms were upstairs on the backside of the building facing a lightly wooded area. An easy escape route for wolveren. More of a trap for her.

Shaking her head, she gave in and let Mark carry her up the stairwell while Runt bounded up beside them. He ushered her into a room and turned back out.

Bailey headed for her first bath in forever.

* * * *

“Bailey.”

His voice woke her with a start. Cool water lapped at her as she snatched at the shower curtain for cover.

Crouching in front of the tub, Mark’s forearms rested on the knees of his yellow cargo pants. The colorful parrot shirt almost made her eyes hurt.

“I’m taking a *bath*.”

His lips tipped in a faint smile. One hand drifted to the edge of the tub. He dipped his fingers in, playing at the water.

“You were taking a *nap*.”

She jerked her chin up, very aware of how much her neck and bruises hurt.

“Well, I’m awake now.” She waved one hand in a circle while the other clutched at the shower curtain. “You can go do ... whatever.”

Mark smiled again. He looked subdued, but determined. This side of him was a little disturbing. Something had taken the laughter away from his summer blue eyes and the world was a little dimmer without it.

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t like this part, but it has to be done.”

She stared at his face, trying to focus on him instead of the havoc his presence played with her senses.

“What?” Her brow furrowed as she tried to follow the conversation.

“You have a bad concussion, Sunshine.” He smoothed the back of his hand over an unbruised part of her jaw. “It’s bad. And you need medical attention.”

“No. Not again.” Bailey heard the whiney sound of her voice and mentally cringed. She didn’t want to drink blood. God, it was gross. “Just give me some pain reliever and I’ll be okay. I promise.”

Mark shook his head and stood up. Bailey followed the movement. Her eyes caught on the still open part of his shirt where the fabulous muscles of his stomach stretched and bunched with the motion. The rest of the shirt came off.

His hands went to the button of his yellow cargo pants and Bailey nearly swallowed her tongue. “You can’t just get naked. I mean, uh ... aren’t you going to cut your arm or something?” The smile faded and shadows darkened the bright blue of his eyes. His hands fell away from his waist, making her hormones boo and hiss at her decision making abilities. He didn’t move much, but the subtle shift in his posture made him look less sure,

a little hunched. Rejected. Even he wasn’t so insensitive to think she’d want to have sex in her condition.

She leaned forward and touched a hand to his pants leg. “Why?” Mark sucked in a breath and looked away. His face flushed red. It was kind of interesting to watch the pink flow up his neck and ears like a rising level. “I need your touch.” She rubbed her fingers on her throbbing head, trying to force her sluggish thoughts to move faster. Her stomach flipped at the thought of ingesting wolveren blood, any blood, even if

she’d heal super fast. Her hormones danced at the thought of being naked with him. “But Chase and Runt are your kind. You said” He stiffened and turned to the door. His words were clipped. Harsh to her ears. “Fine. Never mind. Get dressed and we’ll do the rest out there.” “Wait! Don’t go.” She was a brain dead idiot. “Stay. Stay with me.” Mark jerked around. His face was hard.

Behind the anger in his eyes was the hurt she'd put there. He snorted at her request. "Save it. I don't need your pity. I'll do what needs to be done and leave you alone."

Bailey let go of the shower curtain, giving him a full show. His eyes widened but he stayed in place. She was an awful sight, she knew. Touching the swollen mess of her eye, she held the other hand out.

"Mark." Soft words, so as not to agitate him further. "I'm not thinking at my best. It's a big enough tub for us both." The harsh mask of his face slipped a little. He swallowed and shook his head. "I was wrong to ask, Sunshine." He turned to leave, hand on the knob. "Don't make me beg. I want you." His back stiffened again, then slumped. He leaned forward, resting his forehead

against the door. The play of muscle across his shoulders fascinated her. "You don't want me. You want a man. Not a monster."

She sat in the cold water, stunned.

The Mark she knew was cocky, annoying, and full of confidence. Not this. It was time for some deliberate action.

Draining the tub, she carefully stood up and stepped out. She knew he heard her movements, but thankfully stayed where he was. She didn't have the energy to chase him down.

The cool temperature of her hands raised goose bumps on his back as she slid them around his waist, slow and deliberate. She leaned, skin to skin, her bare breasts soaking in the heat of his body. Resting the less bruised side of her face against him, she closed her eyes.

"You're a *man*. And I want you." She shifted to place a kiss on one of the bumps of his spine. "Never call yourself a monster again."

He shifted and turned in her arms. His gaze roamed down her body.

She squashed down the feeling of unworthiness and let him look his fill, waiting to see if the extra pounds and silvery stretch lines repulsed him. The heat and arousal she found instead flustered her.

"I can't"

Mark pulled her flush against his chest, his hands trailing down her back to smooth over her buttocks. He leaned back against the door, cradling her close. The hard jut of his sex prodded her thigh though the material of his pants while his hands roamed up and down her body.

"Just touch me, Sunshine. I want to feel"

"What?"

Her words feathered across the smooth plain of his chest. Mark wasn't an overly hairy man. A smattering of crisp hairs trailed leisurely downward, pale enough to miss if she weren't looking for it. Pleasant under her cheek. She smiled.

"What do you want to feel?"

He laughed, a low rumble in his chest.

"Not what you're thinking."

"Oh?"

The heat in his body spiked with embarrassment and the rod poking her thigh bobbed enthusiastically. Mark shifted, putting her weight back on her own feet.

"I definitely want to do that later. Now let's get in the tub."

Bailey started the water while he dropped his pants. She froze at the impressive beauty of him. Her eyes traveled up his sculpted form worthy of a Greek statue.

His eyes were unsure.

She held out a dripping hand, pulling him to her. He stepped in, sat and pulled her down, settling her in the curve of his body.

Bailey's eyes drifted shut for a moment, from the sheer delicious comfort of him. Oh, she was turned on as hell. There was just something so intimate and peaceful about cuddling skin to skin. She wasn't a virgin, but this was an entirely new experience.

Mark's breath let out against her neck. She felt the tension ease from his body, even as his

trailing fingers left a fire on her own body.

She stiffened.

"Where is Runt?" "He's discovered popcorn and the SciFi channel in Chase's room." "Oh." She relaxed again. In the end, taking Mark's blood wasn't the awful, embarrassing experience it had been two years ago. She trusted him. Despite wanting to gag, she swallowed and gave in to the drugged lassitude that followed. She snuggled closer into his embrace and sighed. She could stay here forever, safe in his keeping.

No, Mark wasn't a monster. Because, she wouldn't love the bad guy.

* * * *

Chase waited for the little guy to fall asleep and for the other two to finally settle in the bed before making his call. Not that they were doing the deed yet. Nah. He couldn't be so lucky. Both of them were too wiped out to do more than snuggle.

The other side picked up on the first ring. "Adam here." "Hey, boss man. I've got the kid under wraps for now." "Good. I'll call the other wardens to arrange for a flight out tomorrow." This was where the phone call was going to get dicey. In Chase's opinion, all the kid needed was time with his woman. Then there was the pup. Mark needed to settle his business with whatever was after him here and get his little family in order. Chase intended to give him that time. "Hold off on that for now. There's trouble here that could follow us home." The line was quiet while Chase knew Adam was getting frustrated and upset. The boss did like his pack on their home turf and under his protection. "Fine. Mack and I'll be there later tonight." "Nah. Don't do that. I'm good here." He related how he'd found Mark's room and their fast relocation to a safer place. "That's not supposed to be possible." Adam's surprise over the pup was evident.

"I'll talk to Tank about that and get back with you. Is Miss Sparks well enough for travel?" "Yeah, she could probably travel. But he's not going to let her out of his sight." Adam's frustration would be skyrocketing by now. Chase could hear the grinding of the boss man's teeth as he tried to find a way around that one. Finally, the Canis Pater of the Texas Anderson County Pack sighed. "So she's really the one? Mark has a mate?" "Well ...," Chase hedged a bit, egging on Adam's matchmaking streak. "They're working on it. And the pup is a cute little fuzzball." The boss loved being a dad and a grampa. "You know how grumpy Mark can get if he feels we're hounding him. That girl is just as stubborn." Adam growled over the line. "Alright. Keep watch over them there. I won't send anyone else. *Yet.*" The Canis

Pater paused. Chase could almost see the finger leveled at him. "But Mack's visions are never wrong. We're on a plane, the first hinky feeling he gets. So Mark better get busy getting her to mate-bond him."

The line clicked off and Chase let out a pent up breath.

He hoped he'd done the right thing, insisting they let the boy out of his bubble wrap. Otherwise, Adam would have his heart for letting his boy die. The thing of it was, Chase would gladly let him.

Somehow this pack thing Tank had insisted on all those years ago had grown on him. Having a family to worry about was a real bitch that could carve your heart out and eat it in front of you.

Chase hoped he wasn't going to have a repeat of the day he lost human life, because losing his wolveren family would suck the big

one. * * * *

Bailey's body burned with need. Already, her head felt clearer. Her aches and pains muted as her desire rose. She twisted, one hand on the side of the tub for balance, and straddled Mark.

Normally, she would feel self-conscious of exposing her flaws. Underneath her, Mark made a sound. His hips shifted so that the jut of his penis rode the crack of her behind. His hands slid up her thighs and traced a path to her breasts. His eyes were full of appreciation as he palmed the weight.

"These are perfect."

Her nipples pebbled under his light touch. She groaned and let her head fall back.

His caress traveled to the valley between her breasts and stopped. When he didn't begin again, Bailey opened her eyes.

Hesitant blue eyes met hers.

"I'm not going to stop once I start, Sunshine."

She smiled, feeling bold. Maybe it was surviving Hell. Maybe it was the werewolf blood. For now, she just wanted to feel alive.

She wanted to feel him moving inside her. The idea of Mark wild for her, coming inside her, made her breath catch. Her channel ached to be filled.

"Then don't stop. Make love to me."

Mark growled and sat up in the tub. He wrapped his arms around Bailey and stood. No way was he making love to her in the tub.

What if they slipped and she hit her head again?

He stepped out, letting her wet body slide down against his. His breath came out in ragged pants.

Her hand circled his dick and he shuddered.

She was a wet dream. Her hair hung around her body in the long wavy ropes he imagined dragging over his body. Her curves, dotted with delicious freckles made him want to run his hands over every inch. Then his tongue.

"I won't last if you keep doing that."

Gently, he pulled her hand off him. Tucking strands of her curly hair behind one ear, he brushed his fingers across the bruises on her neck.

Mark tamped down the fury over the shadows and placed a kiss there.

Bailey quivered. He pulled back.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No." She reached up, dragging his mouth back to hers. "Make love to me. Now."

Mark inhaled a ragged breath, closing his eyes against the emotion building inside. He had to get a grip. He didn't want to hurt her more. Didn't want her to see

"You're not a monster. You could never scare me."

Bailey saw the moment he started to believe. She reveled in it.

The room spun like crazy when he scooped her back up and fumbled the door open.

She didn't care. Mark would never hurt her.

Panicking just a moment when he paused in the middle of the room, Bailey realized that the adjoining door had clicked. Locked on the other side.

Deciding to be grateful instead of embarrassed, she nibbled at the delicious plumpness of his bottom lip.

Mark growled and settled her on the bed. His lean, muscular body stretched out over her.

"My Sunshine." He breathed the words reverently, sending another shiver up her body. For the moment, the possessiveness reflected in his eyes felt right.

Heat seeped into her, stoking on the fire inside. When his mouth settled on hers again, she opened eagerly. She met his tongue and pressed forward, hungry for more. Tasting, she delved deep, wanting it all.

Mark pulled back, locking his arms so as not to squash her. He could hardly believe she was making love with him. Part of him wanted to question, to make sure she wasn't just reacting to everything that had happened. That she was drunk on the magic in his blood.

He didn't want to know. He needed her too much right now. If Bailey went back to hating him tomorrow, then he'd have had one shot at it.

"Look at me."

Her pretty eyes fluttered open. They fluttered again as he rubbed his aching erection against her hot wet folds. He growled.

"Look at me, Sunshine."

When she focused on him, he pressed inside. Slow, bit by bit, to draw out the torture of

joining. To be careful. She was so tight.

Her expressions ranged from surprise and pleasure, to an intense something he had no name for.

“Harder.”

He bit his lip, shaking with the effort to hold back.

“Don’t want to hurt you.”

Bailey made a strangled sound. Wrapping her legs tighter around his body, she leveraged herself up, pumping up against him.

He wasn’t going to go slow and easy if she kept that up.

“*Sunshhh ...*”

Satisfaction flooded Bailey when he finally let go. With one more cry of protest, he lay back down on top of her.

One big hand slid down her body to lift her leg higher, adjusting the angle of penetration. He pumped into her deeper.

She had no leverage, no control. Above her, he was in command of their lovemaking.

This time, she didn’t care. She’d follow where he led.

Grasping the slick muscles of his back and shoulders, she buried her face against his neck. Pleasure built with every stroke inside her.

His intense need drove her own forward until it exploded all around her. She stifled her cry in his neck.

Mark froze. She looked up into his wild dilated eyes. Opened her mouth

He thrust into her again and shuddered, pressing her further into the bed as if to make them one. His hand found her hair, his mouth hers.

He thrust into her one more time and locked around her, growling his release down her throat.

His coming triggered her own climax. Bailey convulsed around him again. A wave of pleasure flowed from him and into her, making them one.

Just as it was supposed to be.

Chapter Nineteen

The Galaxy Wars theme belted out, ominously warning him of an unknown caller. In retaliation, Mark snuggled closer into the sweet smelling warmth.

In that particular moment, he hoped old Alexander Bell was having a good time laughing his ass off. Next, as his cock protested the layers of clothing and blanket between him and ultimate bliss, Mark decided that the inventor of the telephone had been a sadist. The concert paused, and then persisted, as whoever it was, called back.

“*Wuff!*”

Runt bounced on the bed, killing any illusions Mark’s libido had. The puppy bounced and climbed over them both, snuffling and wiggling.

Mark was kind of glad now that she’d prodded him into putting on his shorts before he passed out. Though, he’d hated to see her cover up. He’d wanted to snuggle naked all night. What was left of it, anyhow.

“What ...?” Bailey laughed, looping her arms around the puppy. She tugged their assailant to the side and tossed the corner of the blanket over him in play.

“What are you going to do now, tough guy? Huh?”

The simple joy she took in playing with Runt took Mark’s breath away.

She looked at him curiously over an armful of yapping, jumping puppy. She wasn’t afraid or disgusted at Runt’s obvious deformity.

Mark shied away from any thoughts of yesterday’s activities or of Runt being born in the wrong form.

“Mark? Isn’t that your phone?”

He jumped and pulled away, grabbing the offensive device from the nightstand. He flipped it open with a snarl.

"Mark Weis."

"Mr. ... uh, Weis. I thought I was going to have to leave another message."

"Who is this?" He was having trouble waking up. Chase's smug grin as the warden lounged in the connecting doorway made Mark want to bite his packbrother.

"Hamilton Young."

"Okay." Whoever this guy was, Mark figured he'd deal with him better with a cup of caffeine in hand. He slid out of the bed and brushed past Chase, following the scent of coffee. "So, what can I do for ya?"

The words just popped out before he could stop them. They were automatic, ingrained from hard-earned lessons in politeness. That and customers tended to like the good ol' boy attitude better than the asshole.

He radared in on the coffee pot, phone stuck to his ear while he waited for the caller's spiel. Appropriating a cup, he loaded it down with all the toxic powdered creamer and artificial sweetener until it was a nice creamy color. Coffee. The breakfast of champions.

"This isn't easy. You're not gone yet and all hell is going to break loose if you don't leave." The man's local speech cut short with a sharp intake of surprise.

"*Traitor!*"

Mark's supernatural hearing picked up the muffled conversation on the other end. His whole body went still, alert to the dangerous tones in the argument.

"Ferris, what are you talking about? Put the gun down. We can talk this over."

The newcomer's voice became stronger. Possibly, approaching Mark's caller. By now, he thought he'd figured out who'd woken him up at this ungodly hour.

"We saw you. You bastard. Conspiring against your own kind ..."

There was a bump and a scuffle. The phone clattered, bringing clarity to the call. The gun fired, sharp and painful in his ear.

Mark growled, frustrated with his inability to help. Waving off Bailey's concern and Chase's interest, he paced back to his room, the need for coffee drowned in a surge of adrenaline.

Damn. Damn. Damn. He was going to learn to stop giving out his card to every dipwad he met.

A grunt of pain shot a premature surge of relief through Mark's system. It could be the attacker. He debated calling out. He didn't want to get in the middle of a local witch, or psychic hunt.

The phone clattered again then the heavy, wheezing breath of someone really out of shape, or really hurt, rasped in Mark's ear.

"Are you still there?"

"Hamilton Young?"

"Yes. It's ... that's me," Young gasped and Mark heard the jingle of keys and a door.

"Answer me, Young. Are you hurt?"

"No. Not bad. I'll live."

The sharp bang of a door slam told Mark that Hamilton Young's career in Auto Parts management was over in this town. He was on the run.

"You've got to get out of town. You and the others. They're starting a war."

"Who's starting a war?"

The click made Mark think that Young had hung up on him. Common sense told him to stay out of it.

Psychics could get crazy rabid about other supernaturals. He could see them hunting down skinny Hamilton Young and disposing of the guy in some backwoods swamp for alligator take-out.

He shook his head to clear the stupid images his imagination was running and focused on the psychic.

