



McCallan's Blood

The McCallan Legacy

Lynn Lorenz

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Blurb

The McCallans of central Louisiana are rich and powerful. They're also werewolves. Jake McCallan is the owner of McCallan Lumber and the alpha male of their small pack. His sister Tori has left to find her own life away from weres and his younger brother Trey is nothing but trouble. When Trey shows up and tells Jake about fathering a child during a one night stand, Jake throws Trey out of the pack. Then Jake tries to make it right with the mother.

Rebecca Miller has no intention of letting any McCallan run her life or her son's, but when she meets Jake, he stirs something deep inside her, something she doesn't want to acknowledge.

But Jake knows the truth the first time he meets the beautiful single mom.

Rebecca is his lifemate, the one woman meant for him, and she's as drawn to him as he is to her.

And she's had his brother's baby.

If that's not bad enough, while drunk, Trey's hired a stranger to kill Rebecca and the child.

When several attempts to kill Rebecca fail, it's up to Jake to protect his mate, even if he has to kill his brother to do it.

Chapter One

“Will we make the order?” Jake shouted to his foreman. Robert leaned closer to catch his boss’s words. The bulky hearing protection they wore over their ears dampened the deafening noise of the lumber mill. After looking down at his clipboard and making a quick calculation with his pencil, Robert smiled.

“Yes, with about a thousand board feet to spare.” He gave Jake a thumbs up.

Standing on the catwalk suspended high above the floor of the mill, the two men watched the reclaimed lumber as it ran through the huge planers, making the boards equal thickness.

“Good. Have them stack what’s left over, don’t plane it.” Smiling, Jake bent over as he leaned on the railing of the catwalk, pleased with his new purchase of lumber from an abandoned warehouse across the Mississippi River in Natchez.

This lumber would fill his latest order for the highly prized old oak. The builder ordered it for the construction a four thousand square foot timber-frame home in Oregon for a multi-millionaire movie star who’d insisted on using only reclaimed and recycled materials. Conservation came with a hefty price tag, and Jake McCallan had turned around his family’s failing Louisiana lumber mill by providing specialty wood for high-end buyers.

Catching a glimpse of movement from his heightened peripheral vision, Jake turned and watched as Hazel, his secretary, wobbled on unsteady legs towards him. She hated heights, so she must be upset to come out on the catwalk and without hearing protection.

“Hazel, what do you think you’re doing?” Jake pulled off his earmuffs, placed them over her head, and then plopped his hardhat on top of her grey hair. She gave him a brief smile of thanks and then frowned.

He leaned down so she wouldn’t have to yell. “Your brother is in your office.”

Straightening, his body rigid, the growl in his throat hidden by the hum of the machines, he glared toward the door. He gave Hazel a sharp nod, took her elbow, and then guided her back down the catwalk to the main offices.

Jake’s wolf ears ached from the brief exposure. The noise from the mill’s equipment, deafening for a normal person, was even more so for his hypersensitive ears. They stepped through the doors, shut them, and only a low rumble penetrated the sound-dampening insulation in the floor and walls of the office. Hazel hung up the earmuffs and hardhat with the others near the door and returned to her desk.

After shaking his head to clear it, he faced his office.

Jake McCallan, President, McCallan Specialty Lumber Company was etched on the door’s frosted glass window.

Taking a deep breath, he unclenched his fists, rolled his shoulders, and entered his office.

Trey McCallan sat in his older brother’s leather chair, his boots propped up on the antique oak desk that had served three generations of McCallans. His lips twisted as if he’d swallowed sour milk. Jake knew Trey hated everything about the mill, from the smell of the wood to the sound of the saws and belts, but he’d never rejected everything it brought him.

“Why aren’t you at LSU?” Jake walked to the desk and shoved Trey’s feet off. His boots hit the floor. Jake jerked his thumb to indicate Trey had better move out of his chair.

“I’m taking a break this semester.” Trey stood and shoved the rolling chair towards Jake, who caught it before it hit him.

“You mean you got thrown out?” Jake spun the chair around, eased himself into it, and leaned back.

Trey looked good, strong, lean, and powerful, but not the alpha male and Jake knew Trey resented it. Ever since Trey had turned eighteen, there had been no love lost between them. Merely a dance, each circling the other, as Trey looked for weakness, and Jake looked to defend what was his by right and effort.

“No. That’s not what I’m here about.” Trey lounged in one of the two brown leather wingback chairs in front of the desk, stretched out his legs, and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

“Money? You’ve already gotten your monthly allowance.” Jake typed on the keyboard of the laptop and brought up the accounts.

“No, but if you’re feeling generous, I could always use more. I’ve decided to go to Europe.”

Jake shook his head and hit a key, closing the program. “How can you afford that?”

Trey smirked. “I’m a finance major, Jake. Despite your opinion of me, I’ve managed to pay attention in class. I have investments. Anyway, a small matter has come up. Remember last summer, when I came home?”

Jake remembered. He’d had to go down to the county jail and bail Trey out three times. The fines alone totaled over a thousand dollars. Not to mention paying for the company car he wrecked.

“Yeah. I paid all the fines. Is someone suing you?”

“No, you managed to clean up my mess. This is about a woman.” Trey grimaced. Jake waited, his eyebrow raised in question. “There was this sweet little bitch I’d sniffed out. Damn, she was fine. Well, it seems she just had a baby.”

“It *seems*? Either she had a baby or she didn’t.” Jake stared at his brother.

“She did.” Trey glared back.

“Is it yours?”

Trey shrugged. “She says it is.”

“Goddamn it, Trey! How could you be so careless? You know we can’t just mate without consequences.” Jake shook his head. This had to be the worst thing Trey had ever done. “Is she from here?”

“Yeah, some piece of tail I picked up at the Roadhouse.”

“Why didn’t you use protection?” Jake gripped the arms of the chair until his knuckles were white. A half strength blow from him could kill a human.

“You know what it’s like, brother, when you get the scent.” He inhaled deeply. “When I fuck I want to feel it.” Trey shrugged. “I ramped up my pheromones, but the little bitch still resisted. So, I had to slip her something.” Again Trey’s face twisted.

“Shit, Trey. You raped her?” God, this was getting worse and worse. Jake hauled himself to his feet. The old desk was all that stood between them.

“She was willing. Look, it was a one-night stand. Just a fuck. I took off back to Baton Rouge that week. Call it my end-of-summer romance.” He gave a hard laugh.

Jake vaulted over the desk, landed in front of Trey, and backhanded him across the face, knocking his brother out of the chair and onto the floor. Shaking the blow off, Trey rose in a crouch growling low in his throat as he touched his hand to his face. Blood from his nose stained his fingers. Naked hatred burned in Trey's eyes as he dragged his sleeve across his face. Jake's hackles rose in warning.

"What I need, big brother, is for you to take care of it." Trey spit blood on the polished wood floor and moved to put the chair between them.

"It? You mean the baby?"

"Yeah. Make it go away."

"Are you out of your mind? This is your problem, Trey, not mine." Jake shook his head.

Trey's teeth showed in a bared grin. "Love to, really, but..." He shrugged. "It's the alpha male's role to protect the pack. With Dad dead and Sis living in Mississippi, you, Mom, and I are it. You don't want the good name of McCallan to get sullied in some sordid small town scandal, do you?"

"Does this woman know who you are?"

"Yeah, but it didn't seem to impress her at the time. However, she might contact you to get money for the pup."

Trey would think the worst of people.

"Are you sure it's yours?"

"Yeah, it's mine. And I don't want it. She's not my lifemate, just a fuck."

Jake ran his hand through his hair. He considered changing form right in the office, attacking his brother and placing him in submission. But that was pointless. It hadn't worked when they were younger and it wouldn't work now.

"Christ, Trey. How can you be so callous? You're responsible for this mess."

"Accidents happen." He touched his nose and checked for blood, but it had stopped bleeding. "I'm a long way from reaching mating age like you, old dog, and I'm going to keep right on playing in the woods. You remember what it was like, don't you? Even you have a cock and a pair of balls." He smirked at Jake. "Maybe it's been so long since you used them, you forgot."

"I just know my responsibilities, little brother, and I managed to keep the women I was with safe. Did you tell Mom?" He moved behind his desk, putting distance between them.

A flicker of fear marred Trey's good looks. "Hell, no. Since you love tattling on me, I saved it for you."

"Just great. You're such a waste of breath."

"Well, I won't be breathing down your neck for much longer."

"What do you want me to do?" Jake knew he'd regret this. He'd thought sending Trey away to LSU for an education and a dose of maturity would help, but it didn't seem to be the case.

"I don't care. Kill them if you want." Trey tossed off the hard words with a flick of his wrist.

"You son-of-a-bitch, I'm not killing anyone for you. Especially not a local girl and a baby. Your baby, for Christ's sake! This is the last straw, Trey." He gave a warning growl low in his throat.

"Then pay her off. I don't care." Trey turned to leave. "I'm leaving for Europe in two

days. Either you take care of it or I'll have to find someone who will."

"Don't drag anyone else into this, Trey. It's a pack matter."

"When I leave, you won't have a fucking pack, Alphaboy. Her name is Rebecca Miller."

"Is it a boy or girl?" Jake and Trey both knew if it were a boy, he'd be a werewolf. A girl would be safe from the McCallan legacy, like their sister Tori.

"I don't know and don't care, but if it's a boy, you know your duty, Jake. You're going to either have to take him into the pack or kill him." Trey smirked. "Remember what Dad said about rogue wolves? They need to be eliminated."

"Leaving your hands clean, is that how you figure it, Trey?" Jake glared at him.

"You're the boss, deal with it." He stood with his hand on the doorknob.

"You're out of the pack. Stay out of my territory. That's my only warning." Jake bared his teeth at his brother.

"Right. There's only room for one alpha in this town and you're it."

"Goddamn right." Jake's fist hit the desk and the pencil cup bounced, spilling its contents across the leather blotter.

"Fuck you, big brother." With that, Trey left, slamming the office door so hard the glass cracked.

Jake slumped into his chair. Placing his elbows on the desk, he put his face in his hands, then dragged them through his hair. How could his brother expose an innocent woman to their world? Trey knew the rules but had always flaunted them. He'd always been reckless and out of control, dancing on the edge of the law.

Jake supposed it was just a matter of time before something like this happened, only he figured his brother would be shot running the streets as a wolf, or killed in some bar fight. Werewolves weren't indestructible, just damn hard to kill. Even in their human form a werewolf was too strong. However, they could be fatally shot, stabbed, or like his father, die in a car crash.

Reaching over to his phone, he hit the intercom. "Hazel. Get me the address and phone number of Rebecca Miller. She's local."

Jake sat back and closed his eyes. He'd have to handle this personally.

* * * *

Rebecca stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes. The baby was finally down, after four hours. Why he'd woken up so soon from his nap, alert and ready for action, she didn't know. What she did know was if she didn't get some sleep, she'd lose her mind.

Tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, she listened. Sweet silence. No crying baby, only the sound of her own ragged breathing. Rolling over, she exhaled and let herself drift. It was a month since he'd been born and it'd been a doozy. Sleepless nights broken only by sleepless days. She'd never taken so many walks around the block pushing him in the stroller. Benjamin loved being outside. Even at night, she'd taken him out in the stroller to soothe him. The baristas at the local Starbucks were getting to know both her and her baby.

Her baby. Just the thought of Ben made her heart sing. He was so beautiful, so tiny, so demanding. Once she got over the initial shock and accepted she was going to have a baby, she'd enjoyed being pregnant. Well, the morning sickness sucked, but she loved the way he felt growing inside her; from the first little fluttering movements to the big kicks

and barrel rolls.

The only hard part had been doing it alone. In her daydreams, her husband would lovingly stroke her belly and adore how she looked all big and round. In reality, her face looked too full, her bras didn't fit, her feet were swollen, and she was left to face this alone.

On days like today, when the exhaustion threatened to overtake her, she would tell herself with a dash of pride, "You did it, girl, all by yourself. Who needs a man?" Today, a small voice answered her, "Ben needs a father." Rebecca felt a pinprick of doubt as she'd wondered if she'd done the right thing by having the baby. Picking up the blue baby album lying on the coffee table, she flipped through it and her doubts vanished. After nine months carrying him in her womb, and one month of loving him in the flesh, she couldn't picture her life without him.

As she flipped the pages of the album, she relived every moment, from his prenatal ultra-sound snapshots, to his birth certificate, even the tiny bracelet he wore at the hospital. She wanted everything ready for the day her parents would forgive her for shaming them and agree to see Ben.

Right now, all she needed was some sleep. Just a few uninterrupted hours were all she asked; a week's worth would be nice. Ben would wake soon and she'd have to become super mommy, fast on her feet to get to him, able to clean poopy diapers without barfing, and continuously pump out an endless supply of milk.

She put the album back on the table and rolled over, searching for a comfortable spot on the sofa. Rebecca noticed one of Ben's stuffed bears on the floor. She picked it up, brought it to her face, and inhaled. Ben's soft baby powder scent filled her heart and soul with contentment. Pulling the bear to her chest, she nestled down in the cushions and fell asleep.

* * * *

Jake parked the Explorer outside the small house. From the way Trey had talked about the woman, he'd expected to be sitting outside a trailer on the other side of the railroad tracks of their small central Louisiana town.

But the address was in the older, historic section in the heart of town where spreading oak trees and huge magnolias lined the streets. The white wooden house had dark blue shutters and brick red trim, and, like most of the houses in the neighborhood, it was raised off the ground about three feet. Azalea bushes marched along the freshly painted white picket fence and white camellias stood guard on either side of the wide front porch steps.

With his hand on the door of the car, Jake took a deep breath. Damn, this was going to be hard. Explaining himself meant exposing his secret, something he never did unless it was necessary. Only three people who weren't werewolves knew of his family's secret. Hazel, his secretary was one. She'd worked for his dad for over twenty years and was a trusted family friend. Jake's best friend from high school, Barker Sims, was another. Barker, a cop on the town force, was a good friend to have when you're a werewolf with a brother who loves to skirt the law. And their priest, Father Peter, had watched over the McCallans for almost sixty years.

Now, Jake might have to expose himself to an innocent dragged into their world by his reckless brother. Not just reckless, Trey had a cruel streak. Sure, he could be

charming when it served him, but underneath, he was just bad. Ever since Trey made his first change at thirteen he'd abused his newfound powers even though their father had explained the responsibilities of being a werewolf. Ignoring Dad, Trey decided whatever Trey wanted, Trey got.

Jake got out and stood on the sidewalk. *Stop stalling, it's not going to get easier.* Walking to the gate, he went through and trotted up the porch steps to the front door. Taking another deep breath, he knocked and waited. The house was silent. He knocked again.

A woman in her late twenties opened the door, hugging a blue teddy bear to her chest. Her dark auburn hair was pulled up in a ponytail and part of it had fallen out to hang down one side of her face, partially cloaking sleepy, deep green eyes, full lips, and delicate features. Trey was right about one thing. She was sweet.

"Excuse me, are you Rebecca Miller?"

She stared up at him. He could tell she was deciding if she should slam the door on him or scream. It wasn't his looks, he was well aware of his good looks. He was also aware that at six feet three inches and two hundred and twenty pounds, he could intimidate people.

"Yes, I am. Who are you?" Shifting her weight, she dropped the hand holding the bear to one round hip and managed to look as if he didn't intimidate her at all.

"You don't know me but I'm Jake McCallan."

Her eyes grew wide and then narrowed. Instead of speaking, she stood in the doorway as still as a statue.

"My brother is Trey." Her steady stare made him self-conscious. Jake looked down at his work boots, frowned, and then looked into her eyes. Deep woods, cool shade and cold, clear streams spun in his mind's eye.

"What do you want?" She angled herself in the doorway in a useless attempt to block access. Jake was capable of kicking down any door.

"I'm here about the baby. Can I speak to you about this? Inside?"

Her heated gaze traveled up and down the length of his body. He gave her his most innocent smile, the lop-sided one he always used on his mom when he was a kid. It must still be working, because she stepped back and let him in.

"Thank you, Ms. Miller."

"Call me Rebecca." She walked over to a gliding chair and sat, indicating he should sit on the couch. The blue bear found a seat in her lap.

Lucky bear.

In the closed room, her scent hit him full on. Female musk blended with another scent, making the hair on the back of his neck stand up and take notice. Milk. She must be lactating. Christ, the combination was heady. His nostrils flared as he drank her in like a fine wine, swallowed hard, and then brought himself under control.

"Rebecca, my brother Trey is many things, most of them no good," he said. "I can't begin to tell you how upset I am about this."

"Look, if you think I'm going to file a lawsuit or ask for child support, forget it. I don't want anything to do with Trey, you, or your family, Mr. McCallan." Her hands rested on the arms of the chair as she glided back and forth. She looked regal, despite the t-shirt and the soft jersey sweat pants she wore. He could have sworn the bear smirked at him.

“I understand. I know the pain and embarrassment he’s caused you.”

“Oh, you do? When did men start having babies? You try squeezing a ten-pound watermelon out your ass, and then talk to me about pain.” Clearly, she had a wicked sense of humor. “As for embarrassment, I hardly think you have any concept of the depths one can reach.”

“I assure you that—”

“Do you know how many times you have to answer the question married or unmarried when you fill out medical forms? I’ve lost count. Furthermore, I doubt everyone you or your brother has met over the last nine months knows that...” She held up a finger. “One, you slept with a man. Two, he knocked you up. Three, he deserted you.” The three fingers curled down to join the others in a tight fist. She stood and the bear fell to the floor. Turning her back to him, she looked out of the window. “And I doubt you had to stand in front of your parents and tell them you got knocked up during a drunken one-night stand.”

What could he say to that? Jake stared at the bear on the floor. Something tried to surface to the front of this brain, but it slipped away.

“I only found out about this yesterday, Rebecca.”

“Trey just told you? Odd.” She turned to look at him.

“What?” Jake sat forward.

“I told him I was pregnant three months before I had the baby. Haven’t heard from him since.”

Swiping his hand through his hair, Jake muttered under his breath. “That bastard.”

“Are you talking about your brother or my baby?” Her green eyes blazed.

“My brother.” He swore, brother or not, if he ever saw Trey again, he’d kill him.

“Just what do you want?” She folded her arms underneath her full breasts.

He couldn’t help but notice her narrow waist and round hips. His animal back brain told him with her lovely hips and those full breasts she could have many pups. Christ, what was he thinking? It had to be her scent. It filled the room, muddled his thinking, stirring long dormant desires. Driving him crazy. He had to leave before it was too late.

“Is it a boy or girl?”

“A boy.”

Jake gave himself a mental slap to the side of his head. Of course, the blue bear. Blue is for boys.

“I named him Benjamin Wells Miller.” She tilted her chin up, defying him to say something, yet exposing the soft stretch of throat to him. He longed to run his tongue up it, taste her skin, feel the heat of her body, the beat of her heart beneath his lips.

“Not McCallan?” He wasn’t sure if his disappointment was because it was a boy or because the child didn’t carry his family name. The child was a McCallan.

“No. Don’t worry. There is no evidence who the father is.” She said it with such distaste it triggered a surge of possessiveness in him.

“There is *nothing* wrong with the McCallan name, just my brother,” he snapped. For a second, her gaze flickered, giving him a glimpse of her vulnerability and something deep inside him tugged hard. He softened his voice. “I don’t care about evidence, Rebecca. I just want to know if there is anything I can do to help you.”

She lowered herself into the chair, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Help? You mean buy me off, don’t you? I know you McCallans own half this town, half the

land in the parish, and you probably run it, too. But you aren't going to own me or my son." Her eyes flashed at him, making her even more beautiful. He suppressed a groan of desire, but couldn't do a damn thing about his erection. "And you won't run me out of this town either."

"It's not like that. I don't want—" He couldn't finish. How could he explain? Just come right out and say "Your son is going to be a werewolf"? No, it was too soon.

Besides, would she even believe him or think he was insane? It was a hard story to swallow unless you saw it for yourself and he wasn't ready to do that, not unless it was absolutely necessary.

Regardless of what she wanted, this child was going to be a werewolf and had to be prepared for it from the time he was six until puberty, just as the last four generations of McCallans had been. Without the training to help him change into his wolf form and back to human, the boy would probably die the very first time or be trapped forever as a wolf.

If she kept him from the pack, he'd grow up rogue, and a wolf without a pack to guide him, to teach him how and when to use his power, was a danger to everyone around him, including other wolves. For the common good, they were to be eliminated.

As Alpha, it was his duty to their pack to keep them safe.

Death now or death later? Dear God, how could he make that horrible decision?

"I just want to help you and Benjamin." He wanted to pull her to him, keep her safe, protect her and her child.

"I think you'd better leave, Mr. McCallan." She stood and so did Jake.

"Perhaps you're right." He headed towards the door, but each step he took farther from her only increased this need that burned like fire in his blood.

Too many thoughts bombarded his brain and he didn't like any of them. Trey's harsh words echoed. *Kill them.* Trey would throw the pack rules in his face, placing Jake between his duty to the pack and his morals as a man. Jake stomped the thought, grinding it into sawdust on the floor of his mind.

Next up in the path of his mental buzz saw was the overwhelming urge to mate with this woman. His erection, an unwilling captive behind the zipper of his jeans, throbbed with his building hunger for her.

Jake fought his raging desire. He'd never wanted a woman this badly. The hackles on his neck had risen along with his cock and his body quivered as he inhaled her delicious scent. It called to him, reaching into somewhere deep and wild in his brain. He wanted to howl as he covered her with his body and mated with her.

He was truly crazy if he thought that was ever going to happen. His brother had drugged her and had sex with her. There was no way, seeing the look of hatred in her eyes when she spoke the McCallan name, she'd ever let him near her.

"Mr. McCallan?" Her voice triggered something in him, called to his wolf.

Fists clenched, he was almost to the door, but the urge to change ramped up, too damn strong. It coursed through his blood, pounding in his body. The air around him began to vibrate. He had to get out of there. Now.

"Mr. McCallan, is something wrong?"

Reaching for the doorknob, he closed his eyes tight as every muscle in his body strained to change and every bit of his mind ordered his body not to. A war raged between instinct and reason and he had no idea how to stop it or which would win. He'd never had such a fierce reaction to any circumstance or any woman and that was more

frightening than the thought of changing in front of her.

“Mr. McCallan? Jake!” Rebecca’s voice cut through his thoughts as her hand touched his arm. He tried to jerk away, afraid her skin would sear his, but instead of igniting the fire, her touch soothed him, doused the inferno, and brought him under control.

Amazed, he turned to her and opened his eyes.

She looked up at him, green eyes wide, as her hand rested on his forearm. Through the soft t-shirt, the curve of her full breasts, nipples like hard points, tempted him. She bit her bottom lip and held her breath, waiting, as if captured by the same fire as he.

Jake cupped her face with his hand. She didn’t jerk away. His thumb eased her bottom lip from her teeth’s bite and then brushed against it in the lightest caress. She trembled.

“I have to go now,” was all Jake could manage to say.

Nodding, her eyebrows furrowed downward and her gaze searched his. He caressed the softness of her cheek with his fingertips, then opened the door and left.

Jake strode down the walk and got into the truck. He stared out through the windshield, his hands clutching the wheel, as he collected his thoughts and his control. Christ, she must be thinking he was out of his mind or he’d had some sort of fit. Well, that was better than the truth, wasn’t it?

The truth? That was for another day.

Chapter Two

Shutting the door, Rebecca leaned against it and let out the breath she'd been holding.

What the hell had just happened?

Walking to the couch, she sat and replayed the events. At first, everything was normal. Well, almost normal. Okay, not normal at all. Frightening, really.

When she'd opened the door and saw the man standing there, every erogenous zone on her body caught fire. Keeping her mind focused on their conversation and her eyes off his body had been difficult.

How could a man look so delicious in blue jeans? She'd never felt such a strong pull towards any man, much less a complete stranger and she knew that if he'd taken her into his arms she would have gone without question.

And boy, did *that* scare her.

But not as much as when McCallan began to leave. Something happened. There had been a vibration in the air that set off some sort of harmonic resonance in her body as if someone had turned on a vibrator and held it to her most private place.

She'd been exhilarated. Aroused.

Jake McCallan. She couldn't deny her body's reaction to him. Jake had taken her breath away, pure and simple, on the very first look. Dark brown wavy hair, worn just a tad too long, fell carelessly over his forehead. Eyes the color of milk chocolate and full lips set in a rugged square jaw with a have-mercy, honest-to-God cleft in his chin.

Then he'd told her who he was and she'd deflated as the air in her lungs escaped in a long, slow, silent hiss.

This was Trey's brother? They had the same look about them, even the cleft, but Trey was shorter, slighter in build and had blue eyes.

She remembered him from that night at the Roadhouse. It was a honky-tonk kind of place, but her best friend Vicki had insisted it was where she'd wanted to celebrate her birthday. There'd been a pitcher of beer on the table, and Rebecca would have sworn she had no more than two glasses.

Trey had strutted over to the table, introduced himself, and then waited for their reaction, as if they were going to throw themselves at his feet. She couldn't deny he was good looking, but she just didn't like his cocky attitude. And, for her, he certainly didn't set off any bells, whistles, or vibrations. In fact, she'd felt nothing, not even a glimmer of attraction towards him.

Yet, two hours later, she'd left the bar with him. She remembered unlocking the door to her house and letting him inside. The next morning, she'd woken up alone in bed with no memory of what had happened. Eight weeks later, she'd huddled on the floor of her bathroom with Vicki as they waited for the stick to turn pink.

One McCallan had changed her life, but she couldn't in all honesty say he'd destroyed it. Not when she looked at her sleeping son, so tiny, so beautiful. Was Trey even aware of the gift he'd given her or what he'd so readily abandoned?

Now another McCallan had walked into her life. She couldn't help but wonder what effect this brother would have on her. If she were smart, she'd run in the other direction.

As she sat on the couch, Rebecca realized her panties were ridiculously wet. All Jake had done was touch her face with his hand, stroke her lip with his calloused thumb and her knees had almost buckled. Then he was out the door, leaving her aching for his touch and wondering about the taste of his mouth.

“Snap out of it, Becca! That is so not going to happen.” She spoke so loud she cringed. Tilting her head to the side, she listened, but there was only the silence of the house. Rebecca puffed her breath upward, ruffling a thick lock of hair that had fallen over her face and then she curled up on her side.

Being smart was the right thing to do.

She would never see Jake McCallan ever again.

* * * *

Jake drove all the way to his house without really being aware of the road. On auto-pilot, he swung the Explorer off the highway and had driven through the iron gates before he noticed where he was.

Damn. She had him so muddled.

He drove down the long driveway towards the large mansion Caleb McCallan, his great-grandfather, built just before the turn of the century, when he made his fortune on the dense pine timber forests of Central and North Louisiana.

The three-story red brick house had a central building and two wings projecting off from either side. It always reminded Jake of a large schoolhouse. Now only he and his mother lived there, she in the west wing, first floor and he in the east wing, second floor. Trey, when he came home from LSU, had the west wing, second floor. The entire third floor was empty.

Empty. That summed up the house now. Once built to hold three generations of McCallan werewolf families. It had been a pack united under Jake’s grandfather, then his father, and now, him. Trey was right. There was no pack, no family bounding with pups, seated around their large dining table, sharing food, laughter, and love.

Days long gone. Jake despaired of ever seeing those days return. He drove around the back and parked in the detached garage next to his mother’s Cadillac. Carrying his laptop in a backpack, he went up the steps of the large raised bluestone patio to the back door.

Entering the kitchen, he closed the door behind him, inhaled deeply, and savored the aroma. Dinner was cooking in the oven and two places were set at the kitchen table.

“Mom!”

“In the study, Jake.” Her voice carried from the other room.

Jake carried the backpack into the study and laid it on a chair. Caroline McCallan sat at the desk nearly hidden behind the flat screen of a computer. She looked over the rim of her teacup as he turned to face her. As she took in the scowl on his face, her smile faded.

“What’s going on?”

“We need to talk.”

“Business?” She sat back in the large chair and cocked her head as her sharp blue eyes took in her oldest child.

“No. Trey.” Jake fell into a chair on the other side of the desk and ran his hand through his hair. His fists caught up locks of his dark hair, tugged on them, and then let them go.

“What now?” She didn’t hide the irritation in her voice.

Jake leaned forward and clasped his hands together. “First let me say, Trey told me about this today, but it seems he’s known about it for over three months.” Taking a deep breath, he continued, “Trey got a local girl pregnant.” His mother’s eyebrows shot up and she opened her mouth to speak, but he held up his hand to stop her. “She’s had the baby. It’s a boy.”

“Go on, there’s more, isn’t there?” Caroline’s voice held steady, but he could see her hand trembled as she brought the cup of tea to her lips and sipped.

“Yes. He drugged her. Put something in her drink. She has no idea what Trey is, other than an utter bastard, or what the baby will be.”

He watched as his mother’s eyes closed and her mouth puckered as if she’d sucked on the lemon sitting on the cup’s saucer.

“He told you about this today?” She placed the cup down with such care even his wolf’s ears barely heard the clink of china.

“Yeah. He’s flying to Europe, running away from his responsibilities, as usual. This was the last straw, Mom. I told him not to come back. I don’t want him in my territory, ever.” Jake raised his eyebrows to his mother and waited, unsure of her reaction.

She sat back and folded her arms. “You’re pack leader, Jake, it’s your decision. For my part, I stand with you. This is the worst thing Trey’s ever done. How could he do this to that poor girl?” Sadness and tears filled her soft blue eyes, but she blinked them away. “Thank God, your father isn’t alive. He’d do much worse than kick Trey out.”

“I know. It took everything in me not to change right there in the office and deal with him.”