"Hamilton? Hamilton! Why are they starting a war? This is a no-pack zone."

"Listen. Mr., *uh*, Weis. I've got to go. The elders know I've got ..."

A vehicle engine turned over in the background. "*Shit! Fucking fairys! ... No! The egg!*"

The line went silent. Mark checked the screen and saw that the call had ended after six minutes. It had seemed a lot longer than that.

He shut the lid with a final click, forcing the burn of adrenaline to simmer.

Automatically, he imagined the steps of kata he was learning back home. Just thinking of the fluid motions his Sensei drilled into him had a calming effect.

He let out a breath, thinking out his next move.

Chase's eyes met Mark's and held. A lesser rank in the pack, Mark normally wouldn't keep the stare. Let it turn into a Challenge.

Tension stirred in the room. The hairs on Mark's neck prickled and rose as the older, stronger, pack guardian stared down at him.

There was order and rank in the pack. Someone was always more dominant and if you wanted a promotion, you had to fight for it. Literally.

Mark was happy with his place in the pack. Challenging Adam's badass backup or any of the wardens ranked somewhere up there with fishing barehanded for electric eels. Yeah, sometimes he wanted his higher-ranking family members to stop treating him like a kid. Sometimes he felt smothered by their overprotective hounding.

The little show in the car had been him marking his territory. Since Chase didn't poach on another guy's woman, he'd backed off. This was more of the same.

Even while Mark kept the steady stare, part of the wolf in him wanted to tuck his tail and roll over like the good middle ranking pack wolf that he was.

Chase's mouth quirked in a smart-assed smirk. Mark kept his ground in the battle of wills.

If he lost, he'd be on the next plane home without Bailey. A guy who couldn't protect what was his might as well roll over and volunteer to be omega. There was no way he'd ask her to accept a mate who couldn't stand his ground.

The warden's smirk spread into a full out grin.

His white predator's teeth snapped together in a biting laugh as he slumped into a chair. "Okay, boy. What's the plan?" * * * Bailey stared at the two men ... no,

male *wolves*, pretending to be men. All that posturing and marking of territory were not the actions of civilized modern men.

She loosened her hold on Runt's body and tried to calm her racing heart.

The puppy pulled his head from under her arm and watched Mark and the other wolven back down from their almost fight. For the second time in as many days, the poor puppy's tail was tucked tight between his back legs as he pressed his body into Bailey for protection.

When Chase dropped into the chair, she'd almost thought that he'd gone for Mark's throat. The warden's sharp laugh shivered down her spine and her stomach bottomed out. She stared, frozen while the testosterone settled.

The wolven's lazy slouch wasn't submissive. He could have won ... if he'd wanted to. It simply suited his purpose to let the younger wolven have his way.

Oh, Bailey knew Mark was strong and a powerful creature that others didn't cross lightly. The wild, primal thing that lived under his skin was evident with every move he made. The obnoxious clothes and irritating attitude he put off didn't hide what he was. Chase, on the other hand had a hard edge that Mark lacked. And she was glad for it.

On an instinctive level, she understood what Chase was. The same thing as the psychic community's elders. Too often Bailey had witnessed what price other people had to pay for her own species security. Whatever species, they were the enforcers who would do *anything* to ensure the safety and continuance of their people. Heaven help the fool who crossed them.

Mark might have the ability and the willingness to kill if necessary, but her lover would never be

an enforcer candidate. There were lines that Mark would not cross. That kind of ruthlessness just wasn't in him. That comforted her, making her care that much more for him.

"Mark?"

He turned at her voice. His blue eyes were brilliant, untamed. The restless energy that she always sensed vibrated from his body. In two strides, he was in front of her. His hands buried in her sleep tangled curls, pulling her into the warmth of his body.

The hard line of his mouth captured hers, softening as he deepened the kiss. Bailey whimpered in surrender, opening her lips for entrance. His tongue delved deep. His retreat made her chase him back into the hot deliciousness of his mouth.

Dimly she realized that the teeth she scraped her tongue against were longer, sharper than usual. She didn't care. The element of danger excited her more.

Bailey protested when his mouth left hers to lave and nibble at her lips and jaw. She imagined she could feel the dominant possession that drove him. Heat suffused her. She almost surrendered to the promised passion.

Mark pulled away. A sharp yap brought her to her senses as Runt wiggled free and up to rest his front paws on Mark's chest.

Despite the heavy pulse she could swear drummed in time to his, she watched as he leaned down to rub cheeks with the puppy. Runt whined and scrabbled until Mark picked him up, allowing sloppy puppy kisses on his cheeks and neck.

Watching how attached the little one was getting, a new fear seized Bailey's heart. What if Mark couldn't take the puppy back to his pack? She couldn't let anything happen to Runt. He'd already suffered so much.

* * * *

Mark would have liked to do more than kiss her lips. Hell, he'd love to sit and watch expressions dash across her face forever. The subtle flavors of her emotions tantalized his nose. He already missed her dreamy arousal that had shifted into concern.

Mark set a hand on the puppy's head to slow the slobbering attack while he shoved his brains into gear.

It took all his will not to look at the older wolf for approval. Instead, Mark walked to the closed curtains and stared through the thin sliver of the outside and the woods beyond.

"I'd like to make that bastard top priority for touching what is mine." He ignored Bailey's protest and Runt's extra kiss for the sentiment, as if the puppy knew he was included. "But I told Young to call if he had any problems ... and damn if he didn't do it."

He didn't add that he had a sneaking suspicion that the psychics were after his hide and that maybe Hamilton Young was just the bait for their trap. How an entire magic using species could claim they weren't supernatural at the same time as keeping up a centuries long holy war against the rest of them was just insane. With a few exceptions, the psychics were completely, totally bugfuck.

"So what are you going to do, hotshot?"

Chase leaned negligently, a bare foot propped up on the room's tiny table. One hand scratched the muscled expanse of his chest. Fine, almost unnoticeable lines mapped the warden's torso. The hard life of first a Hellhound, and then a rogue, then as protector of the pack was visible for those who knew what to look for. Old scars made by silver and supernatural means left their mark, though long healed. Badges of honor and courage.

Mark set Runt down and walked to where they'd tossed his bags yesterday.

"I'm going to go get Hamilton Young. You can take him home with you when you leave. Then, I'm going to find Marcus Cargill and do what should have been done sixteen years ago."

Chase's laugh was sharp and derisive.

"Not going to happen."

Mark turned back around, his eyes narrowed. His jaw clenched in defiance. He barely restrained the urge to leap at the warden, standing his ground instead.

Chase just rolled one shoulder.

"The boss sent me to watch your back, kid." He raised one finger in the air to make his point.

"First. Stay way the hell away from those crazy psychics."

Another finger joined the first.

"Two. You go after this werewolf, I'm going right in with you."

Bailey's breath caught as she stared at the two males as her brain finally clicked onto what had gone on the other side of the phone call. She shot up and marched over, snatching Runt away from his arms. She wound protective arms around the puppy as she glared at both.

"Community psychics? Are you insane?" She ignored Chase and rounded on Mark. "What do you think they are going to do when they find out about all of us? They won't care that Runt's a baby. To them *we* are the monsters."

She paced back to the opposite side of the room.

Agitated, she rubbed the puppy's ears as she contemplated what was going to happen now that the idiot had tipped off the locals. Bailey hadn't considered them when she'd moved here. She'd made her contacts over the Internet, stayed clear of supernatural activity.

She swallowed.

They'd put her on trial the old fashioned way, then hunt down Mark, Chase, and Runt and coldly execute them on the spot. Or find someone else to do it. She wasn't afraid of death by Witch Trial. Any traitor should expect the same.

That stopped her cold. Bailey hugged the subdued puppy tightly to her chest while she glanced at the staring men.

Here she was, trying to plot the safest way to extract a bunch of werewolves from a psychic community. She knew she was changed by the forbidden magic-charged werewolf blood she'd taken, before and now. The psychics would be able to sense the difference in her. She was a traitor to her own people. She didn't belong to Mark's pack, like his adopted sister Karen Ridley did.

Runt was a wolf. The pack would probably take him in. She was kidding herself to think the puppy wouldn't be accepted by a pack as open-minded as Mark's family. All her worrying was an excuse to hang on to him as long as possible.

Bailey Sparks didn't belong anywhere. She didn't have anyone.

Runt licked her chin.

You have me. And Mark.

The stray thought made her blink. Well, technically, yes she did have Mark. But for how long? His fixation with her could only be trusted until another bimbo bombshell plopped herself down in his lap. Last night could be chalked up to the stress, magic, and hormones.

Face it, the man was hot. His body was lean and seriously ripped. He was young. And that right there, said it all. Too young.

Bailey automatically tightened her arms around Runt's wiggling form. The puppy sneezed and ducked his nose into her armpit.

Mark's not ripped. He's almost healed. Smells good here. Safe.

Bailey blanched, nearly dropping Runt. She wound up setting him on the bed and backed away, her breath coming way too fast. She didn't notice Mark until he had her in his arms.

"What?" She focused on his looming face. Saw his lips moving. Then processed his words after a quick shake. "Bailey! Geez, woman. I'm not taking on the psychics head on."

She dragged her gaze from him back to the bed where Runt stared at her with his bright baby blues. Mark's fingers spasmed on her arms and she blinked back to his eyes.

A dim part of her brain registered the same beautiful brilliant blue that had become her favorite color.

Sucking in a breath, Bailey took a firm hold of her erratic emotions and libido. One problem at a time. She faced the largest one.

"Okay, Chase is right. Stay away from the psychic community. Have you forgotten that my

community, my *family*, wanted Karen dead because they thought she was one of you?"

Mark nodded. He ached to hold her, to soothe the alarm that he knew was flooding her system. God knew, if he ever figured out how women thought, maybe he'd stop screwing up with her. His next words were sure to piss her off.

"Lawrence Daily was after Karen because he was sick. The rest of those psychics pulled out of the hunt after she left town."

He reached out to touch one of her long spiraled curls.

"Those people aren't your family, Sunshine. They don't deserve you. Take Runt and head back to Packhome. Adam'll make sure you're both safe while I settle this here."

She slapped his hand away. The confusion he sensed in her flared to anger.

"Right. The little woman goes running while the big he-man takes care of it all. Eh, Mark? The smart thing would be for us *all* to go."

He sure didn't feel like a he-man, but didn't dare mention it in front of Chase, or Runt. The little one seemed to think he could save the world. On the other hand, Bailey didn't think he was competent enough to escort them from one side of the street to the other.

He suffered a momentary pang for the loss of his sexy black Mustang, while the wolf in him sneered at the idea that he might not be capable of protecting his mate and pup.

Mark straightened his spine, his gaze fixing on the warden.

The other wolven held his hands up.

"Unless you're planning on heading home, I'm staying. Those two are your responsibility, not mine." Chase visibly shuddered. "And for a good reason, too."

Mark growled and headed for the door. It was past time for him to be making tracks on the situation. No, *situations*.

"Where are you going?" Bailey's voice was sharp with worry. Her scent was just as strong.

"To find a fairy nabbed psychic, kill a rogue werewolf, and return that effing dragon egg."

Mark looked back over his shoulder. His bright blue eyes inquired under the yellow blond fringe of his bangs. "Need anything while I'm out?"

Chapter Twenty

In the end, Bailey, his very own sexy homing device, went with him. She pointed out that if he was so determined to find a fairy-nabbed psychic, it would take another psychic to do the job. So did Chase, in full warden mode. Runt too, for lack of a puppsitter.

Bailey sat in front while Mark drove. He'd been pretty surprised when Chase just handed the keys to the rental over.

"Just don't trash it. 'Cause I'll take the bill outta your hide, kid." The bigger wolven slid into the back and promptly made the puppy sit still.

"Don't they have puppy car seats? There's no way its safe for the little guy to be loose like this."

Chase's concern touched Mark. If a badass like the warden was worried about Runt's well-being, then surely the rest of the pack would accept the puppy's differences.

He looked into the rearview mirror to catch the other wolven's eyes.

"I think I saw something like that at the Pet Smart in Tyler."

"Didn't figure you for the type to hang out in pet stores, kid. Volunteer at the pound too?"

Mark clenched his teeth at the rising heat in his face. He sat ramrod straight, with his eyes on the road, fighting the urge to hunch in embarrassment.

What did it matter if he liked to stop and visit unadopted animals at the pet store?

So what, if all the toys he bought wound up at the animal shelter along with several hefty bags of dog and cat food, bleach, and other stuff the little fuzzies needed?

The whole place amounted to nothing more than an orphanage for normal animals. Mark absolutely hated to see any creature abused.

"I think it's a wonderful thing to do."

Bailey's dreamy tone indicated her preoccupation with Finding their quarry, Hamilton Young, misplaced psychic.

She looked beautiful, all pink and scrubbed, with her damp hair half falling in a waterfall from the haphazard knot on the top of her head. She blew hot and cold, driving him nuts. Last night she'd told him he wasn't a monster and let him make love to her.

For a brief moment his heart had soared when she linked herself in with the supernaturals the psychics considered monsters. But she still rejected his pack, his fundamental family unit. With her injuries, she was a little off her game, but no doubt she'd rip him another one if he tried putting her up in another hotel room.

Hell, he was still smarting from the tongue-lashing he'd gotten for suggesting she wait it out in the room. The woman had barely survived the house of horrors. She needed her rest.

Mark shook his head. Never in a million years would he understand women. Runt barked his support from the back seat wriggling against the warden's restraining hand.

"Jesus. You guys are a bunch of saps."

Chase's knees bumped the back of the driver's seat just to annoy Mark. He recognized the move as one of his own favorites and let it ride. To complain would just make Chase do more irritating stuff.

Mark knew he would. In a heartbeat.

"Are we there yet?" Chase's sharp predator's grin flashed in the rear view mirror. Bailey's dreamy stare fixed on the swampy woods that the Army liked to train in.

"Close ... not far now."

* * * *

Marcus followed the ridiculous sedan in his Jeep Liberty. The SUV was his contingency vehicle if something happened to the Lexus or if he had out of the way business. This business was more than a little out of his way. And inconvenient.

Oh, he was pretty pissed at his lair burning. The boy was going to get a lesson for that. And for the first time that junior had played firebug.

In his seventy-one years, Marcus had proved time and time again that he could track and wait out his quarry. His own bastard of a father had demanded it. When the old wolf had gotten weak, Marcus had challenged him in front of the pack and won.

He'd seen the smoke from his house and known whose handiwork it was. This was his town. Finding and following their trail was easy. Keeping track of them and staying out of Weis' warden's range was only a little less difficult.

Years ago, Marcus had been worried that Weis knew he'd escaped and was going to hunt him down. Taking the time to sweet talk a witch into making him a scent charm had turned into one of his best investments. He remembered that the witch had been a tasty morsel. Literally.

Thanks to that little scent charm, he'd been able to lay and wait just outside their hotel door. With his wolf's hearing, he knew everything he needed to know. And how to double cross the fairy bastard who was trying cheat him. Marcus was still pissed that the asshole Weis had settled in *his* territory and taken over *his* pack. The big kicker was that the bastard had given *his* boy, Marcus Cargill's heir, the Weis name.

He'd had enough. The boy could call himself anything at all, but he was still Marcus Alexander Cargill, junior. Blood would tell.

Marcus was sure of it. When the time came, his boy would choose blood over those pussies Adam Weis called a pack. And the Runt?

Well, the bitch that had birthed him had been an interesting diversion, but Marcus always did have a distaste for deformities. *

* * * Mark pulled over onto a tank track path. The wary feeling of being followed had finally passed.

Bailey's Finding power had gotten them this far a heck of a lot faster than by nose and foot. Now

it was up to him and Chase to get in, do the job, and get out fast. Maybe even without the fairys noticing. Hey, *it could happen*.

His Sunshine might look and feel better after having his blood. She might not feel good about being left behind, but she still wasn't up for a field trip through the woods. The pup had no business being in the middle of this mess. What else were they going to do with the little guy?

He glanced at her, debating just how to break the news about being left behind.

"Forget it, fur-face." Bailey's raised eyebrows and the look on her face told him that she knew his thoughts. It was a woman's thing, not a psychic gift. Or at least that he could tell, all the females in his life could do the same thing to some degree. His, mom. Karen. Heck, even his wolven packsister Tamara and the housebrownie, Ember had that weird ability.

Chase snorted and Runt yipped. They might think she was a bucket of laughs. Mark didn't see the humor at all.

"What?"

He gave her his most innocent look, trying to tell her with his eyes and face that he didn't do anything.

"You're thinking of leaving me behind. You need me to find your lost psychic."

Come to think of it, that look had never worked with his mom either. Mark frowned, made a mental note to look in the mirror and see just what was wrong with his trust-me-I'm-innocent face.

"Come on, Sunshine. I can probably sniff him out myself. I need you to watch out for Runt."

Her stubborn expression wavered and she glanced between the front seats at the puppy. Runt cocked his fuzzy blond head and stared back at her. His blue eyes *were* innocent.

She reached a tentative hand back to touch Runt's soft pointed ears.

Mark wondered if she didn't think them all monsters after all, even one as obviously blameless as the puppy.

"Okay. Go do what you need to do."

He caught the insecurity in her eyes. Behind that was a core of steel. Mark was sure of it. He wondered if watching her cousin Lawrence Dailey turn into a werewolf and try to kill her was at the root of her distrust. Or maybe psychics just trained their young that way.

"Oh. Good grief. Kiss the woman already." Chase got out of the car and slammed the door behind.

Mark's mouth quirked as he stared into her suddenly wide eyes.

Oh, yeah. He was gonna kiss the woman good.

He claimed her mouth, taking advantage of her parted lips. His tongue delved deep, exploring the contours of her teeth, the velvet texture of her tongue.

Someone moaned. He didn't know or care who. The scent of her arousal kicked him straight in the gut. God, he wanted her.

Pulling away, Mark fought the wolf inside, who wanted to take her. Make her his. Bailey panted for breath.

His eyes dilated with need under the shaggy blond mop of his hair. The delicious contrast of the bottom half of his nearly shaved scalp tickled her fingers. The man was so causal sexy on the outside and intense on the inside.

She wished she could stay like this forever. She wished

"I've gotta go."

His words were husky against her cheek as he pressed his lips against her skin one more time before letting her go.

Bailey blinked, watching him slip from the car and head into the woods. Soon his loud attire disappeared into the trees and she was left alone with the puppy.

Bailey locked the doors and petted her lap for Runt to scramble on to.

"Come on. It looks like we're in this for the long-haul."

What's a long-haul?

Bailey laughed.

"It mean's were going to be here a while."

Oh. Bailey? Can I ask you something?

She smiled and ran her fingers through the soft fur, poking at ticklish ribs.

Now that she wasn't so thrown by the suddenness of the psychic connection, she was enjoying having Runt all to herself. In fact, the mind-speaking was reminiscent of her childhood. Of all the small things that separated her family and relatives from the nulls. If she let herself, she could pretend that they were a family, she, Mark, and their fuzzy baby.

Bailey pushed the thought away, hoping that the puppy could only pick up on thoughts directed at him.

"Ask away, sweetie."

Can Mark really kill Alpha? I hope so.

Shock stilled her hands. She hadn't actively thought about Mark hunting down Marcus, much less fighting the werewolf. She only wanted for them all to be safe.

"He does have Chase with him, just in case. Chase is a pack warden. He'll protect Mark if he needs it." The answer was as much for herself as for Runt.

Her dislike over the puppy's name reared again. She tried squashing the feeling down before he picked up on it. What kind of jerk named their baby that?

That's okay, Bailey. After Mark kills Alpha, you can give me a better name.

She 'heard' a note of insecurity in the puppy's 'voice'.

If you really do want a fuzzy baby. That's okay, if you don't. Alpha says I'm deformed and no one wants a deformed baby, anyway.

"Ohhh. Sweetie." Bailey hugged him close. "You're not deformed. You're just the way you are supposed to be."

Pulling the puppy's muzzle around so that she could see into his eyes, Bailey kissed the black little nose.

"I bet you look a lot like your mama." She hated mentioning the pelt but poor Runt needed a connection to something good. He'd have a hard enough time overcoming the foul taint that Marcus inflicted on him.

Lugging around the wolf skin gave her a creepy feeling. Bailey hoped that they could give what was left of the wolf that had given birth to such an amazing baby a decent burial.

"I already know she was beautiful. I'd bet she was smart too and loved you with all her heart."

Alpha says that blood always outs. That wolves and wolven don't love, they dominate or die. You don't think Mark will pick him over us, do you?

Fingers clenching into the soft fur, Bailey's thoughts turned back to her first meeting with Marcus.

She'd thought someone so handsome and charming would be trustworthy. People usually weren't, so why had she fallen for the act?

Because she was a terrible judge of men, that's why.

Marcus had said he was into acquisitions and investments.

Bad to the Bone belting from the psychedelic phone left in the driver's seat startled her out of her musing. Bailey grinned at the choice of ring tone. He apparently had a different tone for each number. With a soothing hand on Runt, she glanced at the readout.

Packhome.

Hating to let it go unanswered like she had when Mark had been laid up recovering from being shot, she bit her lip.

Guilt swamped her. What if his family really needed him?

She knew what it was to be cut off from family. To wonder if everyone was well and not be allowed contact with her loved ones.

Runt's sympathetic whimper decided her.

"Mark Weis' phone."

There was a short pause, and then the male voice growled in her ear. "Where is Mark?"

"Um. He's kind of busy right now."

"Is this Bailey Sparks?"

She wished to God that she could place which one of the pack she was speaking to. It could be any of them, even their cold scary leader, Adam Weis. Mark's father was a man who could scare serial killers into giving up. Pale and silvery, the werewolf, *wolven*, was the epitome of what it means to be alpha.

"Yes. And this is?"

There was a brief snort. Someone else's voice was just outside her range to make out words.

"This is Brandon Weis. Mark's brother."

"Karen's husband, right?"

Of all the wolven pack, Bailey remembered her friend's husband best. Tall, dark, and brooding, he had a definite James Dean thing going. Or was that the other one? The twin?

"Yes, ma'am. Karen is my mate. Now, if you don't mind, I need to check on my brother."

Bailey pressed her lips together. Part of her wanted to confess what was going on and get as many *were* ... wolven, here as backup. She wasn't blind. Mark was making some kind of stand. He wanted to handle this himself. To the point of wanting Chase gone.

"Look, I'm sorry. He's really not here. He's ... gone to deal with a situation."

The agitated tone of his obscured voice as he relayed her news made her hurry to clarify.

"Brandon! He's really all right. The other wolf, wolven, Chase, is with him."

Brandon and the hushed voice conferred for a moment, trying her patience, as the confines of the car seemed to shrink. His voice made her blink, and refocus, aware that she'd been staring into the woods across the path from where Mark and Chase had disappeared.

"I apologize, Miss Sparks. We heard that you've been through an ... ordeal."

"Just Bailey. And like I said, Mark has it handled."

The back of her neck itched as her gaze drew again to the point where the huge wild ferns covered the woods floor under the thick trees. There was a definite southern tropics thing going there.

"Anyway, he's got Chase backing him up. Marcus doesn't stand a chance." Her breath shook. She swallowed and rattled on blithely. "So you see? You don't need to worry."

"Miss Sparks. Bailey!" Brandon's voice was sharp, cutting into her nervous rambling. A tremor shivered down her spine.

"Yes? Sorry, I was rattling."

"You mentioned a Marcus. Marcus who?"

Her brain fumbled for a moment, sure that Mark had given the werewolf a surname.

Cargill. Alpha's name is Marcus Cargill.

Bailey nodded, relaying the information as she stroked Runt's fur, taking comfort in the contact.

"You're sure about the name?"

A new, darker tone interjected into Brandon's voice. Something she'd glimpsed in

Mark only recently. Something primal that frightened
and made her feel safe at the same time. She glanced
down at Runt, whose little ears were perked forward as
he followed both ends of the conversation. The puppy
nodded his confirmation. "Yes. I'm sure." * * * *

Across the country, Brandon Weis took a steadying breath to calm the rage that threatened to overwhelm him. Subtlety and he were only passing acquaintances. Still, he managed to end the call without alarming his brother's mate unduly.

He was already walking a thin line dodging his dad about Mark's phone calls. The omissions sat like a lie in his stomach. Of all people *he* knew what it was like to need space from the pack to finish growing up.

Brandon's psychic mate, Karen, was certain that the pack was in danger. With Mack's

death vision about Mark and his own jumpy nerves of late he should have realized. Should have known the evil that survived in his nightmares stalked his packbrother now. Some demons were harder to kill than others.

He lifted his eyes to meet those of his identical twin, Bradley, and saw the same fury that roiled inside him mirrored there. Sixteen years of hate and shame.

"No one else." Bradley turned and headed for the back door of Brandon's family home. His brother meant to leave out the rest of the original survivors of the old alpha's perversions.

That was fine. Rick and Seth had been saved from the worst of Garrick's and Marcus's depredations. Those two had different emotional demons to slay.

This hunt belonged to them, Brandon, Bradley, and Mark. The three oldest, the ones Garrick had invested his time and energies to train, for better or worse. The old bastard had died by Adam's hand. Now, Brandon and his packbrothers would hunt Garrick's right hand bastard down and dispense Marcus Cargill the justice he deserved.

Chapter Twenty-One

The two wolves moved through the woods, silent as ghosts. The damp forest, so different from the dry East Texas forests, welcomed them still. The darker gold wolf held back reluctantly, allowing the brighter colored one the lead.

Supernatural animals with the intellects of men, they were not bound to instinct. Though that instinct was a defining part of their make-up.

Mark wove under and around the brush, testing the air for the tell-tale scents of psychic or fairy magic. Both scents were singularly distinctive to their species and lingered only a short while after the magic was spent. For the life of him, Mark would never be able to describe the scent to a human. That would be like explaining color to a blind man.

The faint exotic scent of fairy teased his nose. Just a whiff, but the Anderson County Pack lived in fairy-infested woods. He knew the scent as well as his own pack.

Mark had never heard of any other pack allied with fairys. But apparently his dad had managed a treaty with a fairy lord. A real live elf actually lived in East Texas, protecting nature and all of fairy-kind from harm.

It sure made for some real interesting barbeques.

He didn't count on these fairys honoring his dad's treaty with Jared Morgan.

His keen nose locked onto the minute traces of fairy and Hamilton Young, Mark set off on the trail. He had a sharp nose, sharp for a wolverine, too. Even Adam said he was the best tracker in the pack.

He'd have time later to beat himself up for blocking out the memory of Marcus' scent and letting the bastard grab his woman. Somehow, Marcus had fooled his nose when he nabbed Bailey. Accidental or not, the responsibility for keeping her safe was his.

So was finding Hamilton Young. Hopefully, he'd get there before the fairys did anything to trick the psychic into their service.

Focus. Get your mind back to the job. Mark huffed out a breath.

The scent became stronger, teasing, a lure to hunt driving him to follow.

"Wuff." Chase's soft warning halted Mark's steps. He stopped at the edge of the clearing, one paw raised, looked back at the other wolf. Fairys were tricky little suckers. The big ones were just dangerous.

Chase cocked his big golden head and tested the air. In wolf form, communication was more limited, though not as limited as a human would think. Mark recognized the other wolf's wary body language and reacted by backing up. The air was thick with fairy, enough to make him want to sneeze.

He ignored the urge and carefully sniffed the ground for traps. Chase did the same. Mark's nose found a mushroom buried under the leaves. Fairy magic nearly obliterated the mushrooms' natural musky smell. He found another, and another, all the way around the clearing. A fairy ring. A magical fortress.

If he'd captured a psychic someone and a dragons' egg, Mark figured he'd take them to the safest place around. Since magical fairy rings weren't all that common, he figured that was where Hamilton Young was probably stashed.

Fairy rings took a lot of power to grow and maintain, so if you found one, it was probably the only one in several hundred miles. At least that's what Brandon's housebrownie, Ember, had told him after a really bad hand of poker.

If what the feisty Barbie-sized female said was true, then it was worth every penny of the seven hundred dollars the brownie would have paid. Mark had settled for true fairy lore instead. He wasn't book smart like Bailey or his packsister, Karen. But Mark liked knowing useful stuff. And in his neck of the woods, fairy lore was pretty useful.

Staring at the quiet break in the fern and trees, he mulled over what he knew about fairy rings and fairys in general. More than most of his kind, less than he probably needed.

What the hell.

With a shrug that was more of a shoulder twitch, he jumped over the ring.

* * * *

Long minutes after setting the phone down, Bailey's eyes were drawn again to the spot across the path. The feeling of being watched intensified, making her skin crawl with imagined sensation.

How long had Mark and Chase been gone?

Did those bushes just move?

Bailey caught her bottom lip in her teeth, slowly pulling the fullness free while she debated. She didn't like the idea of leaving the guys stranded. Though, the idea of two full-grown wolveren males being stranded and helpless was a bit ridiculous.

Easing Runt out of her lap, she moved into the driver's seat, her gaze fixed on the foliage.

There. Again, a small patch of leaves seemed to dance to a different tune than the faint breeze. Paranoia had pushed her imagination into overdrive.

The puppy whimpered at the loss of her touch and scrambled after her. She pushed him firmly down. Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

"No. Stay down."

The car engine turned over easily after only a slight fumble with the keys.

Bailey held her breath, aware of Runt's nose pressed to the side of her jeans covered thigh. The puppy's quiet terror of being found by *Alpha* fed her own unease.

"We're not leaving them. Just relocating to a safer place." The words didn't reassure her one bit.

A glimpse of blond fur made her sigh. The wolf stepped out, a beautiful yellow blond male as huge as a Great Dane or a St. Bernard.

"Mark."

No! Go, go, go!

Runt's paws hit the dashboard with a click. His yelp and whine startled Bailey as much as the mental scream.

Mark started to walk sedately toward the car while she tried to push Runt aside.

Something about her beloved wolf was wrong.

Her eyes narrowed, her breath caught as he paused, muscles bunching under blond fur. Bailey threw the car into reverse, shoving Runt into the floorboard. She stomped a foot on the gas as the wolf took to the air.

Jerking the wheel in a hard right, they swerved. The wolf sailed by. Bailey shifted into drive and stomped on the gas again. The werewolf's stride matched the pace of the car easily.

Bailey's heart pounded. Runt's whimpers from the floorboard were irrelevant to their safety.

A pothole jarred the car hard. Runt yelped.

Sorry! She thought the words at the puppy. There was no time to voice the word.

Go, go, go! Don't let him get me!

Runt's words pulsed with the same fear and adrenaline that rushed through her veins as the

werewolf kept up on the rough tank trail. Bailey clenched her teeth.

Not on her watch. The bastard wasn't laying a paw on either of them.

Bailey swerved left. A thump and a yelp sounded nearly in her ear.

Yes!

Her premature cheer ended with the abrupt thump and shatter of the back passenger window.

Runt's squeal absorbed into the moment.

In the side mirror, Bailey watched the half-man/half-wolf clinging to the side of the car, one arm wrapped over the broken window. She watched with horror as the opposite arm, a long and gangly digit with sharp knife-like claws, came swinging into her vision.

She swerved again. This time she aimed for the trees lining the rutted path.

Safety glass rained in on her as she dodged the werewolf's grasp. Automatically correcting the wheel, she missed the first of the trees and caught the fender with the next tree, scraping down the side of the car. The side mirror was ripped off and the werewolf was knocked free. His growling curse was harsh in her ear.

Bailey gunned the engine. The car fishtailing in the loose gravel and dirt was nothing compared to the werewolf in the rearview mirror. He held his left arm. Bright red stained the bright blond fur covering his body.

The squared stance was all wrong. Not Mark's off-center and fluid movements at all.

Bailey eased out a breath as she bumped around the corner and onto the regular dirt road without being followed. With reaction and shaking hands setting in, she realized she'd mistaken Marcus for Mark. In wolf and werewolf form, the fur was almost a match.

Only, Mark was more casual. Hyper, yes, and brimming with bright energy and friendliness. Even in wolf form, her lover had such a casual attitude and composure that felt unmenacing. That could change in a heartbeat if he felt threatened.

Shoving her glasses firmly up her nose, she risked a quick glance in the rearview mirror. She rubbernecked to check all angles to make sure Marcus hadn't resumed the chase. With a heavy foot, she followed the main path toward the paved road, praying that neither the military police nor the city police felt she was suspicious enough to stop.

Did they patrol these trails? She didn't know, only that she had to get out of there.

Movement at the corner of her eye caught her attention. Bailey frowned at the vague outline of a bird. That werewolf had her jumping at birds.

A big bird with a wide wingspan. It folded its wings and dropped strait down.

Bailey sucked in a breath, jerking the wheel aside as the bird grew huge. As big as a cow, it dropped into the road in front of her.

Not a cow, a dragon. Mr. Smith. Gray, with a gleaming iridescent rainbow that shifted with the creature's movement, like oil on water. Her first instinct was to turn the car around. Fear slick hands clenched on the wheel.

Marcus, the werewolf was back there.

The dragon's triangular head rose with a snake-like undulation of its neck. Its claws, a full five finger hand, dug into the packed dirt. Smith walked toward her with a distinctive lizard sway while she debated her next move.

She pushed the loose strands of hair out of her face.

Forward or back? Dragon or werewolf?

The dragon's chest expanded with an indrawn breath.

Bailey shoved the car into reverse and slammed her foot on the gas.

Fiery dragon's breath followed her backward in an orange and yellow ball that fell short of the car, a glimpse into Hell as the heat of the inferno warmed her face. The engine whined as she pushed the car past the gear's speed tolerance.

The dragon leapt up into the air, wings puffing out on the down stroke. Its head drew back. Jaws opened wide showing rows of dagger-sharp teeth.

She wasn't going to be able to out-drive a dragon. She wasn't going to be able to outrun a werewolf on foot either. A moot point if she was burned to a crisp.

Bailey veered toward the trees and slammed her foot down on the brakes. Mr. Smith, the dragon was at his apex, apparently not willing to fly past the tree line on a military outpost that practiced with live rounds.

Anticipating their escape, Runt scrambled onto the seat. As soon she shoved open the door, he jumped over and out. Tail tucked under, he ran for safety.

The dragon dived. A breath of fire spewed from its mouth. Bailey left the door and ran after the puppy, into the trees waiting for the explosion.

Instead, the dragon screamed. His fury at her escape bit into her mind like needles.

Bailey stumbled. She barely noticed the pain of jerking the long tangles of hair loose from low branches. The mess was always slipping loose, getting in the way. She didn't know why she hadn't cut the mop off before now. Jerking another chunk of hair loose, she ran, slapped at the branches. Undergrowth grabbed at her shoes.