She rose and came around the table. Placing her hand on his shoulder, she gave it a firm squeeze. “It will all work out, Jake. Now, tell me all about my first grandson!”

“What?” Jake’s head jerked up. His mother grinned from ear to ear as her eyes sparkled.

“My grandson, of course. Did you see him? Did you see the baby? Are they coming to visit?”

It was so like his mother to accept the child and his mother, sight unseen.

“Uh, no, I guess I forgot to ask to see the baby. I met his mother.”

“And?” Caroline crossed her arms, her eyes demanding answers.

“She’s beautiful. Brave. Determined to raise him alone. She practically threw me out, thinking I was trying to buy her silence or pay her off for the baby.” He tried to hide the admiration in his voice, from showing in his eyes.

“Did she, now?” One eyebrow rose just a tad and the corner of her mouth curled up.

“Yeah. Mom, she didn’t give it the McCallan name. Said she didn’t want anyone to know who the father was. No evidence, is what she said.” He frowned and stared at his work boots.

“Does that bother you?”

“Yeah. Like our name isn’t good enough.”

“Or maybe, like *your* name isn’t good enough?” A smile played on her lips.

“What do you mean?” Jake growled, hunching his head down between his shoulders.

“Nothing. You’ll just have to convince her otherwise, I suppose. Call her, or go see her again. In fact, invite her to dinner after church on Sunday.” She walked to the door and turned back, pinning him with her eyes. “I want to see my grandson, Jake.” Then, she

left.

Orders received, Jake gave her a loose salute. He may be pack leader, but she was still his mother. The idea of seeing Rebecca again made his heart race, not to mention the blood pound in his loins. Could he risk another reaction like before?

What if she was the one? His lifemate. And she hated him just for being Trey's brother. Well, if she was his lifemate, then he was hers. That's the way it worked. The female was just as attracted as the male, just as enthralled with the scent of her mate, his taste, and his touch.

He'd touched her lips with his thumb, her face with his hand, but she'd shown no sign of desire for him, just puzzlement for his behavior. At least she hadn't jerked away at his touch. That was good. Wasn't it?

The power had almost exploded out of him at her house and now, like the erection he'd had in her living room, had waned, but was still lurking. If he thought about her much more, he'd be right back to hard and wanting.

What he really needed was to change and run the woods. Afterwards, dinner and a good night's sleep. He'd think about Rebecca tomorrow.

Jake headed to the French doors leading from the study onto the patio outside. Opening the door, he inhaled the scents that wafted in, calling him home. There was no need to undress, whatever he wore before shifting would return when he regained human form.

Closing his eyes, he called his power.

Hair stood up on his skin and the first vibrations signaling the change shot through his body. The power flowed up from his center. The burning roiled outward, encompassing his entire body. He reached flash point, the magic ignited and he began the physical change. For an instant, his face contorted with unbearable pain, then, mercifully it lessened as he took the familiar shape of his other being. His change complete, the pain merely a memory.

The wolf slipped through the open door, trotted across the patio, down the stairs, and headed straight for the woods.

* * * *

Sensing he was alone, the large grey wolf trotted down the narrow path. He'd trod this path both as a boy and as a wolf for as long as he could remember. Following it was as natural to him as breathing. The color of his coat, deep grey with black feet and ears, fading to light grey on his belly, blended into the woods, the perfect camouflage.

He stopped. Sniffing the trunk of a large pine, he smelled the sharp odor, faint, but still there. The wolf gave a small grunt and positioned himself. Lifting his leg, he marked his territory. Even knowing there were no other wolves around, marking was what he'd been trained to do, and out of habit and respect for his father, the wolf trotted down the path to the next marker.

After he'd made his marks, he circled around behind the great house and sat down under a bush. His amber eyes watched as his mother came out, walked to the edge of the patio, put her hand up to block the setting sun, and called for him.

The whistle sounded shrill in the late afternoon air. His ears twitched.

It took him back to when Trey and he were younger and they would play in the forest behind their house, safe in thousands of acres of tall pines. If they could talk him into it,

Dad would chase rabbits with them. They'd learned early to leave the skunks alone and never to underestimate raccoons.

The wolf lay down and cleaned his front paws with his long, black tongue, and tasted the musty remnants of the forest trapped in his fur.

Would he and Trey ever run these woods together again? He was filled with a longing he hadn't felt since his Dad died. It was so easy to imagine a future with Trey, he, and their pups, running the woods and teaching them what they needed to know to be wolves and men.

Those were his dreams, he realized. He'd never asked Trey what his dreams had been. Obviously, they weren't the same. Now he wondered if he'd ever know.

She called to him a second time.

Lowering his head to rest on large black paws, the wolf thought of not going back. What he really wanted was to hunt down a rabbit, kill it, and eat it. Burn off some of the energy firing his blood in that mad, wild, scrambling chase. He wanted, no needed, to mate. Maybe Trey was right, it had been too long since he'd had a woman, but he knew his heat wouldn't be quenched unless it was his mate.

His mom had made meatloaf, one of his favorites. He ran his tongue around his mouth. The wolf rose to all fours and trotted across the lawn to the patio. Pausing at the edge, he placed one large paw on the sun-warmed stone. A nap curled up in the late afternoon sun would be nice but he couldn't risk being seen, not even here. Anyone could pull around back and see him and wolves aren't supposed to exist in Louisiana, unless you count the *rougarou* down in the bayous and everyone knew that was just a legend.

"Are you coming in or not?" She stood in the doorway, folded her arms, and looked down at him with an amused and loving smile.

He stepped onto the patio and followed her into the house.

"Did you leave any bunnies alive in the forest?"

He called the power and his body vibrated as the flame burned inside him. Flash point. Pain. At last, release.

"Don't worry, Mom, Thumper and Bugs are safe. For tonight, anyway." Jake laughed as he slid into his chair and joined his mother at the kitchen table.

* * * *

"I don't know what to do, Vicki." Rebecca took another sip of the latte and grimaced. Too much milk. What she needed was more caffeine. It'd been two days since she'd opened the door to Jake McCallan, and when she wasn't dealing with Ben, she was thinking of Jake. It was eating into her sleep, and she needed sleep a lot more than mooning over some man she'd met once, no matter how he made her feel.

"Did he offer you any money or suggest you leave town?" Her best friend, Vicki, stirred sugar into her black coffee. They were sitting outside the local Starbucks, just a few blocks from Rebecca's house.

"No, nothing like that. In fact, all he said was he wanted to help me." She shrugged. "I shouldn't trust him, Vicki. Not a McCallan."

"Well, if he's anything like his brother, he's bad news. Stay away from him."

"That's just it. He's nothing like his brother. Similar in looks, but bigger. More solid muscle, with these incredible chocolate brown eyes and a deep voice that rumbles."

"Sounds yummy. Wipe up the drool, Becca, and I don't mean on the baby." She

laughed and pointed down at Benjamin, sleeping in his stroller parked at the side of the table, his pacifier moving with his soft sucking.

“There is no drool. None.” Rebecca stuck out her chin to prove it.

“Admit it, you’re attracted to him.”

“Even if I was, and I’m not saying I am, it could never work. His brother is the father of my baby. God,” she groaned. “It sounds like some white trash soap opera, ‘My Baby’s Daddy’s Brother.’”

“Look, when you decided to have Ben and keep him, you knew this was a small town. People talk. You were bound to run across the father sometime and knew it might get messy.” Vicki gave her friend’s hand a quick squeeze.

“Messy? That’s an understatement.”

“Do you think you’ll see him again?”

Rebecca looked at Ben, so peaceful, so angelic, and so small. What would it be like to have a man who loved her? Would another man ever truly accept and love her son as his own? She’d heard all the time about stepfathers hurting the kids they were supposed to care for.

It might not be like that.

Then again, could she risk herself and Ben?

Standing up, she threw her cup in the bin and then unlocked the brakes on the stroller with her foot. “Let’s go. Ben will wake up soon, and I’ll have to feed him. I’d rather do it in private. I’m not that free and easy yet.”

“I understand. I don’t know how some women can just whip out a breast and start nursing right out in front of God and everyone.” Vicki gulped down the last of her coffee and tossed her cup away.

When they reached Rebecca’s house, Vicki got in her car and left. Rebecca backed the stroller up the steps, unlocked the door, and went inside.

Benjamin woke, looked around, and spied her. With a wiggle of his solid little body, a wave of his tiny fist, and a soft coo, he melted her heart. After picking him up, she went to the glider and sat.

“Is my little man hungry?” She unbuttoned her shirt, unhooked her nursing bra, and offered her breast to the baby. After a swipe or two of her nipple on his tiny bow shaped lips, he opened wide. She pulled him in close and he latched on.

With a contented sigh, Rebecca closed her eyes and leaned back, her legs pushing the glider in a steady motion.

Jake McCallan’s face floated in her mind. Smiling, she replayed again the way Jake’s thumb had brushed her lip.

* * * *

“Now, what’s got you so shook up?” Barker looked across the table at his best friend and took a bite of a ketchup-laden French fry.

“It’s Trey.” Jake let out a huge sigh.

“What else is new?” Barker rolled his eyes. “Look, I know you have all these hopes of him straightening up and joining you in that big-ass house of yours, wives and pups everywhere, but you’re going to have to face reality. He’s no good.” Barker knew his words were harsh and he knew Jake’s hopes, but damn it, he knew Trey, too. It would take a miracle for that man to face the right direction much less do the right thing.

“This time, he’s done it. I put him out. Told him never to come back.” Jake looked like the time in sixth grade when they’d found his dog dead by the side of the highway. Jake had sucked in his cheeks hard to keep from bawling like a baby.

“It’s about time. What did he do?” Another French fry disappeared.

“He got a woman pregnant.”

Barker sat back and whistled. “Damn. He knows better than to do that.”

“It’s worse. He used some drug on her,” Jake lowered his voice to a whisper.

“I haven’t seen an arrest warrant on him. Has she filed charges?” Barker slipped into cop mode. In his crisp black and tan uniform, being a cop was as natural as breathing for Barker.

“No. She thought she was drunk and I think she feels responsible. She’s gone through this all alone. She’s had the baby, a boy, and she’s determined to make it on her own, without McCallan help.” There was such open admiration in Jake’s voice that Barker began to think.

“What are you going to do?” Barker swirled a fry through a mound of ketchup.

“What do you mean? I just told you she won’t accept my help.”

Barker looked at his best friend. “That’s not what I’m talking about, boss.” He pointed to Jake with the French fry. “First, you have to tell her what really happened to her that night. Second, encourage her to file charges and take some control back.”

“Right. Good idea.” Jake nodded, leaning forward to take in his friend’s instructions.

“Third, you have to tell her how you feel about her.” Barker popped the fry in his mouth, stretched his arm over the back of the booth, and grinned.

“Feel about her? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jake growled.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Don’t pull that innocent crap with me, Jake. I’ve known you too damn long. I can hear it in your voice when you talk about her and you have that goofy look, like the time in high school when you got hit with a football right between the eyes.” He chuckled. “I also know it’s about time for you to find her.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Your lifemate. You may be trying to deny it, but when was the last time you and I hit the Roadhouse for some action?”

Jake shrugged and took a bite of his burger, making a big show of chewing, but that wasn’t going to stop Barker.

“Used to be, you and I would go out, drink a few beers, shoot pool and pick up girls. Ever since you turned thirty, I’ve had to listen to all the lame excuses why you can’t go. Admit it. You’ve been hiding, afraid you’ll find her.”

Jake sat up and frowned. “What if I have? So what! It didn’t do much good. In fact, it couldn’t be any worse. She’s had Trey’s son, not mine, and because of him and his carelessness, she doesn’t want anything to do with the McCallans.” His fists clenched and his burger was crushed in the grip. He dropped it on the plate and began snatching paper napkins from the dispenser to clean off his fingers.

Barker laughed. “Oh, boss, you’ve got it bad. It’s her, right?”

“It’s her. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced. Dad always told us it would be strong, but I never realized how strong, how fast, or the depth of the feelings.” Jake looked as if he were treading water in the river, going down for the third time, and Barker was on the bank with a rope. “Now, she’s all I think about.”

“Damn, Jake. It’s that bad?”

“You have no idea of the intensity.”

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve had some pretty intense sex.” Barker laid his other arm on the back of the bench and flashed his own wolfish smile.

“Not like this. I touched her once, that’s all.” He let out a great sigh filled with want and need and despair. “Did you ever want to claim a woman as yours from the first moment you saw her?”

“No.” Barker snorted and shook his head.

“And all you think about is making babies with this woman, making a home?”

“Hell no!” Barker twisted his face as if he’d stepped in something dark and lumpy. “You know me better than that. Under the dictionary for non-commitment is my picture.”

“Then you don’t understand. When and if you ever have those feelings about a woman, grab her, marry her, and never let her go.”

“I can’t just fuck her and be done with it?” His mouth curved in a cocky smile.

Jake shook his head. “You can try, but it won’t work, you’ll be lost.”

“Is that how you feel about this woman?”

Jake nodded and groaned. “And I haven’t even kissed her.”

“Must be one hell of a hard-on.” Barker smirked.

“Yeah, I can’t begin to tell you how many times—” The squawk of Barker’s radio interrupted Jake. Barker held up a hand as he listened to the receiver clipped to the shoulder of his uniform.

“Got to go. Duty calls.” He stood, tossed some bills on the table, and began to leave. Stopping, he turned back. “Hey, what’s her name?”

“Rebecca Miller.”

“If she wants to press charges, and I think she should, have her come down to the station and I’ll handle it for her. Give her some privacy.”

“Thanks, Barker. You’re the best. Thanks for listening to an old dog.” Jake held out his hand. They shook and Barker headed for his patrol car parked outside the diner.

*

Jake looked at the mangled remains of his burger and pushed the plate away.

Now all he had to figure out was how to tell Rebecca about the drug Trey had used on her. And the truth about her son. And that he was her lifemate.

Where should he start?

Whenever his dad had caught him and Trey in trouble, he’d told them “Always start with the truth, no matter how awful.”

Christ, this was awful.

Chapter Three

“Hazel, get me Rebecca Miller on the phone.”

Jake sat back and chewed the end of his pen as he waited for the call to go through. He’d put it off too long. This morning, his mother had reminded him to invite Rebecca and the baby to supper on Sunday.

He still hadn’t made up his mind when to tell her about her son and what he’d inherited from the McCallan gene pool, but he knew he needed to tell her about Trey as soon as possible. However, if he told her before Sunday, she might never let his mother see the baby. If he told her after Sunday, she’d know he held off telling her in order to see the baby.

Rock, meet hard place.

“Jake, she’s on the line,” Hazel’s voice came over the intercom.

He snatched up the phone. “Hello. This is Jake McCallan. We met the other day.”

“I remember you, Mr. McCallan. What’s this about?” Wariness edged her warm alto voice.

“We need to talk, Rebecca.” *I need to see you.*

“I have nothing to say to you, McCallan. I told you that last time.”

“I don’t want anything from you.” He sighed. “That’s not true. My mother wants you to come to supper Sunday afternoon. She wants to meet you and see the baby.”

Silence. Rebecca cleared her throat. “She wants to see the baby?” Rebecca sounded as if she didn’t believe him.

“It’s her first grandson. This is a big deal in our family.” How could he explain without going into everything and having her think he was insane?

“I have to think about it.”

“It would mean the world to my mom.” He licked his lips, knowing there was more he needed to say. “Also, I’d like to talk to you about Trey, and that night.”

“You have all the facts you need to know, Mr. McCallan.” Better. Now he was Mr. McCallan.

“Call me Jake. Please.” He wanted to hear her say his name. “It’s you who doesn’t have all the facts.”

“What do you mean?” Now he had her interest.

“I don’t want to talk about this over the phone. Look, can we meet? At your house, if it’s convenient?”

“What time?”

“What time is best for you?”

“Be here at four. Ben should be down for a nap by then.”

“Thank you, Rebecca.”

Without another word, she hung up. Jake let out a huge breath and slumped back in his chair. Two hours until he saw her again.

Picking up the orders sitting in a stack on his desk, he began to sort through them. He had plenty of work to do to keep his mind occupied until then.

* * * *

Jake ran his hand through his hair, took a deep breath, and knocked. Rebecca opened the door. Damn, she looked so good. Her auburn hair fell loose and soft around her shoulders. Jeans hugged her hips and a camisole top bared just enough skin to make him want to lick every inch of her he could get his hands on.

Feeling his heart pound, he stepped inside, bracing himself. It was useless. Her scent hit him, and his loins reacted.

She motioned to the couch and then sat in her glider. She was too far away. He needed to be next to her, touching her. Taking a deep breath, he regained his control.

“Now, what do I need to know?” She crossed her legs. Everything about her called to him, even the sandal that dangled off her toes drove him crazy.

“This is difficult, Rebecca, but it has to be told. You deserve the truth.” He looked at her, fighting the image of her in Trey’s arms. It was too painful. “Trey used some sort of drug that night. He put it in your drink.”

Her eyes narrowed and she looked as if she were far away. Going over the events, he assumed. Her mouth formed a perfect O as the realization hit her. Glaring at him, her hands clutched the arms of the glider as she struggled with this new knowledge.

“He drugged me.” Her voice was flat.

“Yes.” Jake licked his lips and waited for her to say the words he knew were coming.

“He drugged me.” Much stronger this time. “That bastard.”

“Yes.” Jake sighed and hung his head, ashamed his brother had done this horrible thing, and that he had to be the one to tell her. He prayed she wouldn’t shoot the messenger.

“I wasn’t drunk.” She ran her hand over her face and sat back.

Jake shook his head. “No, you weren’t. It wasn’t your fault. It was all Trey.”

She looked down into her lap. Her tongue did a slow pass over her bottom lip.

“Where is he?” She looked up, determination shining in her eyes. “I want to see him.” Her knuckles went white under the grasp of her fingers on the arms of the chair.

“I understand. However, typical of my brother, he’s fled. Left the country.”

“Fled?” She looked stunned.

“Yes. To Europe. I have no idea for how long.”

Rebecca met his eyes and held him in her stare. “What do you want from me?”

“To file charges against him.” Jake sighed.

“You want me to file charges against your own brother?”

“Yes. I spoke to a friend of mine. He’s a cop. He said he’d help you with all the forms, with as much privacy as you need. Everyone, including my mother, believes Trey should be brought to justice.”

“What charges?” She cocked her head to the side and narrowing her eyes.

“Well, rape for a start. Assault. I’m not sure what else Barker can dig up, but it’s a beginning.”

“Rape.” She licked her lips and sat back. For a moment, her eyes closed. “No. Just assault.”

“But, he drugged you. Had sex without your consent. That’s rape in anybody’s book.” Jake could barely keep his anger in check.

“I won’t have my son finding out he was a product of a rape.”

“What?” This came out of left field and hit Jake between the eyes. “What?”

“Think of it. It would be public record. Benjamin would eventually find out. How

would he feel?"

"He'll find out anyway."

"No, just you and I know." She shook her head.

"And Trey, Barker and my mom."

"Can they keep a secret?" She leaned forward, her green eyes pinning him in place.
"Will they keep it?"

"Yes. If you're sure it's what you want to do."

"It is. Trey is Ben's father. However, there is no proof. His name isn't on the birth certificate. I'll deny it, if I have to. And I'm sure the last thing Trey wants to do is to prove he's the father."

"To protect Ben."

"To protect Ben." She nodded.

"I have to respect your decision. Even if I don't agree." He sat back, knowing there was no point in arguing with her. Like his mother, Rebecca was determined and stubborn.

"Tell your mother thank you for the invitation, but I can't possibly come. It might be construed as admitting paternity." She began to glide back and forth.

Jake felt his stomach clench. The boy wouldn't have the McCallan name, just the god-awful legacy. Jake's mother wasn't going to get the chance to see her grandson. Despite everything, Jake's loyalty lay with Rebecca and Ben.

"It's going to kill my mom not being able to see him." Jake gave it one more try.

"I'm sorry. Really." She stood up. The audience was over.

Jake stood and moved to the door. "Rebecca, please think this over."

"Goodbye, Jake." She held out her hand.

As he slid his hand into hers, he knew it was a mistake. Looking into her eyes, Jake rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand, feeling the softness of her skin.

Rebecca's pupils went wide and dark. She didn't jerk her hand away, but let him touch her. Her breasts rose and fell with her deep breathing.

"Jake." Her voice was so soft he could barely hear her.

"Rebecca. Please." His other hand reached for her, cupped her face.

She rested her head against his palm and closed her eyes.

Jake leaned in, unable to stop himself. He focused on her lush lips.

Rebecca blinked and pulled away. "Goodbye, Jake." Her hand dropped from his, breaking contact.

Feeling as if he'd been socked in the gut, Jake stepped back. "Rebecca. Can I see you again?" The words were out of his mouth before he could think about it.

For a moment, his hopes rose. Her eyes softened and the edges of her mouth began to curl in a smile. Then a curtain of sadness fell, along with his hopes.

"That wouldn't be a good idea." She shook her head. "Bye."

The door closed, shutting Jake out again.

* * * *

Sitting at the head of the kitchen table, Jake took a bite of his sandwich. He'd fixed a po'boy, French bread stacked high with thick slices of rare roast beef and slathered with brown spicy mustard. A cold bottle of Abita beer stood next to his plate.

The back door opened and his mother stepped inside.

Jake stopped in mid-bite. "You're back late."

“I was with Leon Wong.” She took off her jacket and put it on the back of a chair. Pulling it out, she sat down next to Jake.

“The retired physics professor?” Jake knew his mom was seeing the man, and was fine with it; his dad had been dead for ten years, at least.

“That’s right.”

“Nice man.” He took a swig of beer.

“Glad you approve.” She grinned at him.

“Mom. Anyone you pick has got to be just fine.”

Leaning back, she looked at her son as he took another bite of the sandwich.

“What’s the problem, Jake?”

“I messed up with Rebecca. I told her about Trey using drugs on her. When I suggested that she file rape charges she refused. Said she didn’t want Ben to find out his father had raped her. Didn’t want him ever to know who his father was. Said she’d deny it was Trey.”

“Really?” His mom seemed to take in that information and chew it over.

“She won’t be coming for supper on Sunday.”

“Well, I guess not.” She placed her hands on his arm. “I’m sorry, Jake. Don’t worry. She’ll come around. She has to. Ben needs her to and even though she doesn’t know it yet, she needs you.”

Jake looked into his mom’s smiling face. Damn, did everyone know how he felt? Was it that obvious?

“I can’t stop thinking about her, Mom.”

“And if it’s anything like when I first met your dad, Rebecca can’t stop thinking about you either.” She gave his arm a squeeze. Standing, she brushed a lock of his hair from his brow. “If this is her, your lifemate, it will happen. You’ve touched. Marked each other. She’s yours, whether she admits it or not.”

“Was it like that with you and Dad?” He knew it had been, but he loved to hear her talk about his father.

“Your father was magnificent. So tall and steady. Confident, yet never cocky. You’re so much like him, Jake. The first time I saw him, I couldn’t keep my eyes off him. I knew right away I was meant to be with him. But he fought it. Said he was too young to settle down.” Jake saw the tenderness of the memory in her eyes.

“But he did.”

“He kissed me. End of story.” She shrugged.

“I knew it too, the first time I saw her,” he said.

“Give her time. It’s a lot to take, all at once. Her life’s been turned upside down, and her hormones are all over the place.”

“From me?”

“From having a baby, Jake.” She laughed.

“Oh, right. Thanks for talking, Mom.” Jake stood and kissed her cheek. Taking his plate and empty beer bottle, he cleaned up.

“Any time, son.” She left and went to her rooms.

* * * *

Rebecca was daydreaming and it was eight o’clock at night. There she was, lost in thoughts of Jake as she pushed Ben’s stroller down the sidewalk on her nightly stroll to

the coffee shop. He had his big plastic keys in his tight little fist, banging it on the side of the stroller in feeble attempts to get it in his mouth.

“How’s it going, son?” She kept a steady stream of chatter up as they went along.

“Look at the car, Ben.”

“Hear that. It’s a dog. Dog. *Ruff ruff.*”

Ben cooed.

“Do you want a double espresso this time, big guy?”

The keys rattled as his fist shook them.

“No? How about some *au lait* when we get home?”

They were coming to the cross walk. She stopped and waited for the light to change. Across the two-way street, the café waited. Three tables with chairs sat on the sidewalk outside. An older couple sat at a table, a dog beside them.

“Look, there’s a dog.” She pointed to the yellow lab stretched out on the ground between the chairs. “Dogs go ruff, ruff. Or bow wow.” She giggled.

The light changed and pushing the stroller, she stepped off the curb.

Halfway down the block, a dark pickup with no lights on pulled out of a parking spot.

“Look out!” The man at the table shouted at her.

Rebecca’s head turned. A black shape, a blur, headed towards her and the baby. For a second, she froze. Then she bolted forward, pushing the stroller ahead of her trying to save Ben.

She stumbled, let go of the stroller and dove forward. The truck sped past, just missing her. The roar of the engine rumbled in her chest as a rush of wind and the smell of hot exhaust fumes hit her.

“Ben!”

Climbing to her knees, she brushed her hair out of her face and looked for the stroller. It rested against the far curb and the woman from the table leaned over it.

The man rushed to her. “Are you all right?”

“How’s my baby?” She sat back on her heels and pushed her hair out of her face.

“He’s fine, honey.” Welcome reassurance and a warm smile from the woman.

“Take it easy, missy.” The older gentleman helped her to stand. “Your knees are skinned up pretty badly.”

Rebecca limped to the sidewalk and inspected Ben. He seemed just fine. The keys were still tight in his grasp. However, her hands burned. She looked down at them. Angry red scrapes on her palms throbbed and both her knees were bloody.

Touching her chin, she wiped away blood.

“What a mess,” she muttered.

The woman held up a cell phone. “I’m calling the cops, honey. That driver nearly killed you. I’ll just bet he’s drunk as a skunk.” She shook her head.

“Come sit down, missy.” The man led her to the table and pulled out a chair.

One of the baristas came out. “I saw what happened from the window. Can I get you anything?”

“Maybe just some water, please.” Shaking, Rebecca sank into the chair.

In the near distance, she heard the siren of the police car. Flashing blue and red lights cut the night. The cop car pulled up and double-parked in front of the café.

“Are you all right, miss?” The officer was out of the vehicle and at her side in a few

long strides.

“We saw it all, Sergeant,” the older man said. “The pickup pulled out, hell bent, and almost ran her and the baby over.”

The cop turned to Rebecca, took out his notebook, and held his pen ready. “Let me take some information from you. What’s your name?”

“Rebecca Miller.”

The cop stared at her as if she’d grown an extra head. He swallowed and then wrote her name down. “Excuse me, miss. I need to make a call.”

Rebecca watched as he stepped to the side of his car, pulled out his cell phone and punched in some numbers, then waited as the number rang.

* * * *

Jake tried to keep from speeding, but the needle on the speedometer kept inching up. As he hit town, he dropped down to thirty-five. He was sure he could have shifted to wolf form and run faster to her than drive the truck at this slow speed. Not a good idea.

Telling himself to calm down, Barker had things under control, he eased his foot off the pedal. The corner was coming up. He saw the cruiser parked in the street. No ambulance.

Thank you, God.

Jake let out a deep breath, pulled into a space and parked. He got out and trotted over to the corner. There was a small crowd of people standing outside the café.

Spotting Barker’s cap above the crowd, he gave a soft whistle. Barker’s head swung up, he spotted him, and mouthed, “She’s all right.” Jake’s heart, pumping with adrenaline, slowed down only a little.

Pushing through the crowd, he stood at the edge of the circle. Rebecca held the baby in her arms. At first glance, they both looked good. Then Jake noticed her torn pants, bloody knees, and the scrape on her chin.

Rage seethed in him at who had done this and at himself. He should have been here. He should have protected her. Somehow. It was insane, he knew it, but it was how he felt.

Rebecca looked up and their gazes met. For a moment, he froze, unsure whether to go to her or stay back.

She bit her trembling lip.

“Jake.” The need in her voice propelled him forward.

She stepped into his arms as he engulfed her and the baby. Jake rested his chin on her head as she wrapped one arm around his body. The baby lay nestled between them.

“Rebecca, baby. I should have been here.” He was still kicking himself for not protecting her. She was his mate and he’d failed her.

“It was just an accident. I’m all right. Just a little scraped up. And Ben’s perfectly fine. See?” She leaned away from his body and lifted her son up for him to see.

The child looked up at him. Jake got a glimpse of soft brown wisps of hair, deep blue eyes, and rosy cheeks, before she pulled the baby back to her chest.

“He looks like an angel.” Jake couldn’t hide the awe in his voice. “He’s so beautiful.” He wanted to see more of the child, wanted to hold him, but Rebecca snuggled back into Jake’s embrace, sighed, and then stepped away. Jake felt the distance between them yawn as cold and empty as a canyon. All he wanted was her back in his arms, giving warmth to his life.

“How did you know about the accident?”

Jake jerked his head at Barker. The big cop stepped up.

“This is Barker Sims. My best friend. We’ve known each other since junior high.”

Jake gave Barker a grateful smile.

“When I heard your name, I knew I had to report in to the boss.” Barker laughed.

“You’re the cop at the station Jake wanted me to talk to, right?”

“That’s right. I’m still available, whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks. I’m still thinking about it.” She turned to Jake. “You really do run this town, huh?”

“No, it’s not like that. Not at all. Barker was just being a friend. He knows how I…”
Jake stopped. “That I’d want to know about this.”

“I want to go home now. I need to clean up and get the baby down for the night,”
Rebecca said.

“I’ll walk you home, or do you want me to drive you in my truck?” Jake pointed
down the street.

“You don’t have a car seat. I’ll walk. It’s just around the corner and down the block.
Is there anything else you need from me, Officer?” She turned back to Barker.

“No. And call me Barker. You’re family.” He grinned.

She looked from man to man and then sighed. “I just want to go home.”

“Right. I’ll call you later, Barker.” Jake gave him a look that said, “Count on it.”

“That would be a good idea.” The big cop turned to the crowd. “It’s over, folks.
Everyone go on your way.” He shooed them off, went back to his patrol car, got in,
switched off the lights, and sat there working on paperwork.

“Thanks for coming, Jake.” Rebecca looked up at him. She leaned over and buckled
the baby into the stroller. “Let’s go home, big guy. We’ve had enough excitement for one
night.”

Together, they set off, Rebecca limping as she pushed the stroller with Jake beside
her. The night was cool and clear as they walked in silence. Jake wished it had been
different, that she pushed a stroller with his baby. That was a pleasant image and he dwelt
in it as they walked.

Barker was right. He had it bad.

Chapter Four

Trey, you are so stupid to miss this. As Jake strolled along next to Rebecca, he had to remind himself, his dreams weren't Trey's. Two different men, two different paths.

They had reached the cottage. "Let me help you up the stairs." Jake reached down, picked up the stroller, and carried it up onto the porch. Rebecca unlocked the door and went inside as Jake pushed the stroller through the doorway. She unbuckled the baby, and then stood in the middle of the room, holding him.

Jake sat on the couch and held out his arms. "I'll take him while you clean up."

"Great." She started to hand him the baby, and then straightened.

"What is it?" Jake asked.

She looked as if she were making a decision. "Unbutton your shirt."

"What?" Jake blinked in surprise.

"Trust me. Go on, unbutton it."

Jake's fingers worked the buttons of his denim shirt. When it was done, he pulled the ends out of his jeans. "Now what?"

She laid the baby on the couch and removed his onsie, leaving him in just his diaper, then she picked him up and held him out to Jake.

"Now hold the baby, skin-to-skin. There's nothing like it."

Jake pushed the shirt aside, baring his chest. She lowered Ben to him and stepped away.

Ben snuggled against Jake, making small baby sounds. His tiny fist curled around some of the dark hair growing in the center of Jake's chest and held tight.

It took Jake's breath away.

Dear God. The warmth of the baby's body next to his skin was unlike anything he'd ever felt. Some connection formed, a bond forged. Man to child. Wolf to wolf. Uncle to nephew.

Trey was a fool. Filled with sorrow for his brother, Jake prayed Trey would one day know this moment for himself. Then he prayed one day, he'd hold his own son like this.

Curling around the child, Jake closed his eyes and took it all in. The smell of the baby, the softness of his cheek, the sound of his voice. He cradled Ben against him, and leaned down to kiss the top of the child's head.

Rebecca sat next to Jake. He looked up at her.

"You can't keep him from my mom. From us. He's a McCallan, Becca. Don't deny us." Jake's voice rasped with emotion.

Rebecca rested against the cushion of the sofa and watched Jake with her son.

"I just don't know what to do, Jake. Give me time."

"That's what my mom said. Give you time."

"She's right. Smart woman." Rebecca reached out and touched Ben's head.

"Very smart."

Ben began to fuss, turning his head from side to side.

"What's up?" Jake frowned. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"No. That's Ben's signal for feed me. I'm hungry." She laughed and touched the boy's cheek with her finger.

“Can I feed him?” Jake was really getting into this.

“Not unless you’re lactating.”

“Oh. Right.” He sighed. “I guess I should go, then.” He passed the baby to Rebecca. She cradled Ben in her arms as he fussed even harder.

Jake began to stand when she reached out and took his arm. “Stay.”

“What?”

“I want you to stay. While he nurses. We can have some coffee after.”

“Sure, if you’re positive.”

“I am.” She reached under her shirt, and popped the latch on her nursing bra. Jake watched as she rolled up the shirt, catching a glimpse of her nipple. It was deep pink, the aureole large and the nipple hard. Bringing the baby to her breast, she brushed the nipple against his cheek. He turned his head to it, opened his mouth and she pulled him to her.

Ben latched on and began sucking. His tiny fist curled and rested on her breast and his eyes closed in contentment.

Jake had never seen a baby breastfed before and he was amazed by it. “How does he breathe? He’s so close to you.”

“He manages. He has to take as much of the aureole as possible, to pump the milk out,” she explained. He shook his head in wonder.

“Does it hurt?”

“No. In fact, it feels really good. It’s not nursing that hurts, it’s *not* nursing. Trust me, full breasts can be extremely painful.”

They sat on the couch, just watching the baby. When Ben finished the first breast and she switched him to the other, Jake reached out and pulled her to him.

*

Rebecca leaned back and nestled against Jake’s side as Ben nursed. She felt the warmth of Jake’s body, heard the steady beating of his heart and her body rode the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. Inhaling, her senses filled with the mixed scents of her son and Jake.

This is how it’s supposed to be. Just like this.

And it hit her. With this man.

She’d known it all the time, somehow. From the first moment she opened her door and he stood there, she knew.

To her surprise, it didn’t scare her.

*

Rebecca laid a sleeping Ben down in his crib as Jake watched from the doorway. As she covered her son’s tiny body with a small blanket, Jake’s chest tightened and he had to blink his eyes to clear them.

Silently, they crept back down the hall to the kitchen.

“Coffee?” Rebecca held up the coffee pot.

“Sure.” Jake sat on a chair at her small table. “This is a nice kitchen. Very roomy.”

“I like it. There’s plenty of room to work when I’m cooking.” She placed the coffee mug in front of him, along with the sugar and cream.

“Do you like to cook?” He stirred in a teaspoon of sugar. It occurred to him that he knew nothing about her.

“Yes. In fact, it’s what I do. I own a catering business.”

“Is there much call for that here in town?” Jake took a sip of the hot coffee and sat

back.

“Depends on the time of year. I’ve done some weddings, showers, that sort of thing. However, that may be over with.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Seems unmarried mothers are not the most popular caterers. My business really dropped off once I started showing.”

“Really? That’s awful.”

She shrugged. “I guess I should have expected it in a small town. After all, most people here don’t really know me. I left home when I was eighteen. Worked my way through college cooking.”

“Which school?” It was great, just sitting at her table, chatting about normal matters over a cup of coffee. He could imagine doing this every night for the rest of his life. Sharing their lives, talking about their day after the kids had gone to bed. Making plans for their future.

Damn, he had it so bad.

“I started at a small community college, but after two years, I switched to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.”

“Knoxville. I’ve been there. The Smoky Mountains are beautiful.” He grinned at his memories of a summer he and Barker spent hiking and running loose in the state park, baiting black bears and skirting tourists. “Sounds like you had a plan for your life.”

“Not really. I was just determined to get out from under my parents’ thumb and live my own life. After I did, it just seemed like all I thought of was coming home.”

“So you moved back and started the catering business.”

“Right. It was going well the first six months. I had enough to keep me busy and I made good money. But with the baby?” She shrugged. “I’m worried I may have to forget my dreams and find a real job, like my parents kept telling me.”

“Parents don’t always know what’s best.”

“Your mom seems really together.” She sipped her coffee.

“She’s incredible. Any woman that could handle my dad is worth her weight in gold.” He grinned.

“Your dad. Is he still around?”

“No, he died about ten years ago. Drunk driver ran into him head-on and he was killed instantly.” Jake looked at his hands wrapped around the mug. “He was on a buying trip over to Mississippi for the mill.”

“So, now you run the mill?”

“Yeah. It’s mine. I switched over to providing recycled wood from old buildings, barns, and warehouses. There’s quite a market for the old stuff.” Talking business with her just seemed so easy. In fact, it seemed the unsettling reaction he’d had to her before was gone and he was left in control of his emotions. He no longer felt the urge to change to his wolf form.

“What does Trey do?” Her voice turned hard.

“Nothing.” He sighed. “No, that’s not fair. He’s in his last year at LSU. A finance major. I was hoping after graduation he’d come into the business, but he hates the mill.”

“He seemed like a spoiled rich kid to me.” She glanced at him.

“He is. That’s my fault, I guess.”

“You’re not his parents, Jake, just his brother.”

“His *older* brother. He was only sixteen when our dad died. I tried to…” He blew out

his breath. "The older we got, the worse it got between us."

"You can't be responsible for his actions. Only he can take that on."

"True. There's been a lot of resentment, mostly on his part, that's built up over the years." How could he explain it without explaining the hierarchy of a wolf pack, and the role of the alpha male?

"Over the mill?"

"Yeah. That and other things." Like who should be the leader of their family's pack.

"He resents you?"

"Yeah." Jake looked into his mug. "I love him, Rebecca. He's my brother, but when I found out what he'd done to you, I put him out."

"Put him out? Of the house?"

"Yeah."

Rebecca stared at him for a long time. "Can you do that? What did your mother say?"

"I control all the money, pay for his school and expenses. Mom stands by my decision. She's just as upset by this as I was."

Rebecca looked at him, her head tilted as if trying to understand, then she reached out and touched his arm. "This is tearing you up, isn't it?"

Their gazes met. Jake didn't know what to say to her.

"It will work out, Jake."

"That's what my mom said." Jake laughed.

"Like I said before, she's a smart lady." She finished her coffee, stood, and placed the mug in the sink. Jake rose and passed her his mug.

"Thanks for the coffee, Rebecca."

"It was nice, being with you tonight." She smiled at him. God, she was so beautiful. He didn't know what he'd do if she refused him. Could she, he wondered? He could no more refuse her than stop breathing, and the idea that she could walk away from him froze the breath in his lungs.

They walked to the front room and Rebecca waited at the door, her hand on the knob.

"Good night, Jake." She looked up at him.

"Good night, Rebecca." Jake leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. She rose up on her toes to meet him. His lips brushed her cheek in a tender kiss.

"Kiss me, Jake." The way her voice got throaty, her eyes darkened, and her lips beckoned him to taste her, was more than he could stand. Reaching up, she took his shirt in her hands, pulled him down, and he willingly went to her. His lips pressed against hers as she deepened the kiss, pulled away, and then resealed her mouth on his. He could feel her hunger, her urgency, her need.

Jake moaned as her tongue touched his lips, asking for entry. He parted his lips as her tongue darted inside. Desire for her pounded in his blood and then spread in waves throughout his body. Pulling her close, he devoured her, tasting her sweetness, discovering the tender spaces within her mouth with his tongue, then nibbling on her bottom lip.

She had to be his. Damn it, she *was* his. All consuming, it overpowered his reason. His hands slid down her back to cup her soft bottom and pull her against his body, against his hardness. Her soft moan dissolved into a needy whimper. He renewed his discovery

of her.

Jake kissed his way to her throat; the pounding of her pulse beneath his lips so arousing. Rebecca's head fell back as he nipped her, trailing small bites down her neck toward her shoulder. His body quivered, longing to change, longing to pursue her. Hunt her down, drive her to her knees, and take her. His woman, his mate, his very soul.

Her hands released his shirt and she buried them in his hair, pulling him to her. She was strong, demanding, and he knew that when he did take her, she would give him as much as he wanted to give her. As he tongued her collarbone, from the base of her throat to her shoulder, he knew she was his. And he knew he would do anything to protect his mate.

Her responsiveness to him was like no woman he'd ever been with, and how she made him feel like something he'd never experienced. He'd never expected the tenderness that came over him, the longing to hold her dear, treasured and sacred. Jake let himself go, falling deeper, knowing he loved her. She was his lifemate. If there had been doubt in his mind, it was blown away, scattered to the four ends of the earth, by the raging fire that consumed him for her.

If they stood here much longer, he'd have to take her. The wolf in him howled at the thought of burying his cock deep inside her, claiming her as his. He wanted her legs wrapped around his thighs as he pounded into her warm core. If his rod got any harder, he was going to bust the buttons off his button-down jeans.

Taking a deep breath, Jake mustered his strength, his resolve, and pulled away from her.

"We'd better stop, Rebecca. I may not be able to control myself."

"I know what you mean." She heaved a deep sigh of what sounded to him like regret. It thrilled him to know she'd wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"Will you think about Sunday again?"

"Yes. I'll call you with my answer." She smiled up at him and he took hope.

This time, his kiss was brief as he opened the door and stepped outside.

"Be careful, Rebecca. Make sure you lock up." He stood on the dark porch and took a last look at her, silhouetted against the light from her house. His wolf's eyes could see her, even in the dark. His eyes, ears, and nose drank her in, held her essence, and locked it in his memory.

"I will. Night."

"Night."

She closed the door. He waited until he heard the lock snick closed, then he trotted down the path, and began the walk back to where he'd left the Explorer parked on Main.

He turned the corner, passed the coffee shop, and crossed the street. On the other side, he stepped into the shadows of a storefront and held still. Determining the direction of the wind, he positioned himself. Any scents being carried on the air would be detected by his heightened sense of smell.

Closing his eyes, Jake breathed deep and even. Nothing familiar came across. He stepped into the light again and headed toward his truck.

Trey. The scent hit him. He froze and inhaled. Stepping toward the street, the scent was so strong he could almost see its trail. Trey had been here. It could have been an hour ago, a day ago, or even days, he couldn't tell. Now the parking space was empty. Jake turned and followed the scent. Trey had gotten out of a vehicle, stepped onto the sidewalk

and then walked over to the store. Jake looked up and read the shop's sign.

Main Street Pawn Shop—Gold, Watches, Small Appliances, Guns

What the hell would Trey want in a pawn shop? He'd probably never know. Just one of many unanswered questions about his brother, and Jake had no hope of learning the answers.

Jake headed to his truck and drove home.

* * * *

"All right, Barker, what's going on?" Jake said into the phone as he sat in his favorite chair in front of his fireplace. "You were giving me looks that said you had something to tell me."

"Yeah, boss. Look, it's just a gut feeling, but are you sure Trey's gone to Europe?"

"Sure. At least, he said he was. Did I see him get on the plane? No. What are you getting at?"

"Just suppose, for arguments sake, that Trey didn't go."

"I can call his apartment in Baton Rouge, see if he answers," Jake suggested.

"No. I meant what if he's still hanging around *here*."

Jake was silent while he let that sink in.

"Jake?"

"I'm still here. So, Trey's still here. So what?"

"Could he have tried to run Rebecca over?"

Silence again. Jake knew he'd have to come clean and swore softly.

"Yeah, he could have. I didn't mention it before, but he asked me to take care of her and the baby. He meant get rid of them."

"What did he say exactly?"

"He asked me to kill her and the baby," Jake whispered. "Threw my duty to the pack in my face."

"God damn it, Jake! Why didn't you tell me?"

"So you could do what? If it ever comes to that, I'll take care of him myself," Jake growled.

"Jake, you can't do that. If Trey wants to throw his life away that's one thing, but you can't do anything so stupid. Let the authorities take care of it."

"I picked up his scent tonight, Barker."

"Where?"

"Outside the pawn shop on Main."

"Could you tell if it was recent or old?"

"It was pretty strong, but we haven't had any rain to wash it away, so it could have been a few days old or as recent as today." Jake scrubbed his face with his hand.

"Listen to me. I'm going to do some drive-bys of Rebecca's house. It might be helpful if she had a watchdog, you know?"

"I know."

"Stay out of sight, boss. I don't want anyone taking pot shots at you."

"Me either."

"Jake?"

"What?"

"I mean it, be careful. I know he's your brother, but he's dangerous."

Jake sighed. "I know." He hung up, put his head back, and rubbed his eyes.

Damn Trey. Jake had an overpowering urge to find him and talk, just talk. No, that wasn't right. Jake was the one who needed to listen, not talk. Maybe then, he'd understand his brother.

If Trey tried to kill Rebecca, despite being brothers, Jake fully intended on protecting his mate, no matter what the cost.

Chapter Five

“I’m going.” Rebecca took a bite of her chef salad.

Vicki sat across the booth from her best friend and smiled. “Great! I was hoping you would. Everything you’ve told me makes Jake sound wonderful.”

“I’m not doing this to see Jake. I’m doing it for Ben.” She took another bite and chewed as she checked on her son asleep in the carrier sitting on the table.

“Right. Well, if I had a man as crazy about me as he seems to be about you, I’d make plans to see him all the time.” Vicki laughed. “However, we both know my track record. Two starts. Two crash and burns.” She held her thumb and forefinger up to her forehead in the universal sign for Loser.

“Cut it out, Vicki. It won’t always be that way.”

“Sure it will. You forgot about the big sign on my back that says ‘Date me and dump me.’ Well, I won’t be making *that* mistake again. I’m going to join a convent.”

There was a long pause and then both women laughed.

“Seriously, Vicki, you’ll find someone.”

“I don’t care if I ever do, Becca. I just don’t want to get hurt anymore and the only way to do that is to swear off men. I’ll just be one of those teachers who never marry. I like cats, so that should help with the total old maid image.”

“You’re too pretty to be an old maid. You’re a woman any man would be damn lucky to get. You just need time to heal.”

Vicki shrugged and waved Rebecca’s comments away like flies.

“So, enough about my sorry state of affairs. Are you excited about bringing the baby out to Jake’s for his mom to see?” Vicki’s fingers discovered a loose strand of blonde hair and tucked it back into the severe bun she wore at the nape of her neck.

“Yeah. Jake said it would mean the world to her and him. And you know, I thought about it, and since my folks have shunned us, Ben will need someone like a grandmother to love on him.” Rebecca finished her salad and sipped her tea.

“Every kid should have a grandparent to dote on him. I loved my grandparents when they were alive. It’s a special relationship.” She gave Ben’s tiny booted foot a small shake and cooed at him.

“I agree. I’ll call tomorrow and let Jake know I’m coming.”

* * * *

The wolf lay under the large bush at the side of the road and watched the headlights of the cars go by until there was a lull in the traffic. He stood, trotted across the dark street, and leapt with ease over the fence that surrounded the cottage. Making a quick patrol around the property, stopping twice to mark his territory, he settled under the front porch to watch over his mate.

Resting his head on his paws, he could hear Rebecca moving around inside.

The sounds echoed under the raised house. Picking them up with his sensitive ears, he tracked where she was in the house by the creaking of the floorboards, the sound of the water running in the pipes, the flush of a toilet.

Ben cried. The wolf gave a soft whine. No need. Rebecca's quick footsteps as she hurried to the baby reassured him. He heard her muffled voice calming the child, and late in the evening, heard her singing soft songs to soothe Ben to sleep.

At last the house settled, lights went out, and all was quiet.

Sitting under the house, hidden in the shadows, he raised his head and watched a dark sedan pass by. Raising his snout to the wind, he couldn't pick up enough of a scent to know if the driver was male or female. With a whine, he lowered his head to his paws.

A few minutes later, the same car returned. This time, the wolf crept on his belly through the shadows to the bushes near the fence for a closer view. It looked like a man, or at least someone wearing a cap of some kind, but the windows were rolled up so he couldn't catch a scent.

The car slowed and then turned the corner and drove on. The wolf trotted over to the fence, jumped over it, ran through the next yard, and then leaped over that fence. Standing on the sidewalk at the side of her neighbor's house, he watched the red taillights disappear down the street and turn a corner.

Where was Barker?

Realizing he'd been gone too long from his watch, he trotted to the corner and peeked around it. A patrol car sat at the curb with Barker leaning on the side of the vehicle. He trotted down the sidewalk to Barker, and sat on his haunches, his massive head coming up almost to Barker's belt buckle.

"Slow night. Thought I'd come by. Anything going on?" Barker's voice was so low it was just audible, but the wolf's ears had no trouble picking up the words.

The wolf gave a soft whine and nodded. This wasn't the first time he'd worked with Barker in the name of law and order.

"A car?"

Another nod.

"Just recently?"

A nod and a whine.

"Great. Did you get a sniff?"

The wolf gave his head a shake and his thick coat rippled down his back.

Barker gave a final look around. "Stay put, and I'll make the rounds again. After two o'clock my shift's over and you're on your own." He slid into the driver's seat and pulled away from the curb.

The wolf hopped over the fence and scooted under the house, turned a few times in the soft dirt and lay down as the cruiser pulled away.

The rest of the night was uneventful. Barker made a few more passes, but the sedan never returned. Just before dawn, the wolf stood, stretched his paws out in front of him, his rear in the air, and then slid into the opposite position, rear down, head up for a long stretch.

He leaped over the fence, trotted down the block, and disappeared around a corner.

* * * *

"McCallan Specialty Lumber," a crisp efficient voice answered.

Rebecca took a deep breath. "May I speak to Jake McCallan?"

"Hold on, please." The woman put her on hold, and country music filled Rebecca's ear, as she tried to steady her breathing. There was nothing she could do about the racing

of her heart.

“Mr. McCallan is down on the mill floor right now. Can I take a message?”

“Sure. This is Rebecca Miller, I’d like to—”

“Ms. Miller. Can you hold? I’ll go get him.” She sounded excited.

“That’s not necessary. I don’t want to disturb him.”

“If I don’t get him, he’ll be furious.” The woman pressed the button and plunged Rebecca back into country music limbo. Good grief, how did that woman know about her? Or that Jake would be upset to miss her call? That thought gave her a warm feeling all over. Time crept by, the song changed and still Rebecca hung on to the phone. She was debating hanging up when the connection clicked.

“Rebecca?” Jake’s deep voice sounded out of breath and very worried.

“Jake, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for her to drag you back to the phone.”

“No, she was right to get me. Are you all right?” His breathing slowed down and he sounded more himself.

“I’m fine. I just wanted to let you know I’ve decided to come on Sunday.”

“That’s wonderful!” She could hear his elation loud and clear over the phone line, and it made her smile.

“What time should I be there?”

“Well, we usually have dinner after church, so come around one. Food will be on the table at two and it usually breaks up around four or five. You’re bringing Ben, right?”

“Right. Uh, Jake, you go to church?” Rebecca was surprised.

“Yeah, I’ve sat in the same pew every Sunday for as long as I can remember. Dad insisted on it.” He chuckled.

“That’s nice. I always ducked out of church whenever I could. Oh, where is it? The house, I mean.”

“Go down Highway 35 north. The large black iron gates on the right. Turn in there, they’ll be open. Just drive up the road. It’s about a half mile to the house, so don’t worry about being lost, we’re pretty deep back in the woods.”

“Right. Got it. I’ve passed those gates before and wondered what was back there. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“See you then. And Rebecca ... thanks for coming.”

“Sure.” She hung up, sat back on the couch, and hugged her knees to her chest. This would be good for Ben, to meet his family. He’d need relatives, no matter if she didn’t. She didn’t need anyone.

Who was she fooling? Just the idea of seeing Jake made her entire body quiver. No man had ever done that to her. Damn, she felt as giddy as a teenager going on her first date. No, she was no teenager. It was more. It felt like first-time love. Wild, passionate, and desperate. Closing her eyes, she relived Jake’s kisses and the way his arms felt wrapped around her. She wanted to feel his strength surrounding her for the rest of her life.

Dear Lord, she had it bad. How could this have happened to her? And why now? Only she would have such incredibly bad timing. First, you meet the man of your dreams, then you marry, then you have kids. Not, sleep with the brother of the man of your dreams, have Mr. Wrong’s baby, then meet Mr. Right.

This really wasn’t like her. She was capable, steady, a woman with a business plan.

A woman in love. No, she refused to call it love. Like, maybe. Lust, yeah. Love?

No way.

Rebecca sighed. She just had to wait a few more days before she'd get to see Jake again.

Without going crazy.

* * * *

"Barker? It's Jake." Jake sat back in his leather chair and stretched out his long legs. For now, the stack of paperwork on his desk sat untouched.

"Yeah, boss. I'm assuming it was quiet the rest of the evening."

"Nothing happened. About that car."

"I didn't see anything on my end. The streets were deserted."

"It passed by twice going real slow, then turned the corner. I figured it was making the block. Could have been nothing, though," Jake said.

"Could have been someone looking for an address," Barker offered.

"After midnight?"

"Don't let your nerves get to you, Jake. Are you going to be there tonight?"

"Yeah, just in case. I feel easier being there." Just being close to her, but he didn't say it. Besides, Barker knew him inside and out, so there was no need to say it.

"I'll keep up the watch on my shift, too. If you see anything that needs my immediate attention, change and call me ASAP."

"You got it."

"And boss, don't get all heroic on me. I don't want your furry ass shot up, you hear?" Barker laughed.

"Me either. It would be hard to explain to Mom."

"Yeah, she'd really be pissed. So if you get shot, you tell her, not me."

Jake laughed. "Hey, I forgot to tell you. Rebecca's coming to the house on Sunday for dinner."

"That's great. I'm glad she changed her mind."

"Me, too." Jake signed in relief.

"It'll sure make your mom happy."

"Yes, it will. She's so excited about the baby."

"I'm happy for you too, boss. So when's the wedding?"

"As soon as I tell her about the legacy, you catch her for speeding in her attempt to get as far away from me as possible, and then drag her back kicking and screaming." Jake gave a rueful laugh.

"If she's your lifemate, she won't run."

"Sure. Thanks for keeping an eye out."

"No problem. I'm here to protect and serve." Jake could almost see Barker's loose salute.

"See you on Sunday?"

"I'll be there, same as always." Barker hung up.

Jake sat forward, hung up the phone, and picked up a stack of invoices. Bringing up a spreadsheet on the computer, he started filling in the numbers.

* * * *

The wolf sat guard all night, but there was nothing to take notice of, or to report to Barker. The cruiser passed the house several times without stopping.

Earlier in the evening, the wolf enjoyed just listening to her moving around in the small cottage, doing all the things she did at home and caring for her baby.

Mostly, he thought of her sitting in the glider, nursing Ben. She was a great mother. He was proud of her. Strong, independent and resourceful. Just the kind of woman to handle a wolf like him.

Dawn's first fingers painted the sky with her colors. The wolf rose, shook the dew out of his fur, jumped over the fence, and trotted away.

* * * *

"You're in late. Or is it early?" Caroline McCallan asked her son.

"I was on guard duty at Rebecca's."

"That accident with the truck's really got you worried, hasn't it?"

"It may be nothing, but Barker and I think it's better to be safe."

"Good thinking."

"Now," he groaned. "I have to get breakfast, clean up, and go to work."

"Go get cleaned up and I'll fix the breakfast this morning since I'm up so early," she said.

"Great. Hey, why are you up so early? I hope you weren't worrying about me?"

"No. Just having a hard time turning my brain off." She shrugged as she opened the refrigerator to take out some eggs and sausage.

"Is this about Rebecca and the baby?" He paused in the doorway.

"No. It's not. I told you, don't worry about it." She gave him a big smile. Jake nodded, knowing he'd get nothing out of her that she didn't want to give, and headed upstairs to his rooms.

Jake shut the door behind him, stripped off his clothes, and dropped them into a hamper in his closet. Being at the mill wasn't dirty, but if you were down on the floor of the mill for too long fine particles of sawdust covered you. Even though all of the machines had large vacuums to suck up the sawdust, some of it still escaped and floated in the air, ready to attach onto anything.

Naked, Jack entered the bathroom, turned on the shower, waited for the water to heat to the right temperature, and stepped in. The steam felt wonderful, relaxing tight muscles, soothing his aches. He lathered his body and washed away all the previous day's sweat, sawdust, and dirt.

He didn't realize how tense he'd been since this whole thing with Rebecca started. On edge. Ready to act. Constantly holding his wolf in check. A small animal whine escaped his clenched lips as the bar of soap slid over his body, lathering his belly, the soapy foam following the wet trail of dark hair from his navel to the curls at the base of his shaft. His hand slipped lower to cup his heavy balls as he leaned back against the cool tile.

Jake closed his eyes; his other hand gathered his semi-erect cock and gave it a slow stroke. Locking his knees to keep from falling, he moaned as he fell into the practiced routine of jerking off. Before it had been a timely release of building tension, but now, it was to stave off the hunger. His wolf's mating hunger.

"Rebecca," he whispered. Her green eyes, her hair, and those kiss-me lips floated

behind the lids of his closed eyes. Her full, milk-engorged breasts, nipples erect, made him crazy. How could that be such a turn-on? He'd wanted to take her nipples in his mouth and suckle. Everything about her turned him on.

He imagined her rounded fuck-me hips as she begged him to hold on tight while she took him for a ride. Jake's hips moved with the ever-increasing speed of his thrusts, his hand working his cock, bringing him off. His balls tightened and his back arched as he reached the wall and hung there, waiting, needing to explode. Christ, would he ever come?

"Rebecca!" His shout echoed off the tiles as he lost it, his hand wringing every drop of creamy seed from him.

Panting, his head hung as his shoulders took the brunt of the still-hot water. As Jake raised his head, resolve etching his face, blood pounding in his veins, he knew with deadly certainty that he'd kill to protect her.

A voice, sane and human, cut through the blood haze, asking, even if it was your own brother?

Jake rested his head on his arm as he leaned against the shower glass and prayed. *Dear God, don't make me choose. Don't let it come to that.*

Shutting off the water, he shook his head, the droplets flying, then stepped out and wrapped a towel around his waist. Leaning against the counter, he prepared to shave. Jake looked at his face and frowned. His blood-shot eyes said he was dog-tired.

After shaving, he brushed his teeth and then dressed. Checking his calendar on the laptop sitting on a small desk in a connecting study, he was relieved to see his schedule was clear all day. He shut it down and slipped it into his backpack.

Promising himself a Saturday afternoon off, he came down the back stairs to the kitchen and his breakfast.

"The eggs are scrambled," she said. "And I added cheese."

"Sounds delicious, Mom," Jake assured her. He was starving. It was like that for him after sex, even a jack-off session. He needed to refuel, needed protein to feed the wolf. The more meat the better.