Somewhere ahead of her, Runt was lost in the woods. Behind her, Mr. Smith screamed again, assaulting both her ears and her mind.

She ran. No, *crashed* blindly though the woods.

Bailey's chest burned with the exertion.

She was a psychic not a cross-country runner, darn it!

The thought of being found by Marcus turned her legs rubbery with fear. Her mind whirled with visions of what he'd do if he caught her. Of the unspeakable things he'd described while she was chained in the basement.

A fallen branch caught her foot. She tripped and pitched sideways. Arms thrown wide, Bailey caught her balance. Her breath was fire in her chest. Her sides and stomach cramped.

Bent over, hands on knees, she realized that the only sounds around her were her own fish mouthed gasps. The woods were quiet. Thigh and waist high ferns grew in wide swaths, filling in gaps between the trees. The feeling of being enclosed in a green world deepened the sense of disorientation swamping her.

"Runt?"

God, she was lost. Her own natural sense of direction was nonexistent. Without the puppy's help she'd stay lost until either Marcus tracked her down or she accidentally stumbled onto civilization. The lack was nature's way of compensating for her psychic Finding ability.

A crack, like a stick breaking, made her whirl.

Did those ferns move because of the wind? Or something else? Surely, she'd sense if Marcus was toying with her again.

Bailey pulled the entire tangled mass of her hair over a shoulder. Biting on her bottom lip, she turned her awareness inward. Using the puppy as her focus, she Found and fixed him as her personal lodestone.

Now, all she had to do was follow the tug that drew her to her destination.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The first jolt of alarm shot through Mark as his paws hit the glassy smooth floor. Nature and the natural order of his world winked out of existence with the closing of the portal. Shapes blurred by in shades of gray as he skidded out of control.

He stopped and tried to shake off the tingle of pure magic that danced along nerve endings. The hissing slide of metal drew his attention to the quartet of tall fairy guys in full Shakespeare get-up. Only with butt-long hair and pointy ears.

"A wolf?" The fairy's musical accent sounded as shocked as the look on his narrow face. "How did it come through the gate?"

"Fool." A second fairy sneered at his companion and finished drawing a wicked looking sword. Glowing runes traced across the blade. "'Tis no normal wolf. Only that which is a vessel for

magic may come through.”

Mark jumped and scrabbled backward, trying to get some space between him and the Spock brigade.

A sharp jolt of magical current zapped through him, announcing the yelp and crash as Chase hit the smooth marble floor. The wolf slid straight toward the waiting warriors.

Mark Changed. He leaped over the disoriented warden before he became a pincushion. Placing his seven and a half foot tall man/wolf dueling form between the fairys and Chase, Mark growled. He flexed his claws in invitation.

“Back off, Tinkerbell. Just hand over what’s mine and we’ll go.”

“You will go to your gods, werewolf.”

The fairys responded by moving in with their swords at ready. This world’s magic responded to the adrenaline racing through his system, making him feel more powerful than usual. Or he could just be high from all the magic.

Mark gave the fairy a toothy wide mouthed grin and rushed him.

“That’s Mr. Wolf to you, Willie-boy.”

Crazy as it was, Mark was excited to fight the fairy. The guy’s form was all tactical grace combined with the fluid movements of marital arts. The fairy was supernaturally strong. And fast. Mark shifted his stance to avoid the glowing blade.

He grinned like an idiot. He *never* got to cut loose and waylay on someone during practice.

“This will be quick work.” The fairy waved his buddy back, and then managed to look down his nose while looking up at a seven and a half foot tall werewolf. “We can mount the trophy to serve as a warning to others of its kind.”

Mark took advantage of the fairy’s opening to rake his claws across the fancy doublet, drawing blood, and moved again dodging the sword.

Staying in close confines, he planned to hinder the fairy’s main weapon while taking advantage of his own teeth and claws.

His senses picked up Chase’s fight, but he kept focused on his own problem.

The fairy’s blade scored a burning hit on Mark’s leg. Silver and magic. He hissed out, absorbing the pain into the energy of motion, spinning away. At the same time, he delivered a back kick that knocked the fairy flying.

Another fairy took his place. Two dark braids hung from each of the fairy’s temples with a shiny ribbon woven into it. The rest of the fairy’s hair swung like a dark curtain as he dodged Mark’s openhanded swipe.

This guy was a little smarter than his friend. He was fast, deadly with a sword, and took his opponent seriously.

“Nice do, dude,” Mark taunted as he slipped past the fairy’s guard and twisted the sword from his grasp.

Tossing the weapon aside, he blocked Braids’ quick recovery. Then, he delivered a jab to the fairy’s ribs, like being stabbed with a handful of knives.

He followed up with a high double punch to the chest instead of solar plexus, because of his height and overlong arms.

Sensing movement behind him, Mark shifted stances. One furry forearm blocked a stinging silver blade while the other clawed hand automatically reached behind and low. He grabbed and twisted.

The fairy behind gave a strangled yell and tried to pull back.

Mark graciously let go of the guy’s nuts and shook the padded codpiece from his claws.

Disapproval flickered in Braids’ eyes, but didn’t he give a damn. These guys were out to kill him, so neutering seemed pretty fair in the grand scheme of things.

“Enough!”

A musical voice boomed around the room, with enough magical ‘push’ to it to hurt Mark’s sensitive ears. “Stand down!”

The fairy fighting him fell back, no less ready to kick his butt and glanced at the newcomer.

“My Lord! Werewolves!”

This guy dressed fancier than the Spock brigade. A thin band of metal circled round the top of his head. It pinned the long hair behind his pointed ears and marked him as the High Fairy Muckety-Muck.

The new guy stepped over the one Mark had mule-kicked, and apparently knocked out for the count. The fairy ignored the one doubled up over a bloody groin. Blood on the downed fairy’s chest and abdomen, showed a few more moves than Mark actually remembered handing out.

Chase growled over the bleeding, tattered body of his opponent.

The fairy lord stopped outside of Mark’s immediate reach.

“My Lord!”

The fairy lord shushed Braids with a flick of his wrist. His pale eyes gauged Mark’s furry form.

“Now, perhaps you will enlighten me as to the meaning of this...,” the fairy raised an eyebrow that was the same intermediate shade as his hair, “altercation.”

Not for the first time, Mark wished he could see what color a fairy’s hair was. He’d heard that they had some freaky cool hair. Like purple, pink, and green. To him it was all boring shades of gray.

“The human psychic, Hamilton Young, is under my protection.”

“And that means, exactly *what*, to me? You’ve intruded on *my* lands, werewolf.”

“It means I’m going to kick your fairy ass if you don’t fork over my psychic.”

“You will die for your disrespect.” Braids started toward them. The fairy’s movement halted and he stiffened with a quick indrawn breath, as if he’d been jerked up by the nape. Magic tingled in the air.

Mark would have been more impressed if he hadn’t see similar done by his pack alphas. He’d also been on the receiving end of a magical intervention more than a few times.

The fairy version looked just as uncomfortable as the wolver. Mark could almost feel sorry for Braids. Almost. Not quite.

“You are nothing like others of your kind, werewolf. You feel honorable, if nothing else.”

The fairy lord’s lips twisted into a wry smile.

“I am Aiden Faeolin. Heir to the house of Dewmist.”

Aiden held out a hand that Mark eyed suspiciously. He wasn’t about to shake or kiss a fairy’s hand. The rejection was more a touchie-feelie thing than the fairy lord’s uppity attitude.

Unlike a fairy, witch, or even a psychic, a shapeshifter’s magic was personal. Shapeshifter magic only affected the shapeshifter and the pack he was connected to. The energy Changed them, made them stronger, enhanced their senses, and bound them to their pack. An alpha’s connection to his pack and the ability to dish out punishment or reward through that link was still an intimate thing, part of a bigger whole. It wasn’t something to be shared with outsiders.

There was a reason why the handshake was a symbol of trust. Touching or letting a competent magic-user touch him could give the magic-user a direct magical conduit inside another’s natural defenses. Too many magic-using supernaturals, not just fairies, had abused that trust over the centuries.

The fairy laughed. He didn’t smell especially happy or ticked over the rejection.

What was the fairy guy was up to?

Braids looked like he had to swallow a protest over that one. Of course, the other guy was still holding his privates and trying to stand up.

Mark would have been more sympathetic if they hadn’t wanted to stuff and mount him. He knew some gung-ho human hunters that practically kept the taxidermist in business. Personally, he thought it was morbid and disgusting.

“FYI, fairy guy, it’s either wolf, or wolver.”

Lord Faeolin’s lips twitched then flattened into a firm line.

Mark scented some real aggravation over the correction and smiled inside. Needling this

guy was going to be a riot.

"You may return to your human form now."

Mark shrugged. The only group of fairys he trusted even a little was Morgan and his bunch. And that was because his dad and the fairy leader worked at keeping a fair treaty. Mark wasn't about to give up his only weapons for Lancelot here or his buttsniffers.

"That's okay. We're both good." He twitched an ear in Chase's direction. "Just give me my psychic and we'll be on our way."

The fairy lord dropped his hand, hesitation on his features.

"You're not going to *try* and tell me that you don't have him, are you?"

"Do not overstep yourself, *wolf*. I do not have your Hamilton Young."

Aiden's scent spiked with anger at being called on the omission.

Fairys were real good about dancing around the truth. Being called a liar was one of the worst insults they had. Being called a *were* or *junior* kind of pushed Mark's buttons. It was a cultural thing, he guessed.

"Yeah? Well, he's not free to pick and choose who he goes to. He called me for protection before your friends got him. So he's mine."

Mark flexed his claws while the fairy digested that bit of news.

Yeah, yeah. He didn't really believe in the old property claim bit that all the other supernaturals, demons, and fairys, played with psychics and humans. If it came down to saving Young's butt by throwing some ancient laws around, then so be it.

"Truly?" Aiden touched a finger to the side of his nose, the speculation ripe in his pale eyes. And his scent. Mark also thought he heard some smug attitude in there, too. "Is your claim legal then?"

Mark rolled a shoulder in a shrug. The guard fairys' tensing at the sound of Chase's clicking toenails on the marble gave lie to Aiden Faeolin's ease in their presence.

"I gave him my card and told him to call me if he needed help. He called. Here I am."

Mark leaned close, lowering his muzzle to the fairy lord's nose.

"You have the authority to call this all legal and formal?"

Aiden nodded once.

"I am the heir and nephew to Terriwen Faeolin, Patriarch of the ruling house of Dewmist. And you are?"

"Mark Weis, Texas Anderson County Pack. Mechanical Engineer." An oldfashioned grease monkey mechanic, but a darn good one, too.

Fairys were every bit as feudal as every other supernatural thing.

Mark didn't let it bother him that he had no special rank in the pack to trot out when someone needed impressing. A middle ranking wolven was still a freaking scary critter. For the most part, he was happy to let the others who wanted the responsibility do the leading.

Democracy was all well and good for humans, but not for creatures who could on a whim, start a holocaust. Most of the really dangerous supernatural species had one strong leader with enough wisdom to keep the vast majority of humans happily in the dark about the truth. Remember Frankenstein?

Even the Wolven Council left the individual packs to their alphas. They only intervened if one pack posed a problem for the whole. His pack was pretty lucky that the Council hadn't ruled against the lot of them because of Garrick Moser and his followers.

If Adam hadn't taken over the alpha's spot, the Council could have, and should have, had *every* member of the Texas Anderson County Pack executed. Being one of the five surviving members of the old pack, Mark was A-Okay with his dad being alpha.

For now, he just hoped some of his dad's lessons in supernatural politics stuck. Mostly, Mark remembered whining about how boring it all was. Still nose-to-nose with the fairy, he struggled to come up with something that sounded good and legal.

"Okay, then. Aiden Faeolin, I'm lodging an official complaint. The human psychic, Hamilton Young belongs to me by his own actions."

Mark wanted to wince. His speech sounded half-assed even to him.

"I tracked him to your fairy ring. If he's in your domain, then I'm charging you with the responsibility for getting him back."

So much for saving the day with his diplomatic skills. He figured this was where they laughed and magically summoned a room full of warriors to finish off him and Chase.

"I'll not take the responsibility for your property's return. But I will, of course, see you to the proper court to attempt to enforce your claim."

Translation: Someone had stepped on Aiden's toes politically. The fairy noble was going to give up whoever had Hamilton Young so that Mark could kick *that* guy's butt. That way, Aiden didn't have to dirty his hands with either problem.

He'd be happier about the fairy lord's help if he wasn't so irritated at having to rescue Hamilton Young. And he wouldn't be on this little rescue if not for his dad's apparently contagious, and inconvenient, need to take care of every needy thing that crossed his path.

A little nibble in the back of his mind reminded him how needy a thing he'd been sixteen years ago. He told the nibble to shut up.

Aiden looked him up and down, and then glanced at Chase.

"There is a dress code for the court."

"Between fur and skin, I pick fur."

Aiden gave a long blink.

Mark could practically see the fairy processing the information he probably shouldn't have divulged. He supposed that spy job he was planning on applying for was a bust. *Ha!*

"Suppose I could conjure you appropriate attire?"

Mark's attention focused back on the fairy. "No thanks. I'd look pretty silly dressed like you."

He realized he'd put his big foot in it again and shrugged, trying to look apologetic around all the sharp teeth and claws. The fairy guards twitched toward their weapons.

"I mean, think about it. Fur sticking out every which way. Those hose don't look like they'd stand a chance against my foot claws. Not a pretty sight."

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He hoped the fairys' nods weren't in agreement with his silent opinion.

Mark itched to get on with the program. Find Young. Try to get the dragon its egg back. Kill a werewolf and take Bailey and Runt home. His simple plan sure was getting complicated.

Aiden gestured to the guards, another flick of the wrist to get them going.

Fairys healed fast like other supernaturals. Smug satisfaction curled through Mark to see the injured ones were still hurting.

Yeah, they were hiding it pretty good. Even the one Chase had shredded. But they were all up and moving and giving him and Chase plenty of distance along with wary eyes.

Mark kept his muzzle shut and followed Aiden, who *was* being a pretty nice guy after all. They had sliced and diced on his guards. Mark's claim on the psychic was shaky at best. He felt pretty lucky his demands were even considered.

The guards fell into formation around him and Chase.

Mark grinned and told himself to behave. It was hard though while all those tightassed fairy guards stared and fingered their weapons as if to say they'd like to get back to the aborted stuff and mount the werewolf plan.

He wasn't about to ruin his chance to get Hamilton Young the easy way. Damn if he didn't have the urge to turn around and yell, "Boo!"

* * * *

"Okay, so camping is not my thing."

Bailey gave Runt a weak smile. Her energy had given out a lot faster than the puppy's. Thank goodness, all their walking had taken them near a stream where they'd found a small canvas and net structure obviously abandoned by the military.

To be honest, Runt had found the tent first and darted inside before she could stop him. Bailey crawled in after he pronounced it animal free. In the dark, she didn't even speculate about bugs. She'd just pretend there weren't any.

What is camping?

The psychic connection between them was stronger. The puppy no longer had to be in direct contact with her to communicate. He also seemed to be able to pick up a few of her random thoughts.

Was it because of the connection that wolverines, and other supernaturals, already had with psychics? Or was it his own special gift? Or hers?

She scratched the top of his head.

"Camping is when you go out in the woods. Roast hot dogs and marshmallows over a fire. Sometimes you go fishing. Tell spooky stories at night."

Bailey remembered going camping a couple of times with friends of her parents. The friends had about four kids. Those kids were either fighting, pairing up for an even war or being the best of friends. An only child, she'd watched the other children's antics together with the same lonely desire as a beggar at Christmas.

I don't think I'd like scary stories. Hot dogs and fish are good.

After her brief stay in Marcus' basement of horror, she had to agree with the sentiment. Thinking of the werewolf again, she wished Mark and his packbrother Chase would hurry up. Since her trail was simple enough to follow, she was jumpy, as if Marcus were about to burst in on them any moment. Her eyes scanned the dark again for any out of place movement. No werewolf growls or howling disturbed the quiet night sounds.

Bailey shifted, oddly bereft of Mark's presence.

The feeling irritated her. She was an independent woman. He might have saved her life a couple of times, was the most incredible lover she'd ever had, made her laugh ...

She frowned. The point was that for the last few days she'd been trying to lose him. Because eventually he'd realize how much better he could do.

Now, she felt alone, almost as if a part of her was cut off.

Bailey peered outside of the canvas and net shelter, jostling Runt's sleepy weight.

"Look. *Fireflies*. I used to catch them when I was little and pretend they were good fairys."

The puppy raised his head. He grunted and settled back in her lap with a disinterested sigh. The fireflies twinkled, dancing, chasing one another through the leaves, coming closer to the shelter. The little lights blinked white, blue, green, and yellow.

"I always let them go before I went to bed and thanked them for not carrying me off."

Bailey frowned. Fireflies didn't blink colors.

Dread flowed through her, clenching her stomach and transmitting to Runt. He raised his head and growled. She gripped the loose skin at the back of his neck and shushed as hard as she could think. Either the thought, or the grip on his neck got the message across.

For real fairys? Not pretend ones?

She nodded. It occurred to her that she was going to have to be proactive instead of reactive. So far she'd reacted to everything she'd come across. No planning, just action.

Very carefully, she reached up and pulled a section of camouflaged netting over the opening. It wouldn't do anything for creatures tracking by scent. If the lights really were fairys, maybe she could keep from being seen.