"Sausage is on the table already, so help yourself."

Jake speared four sausage patties, a large spoonful of eggs, dashed some Tabasco sauce over everything, and began to eat. His mother sat down, took some eggs and a single patty, and joined him. After wolfing down the food, Jake jumped up to fill a glass with orange juice and then downed half of it as he stood there.

"I've got to run. I'm going to take the afternoon off if nothing comes up."

"That's great. I didn't want to mention it, but it looks like you could use some rest." She smiled.

"You're right. I'm getting old. I can't pull those all-nighters anymore." He shook his head, but he grinned at her.

"And aren't I glad of that. Honestly, when I think of all the times I sat in this kitchen waiting for you kids to come home."

"Sorry." He gave her a sheepish grin. "I blame it on Barker."

"That's funny. His mother said he told her it was all your fault."

They shared a laugh as Jake rinsed his dish and glass. After putting them in the dishwasher, he took off for work.

Driving down the long drive to the highway, Jake had to tell himself to relax and

remain calm. Tomorrow Rebecca and Ben would be here, and he could show her everything.

Well, maybe not everything.

Chapter Six

“Now let’s make sure you look handsome, big guy.” Rebecca straightened and looked at Ben lying in his crib, dressed in a baby blue outfit. He looked good enough to eat, so she bent over, took his tiny foot in her mouth, blew kisses, and gummed the tiny pink toes.

Ben cooed, wiggled in happiness and drooled, his blue eyes never leaving her face.

“Let me put these socks on you, Ben. No, no, give me back that foot. Give it to mommy!” She laughed as his kicking pulled his foot out of her hand, leaving the scrunched up the sock in her fist. That just sent him off in a new set of wiggles and Rebecca tried to hold back her laugh.

“How will it look if you only have one sock?” At last, she got the sock on and pulled his booties on over them. Dressed at last.

The air above the crib changed and a familiar odor hit her nose. “Oh no, Ben.” She moaned. “I just got you dressed.”

Ben cooed and looked adorable. Rebecca undressed him to change his dirty diaper. “It’s so much easier just to hang around the house in a plain old onesie, isn’t it, than get all dressed up for lunch?” She lifted him up and moved him to the changing table, where all the diapers, wipes, baby powder, and diaper rash cream was stored.

Bright dark blue eyes looked back at her as she opened his diaper and reached below the table to the shelf for a fresh one. Baby pee, in a perfect arc, shot over her head, just missed her, and dribbled down the side of the table.

“Nice shot, son. With aim like that you’re bound to make the men’s Olympic Peeing team.” She wiped up the pee and then removed the diaper, rolled it up, and tossed it in the trashcan. After she cleaned him and sprinkled on baby powder, she put a clean diaper on him and put his clothes back on.

* * * *

Jake slid onto his knees. Bowing his head, he held onto the back of the pew in front of him and prayed.

Dear God, where do I start? Usually his prayers asked for good weather, good health for loved ones, good business. However this week, he broke away from his usual prayer with a special request for Trey.

Guide Trey, God. Jake wasn’t sure what to ask God. He felt Trey was lost and floundering with no direction to his life. It was hard for Jake not to take the responsibility for how Trey turned out, but he knew sometimes, despite everything, some people just turned out bad. He couldn’t help but feel like he’d failed his baby brother.

Watch over Rebecca and Ben. She’d been in his thoughts all week long and now she was in his prayers. The minute he’d held Ben, Jake felt blessed to have both mother and child in his life.

Asking nothing for himself, Jake finished with a prayer for his mother, to help with whatever seemed to be on her mind, and as always, he asked God to keep Barker safe on patrol.

As everyone sat back in the pews, Jake smiled at his mother as she settled next to him. She had her own prayers, her own set of worries, and he wished he knew what they were. His overwhelming need to fix things, to make things better, a legacy of his father's untimely death, was a driving force in Jake's character. Reaching over, Caroline squeezed her son's large hand as it rested on the thigh of his dark grey suit.

The priest said the benediction and the service was over. Jake and Caroline McCallan made their way to the front of Our Lady of the Woods Catholic Church and greeted friends and neighbors.

Even though Jake was only thirty-two, he was a prominent businessman in their small town and there were always people to greet, including the men and women who worked for him and other business people in their town. Not to mention Caroline's charity activities that involved her in numerous efforts around the town and the seemingly endless scores of women she knew.

"Father, are you coming out to the house for lunch today?" Caroline asked the old priest as they met at the door of the church. One of the McCallan family's oldest and dearest friends, he'd married Jake's mother and father and christened each of the McCallan children.

"Of course, I wouldn't miss one of your Sunday dinners, Carrie." The corners of his brown eyes crinkled with genuine happiness. "That is, if Jake won't fight me for that extra pork chop. Last time, I almost lost three fingers." He grinned and held up his hand, displaying several fingers curled down at the knuckles, and pretended to bite them.

"It's all yours, Father." Jake laughed as he held out his hands in surrender. "I'm supposed to eat more vegetables anyway."

"Cutting back on red meat?" The priest's eyebrow rose in fond amusement.

"Never! Just adding to my diet." Jake smiled.

"I'll see you there, Carrie. Jake." The priest turned to greet the next people in the line exiting the church.

As Jake and his mother made their way to the parking lot along with the milling crowd of worshipers, Jake caught a movement in the street from the corner of his eye. His head spun to see what he thought was same sedan that had passed by Rebecca's house the other night. His stomach tensed and the knots in his shoulders tightened as he stopped short in the middle of the parking lot.

"Jake? What's wrong?" Carrie looked up at him.

"Nothing, Mom." He smiled at her and continued walking to the SUV. *Calm down.* It had been dark that night and he couldn't even be sure what color the car had been. He pushed his concerns away as he pulled the Explorer out into traffic and headed home. The rest of the day was going to be spent with Rebecca and Ben.

* * * *

Slowing down, Rebecca turned onto the drive, past the tall iron gates and proceeded down the narrow blacktop road leading to Jake's house. Lining the road were huge oak trees. From their size, she guessed they were hundreds of years old. Their massive canopy covered the road, forming a dark tunnel of green leaves and branches.

She wasn't sure what she expected, and until that moment, she hadn't thought about the fact that Jake lived with his mother.

With any other grown man, that would seem incredibly lame to her, but with Jake,

there was something steady and comforting about it. Her guess was Jake had inherited the house from his father and had never thought to ask his mother to leave. Why should he? It was her home, too.

Rebecca came around the last turn, emerged from the tunnel, and slowed the car to a crawl. Across a huge green lawn studded with wild hot red spider lilies was the biggest house she'd seen around these parts. It was three stories and had a center section that in itself was a mansion. Then two wings were set back and extended on both sides of the main house. Dark green wooden shutters framed the windows, setting off the white trim and red brick. The driveway split, one section curved across the front of the house and wrapped back into the drive, and the other headed behind the house, probably to a garage. Right now, there was a black pick-up truck and an older black Town Car parked just in front of the house.

However, what she noticed most was that the house sat nestled among the tall pine trees of the forest. Three sides were bracketed by the heavy woods with a narrow strip of mown grass along the edge. In fact, the forest was such a dominant feature, so integral with the house, that she found it hard to imagine the mansion sitting alone on an empty piece of land.

This house had been built to hold a large family. It made her sad to think of the builders' intent and its current state of use. For just a moment, a scene flashed in her mind's eye. A party on the front lawn. Chairs pulled out for people to sit on. A dozen or so children ran, jumped, wrestled and played, the lush green space used just as had been intended. The image faded. She wasn't sure if it was the past or the future she'd seen.

With a sigh, she drove on. "Well, Ben, here we go." She parked her car in the circular drive behind the others. "I didn't expect there to be other people." She frowned and looked down at her black t-shirt and long blue denim skirt, suddenly self-conscious.

"Certainly, they're not here just to meet us." Ben cooed from the back seat. He'd been excellent so far during the drive. Now would be the test. How would he handle new people? For that matter, how would she?

Her face set in a firm frown. She did not intend to be put on display, paraded around in front of a bunch of people she didn't know. Oh God, what if they announce Ben as Trey's son?

Now was her chance. Back up and drive away. Call Jake and make an excuse.

Her hand froze on the gear shift. No, she had to do this, face them all. If she had to, she'd deny any paternity, it was that simple, and let Jake and his mother explain it. Taking a deep breath, she got out of the car and removed the detachable car seat. Ben blew bubbles like a crab as she picked up the diaper bag, and then walked to the front door.

Doors. Two massive, wide doors stood before her, blocking entry to the house. Dead center in each door was an intricately sculpted cast bronze wolf's head that held a large circular ring in its bared teeth.

Rebecca glanced around. Inset in the bricks to the side was a doorbell set in a brass escutcheon. Holding the car seat by the handle, she slung the diaper bag over her shoulder and pressed the small button. Somewhere inside the great house, a chime rang out. Nothing fancy or pretentious she noticed, just a simple deep bing bong.

The door was opened by a slender woman with salt and pepper grey hair, light blue eyes, and a welcoming smile. "Rebecca? Please come in. I'm Caroline McCallan, Jake's

mother.” She stepped aside to let Rebecca in. Rebecca noticed she didn’t say Trey’s mother.

“Thank you.” Rebecca looked around the great entrance hall. Straight ahead, a wide mahogany staircase with an elaborate carved wooden banister rushed to a landing, then turned and continued out of sight. On the large landing was a magnificent bronze statue of a wolf, standing proudly on an outcropping of sculpted rock.

“Oh my.” She stared at the sculpture.

“I know. It’s sort of overpowering, but Michael, Jake’s father, insisted it belonged there.” Caroline turned to her and smiled. “I see you brought a date.”

“What? Oh, yes. This is Benjamin.” Rebecca held up the carrier for the woman to see.

Caroline’s face softened and the warmth in her eyes was easy to read. “He’s just beautiful, Rebecca.”

“Thanks. I think he’s sort of cute, but I’m partial.” She laughed.

“I understand. A mom always thinks her child is the most beautiful child ever.”

“I’m not that bad, but that’s pretty close to the truth.”

“I can see it. He looks just like—” She cut herself off. “Jake’s in the game room playing pool. I’ll get him.” She moved down the hallway before Rebecca could say a word.

A dozen heartbeats later, Jake came out of a room. His face broke into a huge grin as he spotted her and hurried down the hall.

“Rebecca. I’m so glad you came.” He stopped just in front of her and it seemed to Rebecca he held himself back.

“Thanks. I met your mother.”

“Sorry I didn’t hear the doorbell. The music’s too loud in the game room.”

“That’s okay.” She knew they were standing there making inane small talk, when she could see in his eyes that he was devouring her. She was certain her eyes were doing the same to him.

“Hey, boss. It’s your shot!”

Rebecca leaned over and looked past Jake. Barker stood just outside the wide doorway leaning on a pool cue. Jake stepped back and turned to answer him.

“Hey, Rebecca.” Barker waved his hand. He wasn’t wearing his uniform, just a white button down shirt tucked into faded, but pressed black jeans.

“Hey, Barker.” She waved.

“How’s the champ?”

“He’s doing great.”

Jake grinned at his friend. “Barker, take my shot. I want to get Rebecca and Ben settled first.”

“No problem.” Barker gave him a rough salute and headed back to the pool room.

“Now, let’s find someplace for you to put all that stuff. The library would be best, I think.” Jake took the diaper bag from her and led her down the hallway.

He stopped before two wooden doors, took the door handle, and pulled it back, sliding the door into a pocket in the wall. “In here.” Rebecca stepped through as her gaze traveled around the room.

“This is just beautiful, Jake.” She turned in a slow circle taking in the walls of rich mahogany bookcases filled with books. There were large portraits of women hanging

between the tall cases. "Who are all these women?"

"McCallan wives," Jake said.

Rebecca stopped in front of a portrait of a beautiful young woman in a white wedding gown. "This is your mother, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Dad had it done right after they were married. All the McCallan women, from my great-grandmother to my sister Victoria are here." Jake pointed to the next painting of a beautiful, dark haired, young woman, in her early twenties, standing in front of landscape painting resting on an easel.

"She's very pretty."

"Yeah, Tori's cute, for a sister." Rebecca could hear a note of pride in Jake's voice. "Put your bag and purse on this table. Unbuckle that baby and hand him to me." He held out his hands.

"All right, hold on." She put down the bag and her purse, then lifted the carrier to the table top. After she released Ben, she passed him to Jake.

"Hey there, boss." Jake snuggled the baby to his chest and grinned at Rebecca. If her heart hadn't already been lost to the man, she would have kissed it goodbye right then and there.

Jake reached out, pulled her to him and she slipped her arms around his waist. He cupped her chin in his hand, tilted it up, and lowered his lips to hers in a soft kiss.

Sighing, she leaned into him, knowing this was where she was meant to be, right here in this man's strong arms. He lifted his head and their eyes met. His hunger for her blazed in them. He swallowed hard. She bit her lip. If they didn't let go of each other they'd wind up necking right here in the library with the baby between them.

"Jake?" Caroline stood in the doorway with a knowing smile on her lips. "Am I ever going to get a chance to hold that baby?"

Jake looked at Rebecca and she nodded. "We were just getting reacquainted, Mom. Here, you take him while I show Rebecca around." He held the baby out to his mother as she advanced, her arms held out to receive the precious blue bundle.

"Oh Jake, he's so..." Her chin trembled.

"Yeah." Jake passed his hand gently over Ben's dark hair.

"Make sure you give her the three dollar tour, Jake." She sat down on one of the velvet settees placed around the large room. "This little fellow and I have to talk." She snuggled the baby in her arms and looked up at Rebecca. "Thank you, for bringing him." Rebecca couldn't help but notice the tears in Caroline's eyes and felt her own begin to fill.

Dear Lord. A total stranger had accepted her and her son into her home and her life when Rebecca's own parents had refused to see her or the baby. Maybe it's true that when God closes one door, He opens another. Before she started bawling, she turned to Jake and took his hand. "Let's do that tour."

"Sure." Jake's own voice rasped and she heard the raw emotion that filled it. Afraid they'd all start crying if she looked into his eyes, she looked down at her hand clasped in his. Without another word, he guided her out the door, back down the hall, and began his tour. "The first floor is divided into the main living areas and my parents' apartment. Each floor contains two apartments with three bedrooms, a full bath, and a small living space in each one."

They were back in the foyer looking up the staircase. "This side of the house holds

the library, game room, office, dining room, laundry, and kitchen. The other side is my mom's."

"Wow. This was really built for multiple families, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. My great-grandfather, his three sons, and one daughter lived here originally. Over the years, some of the children moved away, some died, leaving my grandfather the house and business. He had two sons. My uncle died in Vietnam. He was a Marine. He never married. So that left my dad and his parents."

"Until you, your sister and brother came along?"

"Right. Now, Tori's in Mississippi painting, and Trey..." His words were lost in a shrug of his shoulders. "It's just Mom and me now."

"It's an incredible house." Rebecca followed him through a set of doors into the game room. What would it be like to live here with Jake? She didn't want to dwell on that thought. There was no sense in building up any hopes. His desire for her was evident, but to hope it would lead to anything more than sex was foolish. After all, his brother had wanted her too, and look how that had turned out.

They stepped back into the game room.

"Bout time, boss." Barker turned down the music to a normal level.

She turned to Barker. "I have to ask. Why do you call him 'Boss'?"

Jake rolled his eyes and Barker laughed. "Well, when we were kids in high school, we'd work at the mill during the summers. The summer he was eighteen, Jake's dad put him in charge and he took that duty very seriously. I spent most of the time pissing him off, just so he could fire me."

"But the trouble was, he never stayed fired." Jake shook his head.

"Jake would get so mad at me and yell, 'You're fired, Sims!' I'd stomp off swearing, pretending to be mad as hell. Then the next day, I'd show up for work like nothing happened." He shrugged and looked at Jake.

"I had to take him back. What could I do? He was my best worker," Jake added with a straight face.

"I was your only worker."

"True." Jake nodded. "I was being trained to run the mill, even back then."

"Well, if you can call breaking our backs loading lumber executive training." Barker grinned.

"If you can't do the job yourself, how can you expect the people who work for you to respect you?" Jake's face sobered. "It's one of the lessons my dad taught me. I'm not too good to get my hands dirty."

"So, do you want to shoot some pool?" Barker asked her.

"Well, I have to admit, I earned a few beers on the tables during college." She grinned at him.

"Great! Step up, pick a stick, and let's rack 'em up."

"Is that all right, Jake?"

"Sure. Let's play. We have about thirty minutes before dinner hits the table." Jake walked over to a barstool next to a tall round table and picked up the cue leaning against it.

Rebecca selected a stick from the rack on the wall and chalked her hands. *Maybe this will be fun.* She hadn't shot pool in ages. For the time being, she forgot about Ben, secure he was being loved and kept safe.

* * * *

The old priest lowered himself to the settee next to Caroline. Reaching over, he gave the baby a small blessing as he kissed the cross around his neck and then bent to gently kiss the baby's head.

"This child will need a lot of protection, Carrie." His eyes held worry.

"That's what you said about Trey twenty-three years ago when he was born." Her eyes glanced up to his. "And I couldn't protect him, either."

"Trey is not lost to us. Not yet." He shook his head.

"I'm so worried about him, Father. And about this one, too."

"Jake will have to protect him from his father. He must be brought into the pack, not left to face this alone. His mother must be made to understand."

"Jake has every intention of marrying this woman and taking in the baby," she assured the man who'd been their family's confidante for over fifty years. Now in his late seventies, still spry mentally and physically, he continued to offer the family his spiritual and moral guidance.

"Good. He looks like Trey." His eyes shone as he chuckled the baby under the chin.

"I know. Slender. Not like Jake. That baby was a bruiser from the beginning." She laughed and the priest joined in.

"We all thought you weren't going to make it, Carrie. Michael was heartsick, you know. Pulled me out of bed in the middle of the night to be with him at the hospital."

"He was such a worrier." She shook her head. "I miss him, Father. So much."

"Losing a lifemate is hard, Carrie. But you're strong. I understand you're seeing Professor Wong."

"Yes." She sighed and sat back. Ben was sleeping in her arms, but she hated to put him down. "Leon's asked me to marry him."

"Wonderful!"

"No, it's not. How do I explain everything to him? He thinks I'm just the matriarch of this lumber family, busy with my charity work, having lunch every Wednesday with the ladies' church league." She shrugged her shoulders.

"You are all those things. And more."

"It's the more I'm having problems with, Father. He'll have to know about our legacy."

The priest sat back. "Have you told Jake about the proposal?"

"He's got his own set of problems." She looked lovingly down at the baby. "I don't want him to feel like he has to handle mine, too."

"Yes, Jake's broad shoulders are a strength and a weakness. A dual edged sword, I fear." He ratcheted himself out of his seat. "Do you love the professor?"

"Yes, I do. After Michael died, I thought I'd never breathe again, much less love again. It surprised me more than anyone, I think."

"Is he Catholic?" There was a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"No, he's not anything. But we've discussed it and we want you to do the ceremony."

"Of course, I will. We'll talk about it later, when I see the both of you in my office once this is settled."

"Marriage counseling? At our ages?" She laughed.

"Well, once you tell him, there may be some issues the two of you have to face."

She flicked her wrist and glanced at her watch. "Almost time for dinner."

"Can I use the phone?" he asked.

"Of course. Use the study, it's private."

She stood, slipped the baby back into the carrier, and picked it up.

He left the library with her, but stepped into the study as Caroline continued down the hall to the kitchen, baby in hand.

Chapter Seven

“Where’s Ben?” Rebecca looked around the library then walked over to the diaper bag she’d left on the table. “He was in here with your mother.” She tried to keep the accusation from her tone, but a little of it slipped through.

“I’m sure he’s fine. She’s probably got him.” Jake shrugged.

“Got him? Where?” Her frantic anxiety came through loud and clear. Ben had never been out of her sight before, unless he was in his crib asleep. “I shouldn’t have left him alone.”

“He wasn’t alone.” Jake drew himself up. “He’s with my mom. His grandmother.”

Despite knowing he was right, Rebecca couldn’t stop tears filling eyes. She nodded. “I know. Sorry. It’s just that I’m a little on edge.”

Jake held out his hand to her. “Come on. Let’s find them.”

He led her down the hallway to the back of the house. It felt as if her heart were beating in her throat, as if she were on the very edge of panic.

Holding open the swinging door, Jake ushered her into the kitchen.

“Here he is.”

“Ben!” Rebecca rushed to the baby carrier and inspected her son. He was wide-awake, eyes bright, strapped into his carrier sitting on the large kitchen table.

“Ready for dinner?” Caroline asked as she straightened and closed the refrigerator door. She held out a large bowl of potato salad. “Here, Jake, take this to the table.”

He took it and left, backing through another swinging door to the dining room.

“Everything’s ready.” Caroline must have read the look of relief on her face. “I brought Ben with me, dear, so I could keep an eye on him.”

“Thanks.” Rebecca’s heart slid back into her chest.

“He’s been helping me cook.” She smiled down at the child, and then up at Rebecca. “You were worried, weren’t you? I’m so sorry, I should have thought, but you were having such a good time relaxing with the boys I didn’t want to interrupt to tell you we were going to the kitchen.”

“It’s okay.” She pulled out a chair and slumped into it. “I’m just a little nervous.”

“It’s understandable.” Caroline reached over and placed a hand on Rebecca’s shoulder. “Bring him into the dining room and put him next to you on a chair. I’ll bring in the food.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Rebecca stood, picked up the carrier, and backed through the same door Jake had used. Entering the dining room, she stopped.

The table must have sat twenty at one time, but the leaves were pulled out and now only ten chairs marched around it. The others were lined up like soldiers against the wall on either side of a beautiful, six-foot long, burlled walnut buffet. Sitting on the top of it was a crystal bowl of autumn flowers, a set of silver candelabras flanking it. A white linen tablecloth trimmed in lace stretched over the dining table, and at one end, five places were set with lovely old china plates patterned with small, soft multi-colored roses. Rebecca was positive the silverware was sterling.

Jake and Barker stood in front of one of the two large lace curtained windows that brought filtered light in from outside. Heads together, it was as if they’d been in those

same positions before. How many times had they stood there waiting for dinner to make it to the table? Rebecca could just imagine the two men as teens, best friends, sharing a joke, talking about school or girls.

With a bark of laughter, Jake straightened. His gaze met hers, locked and his grin did a slow melt into a quiet, but dead sexy smile. Her heart raced.

He wanted her.

“Look who I found.” She held up the carrier.

“Good. Put him over here, next to you.” Jake held out a chair as she came around the table. She placed the carrier on the chair, then snugged it against the table. He stepped to the side and pulled out her chair.

No sooner was she in the seat, Rebecca popped back up. “Oh, I should help your mom with the food.” Before Jake could speak, she rushed into the kitchen.

*

“You’re a lucky man, Jake.” Father Peter’s voice filled the room. The priest stood in the door from the hall and grinned. “She’s a beautiful girl.”

Jake answered with his own grin of agreement mixed with pride.

“Take a seat, Father.”

The old man pulled out a chair and eased himself into it. Barker sat next to him, just as Caroline came in from the kitchen carrying a large platter of baked pork chops smothered in potatoes and onions. Rebecca was right behind her, carrying two bowls, one of candied sweet potatoes and a bowl of green beans, cooked with onions and bacon.

“Wow, Mrs. M, you sure outdid yourself.” Barker eyed the food appreciatively.

“Back off, boy, there are two chops on that platter with my name on them,” the priest warned.

“No fighting. I made plenty,” Caroline assured them as she placed the platter on the table. Rebecca’s bowls went down on either side, bracketing the chops.

“Besides, it’s Jake who took the last one, not me.” Barker pointed out with a wave of his hand.

Jake rose, got Rebecca seated, and then slid into his seat again.

“Rebecca, this is Father Peter. He’s a fixture here.” Jake smiled.

“Like the plumbing in this old place, old and in need of repair.” Father Peter tipped his head to her.

“Nice to meet you, Father.” Rebecca gave him a nod. “Jake tells me he sits in the same pew every Sunday.”

“That’s true. But it’s been a long time since I’ve seen him in my confessional.” The priest raised a white, bushy eyebrow, then his gaze swung to Barker. “Or you for that matter, Barker Sims.”

“Nothing to confess.” Jake shrugged and glanced sideways at Rebecca.

“I can attest to that, Father. He’s been a real drag lately,” Barker added. “It’s cramping my style.”

“When did you ever have a style?” Jake shot back. Barker looked insulted, but winked playfully at Rebecca.

*

Rebecca looked at Jake. “Was there much to confess?”

“A thing or two.” He looked sheepish. The priest snorted and shook his head.

Rebecca wondered if she wanted to know about them, then decided definitely no.

Well, maybe later. Definitely later.

Barker roared with laughter. “Yeah, right. When we were teens—” he started.

“Barker,” Jake warned. “Remember, you were with me most of the time.”

“Oh, yeah.” Barker shrugged and chuckled.

The men settled down, and Caroline cleared her throat.

“Jake, would you say the blessing?” Father Peter asked softly.

Rebecca watched as everyone at the table held hands. She slipped her right hand into Jake’s large hand, feeling it close around hers. Warm. Secure, but not too tight.

Heads bowed.

Rebecca’s left hand reached out and she extended a finger to Ben. His tiny fingers wrapped it in that oddly strong grip infants possess.

“Heavenly Father, bless everyone at this table, from the youngest to the oldest.” Jake paused as the priest gave a soft harrumph. “Bless everyone we love who isn’t here with us, guide us all, and keep us strong in faith. Thank you for your grace and your blessings.

“Amen.” The word was quietly repeated. Rebecca’s throat tightened, but the word came out. Jake squeezed her hand gently and then let go.

“Now pass those sweet potatoes, Carrie. I’m starved,” said the priest.

* * * *

Dinner was over, the table cleared, dishes washed. Jake and Rebecca sat on the patio. The smell of the trees, pine and oak, the thick scent of wild honeysuckle, and above all the heady mixture of Rebecca’s soap, shampoo and the scent of her body filled him with contentment.

The sun had lowered in the sky, but it wasn’t quite dusk. If they sat there long enough and night fell, he’d be able to show her the fireflies that lit the shrubs along the edge of the woods. And the stars would fill the sky. He pictured himself and Rebecca stretched out on a blanket under the stars making love.

“A penny for your thoughts.”

Jake turned his head and looked at Rebecca. “Just thinking. I’d like you to see more of this place. Would you take a walk with me in the woods?”

“Right now?”

“Sure. Just a short walk. Mom can watch Ben.” He stood and offered his hand.

Rebecca looked at his hand and then up into his eyes.

“Okay.”

*

She rose and waited as he went inside to set it up with his mom. When he returned, he took her hand and led her to the edge of the woods. As they moved closer, she spotted a worn, narrow path leading into the trees. Walking in front, Jake held the branches back as she passed. The bushes were clear up to waist height, but above that, the limbs and branches of the trees and brush grew denser.

The forest closed in around her, but she wasn’t afraid. Jake was there. Deep shade held them as they walked, leaves and pine needles crunched beneath their feet, and the scent of the trees hung heavy in the air. She felt as if these woods could have existed long ago, ages before any man had stepped foot here.

“Jake. These woods are amazing. They’re so ... pristine? Is that the word I’m searching for?”

“Yeah. My dad and granddad went to a lot of trouble to keep this part of the property untouched. We only harvest the trees from the other side of the acreage.”

“It’s beautiful.” She stopped and inhaled deeply. “Everything is so sharp and fresh.”

“Yeah.” Jake’s chest expanded with a lungful of clean, pine-scented air.

Pulling her to him, his hands reached up, entwined in her hair, and tilted her head back. His lips found hers as he kissed her softly.

Rebecca melted. Unable to resist his pull, his taste and the way his body felt against hers, she clung to him to keep herself upright. Why did this man do this to her?

Deciding she didn’t care, she let herself go, and parted her lips to let him inside her mouth. His tongue was gentle as it probed the soft tissue of her lips, then he pulled her bottom lip between his teeth. Heat pooled between her legs. She wanted him, right here and right now.

His hands dropped to her bottom and brought her belly against his erection, thick and hard beneath his jeans. Rebecca moaned as she imagined his cock inside her, making all her fantasies come true. Wrapping her arms around his back, her hands slid over the muscles under his shirt, and she knew she wanted to touch him, flesh to flesh.

Jake brought his head up and stared into her eyes. Two pools of molten chocolate gazed down at her as his breath rasped in his lungs.

“We need to talk.”

“Mm hmm.” She kissed the place on his throat where his shirt was open.

“About Ben.” He put her away from him.

Rebecca opened her eyes and blinked at him. “Ben? You want to talk about Ben?”

“Yeah.” He licked his lips and ran a hand through his hair. “I need to tell you something important.” He paused. “About my family.”

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. “If this is about giving him the McCallan name, I haven’t decided yet. And I don’t want to be pushed.” She took a step back and leaned against a pine tree. Her hands felt the rough bark of the tree and she dug her nails into the large grooves. She couldn’t explain why, but she’d tensed at the tone of his voice.

“This is more than about a name. It’s about my family’s legacy. At least that’s what we’ve always called it.”

“A legacy? Like an inheritance?” She frowned and pushed off from the tree. “I don’t want money, Jake, I told you that. I don’t want anything from your family.” Her voice rose in anger. She’d thought he understood that, and now here he was, going on about money.

“Not money.” He paced in the small space. “It’s sort of like a genetic thing.”

“Genetic?” Her heart jumped into her throat. “Is there something wrong with Ben? Something genetic?” She locked her knees to keep herself upright.

“No, nothing wrong, per se.” He shook his head.

“Per se? Jake, you’re scaring the hell out of me. What is it? Just say it for Christ’s sake!” She wanted to pull it out of him, but she kept her hands clenched at her sides.

“The McCallans came here in the early 1800’s to escape the rest of the world. My great-grandfather bought the original land. My grandfather added more acreage and started the mill.”

“Escape the rest of the world? Why?”

Jake stared at her for a long time and then took a deep breath. She hung on his face, watching for any sign, but all she saw was sadness. “I know this will sound insane,

Rebecca, but it's the truth. The men in my family are werewolves."

Rebecca stared at him as the world around her contracted to herself, Jake and the two trees they stood under. All sound faded away. The seconds rushed past her and all movement halted.

At last, she could form words. "Werewolf. Like the Wolf Man?" She gave a short tight laugh. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. Not like the movie. And no, I'm not kidding. The males in my family have the ability to shape shift into wolves."

"At the full moon?" She couldn't believe she was having this conversation. Jake seemed so normal, so sane. However, the look in his eyes told her this wasn't a joke. Therefore, it could only be insanity.

Jesus, I need to get out of here.

"We change at will. Day or night."

Rebecca started to move, inching her way towards the path they'd traveled, hoping she could follow it, but knowing she'd never outrun him. Besides, he knew these woods like the back of his hand. She was trapped. There was no escape.

"Of course. You're a werewolf." She tried to smile and look natural, but she thought she must look wild-eyed and desperate, because Jake stepped forward. Before she could react, his hands held her arms at her side.

"My grandfather, my father, my brother Trey and I are werewolves. And Ben."

She'd been looking past his shoulder for an escape route but her gaze snapped to meet his. "Ben? You think Ben is a werewolf? You're insane." She struggled against his grip.

"Ben will make his first change when he hits puberty, around thirteen. And if he doesn't know how to do it, it will kill him." Jake was stone cold serious.

Her legs shook now, knees knocking as she listened to him rant. How did this go so wrong? Does his mother know about this delusion? Thank God, Ben is safe with her.

"I don't believe you."

"It's true. Why would I lie to you?"

Because you're insane. No, better not to rile him.

"Prove it." She clenched her jaw and stared at him.

Jake's eyes softened and he licked his lips.

"You can't, can you? It's all a lie, some crazy delusion you're under."

"If I let you go, will you stay and not run off?"

"I'll stay. I'll do anything you want, just leave Ben alone. Please don't hurt him."

She'd beg, plead and cajole, do anything to keep her baby safe.

Jake closed his eyes and winced as if he felt a stab of pain. With a deep breath, he stepped back and released her. Rebecca rubbed her arms and watched as he moved to the edge of the woods and closed his eyes.

The air around him shimmered and the same vibration she'd felt in her house began. She was caught up in it as if it had substance, thick and cloying. The vibrations spread to her core, making her legs shake even worse than before. Her throat constricted, refusing her scream.

Jake's body seemed to flow. Or was the air bending around his body, like a mirror bends light? Rebecca thought the right word would be morph. *He's morphing... changing ... dear God ... who art in heaven...* Her breath came in hard gulps as she was caught

between trying to breathe, trying to scream, and keeping her legs under her. She staggered backwards and slammed against the pine tree. Its rough bark chewed into her, yet held her upright.

Jake's face contorted in pain, then he was gone.

A huge, dark grey wolf stood where he had been.

Rebecca slid down the tree trunk ripping bark as she did. Sitting on her knees, she stared at the wolf. "Don't hurt me ... please..." she whimpered.

The wolf sat and whined. Golden eyes, intelligent eyes stared at her.

"Jake?" Her voice sounded like the croak of a bullfrog in the utter stillness of the forest. It was so quiet. No insects buzzed, no birds sang, just her raw voice shattering the silence. Her ears pounded. It was her own heartbeat magnified to the level of an onrushing train.

The wolf lowered himself to the ground, large paws stretched out in front, and rested his massive head on them.

Rebecca looked at the animal. Her initial terror passed. The creature seemed to be content just to lay there. Thinking it through, she ran through the logical possibilities. This was an elaborate hoax. No. Jake and Barker were playing a prank on her. No, that didn't make sense either. Where'd they get the wolf? This isn't really a wolf, but a husky. A dog made to look like a wolf. Right. Doggy disguises. Now, who's crazy?

Studying the animal, she took in his thick dark grey pelt, slender but powerful legs, massive paws, and amber eyes, not the dark brown of a dog. She was sure it was a wolf. She licked her lips.

I'm running out of logic ... time for insanity.

"Jake. Come here."

The wolf rose and slowly started forward. It stopped when it reached her and then sat on its haunches. Its long tongue lolled. Sharp, white teeth. All the better to eat you with, my dear. Rebecca stifled a giggle. *I'm losing my mind.* Is insanity catching? Could he have drugged her?

She reached out a hand so slowly it trembled when it touched fur. Delving deep into the animal's magnificent coat, her fingers explored the sensation of the thick pelt. He was dark grey on his back, legs, and tail, fading to soft grey underneath. Rising on her knees, she dropped her hands and came face to face with the wolf as she looked into his eyes.

"I must be insane. It is you."

The wolf licked her cheek, dragging his tongue over her skin. Dropping his head, he licked the back of her hands. Reaching with one hand, Rebecca stroked the side of his head and then she climbed to her feet, still shaking. She couldn't stop the shaking.

"I've seen enough, Jake." Stepping away, she leaned against the tree for support.

The wolf took several steps backwards and then lowered his head and closed his eyes. The air did that shimmering thing and Rebecca watched as the man she thought she loved changed from a wolf back to a man. Jake. Jake was a werewolf.

"Rebecca. I had to tell you." He came toward her, but she held out her hands to stop him. He froze in his tracks.

"And this is going to happen to Ben?"

"Yes. But later, much later."

"Thank you for telling me. Take me back now." Wrapping her arms around her body, she stared anywhere but at Jake. "I'm taking Ben and leaving." Her voice was so

quiet she barely heard herself, but her eyes defied him to stop her.

Jake stared at her. "He must be trained, Rebecca."

"I'm going to take him to a doctor and get him tested."

"Tested for what?" Jake countered. She could hear the irritation in his voice.

"Genetics. Maybe they can remove the gene." She shrugged. "Please, I just want to go home." What she wanted was to go home, lock herself in the bathroom, and scream until she couldn't make another sound. Then get drunk. Very, very drunk.

Jake shook his head, but led the way back to the house. He was silent as he went in front of her, holding branches to clear the way for her, but not ever touching her. She tried to sort out the jumble of thoughts that ranged from "run away" to "typical, just typical." Mostly she concentrated on not breaking down into loud, messy, heart-racking sobs.

When they reached the patio, she stopped.

"Jake."

He turned and looked at her. Her mind was made up. This was the only way.

"I can't ever see you again. Or bring the baby here." She didn't even bother to search for understanding in his eyes, because she knew what she'd see.

"Please don't do that, Rebecca." His voice was so raspy and he looked as if her words had physically wounded him. It was only fair, damn it. It was killing her to say them.

"It's my decision as his mother. I'm going inside and get my son and we're leaving. Please don't call me. Goodbye, Jake." She walked past him and went inside.

The screen door closed softly behind her as she walked out of Jake McCallan's life.

Chapter Eight

As Rebecca entered the kitchen, Caroline poured coffee for Father Peter and Barker as they sat around the large table where Ben sat in his carrier. Trying to act as normal as possible, Rebecca smiled at them.

“Mrs. McCallan, thank you so much for inviting me today. Father Peter, it was nice to meet you.” She nodded to Barker. “I have to leave now.”

Walking around the table, she picked up Ben’s carrier and left the room, heading to the library to find her diaper bag and purse. With all of her belongings in hand, she marched to the front door, telling herself to go before anyone tried to stop her. She had no idea what she’d do if they did try, but she was prepared to fight her way out of here if she had to. For a moment, as she walked down the hall, she remembered an old movie she’d seen on late night television, *Rosemary’s Baby*. The woman had given birth to the spawn of the devil and everyone had acted as if it was perfectly normal.

Ben is not some spawn of evil. He is not a werewolf.

Rebecca reached the front door and looked back. The hall was empty. No one had followed her. Her gaze rose to the statue of the wolf on the landing. Of course.

She wanted to scream, “You can’t have him, he’s mine. He’s not one of you. He’s just a normal baby.” Instead, she jerked the door open and stepped through it. Shutting the door behind her, she stared at the brass door knockers. More wolves.

Lips, chin and legs trembling, she made it to her car, strapped in the car seat, and got in. It took all the control she had not to floor the gas pedal and fishtail across the front lawn in a mad dash to escape, but to follow the driveway back to the main road like a sane, rational person. Someone around here had to be.

Keeping her eyes on the road as she drove, she was afraid to glance off to the side. If she saw Jake’s wolf following the car like some car-chasing pet dog she’d lose it. Now in the dark, the trees that were so beautiful in the daylight loomed over the car, threatening to reach down and capture her, to keep her from escaping.

The front gates loomed. The seconds ticked by as she approached them. Almost there. It wouldn’t have surprised her to see them swing shut, trapping her inside the estate. She pressed down on the accelerator and sped forward.

Once through them, Rebecca braked, stopping before she crossed the highway. She looked in both directions and then eased onto the blacktop highway and headed back to town.

She exhaled. And then she sucked in a lungful of air that ended in a shuddering gasp. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the wheel and kept muttering, “It will be okay, it will be okay...”

God let it be okay.

* * * *

“She knows.” Carolina looked at the priest. He reached out and placed his hand over hers.

“I don’t think it went well.” Barker stood, pushing back his chair. “I’ll go find Jake.”

Caroline nodded. Barker opened the back door and stepped out onto the patio.

Jake had his back to him, head tilted up to look at the stars.

"She's gone," Jake said.

"Yes." Barker stood next to his best friend and waited.

"She thought I was crazy. She thought I would hurt Ben." Jake's shoulders slumped. "I've lost her."

"Give her time. She loves you, Jake. I could see it in her eyes."

Jake stepped off the porch and Barker followed. They walked in the moonlight toward the woods.

"Maybe it's not enough. Maybe it's too much for her."

"She's your mate, Jake. She'll come around. She just needs to time to take it all in." Barker didn't know what to say. If it were anyone else, he'd suggest the two of them go get a beer and pick up girls. Rubbing his hand over his chin, he followed his friend, helpless. This sucked.

"Yeah. Time. In the meantime, is Trey going to stop trying to kill her, if it is him? If it isn't, who is it? I can't leave her, Barker, even if she's left me."

"I'll make the patrol, boss. You know that. Between the two of us, we'll keep her safe."

"If I could just find Trey and talk some sense into him." Jake stopped at the edge of the woods. "I need to be alone."

"I understand. Call me later." Barker stopped.

Jake stepped into the woods and within moments was gone.

"Take care of yourself, old dog," Barker called, then turned around, walked back to the patio and went inside.

* * * *

The wolf's ears twitched as the engine of Barker's pick-up roared to life and the sounds of tires on the driveway faded. Next, the priest left. He watched as the lights in the big house went out, leaving only the kitchen window and his mother's rooms lit.

If his brother was around here somewhere, where was he hiding?

The wolf turned away from the great house and began his search.

* * * *

Just ten minutes from town, Rebecca could breathe without sucking in great gulps of air. Her grip on the steering wheel relaxed and she glanced in the rearview mirror to check on Ben. He was asleep. Thank God, he loved to sleep in the car.

It was night now, no pretense of fading daylight. The woods, instead of beautiful and picturesque, held sinister shapes and shadows that seemed to rush past, although she was the one rushing

I'm going too fast. Taking her foot off the accelerator, she slowed to a safer speed.

Lights flashed in her rearview mirror, making her squint. Some creep with his brights on gained on her. Jerk. If he wanted to pass, so be it. Slowing down, she waited for him to pass her.

The vehicle sped up. Her eyes watched the road in front of her when the truck slammed into the back of her car. The impact jolted her forward, her head almost hitting

the steering wheel. Her seat belt tightened and she recoiled back against the seat.

Ben started crying.

“What the hell?”

Glancing up to the rearview mirror, the lights blinded her. For a moment, she thought about pulling over to the side and inspecting the damage, but the lights loomed closer. Some inner voice whispered, “Don’t stop.”

Jamming her foot down on the accelerator, Rebecca pulled the car away from the lights as her speedometer topped sixty. The woods *whooshed* past in a dark blur, and her grip on the wheel tightened as she steered the car around the curves.

At this speed, if he hit her again she might lose control and crash. All she could think about was that her baby could be killed.

Her eyes flicked to the purse on the seat next to her. Her cell phone. Reaching across, she pulled the purse closer and doing a visual dance between the road and her purse, she fumbled for the phone. Trembling fingers caught it up in their grasp.

Flipping it open, she hit 911.

“Emergency. Can I help you?”

“Yes, help! I’m on Highway 35 heading south just before town and there is some madman trying to force me off the road.”

“Can you identify yourself?”

“This is Rebecca Miller, 235 Oak Street. Help me. I’m driving a blue Camry on Highway 35 south into town.” It was all she could do to stay calm and not scream at the woman on the other end of the phone.

“All right. Can you tell what kind of vehicle it is?”

“No. It’s dark. All I see are headlights. Please send someone right away. I have a baby in the car.” Ben’s angry wail came right on cue.

“Yes, ma’am. I have a unit dispatched to your location. You should see the lights in a few minutes.”

“Thank you.” Rebecca sent up another prayer. *Please get here in time. Please, God, I promise ... anything ... just keep my baby safe ... please.*

“Stay on the line, don’t hang up.”

“Right.” She swallowed and glanced behind her. The lights were dropping back. *Thank you, God.* Ben was furious now, his wailing high-pitched and urgent.

The lights stopped and then they veered off as the vehicle turned, red taillights flashed once, then disappeared.

Ahead of her, blue and red lights cut the night. She pulled the car over to the side of the road and stopped. Rebecca rested her head on the wheel and exhaled. The police car pulled up to her front bumper and the inside of her car was bathed in a kaleidoscope of blue and red.

The cop was by her door. Another damn light in her eyes. Rolling down the window, the baby’s cry made the officer jump back.

“Thank you. You scared him off. He turned around and went in the other direction.”

“Are you all right?” The cop stared at her.

“Yes, just shook up.”

“Is the baby okay?” He glanced in the back seat.

“I think so.” She opened the door, got out, and opened the back door. Kneeling on the seat, she checked Ben. She found his pacifier dangling from its tether, and popped it

back into his mouth. The crying stopped, angry wet eyes accused her, and savage sucking commenced. "He's fine."

The cop walked around to the back of the car and shone his light on the rear end. "You got some damage here."

She walked to the back of the car. "It's not so bad. He bumped me pretty hard, but I guess since we were both moving..." She shrugged. Her bumper hung down on the driver's side.

"It could be worse."

"Yeah." Rebecca wrapped her arms around herself. *I could be dead, along with Ben.*

"Let me get some information from you and I'll follow you home."

They moved off to the side of the road as headlights approached. Rebecca tensed. It's not him. He, whoever it was, wouldn't dare come back with the police here. The truck slowed and pulled to the side. Before she knew it, the door opened and a man got out and walked up to the cars.

"Holy shit!"

Rebecca recognized the voice. She held up her hand to shield her eyes from the glare. "Barker?"

"Rebecca? What the hell happened?"

"Someone tried to run me off the road. God, Barker, I'm so glad to see you." The relief was almost physical and her legs begin to buckle under her.

Barker was at her side in a few long strides and engulfed her against his chest.

"Did you call Jake?"

"No. It just happened. Barker, did you pass anyone back there?"

"No, it's been clear since I turned onto the highway."

The officer came over. "Sergeant? I thought it was you. You know her?"

"Hey, Riley. Yeah, she's a friend." His arm was slung around her shoulders.

"Oh, right. A friend." Riley nodded as if he understood.

"Of Jake's." Barker added and gave the guy a look.

"Damn! The boss is going to want to know about this."

"That's what I figure."

Rebecca watched the two men talk about her as if she wasn't there. She pushed herself away from Barker.

"Hey, do I get a say in this?"

They looked at her and Barker shrugged. "Sure."

"Number one. Don't tell Jake."

Riley eyed Barker, pursed his lips in a soundless whistle, and then stepped away to his patrol car.

"Why not?" Barker rubbed his jaw.

"Jake no longer has anything to do with me or my life." She began to walk to the patrol car. "Do you have any other questions?" Riley glanced at Barker, then shook his head.

"Good. I'm taking my car and going home." She stomped back to the car and got in.

Barker came up to the window, put both hands on the sill, and leaned over in his best cop attitude. "I'll follow you." She began to speak. "Not a word. I'll follow you and I won't tell Jake."

"Deal." She gave him a curt nod and turned the key. The car started and she steered

around the patrol car and back onto the highway.

* * * *

Rebecca pulled into her driveway and parked. Barker pulled his truck up next to the curb and got out. She had the car seat out by the time he got to her side and together they climbed the steps to her porch.

Unlocking the door, a wave of relief washed over her. They'd made it home. Safe. She felt like a kid playing tag who'd made it to home base calling "Ollie, ollie, oxen free!"

Rebecca put the carrier on the table and unbuckled Ben. Barker closed the door and watched her.

She held Ben to her, cradling him, rocking, and cooing. He smiled at her. No harm done. Not unless she counted her heart.

Now that the rush of adrenaline receded, it left Rebecca with a sick stomach.

"Barker. Take Ben. I'm going to be sick." She pressed the baby at him.

*

"But, I don't... I never..." Barker accepted the child in his two large hands. Ben dangled, pudgy legs kicking in air, looking at this new person holding him at arms' length.

Rebecca dashed from the room, leaving him and the baby alone. Barker stared at the tiny bundle. Blue eyes looked back at him and the baby cooed.

"Hey, Ben. How's it hanging?"

Ben blew bubbles. Kicked the air. Barker held the child out in front of him, unsure what to do next.

He tried to remember how Jake had held him, but he was afraid to change his grip on the kid. What if he dropped the baby? Jake would kill him. Rebecca would kill him. He didn't even want to think what Jake's mom would do to him.

"What's keeping your mom, boss?" Barker craned his neck to see down the hall. He was afraid even to move.

There was a hard knock at the door.

He looked from the door to the baby to the hall and then back to the baby.

More knocking.

He'd have to shift the baby. With the utmost care, he pulled the baby to his chest, and moved his arm around to cradle the child. Now, he had an arm free. Stepping to the door, he turned the knob and opened it.

"Who are you?" A furious-looking, tall blonde woman stared at him. "Are you Jake?"

"No, I'm Barker." He blinked. "Who are you?"

"What are you doing with the baby?" She crossed the threshold, fists clenched.

"Nothing." For a minute, he thought she was going to attack him.

Brown eyes blazing, she reached out her hands and extracted the baby from him. "You don't even know how to hold him, do you?"

"Well, no. I've never held a baby before." He shrugged. She'd taken him by surprise and he was babbling. He thought he was doing okay with the kid, but her words made him doubt himself. "Who did you say you are?"

"I didn't. I'm Vicki, if you must know." She sighed as if he was too stupid to live.

“Rebecca’s best friend.” Her eyes told him he should have known that important piece of information.

“Right. She’s in the bathroom.” He jerked his head towards the back of the house.

“And she left *you* in charge?” A slender light brown eyebrow arched at him. Her pursed lips disapproved of him. She only came up to his shoulder, but somehow, she seemed formidable.

“Well, I am a cop.” He tried to regain some dignity. “I’m trained to handle emergencies.”

One side of her lips canted up in a grimace of disbelief. “Rebecca!” she called.

“In the bathroom. I’ll be out in a sec.” The muffled voice came from down the hall and behind a door.

Barker and Vicki glared at each other. Time stretched. Vicki ignored him and bounced the baby in her arms. Barker checked Vicki out. Wondered what she looked like with her hair out of that severe ponytail. Blond hair spread across a pillow. Black lace panties and one of those bras that pushed a woman’s breasts up into full, ripe mounds.

Oh, yeah.

The door opened and Rebecca returned. “I see you’ve met Barker. He’s Jake’s best friend and a cop.” She looked a little pale to him, but that was to be expected with the shocks she’d had tonight.

Vicki passed the baby to her. “When I got here I saw the strange truck and I got worried. Did you know the back of your car is wrecked?”

“Yes, I know. So, you just thought you’d come in and check it out?” Rebecca grinned. “Great. Just great. Another baby sitter.”

“We were supposed to have dinner, remember?” Vicki put her hands on her hips.

“Sorry, Vicki. I forgot. Too much going on.” Rebecca sat in the glider and rocked the baby.

Vicki sat on the couch, tucking her legs under her. Barker dropped into the seat next to her. She shot him a look that said, “You’re still here?” and turned back to Rebecca. “Spill it.”

“Someone tried to run me off the road tonight on the way back from Jake’s.”

“Shit.” She turned to Barker. *Now* he existed. “Tell me you caught the guy.”

“No. I never saw him.”

“What kind of cop are you?” She was glaring at him, as if it were all his fault.

“Vicki, Barker was off-duty at the time. He was at Jake’s too. He came across the accident and offered to follow me home.”

“Does Jake know?”

Rebecca rolled her eyes and sighed. “No. And he’s not going to, right, Barker?”

“That was the deal.”

Vicki’s head swiveled to Barker. “What deal?”

“She let me follow her home. I don’t tell Jake.”

“Why don’t you want to tell Jake?” Vicki looked at Rebecca.

“I have my reasons.”

“And you know about them?” Vicki turned to Barker. It was obvious she didn’t like that he knew something she didn’t. Ha. One point for him.

“Yeah. I don’t agree either, but I gave my word not to tell.”

“You’d do that?” Vicki seemed to be reassessing him. He hoped it was in his favor.

She was dead sexy, with that hard look in her eyes and her lithe legs tucked up. He could imagine them wrapped around him, telling him just what she wanted him to do to her. And he was ready to do it.

“Yeah. I still think Jake should know about it, but a deal’s a deal.” He shrugged.

Vicki turned back to her friend. “Okay. Now will you admit it?”

“Admit what?” Rebecca tried to look innocent.

“That someone is trying to kill you, Rebecca. And the baby.”

Chapter Nine

Rebecca stared at Vicki, then she turned to Barker. “Is that what you think, too?”

“Yeah.”

“And Jake?” Rebecca’s voice sounded dangerous and he knew he had better give the right answer.

“Yeah. I’ve been making drive-bys at night on my patrol. I asked some of the other guys to do the same on their shifts.” He tried not to look sheepish. This wasn’t some game. However, he did not intend to tell her Jake had been on patrol, too. And definitely not as a wolf sitting under her house.

“Did Jake order you to?” Her lips were set in a straight, grim line.

“No. I suggested it to him. He agreed.”

Vicki crossed her arms. “That settles it. I’m staying here tonight. No arguments. Give me about forty-five minutes to go home, grab some things, and I’ll be right back.”

Rebecca began to speak, but changed her mind and nodded.

“You’ll stay with her until I come back?” Vicki pinned Barker with those luscious brown eyes of hers. He would have agreed to anything she asked at that moment, instead, he merely nodded.

Picking up her purse, she walked to the door. “Do you mind, Becca?”

“No. I think I’d like someone here right now.” She smiled at her best friend.

Without another word, Vicki was gone.

“Can I get you some coffee?” Rebecca pointed towards the kitchen.

“No, if I drink it, I’ll be up all night. I have the guys on patrol doing drive-bys tonight. I’m back on duty tomorrow.”

“Then let me feed Ben and put him to bed, and I’ll be back.” She disappeared down the hall.

Barker leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and ran his hands through his hair. How was he going to tell Jake about this? He was going to be furious about not knowing of another attack on Rebecca. And he couldn’t blame Jake one bit. If it was he and his woman was being threatened, Jake might have to answer to his fists.

Well, it wouldn’t be the first time they’d duked it out over a girl. He only hoped if it came to blows they’d remain friends after it was over. And that Jake would pull his punches.

Standing, he walked to the window, stood to the side, and peered out through a crack in the curtain. The street was quiet. Where the hell was Trey hiding? It had to be him, who else could it be?

Rebecca came back, dressed in a robe, her feet in fuzzy slippers. “I’m going to bed as soon as Vicki gets back.” She sat in the glider.

“That’s a good idea. I doubt anything will happen again tonight.” He sat down on the couch. Time for cop mode. He leaned forward, his hands clasped together between his knees. “Rebecca. Is there anyone else, anyone in your past, who might want to hurt you?”

She thought for a minute. “No. No one. And most of my past is in Tennessee, not here in Louisiana. I left here when I was eighteen to get away from my parents.” She shrugged. “Alone, by the way. I caught a bus out of here and ended up in Knoxville.

Started working in a diner as a short-order cook. I took some community college courses in culinary arts. Ten years later, here I am, back home. Six months after I arrived and opened shop as a caterer, I met Trey.”

He listened to what he wasn't hearing. “Anyone in Tennessee who might want you back, or might want you dead?”

She swallowed. “I had a boyfriend. The son of the owner of the restaurant I worked at. But nothing ever came of it. We split up when I started going to school full time. Different directions, I guess. But it was mutual. There's been no one else. I've tried to stay away from entanglements and concentrate on my career.”

She leaned back, obviously exhausted. “Can we do the interrogation later?”

“Sorry if it seemed like I was being hard on you, but I need to know everything.” He leaned forward and gave her a smile. Then he sat back. “Your friend Vicki seems nice.”

“She is. She's a teacher at the elementary school.”

“She seems like a real good friend. Did you know her before you left?”

“She was my best friend back in high school. She was one of the reasons I came back here, besides my mom and dad. After she got her degree at LSU, she returned here to teach, to give back to the community. She encouraged me to come back to my roots and that what this town needed was a good caterer.” She flashed a quick smile, then frowned at him. “If you're looking at Vicki as a possible suspect, you're way off base. She has no reason to want me dead, so forget it.” Her eyes got hard and her brows furrowed.

“No, I don't think it's her at all.”

“Who, then? Trey?”

“Yeah. I hate to admit it, but he's the most likely suspect.”

There was a knock at the door. Rebecca got up and answered it. Vicki had returned, a sports bag slung over her shoulder, and a skirt and blouse on hangers draped over her arm. “I got my stuff. Hope I didn't take too long?”

“No, we were just talking.” Rebecca smiled at Barker.

“Well, I better go now that your watchdog has arrived.” He grinned at Vicki.

“Grrruff!” She laughed. “You better believe it.”

He stepped to the door. “Vicki, can I have a word with you?”

She nodded, put down her things, and followed him outside. “What's up?”

He looked out at the street. He couldn't believe he was going to do this, and he couldn't believe how nervous he was.

“I'm off duty on Thursday. Would you like to have dinner with me?”

Vicki stared at him, eyes wide, her mouth opened in a soft gasp. Then, her face changed. He saw a brief flash of a smile, then her lips thinned. “I don't think that's a good idea, Barker.”

“Why not?” He was surprised about her answer. Not many women told him no. He'd thought he'd ended up on her good side this evening.

She licked her lips and then looked up at him. “Look, Barker. I'm sure you're a nice guy, but you're a heartbreak on two legs. I've been there and done that. I even have the t-shirt and I'm not interested in getting the matching hat. Don't look good in them.”

He'd never heard himself described that way before. To be honest, he had broken his share of hearts. He didn't know what to say to her. He just knew he wanted her.

Frowning, he shrugged. “Can I ask again, sometime?”

She stepped towards the door. "Sorry, Barker. I'm off the menu at the meat market." Opening it, she stepped through and went inside.

Barker frowned, took a deep breath, let it out, and headed to his truck.

* * * *

The wolf padded down the trail to the old fort. The moon shone down on it, casting shadows in the small clearing. He sat at the edge of the woods staring at it, unwilling to go into the open until he knew it was safe.

He and Trey had built it the year Jake was twelve, before his first change. He had worked hard to keep their sister Tori from finding out. But, he'd let Trey tag along, a kid brother of six, too big to leave behind and too small to do much. After much whining, Jake had let him help gather wood and carry it to the site.

There wasn't much left of the fort now, just parts of the walls. The roof had caved in long ago and the tarpaper he'd filched from the supplies at the lumberyard was in tatters.

They'd been so proud of it and couldn't wait to show it to Dad. Of course, their dad had walked around it, inspecting it, silently noting all the wood and supplies they'd stolen to build it. In the end, as the boys held their breath, their dad had pronounced it the best fort he'd ever seen, even rivaling the one he and his brother Joseph had built down by the stream when they were kids.

Together, they'd all crawled inside, sat like Indians, and made a sacred spit vow never to allow girls or outlaws or damn Yankees to discover their secret place. The memory made the wolf smile. Well, as close to a smile as a wolf could manage.

A million years ago. When we were young and still brothers. He lowered his head to his paws and scented the ground. No one had been here. All he could smell was the raccoon family living in it now, and somewhere, rabbits.

He turned around and headed back down the trail. The wolf had been to all the places he could think of on their property. Would Trey really hide here? Probably not. He had to have friends in town.

The thought of town led to the last time he'd caught scent of Trey. The pawn shop. As good a place as any to start. The Fells brothers, Tad and Bryan ran it. Tad was all right, but Bryan was a bad ass. Trey had run with him during high school.

The shop opened at ten a.m. He'd check it out then. Ask what Trey had been interested in; pretend he was looking for a birthday gift, maybe. Was that too lame? It would have to do for now.

The wolf shook out his fur, stopped by a tree, and marked it. It had been a long night and he was tired.

The sun would be up soon and he had to go to work, so he headed for home.

* * * *

Rebecca stared at the television. This was ridiculous. She wanted to go out, take a walk, but she'd promised Vicki as she was leaving for work she'd stay put today. It was just a bad case of 'ants in the pants'. Like when she had money and went shopping and nothing looked good, but when she didn't have a dime, everything was something she just had to have.