The subconscious part of her that was constantly searching for Mark pointed out that he'd been gone, *missing*, for hours. Anything could have happened to him.

On a whim, she half-closed her eyes, making him the focus of her Finding abilities.

She found nothing.

Bailey gasped. There was no Mark to Find.

Gone. *Dead*.

Grief she didn't know she had swamped through her. Rage followed behind.

How dare that irritating jerk die and leave them behind! How dare he leave her alone? Didn't he know she loved him?

Bailey?

Jerked from her grief, she looked around before realizing that Runt's voice came from inside her head. His warm tongue lapped at her cheeks while his body quivered in her arms.

Don't hurt Bailey. Mark is too strong to be dead. I love you, too.

She took a breath and willed her raw emotions under control. She had to get a grip for Runt's sake. No matter what she'd been taught, she had to get him into the safety of a pack. Mark's Pack. And let them know what had happened to him.

A fresh wave of grief washed through her. When had she fallen for the big goof?

Despite all her protests of being older than him, not beautiful enough, that a relationship with a supernatural was just *wrong*, she was in love with a werewolf.

Now odds of working things out now weren't just too high. The odds were gone. Dead. Regret churned in her stomach.

Rocking the shivering puppy while she stared at the flitting lights, Bailey felt something inside go cold and quiet.

She could have stayed two years ago with Mark and his pack and had that time with him. Instead she'd clung to her people's single-minded aberrance to all things supernatural.

Not aberrance. Fear of falling in love. Of trusting another with her heart.

Her people had turned their backs on her, declaring Bailey dead to them. Even her own mother had hung up the one time she called. When she'd left Mark the first time, Bailey didn't understand how a pack of werewolves, *wolven*, could accept someone whose people tried so hard to hurt one of their pack. She'd thought that the wolven's insistence that she stay was part of a plan to get even.

Her people were wrong. She was wrong and it was past time to change.

Bailey? You won't leave me, will you?

Threading her fingers through the soft fur, she thought back at him.

No, baby. I won't leave you.

Ever? Like a real, human mom?

She smiled a little, teary again, though her eyes never left the tiny dancing lights beyond the netting.

Mark would have made a great dad.

I'd be honored to be your mom.

Runt's shaking eased and he ducked his nose near her armpit.

She sensed that the puppy drew comfort from the concentration of her scent there. She 'saw' his next question coming in her mind, like you would read a facial expression.

Do you really think Mark would want to be a dad to me even though he's my brother?

Bailey blinked. His *half*-brother.

The hair, fur, the eyes, were all the same. Mark and Runt were nearly identical in coloration. The same as Marcus'. She'd known that, in the back of her mind, almost from the beginning.

Bailey remembered Karen, Mark's *adopted* sister, mentioning that all the older Weis brothers were from the previous pack. The answer had been right in front of her the whole time, but she'd refused to see. Why should she have? Mark was kind, funny, and protective. He was nothing like Marcus.

She placed a soft kiss between the soft furry ears, watching as the fairy lights came closer.

Yes, I think he would have.

* * * * The fairy appeared unaffected by the
twin glowers of Bradley Starr and his brother.

In his own surroundings, Jared Morgan didn't pretend to be human. The fairy *prince*, according the supernatural gossips, lounged indolently in the natural curve of a tree. His fine hair drifted in a halo the color of summer leaves while he watched the wolven twins with eyes as black as a

moonless night.

Bradley could almost see the scattering of stars in the fairy's eyes. Though he'd heard Morgan was old, as in centuries old, the man looked about thirty. He smelled of powerful magic and hinted at other things the wolven had never experienced.

Bradley suppressed the urge to sidle closer and roll in the fairy's exotic scent. He was not a cat and the fairy prince was not a catnip-laced toy.

"We need to get to Georgia as soon as possible."

Morgan's lips twitched into a smirk and made himself even more comfortable against the tree.

The fairy prince's toga-like garment didn't look so much effeminate as just weird. Bradley preferred dealing with the familiar family friend from past barbecues and school functions. Instead of the fairy's usual comfortable western wear, the toga screamed *ancient being*, not pass-the-potato-salad.

"You should have booked an earlier flight then. I do not have airline connections, wolf."

The edge of a growl slipped out before he could control it.

Mark was avoiding them in spirit as much as in the physical. The pack scented him in their shared forest dreams, but Mark had slipped away before they found him. Bradley felt his brother's need to get to Georgia, tonight. The need to get to their packbrother's side was paramount, before it was too late.

That Marcus Cargill was still alive both roused Bradley's protective instincts and sent a small thread of fear through him. Not for himself, but for Mark and Brandon. Both had weathered the brunt of the evil bastard's twisted personality.

He shook his head, a sharp movement to clear out encroaching memories of his own cowardice, and reminded himself that he was treading dangerous ground by approaching Adam's only non-wolven ally for a favor. His alpha would be within rights to punish them for this excursion. Fairys, as a rule, were tricky.

"I'd be willing to barter for passage."

Morgan's gaze intensified.

Bradley felt the hair on his body stand up. At the growl from his side, he automatically shot a hand out to warn Brandon down. Amazingly, his twin brother heeded the warning.

Brandon was no longer the pack omega, last in rank. Somewhere lower than the beta, Brandon would and could fight off any other challenge of dominance. No one save Adam and the pack beta, Mack, knew what Brandon would consider a challenge these days.

"Steep price wolves, just to run to another's side. A plane would be far less expensive."

"I'll decide that." "For yourself, yes. Both of you must pay your own way." Bradley narrowed his eyes. He'd be damned if his brother was going to pay the price for this. "No. The debt is mine. Times two." Brandon stirred beside him. "No. I'll pay my own debts." He looked at his twin. "You've already paid." Brandon's face flushed red. The air charged with the magic of impending Change. "Enough!" Nicole Starr, familiar, female, was every bit as wily as the fairys. Bradley's wife strode into the forest clearing.

The magic that she usually kept hidden licked over his skin in a burning rush that both excited and sickened him. For the life of him, he had never figured how no one else sensed the curse she held over him. How did his packbrothers not see what she truly was?

If they ever did realize the demon he'd brought into the pack's domain, Bradley knew he'd be as dead as any *were* that willfully trespassed into their territory. Anticipating that day both filled him with dread and hope. He'd lose his pack, but he'd be free of her, no, *it*.

Nicole ignored everyone else and walked directly to Bradley. Her nursing scrubs hid the svelte body worthy of a playboy centerfold. Every step she took radiated pure sexual energy. Their eyes locked. She smiled, the corners of her full, sensual mouth tilting up as she reveled in her power. Then, she rearranged her features into a more appropriate expression.

Today's game was wifely concern. Yesterday's had been the hell-bitch who couldn't get

enough of his less than appealing performance. Tonight, while she was in wifely concern mode, she'd make him believe he was the best. Part of the curse was to need her so badly that both personas made him hard.

Bradley ground his jaw against the effort to take his wife, *never his mate*, to bed.

The difference was that of a willing captive and a conquered slave. As a female magical being she was able to cast the spell that would bind them as mate. As a demon, she had to have her victim's assent. Bradley wouldn't let her take that last bit of his soul.

His twin remained silent. Brandon's wary stare was something he felt in one of those odd moments of connection. Did his brother know why he lived off of Packhome property? Nicole stopped, small enough to appear delicate. She looked up with the dark sultry eyes he hated. He much preferred the demon's true red that taunted him at night. Her small hand was tolerated against his cheek. She dropped her eyes. Her coy glance up shimmered with false tears. "Are you so willing to leave me that you would sell yourself to a fairy master?" *Yes!* Bradley crossed his arms over his chest, a barrier that incidentally knocked her hand away. He raised an eyebrow. After ten years of being bound to this *thing*? Yeah, he'd welcome the fairys. Maybe he could work out a timeshare program for his services. It would be a vacation.

"My packbrother needs assistance. Go home, Nicole. This doesn't concern you."

She stamped a foot.

Desire and disgust twisted in his gut.

He could almost smell the sumptuous malevolence of her magic and its hold on him. So tight, so painful.

Nicole was a forbidden pleasure, a curse. Her hold on his soul was unbearable.

She turned to face the fairy prince, Jared Morgan.

"You'll not have him. He belongs to me."

Morgan's black, starry eyes stared at the female. His lips twitched into a half smirk.

"Darkling, do not presume to order me in my domain. Or of your hold on the wolver soul. He still has a measure of free choice."

She sniffed.

"The wolver pack owns these lands, fairy. You are at sufferance here."

Morgan slid from his perch in the tree in a graceful move that reminded Bradley of a warrior dismounting his steed. The toga was raiment fit for a king. His aura of authority sat like a crown on Morgan. Strong and unarguable.

The scent of fairy magic felt like the unsheathing of a sword. The prince's fathomless celestial orbs bored into Bradley.

As Morgan approached them, a negligent wave of his hand shoved Nicole aside without laying a hand on her.

Bradley snarled. The tie that bound him to her called for his protection. Unfulfilled lust and anger mixed into a dangerous solution.

Brandon's touch cleared some of the haze. He had to leave before he did something he'd regret later.

Bradley turned back to the fairy. "Send us to my missing Packbrother, and I'll pay the cost."

"No!"

Nicole's voice deepened and turned graveled. Her exotic brown eyes gleamed red.

Not the wolf red his own eyes took on, but the orange and red flickers of Hell.

"The werewolf belongs to me. Mine! Called to me by his own faithless guilt."

Bradley heard his brother's voice hitch. Brandon shifted closer to him.

"By your word wolf, I'll allow you to take the debt as service to me." Morgan's hair swirled in the nonexistent breeze a green haze around his head. "But the cost will be high."

"Do not do this Bradley!" Nicole's voice was in his ear, vibrating down the cords of her chains on his soul. "You love me. I am your wife! Your mate!"

That scalded him. Memories of the night, hot and fevered sex, shimmered in his mind. He shook his head to clear the urge to run to her.

“You are not my mate, succubus. You never were.”

She screamed, hands forming claws to rent the air, changing as gashes in the very air appeared. The flickers of flame in her eyes reflected in the gashes in reality. Her body stretched upward, the wide bat wings unfurling.

“Fine, not mate then. But you still belong to me. Remember our deal, werewolf?”

Bradley smiled, hard and Changed. Long claws formed, in preparation of a battle to come. “I remember.”

He turned to look at the fairy. “You are my alpha’s ally. I trust

you, Morgan. I agree to your price.” Morgan’s smile of triumph was for the demon. “I win, Nicole. His debt is mine, and so is his service.” The demon’s wide red eyes bulged as her body shuddered.

She screamed as the rents in the air widened and crawled over her, burning. Black smoke writhed in the air, pulled into the fathomless rents.

Motion at his side made Bradley jerk. He almost lashed out until he realized that his brother was keeping him from following after the demon. He struggled for a moment, stalemated, until the flames winked out. The rents knitted back together, fast, seamless, and silent. Better than any Hollywood special effect.

Brandon let go and stepped away. His eyes gave none of his thoughts away. No movie magic ever made Bradley feel so terrible.

The pain in Bradley’s chest was immediate and all encompassing. His breath caught and he stared at the place she’d been like a drug addict whose stash had just been flushed. She was gone.

An unfamiliar weight tightened around his neck and he fought to breathe. His vision blurred as a dark blur flashed past. “Cease!” Bradley shook his head, clearing the panic, the claustrophobia, the ten-year

addiction of the succubus to see his twin scrabbling to attack the fairy.

The compulsion to protect Morgan was immediate. He launched

himself at Brandon, all the while regretting the action. Their relationship was a fragile thing. He threw the other Changed wolveren away and stood in front of his new master. The word was bitter in his belly and tight around his throat. “What debt makes you collar my brother?” Brandon crouched in front of him, expecting an attack, but the words were all for the fairy prince behind Bradley. He lifted a claw to his neck, feeling for the first time, the stiff collar half buried in

the heavy fur ruff around his neck. Bradley turned, a new fury lighting his eyes. He was as incapable of attacking his new master as he was his former mistress. The fairy’s cold demeanor softened a bit, though his magic shields stayed solid. “You are wasting precious time your packbrother does not have.” Bradley nodded. Brandon snarled. Morgan pointed to the arch formed by two trees. “Go.” Morgan’s shield vanished and he tossed a package to Bradley. “By the way, in your new duties as my emissary, here is a gift for your host.” Bradley glanced in identical fierce face of his twin brother. There was no more

time to waste. They loped for the tree-gate and leapt through.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A tingling sensation woke Bailey. She blinked bleary eyes in the dark.

When had she fallen asleep? How late was it?

Runt’s warm sleepy puppy weight twitched in her lap. Inside the tent, the air was humid and feeling a lot stale. She longed for a fresh breeze but didn’t trust that the tiny floating lights weren’t fairys. And worse, dawn wouldn’t make them go away.

A niggling unease stole through her. Why hadn’t Marcus continued the chase?

Had the werewolf really wanted to get them, he could have followed her, then hidden and taken her and Runt once the dragon lost interest. Mark ...

Fresh pain welled up inside her.

God, she was so stupid. She should have done something. What if it had all been a trap? What if that Hamilton guy hadn't been in danger at all?

Bailey?

She dug her fingers gently into the puppy's neck ruff, scratching gently.

Shhhh. Sleep. I'll figure a way out.

I love you.

Bailey shifted Runt onto the ground and gave his neck one more scratch. She straightened into a crouch and debated going outside.

The tiny flickering lights looked the same color and blinked only periodically.

Maybe they weren't fairys.

Bailey had only met one fairy, ever. An outrageous Barbie-sized woman that claimed to be a brownie. A house brownie actually. The arrogant creature lived with Mark's pack in a kind of symbiotic relationship. That bit pretty much exhausted all her accurate fairy knowledge.

I love you, too. Now go back to sleep.

Where are you going?

An edge of panic laced his mind-voice. In the darkness, she could see the faint shine of red from his eyes.

Shhhh. I'm just checking outside.

She also had some personal business to tend to, but refrained from sending those thoughts. She was getting better at this mind-speaking stuff.

Bailey bit her bottom lip and prepared for an attack. Slipping out from behind the netting, she inhaled the cool night air.

The little lights blinked on-and-off. Nothing rushed at her. There was just the night and the little woodland sounds.

Relieved, she let out a great sigh and rubbed at her face. Goodness, she was exhausted. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a full night's real rest.

The insistence of her bladder led Bailey out of and around the brush that hid the tent. During the delicate balancing act of squatting and not getting her jeans wet, she felt another tingle run along her nerve endings, nearly causing an embarrassing toogle.

Pulling her jeans up, she moved to concentrate on the feeling. The sensation wasn't the aches and pains of sitting cramped on the ground.

It was more a sensation. Like the goose bumps a Sensitive got from magic, only stronger. Odd that now, at her age, she was experiencing new gifts or a new awareness of them. That definitely wasn't the norm for psychics.

But then she didn't live the steady, hidden life of an average psychic. Not anymore. Never again.

The weight of an idea being born made her hold her breath while she concentrated, drawing on her lower lip in habit. She loosened when she tasted the sharp tang of blood.

Bailey focused on the tingle. No, what caused the sensation.

Bailey!

She almost lost her concentration. Found it again and realized that the sensation, the magic, had its own flavor in her psych, different from her own. Different from what she recognized as Runt.

She moved back toward the front of the tent. Her thoughts centered on Finding the source of the magic.

Frantic barking came from the tent. Bailey crashed through the growth, no thought but reaching her little one. Light flashed in the direction of the tent opening.

Snatching up a branch, she rushed into the small break. Several tall figures stood in the faint blue glow of a floating ball. Fairy fire.

The tall figures, muscular men, armed in medieval weaponry were source of the magic she tracked. Fairy warriors.

A puppy yelp infuriated her.

“Cut it out!”

As one, the fairy men turned, their features cast surreal in the blue light. Still, she caught the surprise on their faces.

One uttered a short foreign word, a curse. He raised his hand at Bailey. The tingle of magic turned into a fiery itch. Adrenaline rushed through her.

Runt yelped and whimpered again.

She barely saw the green bolt, but she felt it heading toward her. Instinctively, Bailey threw up her own hand and her own will. The bolt hit dead on, less than six inches from her outstretched hand.

The electrical discharge dispersed, spreading out in a miniature lightning display along her psychic shield. The fire intensified as the magical charge absorbed into the shield that was in some way an extension of her aura.

Two of the men pulled swords from scabbards belted to their waist. Swirling script-like designs flared to life. A third uttered more of the lilting language and turned back to the tent where Runt’s growling and barking marked the puppy’s stand.

The stolen power hummed in her veins, demanding an outlet.

Since running away was what they expected, she did the stupidest, lest expected thing imaginable. She ran at them, screaming, brandishing the stick. Intent on getting to Runt.

In front of her, she pushed the shield.

One of the warriors slashed into the shield with his glowing sword. White gold lightning scattered across the surface. Far more power surged inside. Where the green bolt had blazed, this seared. Someone screamed in the white power that engulfed her.

Magic filled her like a reservoir. The dam filled full and still there was more. More power than she’d ever seen in her tiny life.

Liquid fire filled her veins, stealing all breath, all thought. Finally, everything ceased into a cool darkness with one last thought she tried to project.

Run. Hide.

The scream made Runt pause in the middle of savaging the big fairy’s arm. He’d sensed that they didn’t really want to kill him and had taken every opportunity to get away.