Flipping the television remote, she landed on the food channel. Now she was

seriously depressed. It had been four months since her last catering job. Her reserve funds were being nibbled at, draining away in a slow and steady stream. She'd be broke in another three months or so if she wasn't careful. Losing the house and her business was something she couldn't even begin to think about, not on top of her current set of worries.

She should get in the kitchen and cook something up. It would be good for her. But what? At times like this, there was only one thing, one constant that never failed to lift her spirits.

Chocolate.

Ben was taking his morning nap, so she had time. Rummaging around in her pantry, she pulled out the block of baker's chocolate, and some cake flour. A cake, she decided.

Rebecca spent the morning working on the cake, falling into the familiar routine of measuring, pouring, sifting, beating, and blending. Some people relieved stress by kneading dough; she did it through the concentration of following the steps of a recipe. The more complicated the better.

Today, she'd picked a seven-layer Doberge cake, each thin layer separated by rich chocolate filling. The outside was iced smooth with chocolate royal icing. For good measure, and to satisfy her neglected artistic cravings, she decorated it with swags of soft yellow, punctuated with darker yellow roses and green leaves.

It sat on the table, a masterpiece, too pretty to eat. An idea popped into her head. She went to the kitchen drawer, opened it, and pulled out the phone book. After flipping through the half-inch yellow pages, she found what she was looking for.

Grabbing the phone, she punched in the numbers.

"The Garden Tea Room. Can I help you?"

"Yes. I'd like to speak to the manager."

"Hold on, I'll get her."

Rebecca waited, rehearsing her sales pitch in her mind.

"This is Ms. Shane, can I help you?"

"This is Rebecca Miller, Ms. Shane, from Miller Catering. I was wondering where you were getting your cakes and pies."

"Well, we make them here, when we can."

"I'd like to supply your desserts. I make them from scratch."

"Well, I'm not sure we'd be interested."

"Just let me bring one by, Ms. Shane. I have one made fresh this morning. See for yourself if you'd like it."

"I'm not sure."

"You could even sample it." She paused. "It's a chocolate Doberge."

"Doberge? Like the ones from that famous bakery down in New Orleans?"

"That's the one."

"All right. Can you come now? We serve lunch at eleven. If I like it, I'll buy it and see how it sells today. Then we can take it from there."

"That's great! Thanks, Ms. Shane. I'll be right over."

Rebecca hung up and then danced around the kitchen table. Hunting around in her supply closet, she found a cake box, folded it together, and slipped the cake inside.

It might not be much, but at least it was money. There was no way she was going to ask her parents for money. She'd wait tables before she did that.

And going to Jake was out of the question. She knew if she went to him, he'd help

her no questions asked, but it smacked a little of the money she'd refused to accept the first time she met him. Besides, she'd always made it on her own before, and now would be no different.

She rushed off to get Ben dressed. If she worked fast, she could be there in fifteen minutes, show Ms. Shane the cake, sample it, and be home before eleven. With her spirits soaring, Rebecca's heart filled with renewed hope.

Maybe, just maybe, she could salvage her business.

* * * *

Jake knocked on the door and waited for the buzzer to sound before entering. Looking through the glass door of the pawnshop, he lifted a hand to Tad Fell in greeting. The lock clicked and he pulled the door open and entered.

Tad stood behind the counter wearing a pistol on his hip, and grinned at Jake. "Long time, no see, Jake. What brings you in?"

Jake walked to the counter, looking around at the inventory. "I understand Trey was in here a few days ago."

Tad's smile fell as if a curtain passed over his face. "I don't remember."

"Well, I was going to get him a birthday present and was wondering if there was something in here he'd been looking at." Jake shrugged, trying to keep his expression neutral.

Tad looked as if he was trying to decide what to tell him, then he walked to another glass case and looked down. "I think he already bought something."

"Really? Damn, I guess I'm too late. What did he get?" Jake strolled over to the counter. A selection of handguns laid spread out on two shelves. His heart sank.

Tad looked nervous. "I think it was a Beretta." He licked his lips.

"9mm?" Jake looked into Tad's eyes. Small beads of sweat broke out across the man's upper lip and his eyes danced away from Jake's. Tad couldn't lie to save his soul.

"Yeah, I think so."

Jake put his hands on his hips. "How'd he get the gun without the seven-day waiting period?"

"Well... He bought it the week before and we were just waiting for the okay to come in before he picked it up." Tad had all the right answers, but somehow, Jake didn't believe it really went down like that. It's easy to change the dates on paperwork if you wanted to go around the law, and Trey was very good at just that. So was Tad's brother Bryan.

"When was that?"

"Oh, sometime last week, I think. Bryan would know, but he's not here right now."

"That's okay, I can catch him later. Well, I guess I'll have to find another gift."

Jake left the shop and walked back to his truck and climbed in. Damn, Trey had bought a gun. Why hadn't he just taken one of their own guns; they had their own arsenal in a gun safe in the game room, rifles, shotguns, and handguns, and Trey knew the combination to the safe.

Both Jake and Trey could shoot and they had hunted with their father often. Hell, he thought, any male over the age of twelve in this parish could shoot; it was practically a way of life out here in the country.

However, all of their weapons were registered and could be traced. Of course, he

wasn't sure Trey hadn't taken a gun last time he was in town. With no one home, it would have been easy for him to come in, open the safe and take a weapon.

Trey with a gun was not good news. The only good thing was that whoever had made the attempt on Rebecca's life hadn't used a gun. Whoever it was seemed to be taking advantage of opportunities. And so far, she'd escaped, but how long could that last?

Had Trey, or whoever it was, gotten tired of missing and switched to a more accurate method?

Jake decided to head home, check the safe, and then call Barker.

* * * *

Barker watched as Rebecca loaded the baby and a large box into her car and pulled out of the driveway. Damn her, she'd promised to stay put. Good thing he'd decided to keep his eye on her. After the last attack, without Jake's help, he was the only one out here protecting her. He'd have to be on his toes and stay alert.

He drove the truck around the corner and followed her down the street. She turned onto Main and headed west. After a few blocks, she slowed, and turned into the parking lot of The Garden Tea Room. He made a face. It was one of those lady lunch places where no self-respecting, red-blooded, all-American male would ever set foot.

Rebecca parked and after retrieving the baby and the box from the back seat, she went inside. Barker parked on the street with a clear view of the front window. He could see her talking to someone, and then they disappeared into the back.

Thirty minutes later, Rebecca reappeared, baby carrier in her hand and smiling. The box was gone. She got back in the car and backed out of the parking lot, waited for traffic, then pulled out, heading home.

Barker heaved a sigh of relief when she drove into her driveway, parked and got out. She just about trotted up the steps with the baby and went inside. He waited another fifteen minutes, then drove off.

He had to go home, get lunch and some sleep, then do his shift. More than anything, he wanted to tell Jake, but he'd made a promise, and until Rebecca changed her mind, he had to keep it.

He prayed when Jake found out that Jake would forgive him.

Chapter Ten

Jake opened the gun cabinet and checked the inventory. Three .12 gauge shotguns, two deer rifles, two Glocks, a 21 and a 19, and his dad's old Colt 45. The ammo was all there, he was pretty sure. It had been a few years since he'd been in the case, and that was only to pull out one of the shotguns for a charity duck hunt. Afterwards, he'd cleaned all the guns. He made a note to clean them again when he got some time. Either he should take better care of them or get rid of them.

Jake stared at the Glock 21. If Trey had a gun, maybe he should also. No, if it came down to killing each other, Jake didn't think it would be with bullets. Brute strength, cunning, claws, and teeth would be their weapons of choice. The idea of mortal combat with his own brother made Jake's stomach turn.

Leaving the gun in its holster, he closed and locked the case, then headed to the kitchen. A quick sandwich and then back to the mill. He still had work to do.

As Jake chewed the sandwich, he thought about Rebecca. She had to understand, had to accept the truth about Ben. There was no genetic cure for what they carried. Over his lifetime, he'd had so many physicals for sports he couldn't keep them all straight. If there had been something, the doctors would have found it, wouldn't they?

But what if Rebecca was on to something? Jake put down his sandwich and took a long gulp of sweet iced tea. If there were a cure, would *he* take it? He'd never thought of their legacy as a defect, something to be cut out or repaired. The truth was Jake liked being a werewolf. There was a pride in what the men of his family were that had been passed down through generations of McCallans.

No, he shook his head. He wouldn't do it; he wouldn't give up his uniqueness. He wasn't sure if he could survive not being the wolf, not running the wild woods. It was such an intrinsic part of him that he couldn't imagine it gone. Now *that* would be madness.

However, he could understand Rebecca's point of view. She wasn't raised to see being a werewolf as a normal part of life, or even a gift. To her it was a deformity, a cancer to be cut from her child's body, something to be fixed deep down at the cellular level.

If Rebecca truly felt this way and if there were no cure, how could she ever accept Ben and love him for what he was? How could she ever accept Jake? No, he had to keep believing she was his lifemate and would love and accept him and her son for what they both were, even come to embrace it and be proud of them both.

And what of his and Rebecca's own children? Jake put that quiet hope away for now.

He stood, rinsed his plate and glass, and stacked them in the dishwasher. It'd been two days since he'd told Rebecca about Ben. Maybe, it was enough time to contact her again.

No, he sighed. He was too impatient. She'd come to him when she was ready. At least, he hoped she would. He just prayed it wouldn't be because of another attempt on her life.

* * * *

“Man, Bryan, you’ve really changed.” Trey sat on the worn couch and shook his head as Bryan Fells, one of his best friends from high school, prepared to pick up his four-year-old son from his ex-wife. “I never pictured you as Mr. Mom.” He laughed.

“I’m not Mr. Mom, you jerk.” He lobbed a rolled up sock at Trey. “I’m a dad.”

“Believe me, I understand how you fucked up and got Darlene pregnant, but why did you marry her? Did her father force you, or something?” Trey knew exactly the ways someone could screw up, but wasn’t telling his friend about Rebecca Miller.

“We were in love, asswipe.”

Trey just couldn’t picture his old drinking buddy in love, goofy-eyed, being lead around by some girl with her rope around his dick. No fucking way. Not Bryan.

“Bullshit. Before I left for LSU, you were fucking both Bobbie Went and Trisha Hill, staying out late, partying with the guys. Next thing I hear, you’d married Darlene.”

“I fell in love.” Bryan shrugged.

“Getting a girl pregnant is not a good reason to get married.” Trey thought it was a damn good reason to make a run for it, and get as far away from that responsibility as possible.

“I told you, we were in love.” At Trey’s look, he continued, “What else was there for me to do? I was taking over the pawn shop from Dad with Todd and my life wasn’t going anywhere, so I figured when she got pregnant, what the hell.”

“It didn’t last long.” Trey looked around the room and his gaze came to a large picture on the wall of Bryan and Darlene on their wedding day. He had to admit, they looked happy.

Bryan frowned and didn’t respond. He slipped his belt through the loops and buckled it. “I’ll be back later this afternoon. Make yourself at home. Beer’s in the fridge.”

“Why are you getting all dressed up? Darlene going to be there?”

“You’re such an idiot, McCallan. Yes, she’ll be there and I want to look good. I want her back.”

“No shit?” Trey couldn’t believe Bryan wanted back in.

“I want my son.” Bryan’s face grew serious. “I want my family. I was happy.”

Trey shook his head. “Happy? Having someone harp on you, make sure you dress up, fly right, and go to church? Man, if that’s what floats your boat, you can have it.”

“Well, what do you want, Trey? What do you have, big shot? You don’t want your family’s business; you say you hate your stinking degree; you don’t have a woman who loves you. You can’t tell me you’re happy.” Finally dressed, Bryan stared down at Trey.

“I don’t need any of those things. I just want to be alone. On my own and not have to answer to anyone or anything. Be my own man.”

“That was fine when we were kids, Trey. Grow up. There’s more to life than waking up alone in a jail cell with a hangover.”

Trey laughed. “Yeah, those were good times.”

“You’re an idiot, McCallan.” He shook his head and picked up the keys to his truck. “I have to go get my boy.” Bryan walked out the door of the small house.

From his seat at the small kitchen table, Trey could see him pull out of the carport in his truck and head off.

He stood and opened the fridge. Several six packs of long necks were chilling, but Trey reached for the juice instead. He’d quit drinking a few months ago, when the pains started. Pouring a glass, he wondered how the hell he was going to get out of this mess.

He took a big gulp and walked around the room, looking at the photos on the walls.

Bryan and Darlene on the shore of the lake. Yeah, she was cute, in a short, rounded kind of way, and yeah, Bryan sure had on a big goofy grin. But that hadn't counted for much in the long run. Darlene holding a baby, all scrunched up and pink, mouth open in mid-holler. Bryan holding the same kid, this time the baby was asleep. Bryan looked like he was about to bust his buttons, he was so proud. Darlene, Bryan and the baby in one of those Wal-Mart photos, the happy family dressed in their Sunday church clothes.

Trey snorted at the picture. Not him, no fucking way was that going to happen to him, not if he could help it. Tied down to some bitch with a screaming snotty-nosed brat in tow. No fucking way.

He finished his juice and his eyes cut to the picture of Bryan and the sleeping baby. The room seemed to tilt. Blinking, he stared at the picture again. This time, it was him holding the baby, not Bryan.

He didn't even know what his kid looked like. Or what she'd named him.

Trey doubled over as pain shot through his belly. He staggered over to the couch and sat.

"Shit." He rubbed his stomach. The pain was getting worse and more frequent. Now, every damn time he thought about Rebecca and the baby it hit him.

Another cramp seized him and he cradled his belly. Tears stung his eyes and he blinked hard. He had to do something or this pain, this fucking guilt was going to kill him. He knew what he had to do to rid himself of it, and had known it ever since he'd gone into town and bought the gun.

"You're such a fuck-up." He spit the words out. They sounded loud and harsh as they echoed off the walls. What the hell was he doing? His eyes shifted to the coffee table in front of the couch where he'd slept the last few nights. He'd folded his blanket and stacked it on the end of the sofa. The gun he'd bought lay on the table in its shoulder holster.

Shit. He'd never shot anything but deer and rabbits. Now he was going to have to use a gun against a human being. It went against everything he'd ever been taught by his father, but he was an old pro at that. He wiped his mouth with his hand, rubbing against his busted lip, still swollen. His grimaced as the pain in his gut ebbed.

Jake always did have a wicked backhand. Trey had been on the receiving end of it too many times when he was younger, whenever he'd gotten out of line. Jake had tried to take the place of Dad, always the big brother, making Trey toe the line, always the alpha, damn him, shoving it down Trey's throat.

Trey wasn't sure who he was just like, certainly not Dad. Not Mom, either. He ran his hands through his hair and then cradled his face in them. He'd been the outsider for what felt like his entire life. Even his big sister had fit in better, and she wasn't even a wolf.

"Runt" was what Jake had called him when he was little. He was the baby and everyone had treated him like one, as if he didn't know what he wanted, which school to go to, what to major in.

Finance? He didn't give a shit about finance. He'd wanted to be a graphic designer, not work at the damn mill his whole life. But Jake held the purse strings, and he'd pushed Trey into finance just like he'd pushed him into everything when Trey was a kid. And he had let Jake do it, bowed to the alpha. It was built into him. In his genetic make-up.

In high school, he'd been held up against Jake's reputation and had been found lacking. Not big enough, fast enough, or smart enough, never as good as his big brother, and everyone knew it.

Even his dad had died thinking he was nothing but a fuck-up. Before he'd left on the buying trip, he'd raked Trey over the coals about his grades. Like it was yesterday, Trey could feel the sting of his father's hand on the side of his head and see the disappointment in his dad's eyes. He'd told Trey to stop fucking around, then left.

Six hours later, his dad was dead.

Now he was in his last year of college, graduating with a degree he didn't want. His dreams were in shreds and his life was going down the toilet fast.

"God, how am I going to get out of this?" He'd done some stupid shit in his life, well, all his life, but he'd really fucked up this time, no doubt. First with Rebecca, and now by hiring the guy he'd met in the bar in Baton Rouge. After cashing in his airline ticket to France and pulling out another thousand from his account, he'd handed it over to a man he'd only met once, not really expecting him to come through.

There was no one to run to this time. Neither Jake nor his mother would bail him out of this mess. Jake had made that perfectly clear. And there was no way he could face his mother and tell her what he'd done. Trey needed to take care of this himself, like Jake had said. Trey stood and went to the phone hanging on the wall. He dialed the number scribbled in pencil on the back of the worn business card.

The phone rang and rang. Damn, the guy still wasn't answering. He'd spent two days trying to reach him with no luck. Trey slammed the phone down, went to the couch, and fell onto it. He stared at the gun, then picked up the holster and shrugged it on. After seating it against his chest, he stood and threw on his jacket.

It was time to take some action.

Chapter Eleven

“It’s been almost a week and nothing has happened. Barker makes the rounds when he’s on duty and so do the other cops. Really, Vicki, you don’t need to worry about me.” Rebecca sat in the glider and rocked Ben as she held the phone to her ear.

“Well, I still think you should have told Jake.”

“No. That’s over.” How could she tell Vicki about the wolf? Best friend or not, it was a hard story to swallow. She looked down at Ben, asleep in her arms. How could her precious baby be a *werewolf*? Her eyes searched his face for some sign, some mark, but saw only his beauty and perfection.

“What changed? You can tell me.”

Jake did, right in front of my eyes.

Rebecca heard the hurt in her friend’s voice and hated that she couldn’t be honest. More than anything, she wanted to tell Vicki about it, talk it over, even if she thought she was crazy. She needed to work this out.

“Jake’s not the man I thought he was.”

“So, the McCallan blood ran true? He turned out just like his brother?” Vicki’s scorn came through loud and clear and it hurt Rebecca. She had to hold herself back to keep from jumping to Jake’s defense. Despite all she’d seen in the woods, she knew that Jake was a good man.

“Something like that.” She sighed. How could she argue without explaining?

“Call me if you need me. For anything. I’m not kidding. When you’re ready to talk, I’ll be here.”

“Thanks, Vicki.” She said good bye and hung up.

Pushing the chair back and forth, she closed her eyes and let her mind wander. She could see Jake, clear as day, under the trees. She’d wanted him so badly. Still did. Somehow, he’d gotten so far under her skin that being without him was ... well, it stole the sun from her day and made her nights long and empty. Just the thought of him sent all her sexual parts tingling, leaving her in a state of near orgasm. Despite only just meeting him, she felt his loss as the missing half to her whole, the part that made her complete.

Without Jake? The answer was too frightening to even think.

This intensity, this drive, this need for him, terrified her. In her entire life, the only emotion that matched it was the moment Ben had been born and she’d heard his cry and felt him placed naked and wet on her chest.

Beyond everything, the sex and the love, Jake had given her hope for a happiness she never thought she’d find, and his family and friends had given her and Ben total acceptance.

Why couldn’t she do the same for him? If what he’d said was true about Ben, and there was no cure for this ‘legacy’, she must accept her son, as is. Would it be any different if Ben had been diagnosed with some other disease or disability? Her love for her son wouldn’t change, lessen, or falter.

She knew she would do anything for Ben. Even die to protect him.

Could she do something as simple as accept him?

And Jake?

* * * *

Jake pulled the Explorer up to Barker's house and parked. It had been a hell of a week and he was on edge. Over the last five days, the wolf had been under Rebecca's house at night watching over her, listening to her go on with her life without him in it. During the day, he struggled through work at the mill. In between, he snatched naps.

It had gone on too long. He wanted her back in his arms. The desperation of his need for her had grown into something beyond his control.

He charged up the steps and pounded on the door. It was the middle of the afternoon, and he knew Barker was sleeping, but he couldn't wait any longer.

The door opened and Barker stood there in a pair of boxers, his bangs falling in his face.

"What's up, boss?" He scratched his chest and blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

"Sorry. I know you were sleeping, but I had to come by. I need to talk."

Barker stepped aside, Jake entered and began pacing. Barker fell into his recliner and rubbed his face.

"About Rebecca, right?" he said.

"Right." Jake paced back and forth, his energy ready to spill. "She doesn't want to talk to me."

"Yeah."

"I want you to talk to her for me."

"Me? What do you want me to say?" Barker's eyebrows rose.

"Tell her I love her. That I need her." Jake stopped and shook his head as if to clear it. "This is making me nuts, Barker. I don't know how much more I can stand."

"You look like hell."

"Thanks. I'm not used to pulling those all-nighters and then working all day. I don't know how you do it."

"I usually sleep during the day. Usually. Unless my best friend goes crazy, shows up at my house and wakes me up."

"Sorry." Jake shrugged. "This is killing me."

"Look, she's fine. We're watching her at night and she's being really careful. Don't worry."

"Will you talk to her?"

"No." Barker shook his head. "I think you should leave her alone."

"What?" That was not what he wanted to hear.

"Leave her alone. She's got enough shit on her plate. She's trying to deal with a new baby, her business is going under, someone is trying to kill her, and now your wolf shit." Barker pushed himself out of the chair. "You're the last thing she needs right now."

"What the hell are you saying? Did she tell you that? Did you talk to her?" Jake's fingers clenched into fists.

"It's just that she doesn't need the extra stress of dealing with you."

"What's going on, Barker?" Jake's eyes narrowed. "You're not telling me something." He took a step toward his friend. Barker stood and the men squared off, bodies tensed.

"Nothing."

"Barker?" Jake searched Barker's face for a clue. Barker's gaze fell. He was lying. Jake's stomach did a flip. "It's happened again, hasn't it? Someone tried to kill her

again.”

“Shit, boss.” Barker ran his hand down his face.

“And you didn’t tell me?” Jake yelled, as he advanced.

Barker held his ground. “I promised Rebecca not to tell you.”

“You *promised* her? How could you do that? How could you *not* tell me? What kind of friend are you?” Jake roared.

“A best friend.” Barker’s hands fisted and rose to his chest in a defensive stance.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” Jake dove across the narrow distance, slamming Barker hard against the wall.

Jake’s fist connected with Barker’s stomach, doubling him over, but he grabbed Jake around the neck and pulled him down with him to the floor. They rolled around, knocked over a table and lamp, and bumped into furniture as they wrestled.

Barker landed a punch to Jake’s face and blood spurted from his nose. With another roar, he pounded Barker’s ribs. Barker threw him off and rolled away before any real damage was done.

“Cut it out!” Barker yelled. “Get a grip on yourself!”

Jake lay on his back on the floor and held his nose as his lungs screamed for air. Barker rolled to his knees and leaned on the couch to stay upright. The men glared at each other.

“She made me promise. It was the only way she’d let me protect her,” Barker panted as he felt his ribs.

“When?” Jake managed to get out.

“Right after she left your house a truck tried to run her off the road.”

“Fuck!” Jake’s fist slammed against the floor.

“I got there right after it happened. She and the baby were fine.”

“Thanks,” Jake choked out. Werewolves healed quickly, so his nose had stopped bleeding, but it had left a mess. He pushed to his feet and went into the bathroom.

Jake stared at himself in the mirror. He had lost his mind attacking Barker and was lucky Barker didn’t arrest him. He turned on the water and washed his face. There was nothing he could do about the blood on his shirt. He’d have to go home and change it. With a sigh, he turned away. He had some apologizing to do to his best friend.

“I’m sorry. I owe you so much, Barker.” He sat on the couch and ran his hands through his hair.

“Forget it.” Barker waved his concern away. “Have you gotten anywhere with finding Trey?”

“No. I think Bryan’s hiding him. I was going to go over there later.”

“Good idea. Just don’t use your fists on him.”

“Barker... I don’t know what to say.” Jake leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “I think I’m going crazy,” he whispered.

“It’s the wolf thing?”

“Yeah. I need...” He ran his hand over his face. “I need to mate.”

“No shit. If anybody needed to get laid, it’s you.” Barker laughed. “How long has it been, boss?”

“Two years.” Jake shook his head.

“Go to the Roadhouse and pick up some action.”

“No. It has to be Rebecca. Only her. I can’t explain it. I don’t want anyone else but

her.”

Barker rubbed his chin. “I think I know how you feel.”

“Right. Casanova Sims.” He smirked.

“It’s Vicki, Rebecca’s best friend.” Barker leaned forward, hands clasped between his legs. “I met her at Rebecca’s and now I can’t get her out of my mind.”

“So, ask her out.”

“I did. She turned me down flat.” He shrugged.

Jake stared at him, then barked out a laugh. “Rejected? I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“Laugh it up, wolf boy. She’s making me crazy.”

“Women,” Jake sighed. He stood to leave. “I’m going to see Rebecca. We have to talk about this. I need her and if what Mom says is right, she needs me.”

“Well, at least one of us is needed.” Barker grimaced.

“Sorry. Keep trying. Don’t give up.”

“I don’t know how much rejection I can take. I’m not used to it. How do you usually handle it?” Barker smirked at him.

“With grace,” Jake shot back. “Look, if you want her that bad, do what it takes to win her.”

“Well, as long as I can show up at your house in the middle of the night and beat the crap out of you.”

Jake walked to the door and opened it. “Anytime. I owe you.” He left, closing the door behind him.

As he got into the SUV, he decided to follow his own advice and not give up. Rebecca had to know by now they were meant to be together. If he had it this bad, she had to be on edge, too.

Didn’t she?

God, he hoped so.

* * * *

Trey watched the house from down the street. She’d stayed inside all day and there’d been no opportunity to get to her. He sighed and took a sip of his soda. Twice, he’d spotted the patrol car cruising down the street and he’d ducked down to keep from being seen.

The pressure of the gun against his chest felt odd. It was heavy and the leather holster was hot. He’d made a few practice tries pulling it out, but he wasn’t very smooth. It took more practice than he’d had time for. After he’d left Bryan’s he’d headed to a place in the woods where they used to hunt to squeeze off a few shots and get the feel of the gun.

It had a kick, but nothing he couldn’t handle.

He flipped open his cell phone and tried the number again. Still no answer.

How long was he going to sit here, watching the house? Maybe he’d be better off cruising around. Maybe he should check out the few bars in town for the guy. Maybe he should just stay right where he was. Eventually, the man he’d hired would show up at Rebecca’s home.

His stomach twinged and he rubbed it. He was doing the right thing, he was sure of it. For once in his goddamned life.

* * * *

Allen Boudre sat at the bar nursing a beer, a plan circling in his mind. Enough fucking around, playing it loose. Time to piss or get off the pot. He couldn't waste any more time with accidents. Now things were going to get dirty.

That idiot kid had told him to make it look like an accident, but so far, he'd failed miserably. Twice. Fuck, killing someone shouldn't be so hard. Next time, there wouldn't be any screw-ups. Everything would fall into place. Careful planning, that's what was needed for a job like this.

He reached into his jacket and touched the gun.

He was beginning to hate Rebecca Miller. She'd escaped him the first time by jumping out of the way, and pushing the stroller ahead of her, then after he tried to run her off the road, she'd called the cops on him. Fast thinking, but he'd be faster. Next time.

His face broke in a crooked smile as he finished off his beer. Oh, he'd make it look like an accident. He'd been forming a plan in the back of his mind. He'd take her out, the brat, and the older brother, all at the same time.

After the second day in town, Allen had driven by all the places the kid had told him about, her house, the mill, even the big estate. He couldn't believe his eyes. There was bigger money to be made from this; he'd seen that right away.

Maybe he should ask for more money up front for killing the brother. Three thousand for two was dirt-cheap. Going rate was five grand, but he'd cut the kid some slack. The guy had certainly bitched enough about his older brother, so it sounded like he'd wanted him gone, too.

Then, once the older brother was gone, the kid would have to pay out of his ass to keep Allen's mouth shut about hiring him. The McCallan family was rich; there was no doubt about it. One look at that mansion they lived in told him that. He'd hit the mother lode with this job. He dreamed of monthly payoffs for the rest of his life. It'd be like hitting the fucking lottery.

He rubbed his hands together, and then wiped them on his jeans. His palms were sweating, anxious to get to work. Just a few more things to figure out and he'd be all set.

Waving to the bartender, he ordered another beer. After this one, he'd swing by her place to see if she was still around, then head back to the motel room. He only had a few days left to get the job done before he had to pay on the room again and that would eat into what little money he had left.

But after this job was over, the money would come rolling in and he'd be on easy street.

* * * *

Trey sat up, then scooted down in the seat. Jake's Explorer pulled up to her house. Peering over the dash, he watched as Jake got out and raced up the walk, up the stairs and onto the porch.

What the hell was Jake doing now? Trey wondered what kind of deal Jake had struck with Rebecca about the kid. As far as Trey knew, money could have changed hands or not. Jake had been pretty pissed about the whole thing.

Trey had always known there'd come a time when he crossed the line and he'd be

put out of the pack. Knew he'd fuck up so bad, there would be no going back.

He glanced at his watch to mark the time and wondered what his big brother had to say to the mother of his kid.

* * * *

Jake pounded on the door.

"Who is it?" Rebecca sounded scared.

"It's Jake."

"I told you I didn't want to see you or talk to you." Her voice came through the closed door.

"We need to talk." Jake leaned against the doorframe, his mouth close to the door so he didn't have to shout.

"No, we don't."

"Rebecca. I can break down the door if I want."

No answer from the other side, but his sensitive ears picked up her breathing. She must have been leaning on the door, too. His hand touched the wood that separated them.

"Please, baby. I need to see you." Jake rested his head against the door.

The lock clicked, and he stood back. Rebecca opened the door, a frown on her face as she looked up at him.

Jake's breath left him, taken away by her beauty. "Can I come in?"

"Okay." She stepped aside and he entered. They stood in the front room, Rebecca with her arms wrapped around her waist, Jake with his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

More than anything, he wanted to hold her and feel the warmth of her body against his. He craved her.

*

Rebecca looked up into those chocolate eyes and her heart melted. She'd underestimated what the effect of seeing Jake would do to her. Like the first time, her body went on high alert.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked.

"Us. You. Me." Jake's gaze bore into her and she locked eyes with his. God that sounded so good. *Him and me. Us. Forever.*

She didn't want to speak; afraid she'd give herself away. Her voice would surely break, he'd hear it tremble, and know she was barely on the edge, barely in control.

"There *is* no *us*." It killed her to say those words. What she really wanted to say was "I love you" and "Stay with me forever."

"I love you, Rebecca. You are the one woman that was meant for me. Can't you feel it? The connection between us? You're my lifemate."

"Lifemate?" She blinked. What was he talking about now?

"Werewolves mate for life. We come into our prime around thirty, and find our mates. Once we find that person, we can't rest until we're together." He took a step toward her. "And it's the same for our mates. Until we're together, Rebecca, there is no sleep, no comfort, no peace."

She should step back and keep a distance between them, but the neural paths from her brain to her legs went haywire and she stood frozen in place.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she lied. She did know, she'd just fought

it. Dear God, she'd tried to put him out of her mind and her life. She really had tried. But it was as if she couldn't *be* without him. Couldn't even think straight.

No rest. No comfort. No peace.

"Tell me right now and I'll go. Tell me you don't love me." Jake stood in front of her and she had to tilt her head back to look up at him. He stared down into her eyes, his hands still in his pockets, still not touching her. If she closed her eyes, she could see the lines of connection, lines of energy and focus that ran between them, centered on their hearts.

She opened her mouth to speak the lie, then she pressed her lips closed. He asked the impossible.

"Tell me you don't crave me. Tell me that when I touch you," he reached for her face with his hand, "you don't feel the connection." His fingertips stroked her cheek.

Rebecca's eyes shuttered. His touch was like accelerant on her skin, leaving trails of fire, igniting an inferno of need and want between her wobbly legs.

"Tell me when I kiss you, you don't want me." Cupping her chin, he tilted it upward to accept his lips in a soft, brushing kiss, barely there, but it made her core weep and she felt a contraction in her womb as her body responded to him.

"Tell me you love me," he whispered, his mouth moments from her lips.

Her heart pounded in her chest and she thought it would explode if she didn't tell him. Helpless. Unable to resist as his voice called to her and his body beckoned hers.

Rebecca gave in. Jake *was* hers. He belonged to her. He was her *lifemate*.

"I love you, Jake." Her lips brushed against his as she spoke.

He covered her mouth with his and all the hunger, all the need, everything he was and all that they would be was packed into that kiss. As her knees finally failed her, his strong arms held her, supported her, and pulled her against his body.

This was so right. This was where she belonged. With this man. She'd known it the first time she'd laid eyes on him and she knew it now. There could be no more denials. She wanted him. Now.

With a feral growl, he picked her up. She yanked her skirt up and wrapped her legs around his waist, her damp panties pressed against the straining jeans that covered his thick, long erection. Jake moaned as his tongue plundered her mouth, questing, tasting, biting her lips, sucking them softly, then hard, and driving her wild.

Their mouths battled against each other to find the ideal placement, the perfect angle. They fed on each other, tasting, devouring, and savoring. She'd never kissed like this before, with this much passion nor had a man kiss her back like Jake kissed her.

Jake cupped her ass with his hands. His fingers pressed into her soft flesh and brought her tighter against him as she rubbed against his cock. It was so good, so naughty, delightful, and fundamentally sexual.

Still kissing, not breaking the seal of their lips, Jake carried her to her bedroom, as she pulled on his shirt, desperate to feel his skin under her hands. With a strength that shocked her, she jerked the shirt out of his pants and ripped it open. Buttons flew, hit the walls, rolled on the wood floor, and at last, her hands found his warm skin.

Rebecca's moan was captured in Jake's mouth.

She closed her eyes, learning the feel of the hard planes of his chest. She felt the scattering of dark hair across his breastbone as she discovered Jake's body. It was an exploration she wanted to make her life's work. She found his hard, small nipples with

her palms and floated over the tight points in the barest brush of a touch.

Jake moaned into her mouth.

Rebecca growled deep in her throat.

His answering growl rumbled in his chest.

Chapter Twelve

Jake lowered Rebecca to the bed, then straightened. Toeing off his work boots, he bent down and pulled off his socks. Her eyes locked on his hands as he flicked open the button of his jeans.

“Take your clothes off, baby. Slowly. Let me watch.” His voice grated like gravel, thick with desire.

She scooted backwards until her head found the pillows. She’d undress for him, but for now, she wanted to watch him. Shucking off his pants and briefs, he stood naked at the foot of the bed.

Dear God, he was perfection. Every inch of him was sculpted muscle and smooth skin, as if an artist had carved him out of the finest stone. But it was his cock she couldn’t take her eyes off. No statue she’d ever seen had shown such perfection of manhood and if there had been she would have paid and stood in line to see that sculpture.

Her gaze followed the trail of hair that ran from his navel to the thick, dark brown nest of curls. She swallowed, drinking in the impressive sight. Long, thick, its plump head red velvet, its shaft brown, the veins running its length as it stood jutting and proud from his body.

And it was all hers. Rebecca had to suppress a childish giggled. All hers.

She’d never enjoyed giving oral sex before, but now she couldn’t wait to taste him. To feel his thickness in her mouth, against her tongue. She licked her lips in anticipation.

Jake raised an eyebrow at her. “Your turn.”

With a smile she hoped would look sexy, Rebecca pulled her shirt over her head, exposing her bra, pale pink lace against her ivory skin, her nipples, hard and erect, pushed against the flimsy material. She lay back against the pillows, cupped her breast, and struck a pose that she hoped would get Jake excited.

Jake’s other eyebrow joined its mate and a slow smile spread across his face. She’d take that as a good sign.

Reaching around, she unhooked the bra and it fell off her shoulders. Slowly she peeled it off to reveal the evidence of her desire for him.

Jake’s eyes widened, his lips parted, and his hand moved to his cock to stroke it as he watched her. He didn’t have to say a word. The fire in his eyes told her that she was turning him on. It made her feel like a temptress. Wild and wicked and wanton.

She liked it.

Lifting her hips, she unzipped the skirt, pulled it down over her legs, and Jake watched as she tossed it to the floor. He licked his lips and stroked himself, slow and easy, his hand gliding over his shaft. She found it hard to take her eyes off him or to remember what she was doing. If he’d asked her what her name was, she’d be hard pressed for an answer.

Her matching pink lace panties barely covered the auburn curls of her mound.

“They match,” Jake croaked out. “I love it when they match.” He sighed.

She hooked her fingers in the sides and slid them down her legs in a slow striptease, as she wiggled her hips from side to side. She held up the strip of material. It was darker at her crotch where her juices had dampened it. Instead of being embarrassed, she grew

bold and reckless.

She tossed her panties at him and, with his free hand, he snatched them out of the air and brought them to his face. Inhaling, his eyes shuttered as he drank in her scent.

Jake moaned and pulled on his cock, then brought the panties to his dick and stroked himself using them. She stared as he pleased himself with her silk undies. It was naughty. And nice, and everything that it shouldn't be and it turned her on, made her ache for him, made her want to tear the panties from him and make him bury his cock inside her.

"Come to me. Now," she commanded.

"Oh God, Becca," he whispered. He dropped her undies to the floor, then obeyed.

He was her captive.

She'd never felt so powerful, so sexual, so female. She spread her legs apart to make room for him, like a wide funnel, to bring him straight to where she wanted him.

Jake lowered himself to the bed and stalked her on his hands and knees. His intense gaze fixed on her face, his tousled hair fell over his forehead, his shoulder and arm muscles taut as he moved toward her.

He looked like something wild, dangerous, and untamed. Her heart beat faster knowing she would be the one to tame him. He crawled between her legs, not touching her, until he was above her core.

Without taking his gaze from her face, he sat back on his heels and ran his hands over her calves and up her thighs. Everywhere he touched tingled as he warmed the smooth skin of her legs. When he reached the place where her hips met the top of her thigh, he trailed one finger across the fold to her neatly trimmed curls, circling around the edge, not going any farther, and it drove her crazy.

"Touch me, Jake." She didn't care if she whimpered, she'd beg if she had to.

With his thumbs, he spread her nether lips to expose her pink flower. Rebecca's body shook with anticipation as she rose up on her elbows to watch. Jake lowered his head and lapped her, dragging his tongue over her sensitive petals. She threw her head back, bucked her hips, and cried out from the pleasure.

Merciless, his tongue licked each tender leaf, delved into her core, drank her juices, and all the time deep rumblings from his chest sent vibrations like a tuning fork to every erogenous part of her body.

"Jesus, Becca, you taste so damn good," Jake growled. His warm breath puffed against her clit, then he resumed his attack.

She tried to squirm, tried to urge him on, but he held her down, his hands like lead weights on her hips, refusing her movement. Still, he licked her, caught her plump lips between her teeth, pulled gently and released, and then took her engorged nub in and sucked it.

"Oh God," she cried as her core wept and her hands fisted in the bedspread. Not a drop of her moisture could escape his eager tongue as he devoured her, driving her wild, pushing her to a state of arousal she'd never experienced. She buried her fingers in his hair and held his head down to ensure he'd finish what he'd started because if he didn't she'd scream.

She climbed the cliffs of her orgasm and stood on the edge. The inner muscles of her core clenched, her body arched off the bed as she leapt off the cliff to hang in mid-air.

Then she shattered, cried out his name, her tunnel clenching. At the last wave of

pleasure, she fell back onto the bed, her chest heaving. Her hands dropped from his head, releasing him. She was boneless, unable to move or speak.

Dear God. That was only his tongue.

*

Jake raised his head, licked his lips, and moved forward. He did not intend to stop now. She was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, and he knew he'd never get enough of her honey. To know he could please her, make her come, cry out his name, made his cock jump and his balls tighten.

Lowering his head, Jake used his tongue to make his way, slow and deliberate, up her body, dipping into her navel, to her belly. One day, his child, his son, would grow there. He trailed kisses over it in adoration, her sacred woman's promise to him.

He roved side-to-side over her ribs to her breasts dragging his tongue, tasting her as he went, learning the scent of her skin. The scent of his woman, his lifemate.

Dark pink nipples stood erect as beads of cream dripped from them. He dropped his head to taste.

"Jake?" Breathily, deep, and sexy, her questioning voice made him smile.

Oh, yes, he would taste her.

"Shh." He took one nipple in his mouth and sucked. Body-warmed mother's milk shot into his mouth, its taste watery, but oddly sweet. Their moans blended as he suckled at her engorged breast. His hand caressed the other one, thumbing the leaking beads of leaking milk over her nipple.

"Dear God, that shouldn't feel so good," she whispered, her hands returning to his hair, to guide him from one breast to the other. He obliged her by suckling there too.

His body still hung over hers, his cock hadn't touched her yet, and it jerked against his belly to remind him of its needs. Not yet, he wanted more. His tongue laved the base of her throat where it met her shoulder.

Taking her flesh in his mouth, he bit down. Rebecca gasped as he sucked her skin and marked her as his.

She whimpered.

He growled.

Jake ceased his work and looked at his mark. Red, but no broken skin. He smiled and his gaze flicked to her face. Dark forest pools, deep shade, and primal hunger rested in her green eyes.

At last, he lowered his body. Skin to skin, he pressed his cock into her belly and she moaned. His lips found hers and they attacked each other, tongues dancing, teeth biting and pulling lips, tasting once again.

His pressure was returned by her hips, her needy whimpers, and small gasps. Sliding back, he positioned the tip of his shaft at her opening as she spread her legs wider. Damp heat engulfed it as he pushed farther in, easing himself, stretching her, taking his time to enjoy the feel of her tightness around him until he was fully seated deep within her.

Liquid velvet surrounded his cock. Home. He was home. The fit was perfect. Moving his hips only a small bit, he bumped the head of his cock against her womb and she cried out. He wanted to stay there, forever feeling her fire and heat.

Taking her hands in his, he pulled them over her head and pinned her to the bed to dominate her just as an alpha male should possess his mate. He'd been with women before, but none of those experiences matched this one. He'd never let himself go with

the others.

With Rebecca, he could unleash his animal nature, its sensuality, eroticism, and sexuality greater than anything he'd ever known, as if all the other times were merely practice for this, the real thing, the most important mating of his life.

After he took Rebecca, they would truly be bound together, lifemates, and only death could part them.

Her hips surged, eager for him to begin his thrusts. He pulled back, slow and long, until he was almost out, then drove back in, loving the feeling of pushing his way inside her. She shuddered and clung to him, her nails biting into his skin. He welcomed the pain and let it wash over him.

Kissing her neck and shoulders, he began the dance built into every man and woman. Age old, timeless, and primitive. Her hips rolled, his knees pressed into the bed, her back arched, his feet pushed to give support for his thrusts, their mouths joined, separated, rejoined, open and panting, tongues fought, captured and surrendered as they made love.

Jake's balls tightened and he floated on the sensations their love and lovemaking created in him. This was how it should be, what had been missing all his life. The other half of himself. His mate.

How had he lived without her?

Her body moved beneath his, a willing partner in their dance, matching his every move. Gazes locked, they were one body, one heart, and one soul. They breathed as one creature in primal synchronization. His grunts of effort as he stroked harder and faster were answered by her gasps and moans of pleasure and delight.

Damn, he was so close, but he wanted her to come with him. He slipped his arms around her body and rolled over, taking her along.

Getting her knees under her, she rode him, setting her own pace to pleasure herself and him. And he could see in the expression on her face, the way her eyes shuttered, closed, then shot open, the way her lips parted, that she loved it.

He tore his gaze from her face to watch where their bodies joined. His rigid rod was engulfed, then revealed, then swallowed again in the rapid rise and fall of her body as she rode him. It was so fucking hot. If he didn't slow down, he'd shoot his load.

She leaned over him, her hair hung to touch his chest, brushing over his nipples, as her hands pressed against his shoulders, holding him down now. With a knowing, sexy smile, she tossed her hair over her shoulder, and cupped her breast in her hand.

And took control.

It was so incredible, so beautiful, so fucking erotic to watch her play with herself. Her thumb brushed over her tight nipple, rolled it between her fingers, plucked at it, as she showed him all the ways she liked to be touched. She liked it hard, rough.

She dropped her hand and his took its place as he showed her that he was a fast learner. His reward for being a good student was her gasp of pleasure and a tightening of the muscles surrounding his cock.

Showing him no mercy, she picked up her speed and slammed down on him. The look in her eyes and that sexy smirk of her lips told him she loved fucking him, loved pleasing him, loved making him come.

Leaning close enough to take his bottom lip between her teeth, she bit, then released him. "Are you my wolf?" she whispered.

Jake's eyes shuttered as he fought to keep from spilling. She had accepted him,

completely, and his heart swelled with love for her.

"I'm your wolf," he growled back. He'd be anything she wanted him to be, she just had to ask. "Are you my mate?"

"Oh God, yes." She ran the nails of one hand down his chest, across his hard nipple and he gasped. How did she know he liked it rough, to feel just that touch of pain mixed with pleasure?

She leaned down and bit him on the shoulder.

"Jesus, Rebecca!" he cried as she sucked him, placing her mark on him.

If he didn't work fast, he'd lose it.

Jake reached over and found her clit. He worked it, pressing, rubbing, and pinching with his thumb and forefinger. Her breath hitched, and she threw back her head, closed her eyes, and fucked him like a wild woman as he kept up the pressure on her nub. The heated friction as she slid up and down his shaft was unbearable, bringing him to the edge of his control.

Her body constricted, muscles tightened. His control cracked.

"God, Jake!" She groaned and groaned and groaned as her orgasm ripped through her. The walls of her tunnel spasmed, setting his orgasm off. His back arched as he held her hips down and drove his cock up into her very core.

"Oh baby. So good." He spilled, pumping his hot cream deep inside her as waves of pleasure rolled over him. He wanted it to never end.

She collapsed on top of him, panting. Her heart thudded against his chest. He cradled her against him, still joined, brushed the hair from her face, and kissed her forehead.

The baby started to cry.

"Perfect timing." Jake chuckled.

Rebecca sighed. "I'll get him. You stay here." She rolled off him with a groan and sat on the edge of the bed. "If I can stand, that is." Pushing herself off, she walked to the door, took down her robe, slipped it on, and went down the hall.

Jake concentrated on focusing his eyes, catching his breath, and testing if he had any control of his body. He could scratch his chest, so his arms and hands worked. But his legs felt like rubber. He pushed himself up and rested against the headboard.

Rebecca returned, the baby in her arms. "He's hungry and needed his diaper changed." She knelt on the bed.

Jake pulled her to him. She sank back and nestled against his shoulder. Pulling open her robe, she offered her breast to the baby.

"I'm jealous." Jake smiled down at Ben. "You're a lucky boy."

Rebecca grinned. "Yes, he is."

Jake took her chin in his hand and turned her to face him. "Does this mean you've accepted me, what I am? What Ben is?"

"I love you and I love Ben. It was an easy decision. You're more than a werewolf, more than a man." She smirked at him. "I think I can handle both."

"Good." Jake settled in to watch her and his nephew, contentment filling his every pore. One day, they'd have their baby, his son, between them in bed. His house would have a purpose again, a family to fill its halls with laughter.

He wanted to ask her to marry him, but he didn't have a ring and he was positive that while she was breastfeeding wasn't the best or most romantic time for a proposal. He'd find the ring first, then think of a way to ask her.

After Ben had tanked up, she showed Jake how to burp him, then she returned him to his crib while Jake dressed.

“Is there anything you need?” he asked. Barker’s comment about her business being in trouble bothered him, but he knew better than to offer her money.

*

Rebecca stared at him for a long time, thinking hard. No, she had a new business connection with the Garden Tea Room. They’d take three cakes each week, more if they sold out, and at thirty dollars a cake, it was enough to offset some of her expenses. She’d just have to have faith her catering business would pick up.

“No, I’m fine. Now get back to work. I’m sure someone must be missing you.”

“Well,” he shrugged, “the mill operates itself, really. I just answer the phones and do some paperwork.”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes and walked him to the door.

Jake slipped his hand under the robe to cup her soft bottom and pull her to him. Tipping her head back with his other hand, he kissed her.

“I love you, Jake,” she whispered.

“I love you.” He took a last look at her, then opened the door and headed to his SUV, trying hard not to skip. Rebecca leaned in the doorway, watching him with a soft smile on her face.

With a final wave, he drove off. He had work to do, but not at the mill. He was going to Bryan’s and find out if he was hiding Trey.

* * * *

In the middle of the next block next to his parked truck, Allen stood under the low canopy of branches of the magnolia tree, hidden in its shadow. The SUV pulled away from the curb. She was home alone, but this was not where he’d planned to kill her or the right time. He must stick to his plan.

He’d have to wait two more days until Sunday when the mill was closed.

Backing up, he stepped around the trunk of the tree and walked to his pick-up truck. He got in, cranked it up, and drove away.

* * * *

Trey frowned. Jake had certainly taken his time in there. And he’d come out grinning like ... like a fool.

Rebecca stood in the door in what looked like nothing but a pink robe and a smile.

“Shit. You old dog.” Trey grinned. “You got laid.” He slapped his thigh.

Then he groaned. If Jake, Mr. Responsibility, had slept with Rebecca, it could mean only one thing. She was *Jake’s* lifemate.

And she’d had *his* kid, not Jake’s.

The pain struck, doubling him over in the driver’s seat. He groaned and clutched the wheel as he rode the agony until it passed.

Christ, he had to get it over with before this killed him.

Chapter Thirteen

Jake pulled up outside Bryan's house. It was a plain brick ranch, nothing unusual about it. No cars or trucks were parked under the carport. With no one home, he'd have to work fast to do a quick search.

He got out and walked to the back of the house. Opening the screen door, Jake twisted the knob and it opened. Seemed Bryan didn't bother locking up. He stepped inside the kitchen. It was neat and clean. That surprised him. He'd expected to see old food and pizza boxes, a typical bachelor mess.

Teach him not to make assumptions.

Leaving the kitchen, he went into the living room. Everything was in order. On the couch, he spotted a folded blanket with a pillow on top of it.

He inhaled. Trey's scent was unmistakable, strong, and fresh.

He'd been sleeping on the couch. Jake walked around the room. There was a duffle bag on the floor. He knelt next to it and searched through the clothes. They didn't have his name in ink on them like when they'd gone to summer camp, but from the way they smelled, they were Trey's.

He'd found Trey, or at least where Trey was hiding out. But where was his brother right now and what the hell was he up to?

Jake stood and headed back to the kitchen. Best to leave the way he came.

He halted. Trey would know he'd found him, would scent him, just as Jake had done. He looked around the kitchen, then walked over to a door and opened it. The pantry was half-stocked, mostly cans of chili, spaghetti and cereal. On an upper shelf, he found what he was looking for.

A can of room deodorizer. He hated the stuff because it really messed with his sense of smell. He hoped that it'd do the same for Trey.

He sprayed the living room and the kitchen, then put the can back on the shelf and left, wiping off the doorknob with a wet wipe from the box on the kitchen counter.

Back at his SUV, Jake got in and backed out of the driveway. He pulled out his cell phone and hit Barker's number.

"I found where he's staying," he said when Barker picked up.

"Is he there? Did you talk to him?"

"No, he was gone. He's staying at Bryan's like I thought." Jake let out a sigh. "I've got to head back to the mill and put some time in or you'll be getting a call from Hazel."

"Did you talk to Rebecca?"

"Yeah, we talked." Jake couldn't help but grin.

"Is that all you did?" Barker's voice dropped to low and suggestive.

"A wolf doesn't kiss and tell."

"I told you she loves you. You're a lucky bastard, Jake."

"Yes, I am. I'll talk to you later."

"Will do, boss. Get some rest. You'll be no good exhausted."

"I will. I think I can sleep now."

"Yeah, great sex will do that to a man."

Jake laughed and lowered his voice. "Who said anything about sex?"

“I repeat. You are one lucky bastard.” Barker laughed.
“Later.” Jake flipped the phone shut and slipped it back on his belt.
He took the turn off for Highway 35 and headed to the mill.

* * * *

Allen pulled into the gas station. He got out, went inside, and paid the cashier fifty bucks. As he was walking back to the truck, he watched the SUV with McCallan’s Specialty Lumber painted on the door drive past, but he didn’t break stride. He was calm, cool, and collected. Man, this was a sweet deal and he did not intend on blowing it.

Reaching the truck, he took the nozzle off the rack, unscrewed his gas cap, and topped off the tank. When it clicked, he removed the nozzle and leaned over the side of the truck.

Two red, five-gallon plastic gas containers sat on the back bed. He unscrewed the cap off the first one, stuck the nozzle in, and filled it.

Oh, yeah, this was going to be like hitting the lottery.
Money every month for the rest of his fucking life.

* * * *

Staying home made Rebecca nuts and Ben cranky. He missed his strolls and let her know about it. Nothing seemed to make him happy and he fussed all afternoon after Jake had left.

“I can’t live my life like this,” she told Ben as she dressed him. They were going for a walk and to hell with Barker, Jake, and Vicki. How long did they expect her just to sit in her house waiting for God knows what to happen?

Maybe if she went out, he’d try it again, and they could catch him. Why didn’t they think of that before? She could be the bait.

Rebecca looked down at Ben. What was she thinking? That would put Ben in danger. Risking her life was one thing, but Ben’s life was off-limits.

She sank onto the couch and bounced Ben on her knee as she bit her lip trying to decide what to do.

The phone rang and Rebecca jumped, then blew out a breath and picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Rebecca? This is Caroline, Jake’s mother.”

“Hello, Mrs. McCallan.”

“Please, call me Carrie.” Jake’s mother’s voice was warm and sunny.

“All right. What can I do for you?” She gave Ben his plastic keys to play with.

“I’d love to see that baby again. I know things didn’t go well for you and Jake but…” She faded off.

“Don’t worry about that. Jake and I have worked things out. We’re together.” It felt so good to say and her heart filled with love for him.

“You are? Oh, I’m *so* glad. For both you and Jake.” She sounded genuine, but Rebecca doubted Carrie McCallan would know how to sound any other way.

“Me, too.”

“Can I visit you and the baby? I’d like to talk to you about some things.”

“Sure. Actually, I’d love some company. Jake and Barker have me on lockdown and

it's making me nuts. And Ben could stand to see a new face and be doted on."

"Great. I'll swing by in about an hour. Is that okay?"

"Perfect. Ben and I are dressed, and I'll fix something for us to munch on."

"That would be wonderful, but don't go out of your way for me."

"Not at all. It's what I do. I'll see you in a while."

"Goodbye, Rebecca."

She hung up, carried Ben to the kitchen, and strapped him into his bouncer sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. Once he was safe and secure, she surveyed the pantry and decided on tea sandwiches and gingerbread teacakes.

As Rebecca worked, she talked to Ben, explaining to him all the steps she took to prepare the food. Ben cooed, gummed his fist and blew bubbles.

* * * *

"Jesus Christ!" Trey stared through the windshield as his mother's Cadillac pulled up to Rebecca's house. What was going on now? First Jake, now his mom.

She got out, dressed in a stylish jacket and pants, walked up on the porch, and knocked on the door. Moments later, Rebecca appeared.

The women hugged as if they were old friends and then stepped inside.

Great, just fucking great. Now Rebecca was part of the family.

He was jealous at Rebecca's ease at fitting in. That had been something he'd never been able to do and he'd been born a McCallan. Forget it. He should just be thankful his mom had taken the kid in.

Jake would probably marry Rebecca, and Jake's life, as usual, would be perfect. Once again, the alpha male wins everything, the woman, and the kid. His kid. Pass Go and collect two hundred bucks. Jake would finally have the family he'd wished for to fill up that damn house.

Trey's lips thinned as he thought about what his own life would be like. After this, he could never go home.

Even if he wanted to.

Which he didn't.

Besides, Rebecca would never forgive him for what he'd done to her. And Jake? No fucking way. They would never want him around, a constant reminder of what he'd done to them.

He didn't deserve anyone's forgiveness. He deserved to be punished. To be an outcast. If he lived through this, he'd go it alone for the rest of his life.

He'd go rogue.

* * * *

Carrie sat across from Rebecca at the kitchen table, cooing over Ben in his bouncer. She needed to warn, no, *explain* to Rebecca how her life would be as a lifemate to a werewolf, but she wanted to ease into the conversation so she waited for the right opportunity.

"So," Rebecca said as she slid a plate of tea sandwiches towards Carrie. "What can I expect?"

"Expect?" Carrie looked up from Ben. "Well, that's complicated. You've seen Jake's

wolf?"

"Yes, in the woods that day I—"

"Ran screaming from the house?" Carrie smiled. She wanted Rebecca to feel at ease with her and hoped her soon-to-be-daughter-in-law had a sense of humor. She'd need it, marrying into the McCallans.

Rebecca paused, a small triangle of cucumber and cream cheese at her lips. Then she laughed and took a bite. After she chewed and swallowed, she said, "Like a high school cheerleader in a cheap horror movie." Reaching for another triangle, she looked into Carrie's eyes. "What did you do? The first time?"

"I screamed." Carrie laughed. "Like a little girl. Then I fainted."

"Did you really?"

"Really. I'd never seen such a thing in my life. Remember that in my day the only werewolf I'd ever seen was Lon Chaney, Jr. in a furry face. I had no idea he'd be a *real* wolf."

"At least Jake warned me."

"What did you think?" Carrie wiggled Ben's foot and he cooed.

"At first? That Jake was insane. That no one knew about this delusion and that he was going to kill me right there in the woods. Then, he changed and... I don't know. I changed, too." Rebecca stared intently at her.

Carrie nodded her head. She'd felt the same way all those years ago. Now that she'd gotten Rebecca to open up, it seemed she needed to talk.

"Jake's wolf is beautiful, you know. So incredibly beautiful. I'd never been that close to a wolf before, not even in a zoo. His eyes were," Rebecca shook her head as she searched for the words, "Amber. Golden. Like jewels. And his fur." She shivered. "So soft and thick. My hands got lost in his fur." Looking down at her hands, her soft smile lit her face.

"Michael used to love me to brush him. He'd change and lay his head in my lap and I'd run that brush over him for hours." Carrie hadn't thought about that in a long time. That old longing filled her, but this time it didn't bring tears. "Helped with the shedding."

Rebecca laughed, nearly choking on her tea. "Shedding?"

"The winter coat. It helps if you brush it. Keeps them from rubbing against trees, rocks, the furniture." Carrie winked at her future daughter-in-law.

Rebecca reached over and took Carrie's hand. "I love Jake, Carrie. Man and wolf. I can deal with the housekeeping issues."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now let's get down to business. I've heard your catering jobs have dried up." She shook her head. "Don't worry, I'll take care of that."

"No, Carrie. I don't want you to do anything. Really."

"I have no intention of doing anything other than hiring you to cater all of the remaining meetings of the town's Business Women's Association, of which I am president. We meet once a month."

"That's all? Just give me a job catering your meetings?"

"That's it."

Rebecca grinned. "Of course, once all those women know that I'm going to be your daughter-in-law, they'd be crazy to use anyone but me, is that it?" She rolled her eyes.

"Well, something like that." Carrie laughed. "Or you could just close up shop and be a stay-at-home mom to my grandchildren."

“Grandchildren?” Rebecca’s eyebrows rose.

“Lots of them.” Carrie nodded. “Jake’s always wanted lots of kids, didn’t he tell you?”

“We haven’t really talked about all that yet.” Rebecca looked worried.