He had to get to Bailey. He heard her scream, both with his ears, and in his head and renewed his efforts.

Her last command to run made him tuck his tail. To dart past the man. He had to.

Obedience to his alpha female was first. He squirmed past the second male at the entrance, nipping at fingers.

Runt wanted to stop, to break past where the two other fairys stood over Bailey, putting their big swords away. The smell of ozone and magic fairy and psychic, overrode all other scents.

Her command had to be obeyed. He didn’t have a choice.

He ran into the brush. Fear chased his tail. Not that he would be hurt, but that for the second time in his very young life, he was about to lose a mother while she was protecting him from the monster.

Chapter Twenty-Four

If this was normal for going through the political channels, then Mark finally realized why Jared Morgan kept his court separate from the rest of the fairy courts.

For what felt like forever, he stared around the glittering throng seated at tables in the throne room. On a stage up front, the various fairys sucked up to the guy in the tacky gem covered chair. That would be the higher-ranking Fairy Muckety-Muck, Terriwen Faeolin.

Columns broke up the line of vision in the room, and made great hiding places for sneak attacks and secret meetings. Curtains back draped the stage that the throne sat on, also making good spots to

hide guards.

Depending on Lord Terriwen's mood and if he liked that particular fairy, maybe the petitioner got his wish granted. Once a guy pissed off Terriwen badly enough that he got dragged behind the curtains by the guards. The guy struggled and screamed, then was silent.

Mark was curious about what happened to the guy. But not curious enough to make trouble about it.

The rest of the petitioners bowed a little lower.

He had plenty of time to think while they stood around on the sidelines and waited for their turn with the other fairys not important enough to sit and eat at the tables.

A hot naked chick had offered them food, but both of them declined. Chase sounded sorry to see her go. She *was* wearing a dress, but since it was see through the garment really didn't count.

She was thin and pretty enough to be an angel. Her small tits were full enough to bounce and the room cool enough to make her nipples pucker.

Mark wasn't interested.

Visions of Bailey's naked body wet and trusting while she let him hold her in the tub the other night teased his brain. The scent memory of how willing she'd been made him want to whimper.

Instead, he elbowed Chase in the ribs and told him to stop drooling.

All around, the court's suspicious, but not outright, stares made him think of the old cartoon where the two vultures sat in a tree. When the guy they were watching kept walking, they hopped to another tree to watch. And so on.

The fairys were beautiful, fancy dressed vultures who waited to see Mark's next move. Like they knew something he didn't. Or was too stupid to have figured out yet. Between that and Aiden's comment about being more honorable than the rest of his kind, Mark started to wonder real hard about what was really going on here.

There was a pack in the Savannah area that could have some dealings with the fairys. That didn't feel right. Mentally, he shook his head.

In the last couple of years psychic communities were coming out of hiding. They were getting bolder with their attacks. With the local psychics in control of a military town, the smart move would be for the wolveren to keep their distance. Lots and lots of careful distance.

Which left only one other possibility.

The commotion of great doors opening called the room to attention. Fairy guards, like the ones Mark had met in the little room marched in.

Eight of them total, with more long hair than at a concert. Some with braids. They wore mostly leather pants, vests, and those pretty shirts found in old movies and at Renaissance fairs. All of them carried fancy swords belted at their waists and looked tough enough to make up for having girly hair.

One of them, their leader, walked ahead of the others toward the throne, where Lord Terriwen Faolin looked way too interested. The room fell silent, waiting to see what their lord would do. The thread of fear that seemed to permeate the place spiked higher.

The scent of blood and woman, *his woman*, reached Mark. A growl vibrated around the quiet throng. Unmindful of the attention, or Chase's warning, he shoved past the closest fairys and vaulted onto one of the long tables.

Running halfway down the table, Mark vaulted into the air. He landed in the center aisle in front of the approaching guards. The lord and his leader of the guard at his back.

Mark didn't care. His one thought was for the woman in the center guard's arms. He'd been aggravated about Hamilton Young. The other guards fanned around the one carrying an unconscious Bailey. Mark met the guard's eyes. His lips peeled back from very sharp canine teeth.

He crouched, preparing to wade through bodies if necessary.

"Mine," he growled.

The fairy holding his mate met Mark's eyes, and then flickered to his lord and back to the wolveren. There was a slight tightening to the male's expression, then he straightened ramrod straight.

Mildly surprised that the male began carrying her towards him, Mark waited for the guy to try

and veer off.

“No! Bring the woman here.”

The leader guard, Mark supposed, since it wasn't Terriwen, yelled. He tensed, and felt Chase covering at his back as the rest of the guard pulled their swords.

The guards fanned out further, protecting the lone guard and Bailey.

Face to face, the guard looked up, his wide, pale eyes, searching for something in Mark's half man/half wolf features without the challenge most eye-to-eye contact represented. The fairy nodded.

He offered Bailey to him. The tips of the fairy's pointed ears peeked through for a moment, a cute touch for such a dangerous creature. The fairy's accented words laced with quiet emotion.

“I once had a wife and family to protect.”

Careful of the precious treasure he received, Mark looked Bailey over. She was paler than usual. She smelled of blood.

He found the source behind her ear and cleaned the cut with his tongue, cuddling her close to his chest.

The guard caught his attention once again. The weight of his actions slammed home.

Mark's emotions swung from possessive to anger.

If he'd just packed Bailey up and gone home, she wouldn't have been hurt. He was such an idiot. Instead of insisting that he could do everything himself, he could have had the strength of his pack with him while protecting her.

Fuck Hamilton Young. The guy had gotten himself into his own mess. He wasn't part of the pack.

Mark shifted into a protective stance, his only goal now to get his mate to safety. His second thought was to find his missing pup. After that, he might think again about getting Young freed. Or he'd just take both Bailey and Runt home.

Since the guard didn't look suitably warned enough, Mark curled his lip. The guard gave a faint smile and stepped back.

“We routinely patrol the woodlands close to our entrances. Your cub escaped into the woods when your mate attacked us.” Something a lot like jealousy entered the fairy's eyes. “You have a family to be proud of, wolf. But better kept far away from here.”

Mark nodded and moved towards the doors.

Chase shadowed behind him, apparently in full agreement on the issue of freeing Young. Being a warden made the pack Chase's first and only responsibility. Anyone else could pretty much go to hell.

One set of claps, slow and sarcastic, made Mark stop. He resisted the nudge from behind.

Ignore it. Keep moving. Chase pushed the sentiment through the pack link toward Mark.

He turned anyway to face what his nose already told him.

Marcus Cargill, leaned arrogantly against the huge ugly throne. On the opposite side, Aiden Faeolin and his uncle Terriwen were locked in a furious magically silent battle of swords back-dropped by the heavy theatre drapes.

A glance at the doors showed the exits blocked by more than just the eight guards that had come in originally.

Mark had missed a whole fairy uprising while he concentrated on Bailey.

He returned his stare to the creature he hated most in the world. His personal nightmare. A growl filtered through his teeth as he struggled with the decision to take his mate away or attack. Fight or flight?

Marcus threw his head back and laughed. He looked just like Mark remembered.

Features that looked out at him in the mirror every morning, except polished. A real high-class gentleman. Perfect white teeth flashed with charismatic cheer. Marcus' perfectly groomed hair and beard gave him a strange credibility that was almost magical.

Marcus' eyes sent a familiar chill down his spine that said, *evil*.

As a pup, Mark had seen a lot of people who'd thought that Marcus was a great guy. They'd suck up when Marcus showed off his possessions, saying how Mark was just like his old man. When

they weren't useful anymore, those people saw the real Marcus. Then they were just food for the monster.

As the laughter echoed around the room, Mark realized that magic, not acoustics propelled the awful noise. With the drapes, thrones, and hidden nooks, the place was set up to impress and intimidate, not carry sound.

"Oh, this is rich. You come to my home, steal my prey and my pup. And my *allies* send you on your way with a pat on the back."

Again, Chase prodded him through the pack link.

In answer, he turned and gave the warden his mate to protect.

In his heart, Mark knew this wouldn't end without a fight. It was time to grow up and face the monster.

"My mate is not your prey." Mark moved away from Chase, shutting away the warden's conflicted feelings. He shot a nose-curling sneer at his enemy.

"And the pup is mine now."

Poking at the werewolf's territorial nature worked. Marcus' eyes narrowed. He nearly stepped off the raised throne dais before he caught himself.

"I bred the brat. He belongs to me." Marcus' face reddened with the effort not to Change. "But then you always did have a problem with authority, didn't you, *boy*?"

Calm. Mark centered the turmoil inside.

Fights were not won with emotion. The skill and patience taught to him by his human Sensei were as much his weapons as his teeth and claws.

"Just because you bred him doesn't make you his father. Or mine."

There. He'd said it. He'd had his Luke Skywalker moment and so far the worst thing happening was that everyone was staring at him. Wasn't so bad. He got stared at all the time at home for acting an idiot.

"My *real* father *chose* to protect me and my packbrothers. Like I *choose* the pup for my own." He braced for the attack that he was provoking. "And I'll give him a better name. '*Cause only a fucking moron names a kid like that.*'"

Marcus roared and Changed.

Around Mark, gasps and the clatter of chairs came from the fairy nobles that had had enough of the show as they ran for the blocked exits.

While fairys can be sneaky and bad, everyone in the supernatural realm knows who the real monsters are. They have teeth, claws, and will eat you if you get in the way.

Marcus didn't run down the steps as expected. Instead, he shook off the after tingle of the Change and stretched to his full werewolf height.

Mark noted that his fur, like his hair was the same shade as his own.

The werewolf took a couple of long-legged strides backward and grabbed a fistful of the drapes surrounding the throne.

"Thought you could provoke me into coming down after you, *Junior*?" Marcus laughed, seeing the flinch that his taunt caused.

Mark had hated knowing he was named after the bastard. Adam had made sure the adoption papers listed the shortened form of the name that Mark preferred. But he hated that he'd started life out as Marcus Alexander Cargill, Junior.

He'd be damned if he'd end up like that. He was Mark Weis. Plain and simple. No middle name needed.

The distraction gave Marcus plenty of time to jerk the fistful of drapes down. The fabric fell in a graceful waterfall.

Mark felt a strange *pop* in the air that must have been a spell hiding what was behind the drape.

Hamilton Young, sat huddled and shaking in an oversized birdcage. The smell of pain, blood, and magic wafted in the air as Marcus loosed the chain holding the cage aloft.

Not fairy magic, but wolverine magic.

"Awww. Hell." In full agreement with Chase's murmured sentiment, Mark watched with sick sympathy. "Now we've got to play damage control."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The cage fell the six feet with a metallic clang and shook the occupant like a ball in a box.

Taxed to his limits, Hamilton Young, didn't give in, didn't die. He burst upward out of the cage in the first most painful Change of a bitten. The bloody tatters of his shoulder healed in reverse as the magic contorted his body.

The cry of mindless fury from the new werewolf scattered the few fairies not hiding, turning them into instant prey.

A bitten werewolf's first Change was always dangerous. The pain usually made them unstable, feral things, and the magic drain made them hungry.

Mark was torn with wanting to go after Marcus, containing Young, and getting Bailey the heck out of Dodge.

Bailey's fairy guard appeared at Mark's side. He directed a short nod at Chase, then met Mark's eyes. Holding out his arms, he motioned with his fingers. "Give me your lady."

In refusing to turn her over, Bailey's fairy guard had apparently chosen Aiden's side earlier. Blood spattered the light shade of his blousy shirt. His fancy sword was tucked into its scabbard. Smears of dark blood marked the hilt, proclaiming it the lethal weapon it was.

"I am not trained to fight this. Marcus Cargill was Lord Terriwen's butcher. Help me to save my people and I will protect your lady."

Mark nodded at Chase, who reluctantly handed her over. Before the fairy could disappear, Mark grabbed his arm with one claw.

"Kelvis. My name is Kelvis."

"She gets hurt Kelvis and you die. Got it?"

The fairy nodded and flinched at a fairy's scream. A woman with flowing hair the same shade as the blood running down her struggling arms went limp as Young tore pieces out of her torso.

Another fairy, a glittering male, screamed and loosed a magical bolt at the new werewolf.

The fairies holding the doors faltered and a burst of power threw the doors open, letting in more fairy guards. These took up the fight with Aiden's guards. The werewolves they ignored.

Mark had always been told that they were at the top of the magical food chain. Wolves ranked right up there with dragons and vampires. Now he knew why.

Young shrugged off the fur singeing bolt that would have fried another fairy or a human, and leaped after the caster. In the space between one breath and another, Young had another fairy meal.

Mark surged after Young. His arms wrapped around the werewolf in a football tackle that had the tacklee squirming and chewing on his arm. They hit the floor, knocking chairs and other things aside, sliding to a stop under one of the long banquet tables in a furry tangle.

Young struggled to be free. The table toppled. Mark turned his body and caught a flailing arm, twisting up and back.

The only way he was going to get Young to stop without killing him would be to exert his dominance over the newly Changed male.

Not so easy, since he'd be running high on adrenaline, endorphins, and magic. Since Adam had a ban on turning humans, this was the first he'd seen of this sick game in ages. Marcus had a liking for turning a wolf loose among sheep. But then, Marcus had a lot of unnatural likings.

Young struggled, growling, bowing his back to throw Mark off of him. He grabbed the werewolf's other arm and twisted it, shifting to move his knee into the small of Young's back.

Takedown and subduing moves worked just as well on werewolves. Transferring both wrists into a one handed grip, Mark pushed up on the angle of Young's arms until he whimpered and subsided some.

Intimate with the mechanics of a pack fight for dominance, Mark used his free hand to fist into

Young's thick ruff. He clamped his massive jaws down on his captive's neck.

Young squirmed and growled until Mark applied more pressure to both arms and neck.

Power flared across the room, making Mark's jaws clench convulsively. The werewolf whimpered and went boneless, instinctively giving in to the more dominant wolf.

Mark let go, both hands and wrists. He set a hand on the still werewolf's shoulder.

Young's little whines let him know that the other wolf acknowledged him as dominant and wouldn't be moving without permission. Satisfaction rolled through him.

Good.

Mark's eyes narrowed as he reevaluated the room. So much changed in a fight in a brief moment. When seconds could change the tide of a battle.

While he'd been fighting Young, the fairys had decided that Chase was a bad guy.

The warden used flat openhanded swipes to knock his opponents away, rather than gut them. It wouldn't take long for the pale wolvern to get tired of that and play for keeps.

A sharp warning bark made Mark duck and flatten himself over the prone submissive. He caught a glimpse of light and dark colored fur tumble by in bloody combat.

His hackles rose for Marcus' tainted scent.

Aggravation spurred through him that Brandon had somehow followed him here. Another pack babysitter was trying to finish *his* fight.

He stood ready to go after them.

He wouldn't let Marcus go without taking his pound of flesh out of the bastard's hide. For himself, for Bailey, even for Runt.

"Let it go." Bradley's familiar rumble made him turn and flatten his ears.

"This was my fight. Not yours."

A glint of metal shown in the ruff around Bradley's neck. The older wolvern gestured with his nose, his flicking ears and heated scent conveying his feelings.

"Is it any less his fight than yours? Does he have any less a right to the kill?"

Mark watched the fury in his adopted brother's body as he bit and scored a hit on Marcus' chest.

Mark *wanted* to be the one to hurt Marcus.

On the floor, the werewolf stirred, pushing his arms underneath to get up. Mark growled and pushed him back down with one foot. He didn't need Young running amok again through the fighting fairys.

Chase freed himself and came to stand opposite them, watching the fight with the same intent expression as when they'd executed Lawrence Daily. Not the same eager expression as Bradley, or Mark's own, he'd wager.

"Do you really want to be the one to kill him? To take his life on purpose?"

Bradley's question made Mark think.

The light touch on his side didn't startle him. He looked down at Bailey's pale and slightly unfocused gaze. She'd lost her glasses somewhere. Her hair tumbled down in a mass of curls around her soft, freckled face. Her beauty went beyond her pretty face. It was soul deep.

He'd give her the world if he could.

Mark waited for a moment for her to look at him horrified, or disgusted like she'd done once. But she only glanced down at Young under his foot and pressed against his side. One small hand gripped the fur on his lower back while the other unconsciously petted the thinner fur on his belly.

Mark laid a claw over her hand before she gave him a hard on.

Marcus broke Brandon's hold on him and the younger, darker wolvern slid several feet. Blood smeared on the floor from a back wound.

Chase stepped in before Marcus could escape. A cool and calculated leap attack that drove Marcus face first into the marble floor, Chase riding him down. A piece of flesh tore from the werewolf's shoulder, disappearing in the fury of the moment.

A lot of wolvern/werewolf combat ended up with pieces of the fighters that couldn't be found.

They weren't cannibals by nature, just by the nature of the fight. The only time it was allowed to eat anything two legged.

For a moment Mark had to force himself to watch.

He turned to snarl at a fairy who found easier prey. Theirs was a fight within a fight. Almost an island. Most of the fairys gave them a wide berth.

Brandon found his feet and sprang into the battle again.

Mark remembered how much more his brother had lost to Marcus. His dignity, his self-worth, and possibly his virginity.

No, Marcus had never raped Mark. But other pack members had been fair game. And Brandon had been pegged omega early on.

"No. I don't want to kill him. But I want him dead."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The fairy's fight lasted almost as long as it took for Brandon and Chase to wear Marcus down. Bradley and Mark kept track of the fairys enough to keep them out of their fight.

A flash of light on a magic silver blade in Aiden's hands turned into a freaky rainbow that Mark actually saw as it sliced Terriwen Faeolin's head from his shoulders.

Aiden, now the new Lord of Dewmist, raised the sword with a shout of triumph.

Marcus got distracted with the light show and dodged as if to try and save Lord Terriwen.

Brandon buried his hands in the werewolf's chest as Chase ripped most of his throat open in a bloody spray. The werewolf's heart came free in Brandon's hands, still struggling to beat while Brandon smiled into Marcus' fading ones.

"Drop it, brother." Bradley's rumble was a quiet order.

Both Brandon and Chase snarled back as the rush of the fight and instinct rode them. Their kill, the fierce wolver expressions said.

"He's filth. Not food." Bradley's voice held a note of compulsion, of magic. "Step away."

The wolver warriors let the body go. Marcus' still heart fell with a dull splat on the marble.

"Step away."

Mark's hair rose with the strange magic coming from Bradley. He kept his foot tight on Young and circled his arm protectively around Bailey.

When the two wolver were far enough away Bradley raised a furry arm that glowed with the same rainbow that the sword had. The power shot from Bradley's arm and slammed into the body. Flames shot up, consuming it in a clean fast fire that left nothing but ash behind.

The power abated and Bradley stumbled. Without thinking, Mark pushed Bailey behind him and reached out for his packbrother. Bradley waved him away and started toward Aiden.

"Damn. Damn, damn, damn."

Mark crouched and pointed a furry finger in Young's face. If Young had been a less dominant wolf in the pack, Mark would have used the connection to drive his point home. Since they didn't have a link with Young, Mark called the connection he had with the pack and shoved it magically or psychically into the werewolf, forcing the connection.

"Stay. Stay right there. You don't eat until I let you. Got it?"

Young whimpered and curled, hiding his nose in the crook of an elbow.

Satisfied that he'd do what he was told, Mark stood. He reached out a hand to Bailey.

"No." She shook her head and glanced down at Young. "He needs someone to stay and watch over him."

"You didn't see him eating people a few minutes ago."

She shot him a dark look as she crouched by the huddled werewolf. Unmindful of the drying blood, she stroked his ears.

Mark couldn't figure out women.

He finally shrugged and followed Bradley. Hopefully, they'd manage to get out of here alive.

Mark saw Chase's nod as the warden took up a place close to their two weakest pack

members, Bailey and Young. He almost wondered who Chase was actually protecting from who.

Brandon bracketed his twin brother on the opposite side as Bradley greeted Aiden Faeolin, the new Lord of Dewmist in the fairy language. Bradley looked and sounded appropriately ambassador-like. He even had a gift for Aiden that Mark wondered about.

Brandon smelled as pissed as he looked. That was nothing for Brandon. His packbrother was usually mad at someone.

More foreign talk between Aiden and Bradley made Mark's head nearly ache with the boredom of it. He itched to go.

He needed to get Bailey and Young out of here. And Runt was lost in the woods. There was no telling what could happen to the pup all alone out there.

"Uh. Sorry to interrupt." Mark scratched at an itchy patch of drying blood on his fur. Not so sorry. Just impatient. "The dragon egg you guys got off of my boy, Young."

Mark flicked his ear and nodded back at the submissive werewolf drooling in his mate's lap while she petted him like her lapdog. He might have been jealous if Young had put up more of a fight.

"It sort of came with him. So, we need it back."

Bradley stiffened and gave a warning growl. Aiden's pale eyes rested on Mark.

It was weird to see that the guy had no blood on him. Ignoring the warning, not a good thing since Bradley outranked him. He'd probably get the same treatment as Young got.

Mark blathered on. Mentally, he was kicking himself.

"Yeah. You see, Hamilton Young had the egg when your guys captured him."

"You did not state ownership of an egg when you arrived, only of the psychic Hamilton Young."

Mark could see the gears turning in Aiden's head as he processed the info and tried turning it to his best advantage.

"The werewolf Hamilton Young, is of no use to us. As for the woman, I'll not dispute your obvious claim on her."

Bradley did some more fairy-speak at Aiden, making Mark more than a little nervous. Aiden's eyes flicked to him then at Brandon, before he spoke to Bradley.

Mark ground his teeth while they kept on with one of his pet peeves. He hated when people carried on a conversation around him in a language that he didn't know on purpose. It was rude.

It made him think they were hiding something. From the look and smell of Brandon, it was bothering him, too.

"Look. That dragon thinks we stole its egg. I sure as hell don't want it following me home."

The full force of Aiden's gaze made Mark want to step back a step. He didn't, but he did sidle a half step away from Bradley.

"You did not say it was a dragon's egg, wolf."

"I tell you what Aiden. You either hand the egg over and I'll give it back. Or I just tell the dragon where its egg is and let you sort it out."

Aiden's eyes narrowed at the threat. Bradley wiped one palm over his face in frustration.

"And what if I do not wish for either?"

Mark wanted to tell him that he'd just let Young have at them again. Instead, he had one of those rare moments of blinding intuition.

His dad always said that even a blind squirrel will find a nut every now and then.

Mark stilled and cocked his head as if he were studying the fairy and was confused.

"Problem, wolf?"

"No, not really. I was just thinking about Lord Morgan. Now *that* is an honorable guy." He glanced around Bradley to Brandon. "Hey, who's bringing the meat to the next cookout? Us or them?"

Brandon didn't miss a beat. One dark furry shoulder shrugged as if it were an everyday question, and weird thing was, *it was an everyday question*.

"Us. Last time was basketball. Fairys are better at basketball than we are. We usually win the football matches because no one with wings is allowed to play."

Aiden gave the werewolves strange eyes. As if they were suddenly talking in a foreign language. Bradley's body language calmed as all three waited for Aiden's answer.

The fairy smiled and gave a head bow. It wasn't a happy smile either, Mark noted.

"A dragon's egg is a terribly powerful thing. Perhaps it should go to its appropriate owner."

"Yeah. That dragon's been after us for days." Mark gave a conversational shrug. "I suppose any responsible parent would get upset if his unborn kid went missing."

Aiden did the head nod thing again with a flat stare.

"Of course, we will search everywhere until it is found and returned."

Bradley's hand came down on Mark's shoulder in a firm grip, just a bit of claw digging in.

"If one of your men will be kind enough to show us to the doorway that leads back to the same woodlands my friends came in through. We'll be on our way."

Mark nodded at Bradley's very careful wording. He was past tired of this place. He'd be damn happy to gather up their new packbrother, his mate, and follow Kelvis the fairy guard back up to the real world.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Standing in the weak morning light, Mark said his goodbyes to Kelvis while his internal clock adjusted to the world around him.

"Time flows differently in Fairie than in the mortal world."

Kelvis kept his eyes averted from their naked human bodies.

Huh. Mark wasn't sure if Kelvis thought he was trying not to offend humans or what. But his odd wrist-grabbing handshake was kind of cool.

"I would fight beside you again, Mark Weis."

Mark nodded, meeting Kelvis' eyes. "Yeah. I'd fight beside you, too."

With a fancy court move, Kelvis grasped Bailey's hand, bending over in a deep formal bow. His long hair swept the ground.

Mark narrowed his eyes at the fairy's smooth moves. He bit back a growl over the blush that tinted her cheeks and put some heat in her scent.

"Lady, my most humble apologies at your ill treatment at my people's hands."

After more polite farewells and another apology to Hamilton Young, the fairy stepped back into the mushroom ring and disappeared.

Mark was relieved to see him go.

"Not a bad guy, even if he does have girly hair."

Bailey shot him a glare and turned to stomp into the woods. She still smelled hot, but angry hot instead of horny hot. Damn, but he didn't understand women.

"Hey!"

Mark started after Bailey, totally focused on catching up and getting back in her good graces. A hand clamped down on his bare shoulder, halting his progress.

Mark didn't have any delusions about what was about happen as he turned to face Bradley. He was a middle ranking Pack wolf.

Bradley had kept him, Rick, and Seth out of the way long before Adam had showed up to save them. Maybe Bradley wasn't a beta, but Adam had been grooming him for a long time to be an alpha somewhere.

The other guy had earned the right to be dominant over him. Mark didn't like the idea of Bailey running off by herself. But another part wasn't eager for her to see the butt-kicking he was about to get. And, as usual, probably deserved.

Mark let his shoulders slump, letting his body language speak for him. He looked away, baring his throat to his packbrother while he tried to hide the way his stomach cramped at the doing of it. It was an act of trust and Mark was dominant enough not to want to debase himself.

Bradley moved his hand from Mark's shoulder to cover the pulsing vein in his throat.

The hand stayed there almost too long for comfort.

Bradley pulled him into a tight hug.

Startled, Mark wrestled with the urge to fight himself free. He needed to bond by touch as much as the next pack wolverine. Still, guys didn't normally go around hugging each other. Usually, a smack on the shoulder or everyone piling together in front of the TV did the trick. Instead, he settled with an awkward pat on his packbrother's back.

Finally, the other wolverine let go to grasp Mark's head between his hands. Not just more dominant, Bradley was taller. Mark had to look up, keeping his neck open and vulnerable. The wet shine in the other wolverine's eyes made Mark look away.

"Don't do that again."

"Uh, Bradley, I give." As childish as it sounded, he said it. "I mean it. You're the boss of me. Okay?"

"God. You can be such an ass. *Don't you get it?*" Bradley gave him a quick shake but didn't let go. "You scared the hell out of us."

"Sure. You can let go, now. No need to be so touchie-feelie."

Bradley snarled, his grip sliding up to pull Mark's head back by the hair. Mark saw Brandon out of the corner of his eye.

"He's submitted. Let him go."

Bradley snarled again. This time at his twin.

Mark swallowed, barely holding back the urge to fight free. He told himself that he trusted Bradley not to hurt him. Really, he did.

Then Bradley's attention was back on him.

"We are a *pack*. It means we are one. You don't go running off by yourself just because you feel like it. *We are one!*"

"Does Dad know you're here?"

Mark couldn't help it. The words just slipped out.

Bradley roared. His grip on Mark's hair slipped as he Changed. The gold necklace that Mark barely registered glowed with the Change, transforming into a collar.

Brandon tried to step in front of him, to shield him from Bradley's rage. Mark just pushed his packbrother aside. He was wolf enough to deal with this himself.

Bradley's pain rolled from the pack link like a blast from a bomb.

Young managed to stay in human form, but his new senses were overwhelmed. He fell, curling into a big furry ball.

The new guy was someone Brandon could protect, so he did, placing himself between the new wolverine and possible harm.

Everyone watched with a blank expression while Bradley raised his head to the morning sky and howled his frustration, pain, and loss to the world. Echoes of emotion vibrated through the pack link. The aftermath left Bradley dazed and catching his breath.

Because Bradley was right, Mark did the only thing he knew to do.

He hugged the other wolverine.

They *were* pack, a part of the same whole. One packmember's pain belonged to every packmember. The simple touch of one another was both comforting and empowering.

The others moved into the hug, until finally Young laid an uncertain hand on Bradley's arm. Smelling Young's fear, Mark moved so that the new guy was in the center of the circle. Surrounding him, the wolverine offered their acceptance in the way of lots of ear scratching and fur rubbing. The final approval rested with their alphas, but no one doubted Adam or Diana Weis's mercy.

Psychics trained their children to believe that supernaturals were evil monsters.

In the space of a day Hamilton Young had been captured by one group. He'd been bitten and Changed by another into the very things he'd been taught to hate. Now the guy was on his people's shoot on sight list. To say that Young was scared and didn't know what to do was the understatement of

the year. He needed the reassurance.

Mark!

Runt burst out of the trees like the ending in every bad B-rated movie Mark had ever seen. A little less coordinated, Bailey slapped a branch out of her way and nearly tripped over a fallen branch. Hard to look dignified while picking leaves out of her hair, but she was all the way sexy to him.

Mark bent and scooped the pup up, letting him wash his face with kisses.

Mark, you're not dead!

"Hey, Ralph. Who told you I was dead?"

Bailey flushed a little deeper than her trek through the undergrowth left her.

"I couldn't feel the connection to you once you went inside Fairie. I thought you were dead."

She frowned and crossed her arms.

"And you are *not* calling him Ralph."

"Who is this?"

Brandon left the circle and approached with the happy interested face that only another parent has when meeting a child.

Only a nose blind moron wouldn't be able to tell the pup was wolverine. Mark nuzzled the puppy's cheek with his own and met the other male's eyes.

"Mine." Mark held the puppy in a gentle protective embrace and met all their eyes. "He's mine and he's going to have my name."

"He's *ours*."

Mark nodded at Bailey's correction. They were both his. His mate and his pup.

"What about Bob?" Mark touched noses with the pup and grinned at Bailey.

"Hey, that's a pretty good growl you've got, sweetheart. With a little practice- *Ow! Hey!*"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mark cocked his head as he watched the most beautiful bride in the history of brides walk down the aisle.

Soft curls framed her face and trailed over the white wedding gown that showed every luscious curve. As she approached, his heart hammered in his chest.

She could still back out. She hadn't mate-bonded with him.

They'd talked about it, but decided to wait until the wedding night for both that and more sex. She thought it was romantic.

He thought that making him wait two weeks was another way to punish him for making her think he was dead for a day and a half.

Daddy. Look.

Mark looked down at the newly named Justin Thomas Weis. He ran the tips of his fingers over the puppy's soft head.

After five minutes with Brandon's litter, the pup had been updated on the subject of parents. From that moment on, Mark was Daddy and Bailey was Mommy.

After a week of arguing over what to name the puppy and fretting over every little detail of Justin's adjoining room, they finally began to settle into the role of proud new parents.

"Dad."

Next to Jared Morgan, who was officiating the ceremony, Adam's pale gaze moved from his soon to be daughter-in-law to his adopted son. He raised a pale eyebrow in question.

"I love you, Dad."

Adam nodded. If his father ever doubted it, Mark wanted him to know. He was proud to be anything like his father. His *real* father, Adam Weis.

When Bailey finally arrived at the altar, Chase handed her over. The nervous warden had been embarrassed when she insisted that he give her away. Bailey tiptoed and brushed a kiss over his cheek and let her escort escape.

Mark didn't want to get away, ever. He could stare at her forever. Someone, his dad,

prodded him to repeat the vows. Mark mumbled something appropriate and waited for her to say, I do. When she did and held out her hand for the gold ring, Mark grinned and pulled her to him covering her mouth with his.

Bailey's toes curled in her shoes when he pulled her to him. The heat from Mark's body seeped into her front. The tip of his tongue delved past her lips, welcomed into her mouth.

There was no more being alone, no more being afraid.

Dropping the hindering bouquet, Bailey pressed herself as close to his heat as possible, winding her arms around his neck. Still it wasn't close enough.

She could feel the bright spark that was Mark in her mind, like a star, shining and just out of reach. Pressing harder against him, opening her mouth, her mind, her soul, Bailey touched the star and pulled it, *him*, inside and made them one.

He pulled apart with a gasp and stared at her.

Bailey stared back, feeling a loud echo of shock. His shock.

After a moment, everyone else's stares began to intrude on their private moment.

Someone cleared a throat. Their eyes refocused on the fairy prince. To Bailey, he still looked kind of odd in western clothing with his green hair and pointed ears.

"Now that is a real wedding." Morgan gestured, hustling the dazed pair to face the assembled pack, fairys, and friends.

"Everyone, I am honored to introduce you to Mr., Mrs., and little Justin Weis." The fairy kindly included Justin in the introductions. "Now, let's get moving. There are pretty women that need dancing with."

* * * *

Still a bit dazed, Bailey jumped when the door to their room opened.

Packhome was a huge log house with plenty of empty rooms since some of the pack were building smaller houses close by on the property. They pretty much had an entire wing to themselves.

This would be their first real night together without Justin's presence as a buffer between them. Neither Mark nor she would be sleeping on the low bed in the adjoining room. For the first time it would be just the two of them, alone.

She clutched her wedding dress to her chest and stared at her husband's, her mate's bright blue eyes. After a moment, she felt his hesitation at her nervousness. Mark licked his lips.

"He's as settled as four pups at a slumber party are going to get."

Bailey nodded, staring at him. What if he thought she was too old for him? Too saggy, maybe?

"It was nice of Karen and Brandon to keep Justin tonight."

The door closed with a soft click. He leaned back against it. The full force of his gaze unsettled her more.

Searching for something to say, Bailey finally nodded at the garish shirt she'd given him as a gag.

"You changed clothes."

Mark smoothed a hand over the front and smiled.

"I like it. Where did you find monkeys and bowling balls anyway?"

She snorted a laugh. "The Internet. Where else? And those are coconuts and palm trees, not bowling balls."

He pulled the fabric up to his nose, exposing a lean, totally ripped, abdomen.

"Huh. I guess they are."

"I'm apparently not the only blind one here."

She didn't mean to sound harsh or understand why she was still so unsure.

Looking away, Bailey missed his super fast move until she was pulled tight against his shirt-covered front. Stunned, she stared openmouthed at a field of purple and green dancing monkeys on a yellow beach with tiny neon palm trees.

Her breath whooshed out as her back pressed tight against the wall. The protective barrier of her

wedding dress jerked from between them and she was left in her new lacy underwear.

The almost feverish heat that all the wolvens had radiated from his body, immediately soaking into cold places she hadn't known she'd had.

One calloused hand pressed into the curve of Bailey's waist, sending a shiver up her spine. The other fisted into curls at the back of her head, pulling her back into the submissive angle she'd seen the pack impose on one another. Seeing the others in that position, she hadn't known what to think, feel.

Now, here pressed so vulnerably against Mark, there was an element of raw sexual excitement. Her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt, wanting the feel of his skin in her palms.

Her eyelids fluttered closed expecting his kiss. Only, Mark stopped. His warm breath fanned over her lips until she opened her eyes in question.

Connected so closely to him, she felt some of the sexual need. The evidence of it pressed against her belly. Beneath that was another, darker emotion she couldn't discern with her own churning feelings confusing her.

His beautiful blue eyes were hard as he stared into hers intense enough that she'd have turned away if she weren't trapped.

"I'm not blind. I can see you."

He pulled her head back further, his palm sliding up to cup the weight of her breast. The soft sensation of his lips sliding along her cheek, leaving little nips behind pulled a whimper from her.

Her stomach clenched. An aching warmth made her press against him tighter. Silkily his tongue traced her collarbone.

"I can smell you, taste you."

Bailey writhed as her bra slipped away and both hands cupped her bare breasts. A soft flick of his thumbs across her nipples wrenched another cry out of her even as she tried to tunnel her hands under the fabric of his shirt.

She needed to feel his skin against hers.

In another preternaturally fast move, Mark pulled her legs up and apart, pressing the hard shaft of his desire against silk covering her damp center. Reflexively, she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer.

Capturing both her wrists, he pinned them above her head and pulled back to stare into her glazed eyes. His eyes traveled over her tousled hair, spiraling over her shoulders and the tight buds of her breasts.

"I see you. I am *not* blind."

His voice was hoarse and gravelly. He pulled on one springy curl then let go to trail his knuckles over the curve of one full breast.

She was on fire, struggling and trapped so close to filling the ache between her legs. He stopped her attempt to writhe over him with a steady hand on her hip. Vaguely, she sensed how hard he was struggling to hold back. To be dominant.

"*Mark. Please.*"

"Why did you mate-bond with me today, in front of everyone, if you weren't sure of me?"

Bailey almost didn't hear the low words. Her need was riding her so hard. Part of it was his need mixed in. She heard, no *felt*, the insecurity and opened her eyes.

"What?"

"Why did you mate-bond with me?"

Her sluggish brain tried to process what he was saying. Now was not the time for a heart to heart. She frowned.

"The magic thing?"

He nodded, the yellow blond fringe of his bangs falling over his lashes. He looked like a wild thing peeking through dry grass. Though, to be honest, grass didn't shine like yellow satin.

He pressed against her, wringing a low moan from her.

"Damn it. Stop torturing me."

"You've tortured me for two years, cupcake. With the mate-bond, I feel your feelings

same as you feel mine. Not just tiny bits to drive me crazy.”

His tight hold on her softened and he let go of her wrists to support her buttocks with both hands. He walked them to the bed while she tried to mentally process through the raging lust.

He distracted her, pulling clothes off a body worthy of a stripper or a model. She started when he crawled up her body and settled over her.

Desire still burned behind the blue flame of eyes, but he was like a dog worrying a bone. Light touches from his fingers kept her on edge until she grabbed his hands.

He might want the comfort of touch, but she wanted sex. Hot mind numbing sex. Mark would just push her buttons until he got what he wanted.

He could be aggravating that way. Bailey dropped back on the bed with a groan of frustration at his insistence.

“Why aren’t you sure about me?”

“I don’t know why you’d think that?”

Irritation was really starting to set in as her blood cooled. Two weeks of waiting, bouncing back and forth emotionally while she remembered the hot bimbos he’d dated before. He started to draw back with an echo of hurt that his half-smile and shrug didn’t hide.

Deprivation was starting to make her feel feral.

“Don’t play coy and run off. Spill it.” She shot a glare at him.

“Men aren’t coy.” Mark sat back on the bed. “Maybe I’m just tired of waiting for you to run off again. Because you aren’t sure about fucking a monster.”

The harsh word slapped her like a bucket of cold water. Bailey rubbed at her face. She hadn’t pressed him about Marcus Cargill because he’d been so adamant about Adam Weis being the only father he would recognize.

Since he would probably reject any overt move she made, Bailey simply rolled over until she lay beside his outstretched legs. Facing opposite him, all he had to do was look down his body and into her face. He twitched but didn’t move the corkscrew curls that draped over him, knee to thigh.

“I remember telling you that night in the hotel that you weren’t a monster.”

When he didn’t say anything, Bailey stretched an arm over her head, pulling her breast to attention. Her neglected nipple puckered, begging for his touch. She nearly smiled when he glanced out of the corner of his eye.

Now that she had his attention, she sat up. Her breasts bounced with the movement, capturing and holding his sullen gaze.

“You’re aggravating, pushy, and sulky when you don’t get your way.”

Mark frowned harder and opened his mouth to protest, only to be stopped with a smile and the touch of her fingers on his lips.

“You’re also sweet, caring, giving, and the most honorable man I’ve ever met. I’ve been unsure because of my own flaws, not yours.”

He shook his head and opened his mouth to speak again.

She shushed him. “All of you are these super sexy people and I’m just me. Klutzy, plump, with frizzy mouse brown hair and eyes. And I need glasses.”

Lying back down to curl around her, Mark played with her hair with one hand. The other he rested against her lips.

“My turn.” He ducked his head and smiled like a little boy at the prospect, kind of shy and a touch nervous at being rejected.

“I don’t always say stuff the right way. When I was twelve, Adam and Diana adopted me. I had more problems than just...having Marcus Cargill for a father. I have to be careful about how I eat because I don’t metabolize sugars and dyes right.”

“Like”

He pressed his fingers down again against her lips. “Yeah. I’m ADHD. Medicine doesn’t work on me, so back then I was a problem. Adam stuck me in karate. Between my dad and my sensei, they made sure I learned to control myself.”

Trailing her fingers down his cheekbones, she marveled at him. She waited, keeping her admiration to herself, while he finished his purging.

"I don't talk about it much, because Marcus taught me that anything weak should be put down." He took a frustrated breath. Old hurt knotted in his chest for the little brother he'd never gotten to know, the mistress he'd liked, and his forgotten birth mother. "*Damn it.*"

Seizing her mouth with his own, Mark poured everything he had into the kiss, branding her. She was his mate. His everything. Pulling back, he finally decided to stop messing around and just tell her.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

Bailey shook her head. She knew what she looked like.

"Don't argue with me." Mark frowned down. This talking your problems out stuff was for the birds.

"I don't know what mouse brown looks like. It's just a shade. I see your hair curling everywhere and it makes me want to smell it. Your scent is like sugar and sex all mixed together. I want you all the time."

He leaned down and tasted her lips, groaning at the flavor. Her little hands on his chest made him so hot he could barely control himself. He pulled back so that he crouched on his knees and looked down over the delicious curves.

In a smooth move, he slid the scrap of panties off and tossed them to the floor, before settling back over her. He rubbed his cock over her wet entrance in a glide that made her gasp and catch at his arms as he held himself above her.

"I need you, my Sunshine. Don't ever doubt that."

Bailey ran her hands over the defined ridges of biceps. Seeing, no *feeling*, this man's heart was an awesome thing that made her worry over their age gap insignificant. Silly. She was beautiful because Mark believed it. He really did.

"Mark, I've got to tell you something." She panted out the words, grasping at the silky bowl of hair on the top of his head as he leaned down to hear. "I love you ... and I'm going to *kill* you if you don't start making love to me. *Now.*"

He entered her in one long stroke that made her shudder to her toes and him growl in pleasure. Her thighs locked around him as she rocked upwards, straining, urging him to go faster. Her inner walls clamped around him as he pumped into her hard.

"Not gonna last, like this."

Emotion, satisfaction at his lack of control, reflected from her eyes, echoing through him. She *wanted* him to let go, to take her.

Mark growled and dug his feet into the mattress. He buried his nose into the crook of her neck, relishing the scents of female and sex.

His female. His mate.

Beneath him, Bailey spasmed hard. Her sheath milking him for the last bit of pleasure. Her nails raked down his back in a pain that startled him into coming.

Throwing his head back, Mark cried out as his body locked into place, spilling his soul inside. A frozen moment in time that blurred as he collapsed beside her.

"Oh, God. I think I'm dead," Bailey gasped.

"Uhhh."

Mark stared at the ceiling, peaceful contentment filling him. He dredged up enough energy to turn and cuddle around his mate. Closing his eyes, he buried his face in the softness of her hair and drifted.

Sometime later. Forever, and not long enough, Mark thought. Bailey stirred. Her hair tickled his nose, while her hand slid over his abdomen.

"Mark?"

"Mmm."

"You're color-blind. Like a wolf or a dog. Right?"

He tensed, and then relaxed again when he felt only curiosity from her.

"Yeah. Some magic has a color though."

She seemed to be thinking through something. It usually amused him to watch her work through a problem, think it out. Mostly he just wanted to sleep, though he'd gladly have another round of mind-blowing sex.

"Why do you wear clothes that make everyone else blind?"

He grinned against her, snuggling in against her soft butt.

"Because I can see contrasting shades. And it annoys the hell out of everyone."

"You are such a goof."

He moved over her, pinning her hands down. A naughty smile curved his mouth.

"Yeah. I'm a riot. Let's see if I can make you scream."

Falling into the game, Bailey pressed her lips together as he bent to taste her ear. The warm tickle of his breath made her shiver.

"You know what I like best about your skin?"

Bailey had no idea. The little licks and nibbles he made down her collarbone and over the slope of her breast made her swallow a whimper. Every light rasp of his cheek was erotic torture to her sensitized nerves.

"Freckles." He nuzzled the side of her breast. His tongue circled one spot until she writhed up against him, wet with need. The hard length of his penis rubbed against her slick folds. She ached to feel him fill her.

"I love freckles. It's like candy sprinkles on a cupcake."

His mouth moved over her nipple, sucking the hard bud. Rolling the delicious morsel between his lips, he inhaled the scent of her arousal.

Bailey gasped at the combined sensations of his mouth at her breast and the ridge teasing her nether region. Her need mingled with his until she could not tell where she ended and he began. She pulled against the restraint on her hands, mindless to everything but the need to touch her mate. To become one.

He entered her in one strong glide. She felt his desire, the depth of his need of her though their connection. The bright blue flame of his eyes burned with possession.

"Mine!"

"Yes!" Her hoarse yell was swallowed by his mouth descending for another kiss.

Pleasure shuddered through her. Her hands were still trapped, but she was not helpless. Bailey dug her heels in the mattress, riding the peak of her orgasm. She was determined to pull him along with her.

Mark tore his mouth away. Her aggressive orgasm dashed the thread of control that had held off his release. With a growl, he pumped hard into her, his body locked deep inside her sheath. He surrendered to the pleasure.

Weak armed and trembling in aftermath, he met her eyes. He bared his soul in a whisper.

"Don't ever leave me again, Sunshine. I love you."

"Oh, Mark."

She raised her hand to his roughened cheek.

He turned to kiss the palm before settling to the side, careful not to lie on her hair. Pulling her palm to his still thundering heart, he caught her gaze again.

"I mean it. I may live in a world without color, but I can't live in the dark."

Bailey smiled. Big goof that he was, her wolverine mate had some romance and poetry in his heart. She thought she might cry, until she saw the mischief dancing in his eyes.

He took a breath and belted out, singing enthusiastically off-key.

"You are my Sunshine! My only Sunshine! You make me hap-py when skies are gray!"

Bailey swatted at his shoulder, giggling, while he cuddled up against her backside. His voice breathed in her ear.

"Please don't take my Sunshine away."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mommy!

A sharp whine and furious scratching at the door woke her from her sleep.

Daddy! Let me in!

Bailey jerked up. She shoved at the sexy hunk sprawled over the bed. "Get up and let him in."

Quickly, she grabbed for her clothes and darted for the bathroom while Mark fumbled around for the door. Spying the shorts and tee shirt from last night, she grabbed those and slammed the door behind her.

She grinned at her wrecked reflection in the mirror, feeling like a teenager who'd just been caught necking.

Mommy! Daddy!

Poor Justin's cry was plaintive, as Mark didn't move fast enough to suit. He may be four footed and furry, but he was a child. The pack's doctor, Tank, after a thorough examination, placed the little one at the same mental growth level as a five year old.

Marcus's abuse made him a survivor, but it had also stunted some of Justin's emotional growth. The pack understood and welcomed the puppy, and Bailey, as their own.

I don't want to be by myself.

She heard the door open and Mark's voice, as he no doubt picked up the puppy for a cuddle.

"Hey, buddy. You're not alone. Why did you leave your sleep-over?"

Justin whimpered in answer.

Coming out of the bathroom, she met Mark's blue eyes. His hair, so very close to the puppy's in color, blended almost perfectly as he rubbed his face into the soft fur.

Justin looked up and wriggled to change arms.

Taking the puppy and setting him on the bed, she stroked his head. The little guy bounced around, already darting back and forth between them. He wouldn't settle until he was assured that his world was stable again.

"Why didn't you sleep over with your new packmates?"

Justin stretched out between his mommy and daddy, making sure to bury his nose against one and his back feet against the other. He couldn't smile like a real human boy, but that was okay. Maybe he'd Change one day. Right now everything was good.

Because Sammy and Shane and Jolie are at their home. Right here is mine.

* * * * Bradley Changed back into

human form and watched the odd little ceremony downwind and out of sight. Exasperated laughter escaped from Mark's mate. The pup barked, excited as he bounced around in a circle around his adoptive parents.

Bailey clutched her shovel and pretended to aim for her furry mate. Furiously digging, dirt flew behind the huge Great Dane sized wolf.

The blanket-wrapped bundle, which was their reason for being in the woods today, was a forlorn lump outside their happy circle. Even Justin, the pup, gave it a cursory sniff and went back to the game of digging.

"Mark! Cut it out! This is supposed to be serious."

Bradley touched the cool metal of the necklace that marked his indentureship to Fairy Prince Jared Morgan.

His packbrother rarely took anything seriously. Mark had always been the cut-up.

Now, a new thread of maturity ran through the wolf. Bradley saw that Mark took his new status as mate and parent very much to heart.

That made the bargain he'd possibly made with the devil, bearable. Then again, said devil had freed him from a demon. And a part of him howled at the loss.

He sensed Brandon. His twin Changed and stepped beside him, silent and comfortable in his surroundings. Together, they watched the new family pay honor to the female wolf who'd born the pup.

Bailey shook out the pelt and ran her hand reverently over the fur while her mate watched. The pup sniffed at the pelt, and finding nothing there for him, went back to crawl over his adoptive father.

"Sometimes I wonder if our mother is alive. Or did she die like that, protecting us from the likes of Garrick and Marcus."

Bradley looked away from Bailey's prayer as she spoke over the new grave to focus on his brother's words. The rare comforting warmth where Brandon pressed against him, skin to skin, shoulder to shoulder made him phrase his answer with caution.

"It was a long time ago. Everyone from then is gone now."

Thankfully. Unless someone other than Marcus had been able to escape Adam's justice.

Brandon rubbed his cheek against Bradley's shoulder. The faint rasp of beard made the movement more real. Brandon was so much more a wild thing than the rest of them.

It was Bradley's fault. He accepted that. His own responsibility in making his own brother the way that he was. Bradley couldn't seem to make small mistakes.

The damage he'd let happen because of his own selfishness had almost destroyed them all. He couldn't change what had been done, but he was trying to make up for his sins.

Brandon stepped away, his moment of connection over. If anyone, save his mate or alpha tried to touch him now, the penalty would be harsh.

Bradley crossed his arms over his bare chest, so as not to startle his twin.

Brandon stared at him, unblinking, considering. Questioning.

"You remember. Don't you?"

The question and the answer was one more damning link in the chain of his sins. He didn't want his brother to know about their parents. He envied Brandon his ignorance.

But then only the innocent deserved that bliss. And even as a child, Bradley's sins were too bad to make him an innocent. He'd known better.

Looking back to the small family within their larger one, Bradley noticed that he and Brandon weren't the only ones who had come to watch over them. A glimpse of silver and cream peered through the brush as Adam kept watch over his adopted son at a discreet distance.

"Will you tell me?" Bradley nodded. Yeah, he'd tell his brother that it was all his fault. He'd take it like a man and watch the tenuous bond they'd formed turn back into anger and hate. It had been easier when his brother had been omega and he'd owed him nothing but protection. But then, Bradley hadn't protected his brother from the monsters, had he? Adam

had swooped down like an avenging angel and saved the day. A hero, that was Adam Weis, doling out protection and generosity. He became Pack Father in truth by adopting them. Except for Bradley. He remembered his father. He needed an alpha, not a dad. Brandon deserved the truth from his twin at least. "They'll be alright." Brandon, always alert, scanned his surroundings. Noting more than the alpha's presence. Picking up on the subtleties were what kept him alive, if not always sane, for so long before Adam. Before Brandon had finally realized that Karen was his true mate.

She'd never belonged to Bradley. Though he'd tried to convince her, tried to be worthy of Diana's daughter, she'd rejected him. She'd known him for what he was. A coward and poacher.

"They'll be happy. They deserve it." "Yes. The bad guy's dead. Let's hear it for the good guys."

As the words left his mouth, Bradley fingered the chain around his neck and wondered which side he was really on. What would happen when he was put to the test?

The End