“Don’t worry, you two will work it all out and come to a reasonable decision.” She patted Rebecca’s hand. “I’m sure of it.”

“Well.” Rebecca gave her a shy smile. “I’ve always wanted a little girl.”

“Then you’ll just have to keep trying until you get one. But I have to warn you that the McCallans are genetically geared for sons. Only the males are wolves.”

“But you have a daughter.”

“Yes. I still don’t know how that happened. She was the first girl born into the McCallan family in three generations. All the other women married in.”

“That explains it. All those paintings in the library. Jake said they were of McCallan *wives*, except the one of his sister.”

“I still remember the look on Michael’s face when the nurse brought him in to see his new baby girl. At first, I worried that he would be disappointed. But he wasn’t. He told me he’d wanted a girl, but since he knew the family predisposition for boys, he didn’t get his hopes up.”

“He sounds like he was a wonderful man. I know Jake adored him.”

“We all did. Everyone who met Michael fell under his spell. It was his personality, so strong, so confident. I just knew he could handle anything.” Carrie sighed. “I thought he’d never die and that we’d grow old together, watching our grandkids scamper around the house and the woods.”

Rebecca smiled. “Well, with Ben I can guarantee lots of scampering. And laughing, and crying. I have to warn you, he can scream his head off when he’s mad.”

“I had three, dear, I won’t mind. And besides, that old house was built to hold multiple families. A bomb could go off in one apartment and the others would never hear it.” Carrie laughed. “In fact, one time Jake and Trey set off a cherry bomb in one of the unused bathrooms. They were so disappointed when no one came running. They’d forgotten to leave the doors open and Michael and I didn’t hear a thing.”

Rebecca grew quiet. “About Trey.”

Carrie sighed. “He’s Ben’s father, no matter what he’s done. I don’t know how the three of you are going to handle this. Jake threw him out of the pack when he found out what Trey had done to you.” She frowned. “I stood behind that decision.”

“You did?”

“Jake is pack leader and his decision is final. And I thought Trey could use some tough love. If I’d seen him after I found out about it, he’d gotten more than that, I assure you. I’m used to dealing with McCallan men and they don’t frighten me.” Carrie straightened.

“I get the feeling that Jake is torn up about his decision.” Rebecca bit her lip.

“He is. He loves Trey. When Michael died, Jake tried to take his place, but Trey wouldn’t have it. I’m afraid things happened between them and it got out of hand. I regret that I didn’t stop it.” One of many regrets. Perhaps the biggest regret.

“Things?”

“Jake was in college when his dad died. Trey was a wild teenager. Rebellious. Stubborn. His father’s punishments and discipline had been physical and Jake was only

doing what he'd seen and had done to him."

"Physical?" Rebecca's brow furrowed.

This was harder than Carrie thought, but it had to be said, had to get out in the open. Shame and fear wouldn't hold her in their stranglehold any longer. "You have to understand. Jake did the best he could, but he was just barely out of his teens himself and had no idea how to handle Trey. Neither did Michael for that matter. Jake and Tori were good kids, did what they were told, never got into trouble or hung with the wrong people. Trey seemed to gravitate to all the wrong people, places, and things." She sighed.

"What you're trying to say is that Trey was *beaten*? By his father *and* Jake?" Rebecca's eyes darkened as she frowned and reached out for Ben's hand.

"You have to remember in those days and in this part of the country, parents spanked their kids. And the McCallans were no different. But because of their wolf nature they're tougher, harder to hurt and fast to heal. A spanking to Jake and Trey would have been like a beating to a normal child."

"You're trying to say it was *okay* for that to happen." Rebecca's voice grew hard.

"No, Rebecca. I'm just telling you that's how they were raised. But Michael loved his children, all of them. There were far more good times than bad. Still, I regret that I did nothing. It was the way Michael had been raised and his father before him. He believed he needed to make the boys understand what they were, how they had to behave, and how they had to be strong enough to control themselves to keep from hurting others."

"Because hurting others would mean discovery?"

"That's right. And once the world found out about us, it would be the end of our lives. Michael and I lived in fear of being found out, what the authorities would do to us and to our children. You're going to face that same fear, Rebecca. How you and Jake choose to deal with it will be up to you two."

Rebecca sat back and seemed to take all this in. After chewing her lip, she looked up, determination in her eyes. "Before we get married, Jake and I will have a talk about this and come to an agreement about discipline because that is *not* going to happen to my children. Not Ben and not his brothers or sisters."

"Don't worry. Jake isn't his father. He'll be open to change. In dealing with Trey, I believe Jake came to realize that the old ways didn't work, but I'm afraid the damage to their relationship was done by then." She stood and gave Ben a kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you for sharing this with me, Carrie. I think I understand Jake just a bit better now. And Trey." Rebecca stood and walked her to the door.

"You're welcome. I thought since you're going to join the ranks of McCallan women you'll need to understand and have all the information before you commit yourself."

"Commit? It's a little late for that, isn't it? I couldn't live without Jake, could I?"

"You could live, Rebecca. But your life wouldn't be worth living without him."

Carrie gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'll call you about the details of the meeting next week." She walked to her car, got in and pulled away.

She didn't regret telling Rebecca the truth. Most families had their secrets.

But the McCallans' secrets were more dangerous than most.

Chapter Fourteen

“Calm down.” Vicki’s voice was so even, so placating. So annoying.

“I tell you, I’m going to go insane. I need to get out!” Rebecca shouted into the phone. If she could have reached through the line and grabbed Vicki by the throat and shook her, she would have.

“Stop being such a drama queen. I’ll come over later this afternoon and visit. I need to get a few things done for my class, then I swear I’ll be there.”

“You better. I can’t take another day of bad daytime television. If I’d known I’d be stuck here this long, I’d have ordered cable.” Rebecca growled in frustration.

“I don’t know why you don’t have it now. I can’t live without it. I’m hooked on that deadly catch fishing show.” Vicki laughed. “Who knew fishing could be sexy?”

“For you, maybe.” Becca laughed. “I can’t afford it. Not until business picks up.”

“Look, I’ve got to run or I’ll never get there. You’re okay?”

“I’m okay.” Becca sighed. “Go. But with all haste.”

“See you later.”

“Bye.” Becca hung up the phone and sighed. Then she plopped onto the couch, put her feet up, and stared at her ankles.

Being stuck inside was a pain in the ass, but at least her feet weren’t as swollen. Without all the walking she’d been doing, she’d spent more time on the floor and lying on the couch as she played with Ben.

In fact, they’d played so long today, he’d fallen asleep as soon as she put him down. She took the rare opportunity and closed her eyes, hoping for some rest.

There was a firm knock on the door.

“Too good to be true,” she muttered as she got up and went to the door.

Another knock.

She opened the door and found a grinning Jake on the other side.

“Hi.” His smile was infectious and she smiled back.

“Hi.” She stood there, staring into her lifemate’s deep brown eyes.

“Hope you don’t mind if I didn’t call before I came over.”

“Are you kidding? I need something to break the boredom.” She reached out, grabbed his shirt, and hauled him through the doorway.

Jake laughed as she continued to pull him. “House arrest getting to you?”

“Just going insane, that’s all.” She stopped in the middle of the living room. Damn, he looked so good. So strong. And he was all hers.

How could her body go from tired and lifeless to turned-on and needy with just one look at him?

She launched herself at him like a wildcat.

*

He caught her in his arms and their mouths fused. God. Becca’s passion spilled out between her lips as she caressed his chest with her hands, setting fire to his arousal.

“I think I can keep you sane.” He growled.

“No. No sane. Drive me insane,” she whispered, then licked at his lips, teasing him, making his dick snap to life in his jeans.

“Are you my mate?” Nuzzling her neck, he blew against her skin, heating it. He smiled as he felt the shiver that ran through her body.

“Now and always. Are you my wolf?” She looked at him, her eyes glowing as if magic swirled in them.

“Now and always.” He claimed her mouth, just as his hands claimed her body, clutching her tight against him, rubbing his erection against her belly, pulling her up.

Becca climbed him as if he was made of stone, solid and sure and he felt invincible. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she pressed herself to him. The wet and heat from her core soaked through his t-shirt. Her heady scent told him she was aroused and ready for him, clouded his mind, pushing all rational thought out, and leaving only animal need.

He carried her to the sofa and sat, holding her on his lap. She wiggled against his erection, goading it, driving him closer to the place where nothing would exist but their desire for each other.

She leaned back and her quick fingers unbuttoned his shirt. Flinging it open, she lowered her mouth to his chest and took his nipple in with a hard, urgent suck.

“God, Becca.” Jake moaned as she laved it, her fingers plucking at the other hard point.

Her hands traveled down to his belt, and before he knew what had happened, she’d unfastened it and jerked it free. She dropped it on the floor behind her and went to work on the button of his jeans. His cock strained against the zipper, eager to greet her.

“This is what I want.” Jake leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He heard the zipper’s metallic *plit plit plit* as it lowered, then her warm, strong hand wrapped around his shaft.

Jake groaned. “Oh yeah, baby. That’s it.” He looked down at her working his flesh, and couldn’t resist thrusting into her palm.

Becca made little noises of pleasure and discovery, then she got off his lap and fell to her knees. She pulled at his jeans, he lifted his hips, and his cock and balls came free of their restraints.

“This is what I need.” Leaning forward, she ran her tongue over the full, engorged head, driving Jake up the wall.

“Me too.” He gasped, as her tongue teased at his slit. All he wanted was her mouth on him, to feel her heat as she swallowed him, to watch as she pleased him.

She claimed his cock, taking it into her mouth, her tongue doing incredible things to him. Jake watched, even more turned-on, as she moved up and down his shaft, her long hair swaying, brushing the skin of his belly. He reached out and buried his hand in her soft tresses, letting them wrap like silken tendrils around his fingers.

He wasn’t going to last long. That much he knew. Unable to say anything more than the smallest words or animal noises, he lost himself in the pure pleasure she gave him. That familiar tingling began in his loins, his balls tightened and he knew he was close. He could hold off, make this last, take it until he couldn’t.

Becca fondled his balls and he lost what little control he had.

She took him deep in her throat, hummed, and the vibrations against his flesh sent him right over the edge.

“Sweet Jesus!”

He came. She swallowed, her throat massaging his cock, dragging each spurt from him, demanding he give her everything.

Jake collapsed back against the sofa, panting and spent.

Becca released him with a soft pop, gave him a last lick, and then laughed.

“Is this what you came over for?” She grinned up at him.

He snorted. “No, but I’m glad I did. Must remember to keep you locked up more often.” He reached out and cupped her cheek.

“I don’t know what happened. One minute I was lying on the couch, trying to rest, then you were at the door, and I lost it.” She shrugged.

“Glad. So very very glad.” He sat up, grabbed her by the waist, and lifted her up. “Your turn.” With a quick twist, he had her on the couch, and he kneeled over her.

“Oh yes. I could use a turn.” Her eyes glittered and her sweet lips turned up in a sexy as hell smile.

He pulled her t-shirt up and pushed down her bra to expose her breasts. “These are mine.” Cupping them, he lowered his mouth to one erect pink peak and licked it.

“Yours and Ben’s.” She gasped as he pulled the nub into his mouth and suckled.

“Uh huh.” He gave the barest nod. They might be Ben’s at feeding time, but they were his right now.

He left the nipple and tongued his way down her stomach, pushing her soft jersey sweats down around her hips, taking a very sexy pair of satin panties with it.

Her scent, now fully released, flooded his nostrils and went straight to his cock. Laying kisses along the line of her soft curls, he kissed his way closer to the prize.

*

Becca whimpered and thrust her hips up at Jake. She was shameless in her need for him.

“Do it.”

“Do what?” He grinned up at her, that wild forelock of hair falling over his brow, making him look just a little dangerous. Jake was dangerous and she was a good girl who loved danger.

And nothing could be more dangerous than having sex with a werewolf, right?

“Lick me.”

He obeyed, dragging his tongue over her mound. “Like this?”

“Oh yes.”

He parted her nether lips with his fingers and ran his tongue between them.

“Yes. More.” Her body demanded more, and her hips rose to meet his questing tongue.

Jake dipped his head, and his tongue dragged upward, pushing deeper this time, parting her folds, until he reached her button. Then, he worked it, licking, sucking, torturing her.

Becca’s core throbbed with need.

“God, baby, you taste so good. So delicious. I can’t get enough.”

“Less talk. More tongue,” she ordered. She needed more of her wolf. Needed more of his touch, his tongue, his fingers exploring her most private places. “Touch me. Make me come.”

“Hell, yeah.”

She spread her legs wider, offering her body to him. Head back, breasts pushed up and nipples so hard they hurt, she gave herself to her lover, her lifemate, her wolf.

Jakes slipped a finger inside her and she clamped down on it.

“Damn, woman!” He growled.

His tongue returned to teasing her as his finger explored her. He changed the position each time he entered her and pulled out, pushing and rubbing against the edges of her opening. God, the friction was so achingly good.

Becca’s body tensed as she began the slow climb to orgasm.

Jake took her clit in his teeth and flicked his tongue on the small tip he’d captured.

“Oh God. Jake.” Now she was soaring, rushing towards climax, as his tongue, his teeth and his fingers drove her there, like a demon with a wicked whip.

Jake was wicked. Wickedly good. And he was hers. All hers. Forever.

A second finger entered her, stretching her wider, and he sucked harder on her clit.

She buried both hands in his hair, pushing him down, controlling the pressure on her body, as her hips rhythmically bumped and ground against him.

“So close.” She gasped, flung her head back, and let go.

Spinning out of control, she hung on the edge, then dropped. Her core spasmed as she came, over and over, as if it would never stop.

After what seemed forever, it ended. She fell back, chest heaving, sweat damp on her face, strands of her hair plastered to her neck.

“Amazing.” She sighed. “Now, *that* was what I needed.”

“Just call next time. I’ll be glad to come over and take care of your every need.” Jake chuckled as he sat back.

She opened her eyes and looked at him just in time to catch him licking his lips as if to catch every drop of her juices. She shuddered. Damn, she’d just come and her body was ready for more.

But Vicki was coming over and Ben would be awake soon.

“So, why did you come over?”

“Two things. First, to invite you to church and to lunch afterwards. All the usual people will be there.”

“Sure. Right up to the time I ran away, I really did enjoy the visit.”

“Good.” He stood, zipped up, and buttoned his shirt. She righted her clothing also and they sat on the couch, her tucked under his arm, her legs folded under her.

“And the second thing?”

“I found where Trey is staying.”

“You found him?” She sat up.

“No, but I know where he’s been hiding out. I’m still looking for him.” He didn’t look at her.

“I know this is hard for you, Jake.” She took his hand and meshed her fingers with his.

“Yeah. I just can’t believe Trey would try to kill you.” He sighed. “He’s a lot of things, but he’s not a murderer. At least, I don’t want to believe it.”

She didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t sure it was Trey, but she was sure he knew something about the attempts to kill her and Ben.

“Well, you know your brother, Jake. I only met him once.”

“Obviously not as well as I thought.”

“When you do find him, I think you two should have a long talk.” She gave his hand a squeeze of support.

“Yeah. We need to talk.” Jake nodded.

“Without fists.”

Jake sat up and stared at her. “What did you say?”

“Your mom came to visit the other day. We had a long talk. She told me about how your father raised you. About how you tried to use those ... methods on Trey. And how they didn’t work.” She petted the back of his hand as she looked into his eyes.

“Oh.” He cleared his throat. Jake’s lips turned down and his brows furrowed. “I’m not proud of that. I was wrong to try to dominate Trey. I realize now how badly it damaged our relationship.” He ran a hand through his hair.

“I know you do. I can see how torn you’ve been about this whole thing.”

“Thanks for understanding.” He caressed her cheek with his knuckles.

“And I just want you to know, up front, before we go any farther, that I won’t tolerate that with my children. A spank is one thing, but there is no way I’ll stand by and let you or anyone else beat my children, werewolves or not.” She stared into his eyes, determined to make him understand she could be just as strong as he and that she meant every word.

“I agree.” He licked his lips. “It hurt Trey and it hurt me. I can’t tell you how upset I was each and every time I hit him. He was my little brother, for Christ sake. And I didn’t know what to do. How to make him behave. How to save him from himself.” Jake’s eyes filled with tears and Becca’s heart ached for him. He had let her see his pain, and that meant so much to her.

“You were just a kid too. And it’s all you knew.”

“Dad was strict. And he had to be. We had to learn control. I didn’t get half the licks Trey did, guess I learned quick how to toe the line. Be a good wolf.” Jake snorted. “But Trey? He fought it every step of the way. Fought Dad, then he fought me.”

“Looking for himself, that’s all. Both you and your father were strong, knew what and who you were. Sounds like Trey’s been lost for a long time.”

“Lost. That’s it in a nutshell. And I don’t know how to help him.”

Becca snuggled against him. “Maybe you don’t have to. Maybe you just need to respect him, let him live his life and make the mistakes he has to make.”

Jake leaned back and sighed. “You’re right. And I will, but after I find out who’s behind all this. We’ll talk, I promise.”

“Good.” She brought Jake’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “Are you staying longer? Vicki’s going to come by and keep me company.”

“No, I need to go, baby.” He let her go and stood.

Becca stood too. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow at church.”

“Want me to come by and pick you up?”

“No, thanks. I’ve got too much baby stuff. The car seat is a pain to take out and put back in. I’ll just meet you there.” They walked to the front door and she opened it.

“Okay. See you at ten on the front steps.” Jake stepped out and turned back to her. “I love you, Becca.” His love shone in his eyes, surrounded her, keeping her safe.

She rose up on her toes and gave him a kiss. “I love you too, Jake. Tomorrow.”

He went down the steps, got in his car, and drove off.

As she was about to shut the door, Vicki pulled to the curb.

Becca waved at her friend as she got out.

“Waiting for me?” Vicki called.

“No. Just perfect timing.” Becca laughed.

Vicki came up the steps. "Wow. You look great. Glowing." Her eyes narrowed, then they flew open and she shook her head. "You've been busy."

"Busy?" Becca tried to act innocent as she led the way into the living room and fell onto the sofa.

"Yeah. Getting busy. As in great sex." Vicki sat down and tossed a pillow at her. "Jake was here, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Becca grinned.

"And you got laid."

Becca rolled her eyes. "Not exactly." She petted the arm of the sofa as she fought off a smile of satisfaction.

Vicki tilted her head. "Oh. My. God." She jumped off the couch. "Here? On the couch? Ewww!"

"Relax. We didn't ... well, just a little..." Becca stumbled.

"Say no more. TMI." Vicki laughed. "I guess I can sit there without any images popping into my mind."

"Good. My lips are sealed." Becca laughed.

"You are one lucky girl." Vicki shook her head. "Jake's a great guy."

"He is." Becca nodded. "What about Barker? He's pretty cool."

"Barker?" Vicki looked down at her lap. "Forget it, Becca. He's just a player. Love 'em and leave 'em. And I'm so not going there."

"But he likes you, I can tell."

"I have the feeling Barker likes anything with a vagina." Vicki rolled her eyes.

"I don't think you give yourself enough credit. I think he likes *you*." She tapped Vicki on the shoulder with her finger. "Just Vicki."

"Forget it. I'm not going to do it. I've given up on men, I told you that and I meant it. Can we talk about something else?" Vicki's eyes pleaded.

"Sure. I'm going to church with Jake tomorrow and lunch at his house."

"Great."

"Why don't you join us?"

"Uh no. Barker will be there, right?"

"I guess." Becca shrugged.

"Forget it." Vicki shook her head and stood up. "Where's the little man? I want to see my boy."

"Sleeping. But he should be up soon. I'll get him."

"I'll come with you. I love to see babies sleeping."

Together they went down the hall to Ben's room. Becca opened the door and went to the crib. Her darling baby lay on his tummy, his little fist tucked under his chin, looking like an angel. Love filled her heart as she gazed down on him.

She had it all. A beautiful baby. A wonderful man who loved her. A future mother-in-law she actually liked and a business of her own.

It didn't get any better than this.

Chapter Fifteen

The wolf trotted to his spot under Becca's house, lay down in the cool dirt, and kept watch. Now that he knew for sure that his brother was still in the area, he wasn't ready to give him or anyone else a chance to get to Rebecca and Ben.

But he still couldn't believe Trey would do this. He might talk a good game, all bluster and bragging, but murder a woman and a baby? No way.

Right?

Trey's words haunted him. "Get rid of her," he'd said, as if he'd ordered someone's death before, and as if Jake would do it.

The wolf growled, teeth bared.

No matter who was trying to hurt Rebecca, no one was going to slip past him. He'd do whatever it took to keep her and the baby safe, even if it meant giving up his own life.

The house was quiet and dark. Rebecca had gone to bed hours ago.

Morning would come soon enough. At dawn, the wolf would leave his post and Jake would try to catch a few hours of sleep before the day started.

He'd be seeing Rebecca at church.

Alert, vigilant, the wolf rested his head on his paws.

* * * *

Parked around the corner in his truck, Allen waited, his finger tapping against the steering wheel. It was the perfect place to watch the house. This morning he'd make his move and ensure his fortune for the rest of his life.

Sundays were quiet in small towns, that's why he'd chosen today. People either slept late or headed off to church, including Jake McCallan. Allen had been following him, learning his routine. With McCallan out of the picture, Allen would be able to snatch the bitch and the kid, take them to the mill, and by this evening, he'd be a rich man. Maybe even part owner in the mill.

Allen glanced at his watch. Nine-thirty. After checking all around him, he got out of the truck, and walked up the street, his eyes darting around, checking porches, driveways, and windows for any sign of life. Hands in the pockets of his jacket, he strolled around the corner to the woman's house. Once there, he turned and quickly went down her driveway, slipped into the shadow of the house, and made his way to the back.

Before he made another move, he waited, listening for any sign that he'd been seen. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Just as he was about to go up the stairs to the back door and force it open, he saw movement near her car.

Fear skittered through him, and he ducked back down, his gaze locked on the car.

It was the woman. And she carried the baby.

Shit. She was supposed to be home. This wasn't how it was supposed to go down.

Didn't matter. Just a change in plans, that's all. Nothing to worry about.

She leaned into the car, putting the kid in the back seat.

He took his chance. Crouched, he stayed in the shadows as he ran along the house to the car. Just as she got in the driver's seat, he pulled his gun, threw open the door and got

into the backseat.

“Don’t scream.” He pushed the gun in her face. Then he turned it on the baby. “Not one fucking word, or else.”

*

Rebecca swallowed down the scream lodged in her throat as terror filled every nook and cranny of her being. The gun in her face was bad enough, but seeing it pointed at Ben was absolutely mind-numbing.

Unable to move, she stared at it, black and menacing, as he held it in the air, pointing it at her child. Her body tensed as the urge to lunge across the seat, knock the gun from his hand, and beat him with her bare hands took over, but she knew it was foolish to even think she could get move fast enough to stop him.

She swallowed and nodded.

“Good. We understand each other. Now, we’re going for a drive. Back out and head to the highway. Nothing unusual. I’ll be back here with the baby. Cute kid.” He grinned at her and Becca’s heart turned to ice in her chest.

“Don’t touch him,” she growled. If he did, she’d go insane, lose it. Attack him and probably get herself and Ben killed.

“I won’t touch him. Just shut up and drive. Nothing stupid, okay?”

“Okay.” She turned around and started the car. After backing out, she drove through her neighborhood as familiar houses slipped past.

No one was out. Almost ten, most people would be at church. In fact, she’d been running late herself.

Maybe if she saw someone she could signal them.

“Don’t even think about it. I can pull the trigger and be gone before you blink.” His harsh voice made her believe everything he said. He’d tried to kill her and Ben before, and this time it seemed he might succeed.

“Why are you doing this?” Her gaze darted to the rearview mirror. He grinned at her.

“Money. Why else?”

“But I don’t have any money.” Tears welled in her eyes, but she fought them back. She had to stay calm, be brave, for Ben’s sake.

“No. But your boyfriend does.”

“Jake?” What did Jake have to do with this?

“That’s right. That mill he owns is a cash cow. It’s pulling in almost a million a year.”

“How do you know that?” A million? Jake never mentioned being ... rich. Yes, she’d seen the big house, but that had been passed down in the family. And he drove a company vehicle.

“I have someone on the inside.” He sounded smug. Sure of himself and his plan.

“Trey? Did Trey tell you about the money and the mill?”

“You’re a smart bitch.”

“Well, you’re wrong. Trey’s wrong. There’s no money.” Maybe she could bluff him into giving up this plan of his.

“No money? Right,” he scoffed. “Good try. Just shut up and drive.” He waved the gun once so she could see it.

She clamped her mouth shut as they rolled to a stop at a red light.

“Now, let’s go to the mill.”

“The mill? Why there? No one is there.”

“Exactly.” He smiled and her blood froze in her veins.

The light changed and she moved the car forward.

No one would be there. No one to help her. Just her, Ben and this crazy bastard. And his gun. *Don't forget the gun.*

Tears threatened again. She was going to die. No, it was worse than that. Ben was going to die, his tiny, new life ripped from him by this fucking idiot. Her chin quivered, but she thought about what she'd do to him if she had the gun.

There would be no place he could hide. No one would be able to save him.

No matter what happened to her, she would do whatever it took to save Ben.

* * * *

Trey sat in the diner and stared out of the window. He ran his hands through his hair and tried to think of something to do, but he was out of ideas. The guy wouldn't answer his phone, and he was still out there, trying to kill Rebecca and the baby.

His son.

Trey's stomach cramped and he moaned softly, hoping the waitress wouldn't hear. The pain passed, and he took a sip of iced water.

Rebecca's car drove past and stopped at the red light. After staring at that car for days, he'd recognize it anywhere. Trey sat up, gaze intent on the vehicle.

Someone was in the car with her. In the backseat?

“Fuck!”

He tossed a ten on the table, slid out of the booth, and watched as her car started forward and headed down the street. Trey ran around the corner to Bryan's borrowed truck, got in, and fired it up.

Turning onto the road, he followed the car, keeping several blocks behind them. They turned onto the highway, and his stomach sank.

They were heading for the mill.

* * * *

Jake paced back and forth on the top step of the church.

“Go on, Mom. I'll wait for her. Save us a couple of seats.”

“If you're sure.” Carrie nodded and pulled open the massive door. Organ music filled the air, then as the door slid shut, it was cut off. The service had started.

“Becca, where are you?” Jake pulled out his cell phone, punched up her number, and hit Send. The phone rang and rang.

* * * *

Her cell phone played Amy Grant's “Baby Baby”. Rebecca jumped like a terrified mouse with its tail caught in a trap and let out a squeak.

“Don't answer it.”

“Okay.” It was Jake. She knew it was Jake. He was probably wondering where the hell she was. *Jake, help me.*

The music ended.

Rebecca shuddered. What would Jake do now? Go to church? No, he'd come looking for her, but he would find the house empty, nothing out of place and no clue as to what had happened to her.

They passed the sign for the mill.

She scanned the highway behind her and in front of her, but it was clear. No one had seen her in town, and they'd passed no one on the road.

Jake wouldn't find her until it was too late.

No one was going to save her, except herself.

She set her chin and her resolve and turned onto the road leading to the mill.

* * * *

Jake snapped his phone shut and bit his lip. She would have called, even if she couldn't make it or was running late. He turned and stared at the door of the church.

Something was wrong.

His gut clenched, and he sucked in a deep breath, in an internal recognition that Rebecca, his mate, was in trouble. All he knew was that if he didn't do something now, take some action, it would be too late.

He spun around and ran to his SUV, slid inside, had the engine running and the car headed out of the parking lot before he took his first breath. He had his phone still in his hand when it rang.

He flipped it open, not looking at the number. "Rebecca?"

"Close, but no cigar." He didn't recognize the voice. It definitely wasn't Trey.

"Who is this?"

"Never mind. Listen closely. If you want to see your girlfriend and her brat, come to the mill in one hour. Alone. No cops, man. If I see a cop, I'll kill them both. Got it?"

Jake's hand shook and he almost lost his grip on the phone as he pressed it to his ear. "I got it." Oh shit. This was so bad. What the hell had happened and who the hell was this bastard?

"Remember, no cops." Then the line went dead.

* * * *

The man with the gun pointed at her baby laughed as he tossed her phone onto the car's floorboard. "Good thing you kept your mouth shut. No sense getting your kid killed. How would you ever live with that?" He laughed.

Rebecca knew in her heart he did not intend on her living much longer.

But she also knew something the man didn't know. She had a secret weapon.

Jake McCallan.

Chapter Sixteen

Rebecca pulled up outside the mill. The parking lot was empty, and the mill stood silent. They were at least a quarter of a mile from the highway. No one would hear the shots or her scream.

“Pull around the back.”

She put the car in gear and eased it forward, then turned around the corner of the building. A sign declared “Contractors Entrance” and she drove past it to the back. The yard was empty. Two large delivery trucks sat against a chain-link fence.

There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

It wouldn't matter. As soon as Jake got here, the odds would change in their favor.

Large sliding doors, probably used to move lumber in and out, were closed. Next to them was a smaller glass door, “McCallan Lumber Sales” stenciled on the upper half.

“Park here.” He pointed to a spot in front of the door and she pulled in, parked, and turned off the car. “Now, give me the keys.”

She took them out and handed them to him.

“I'm going to get out. You're going to get out, then get the baby.” He opened his door, the gun still trained on Ben. Ben, now awake, began to fuss.

When she didn't move, he shouted, “Now!”

Rebecca nodded, got out and shut the door, then opened the back door and took Ben out of his car seat. Clutching the baby to her, she bounced him to quiet him.

“Inside.” He jerked the gun toward the door.

“But it's locked.”

He sauntered over to the door, smashed the glass with the gun, reached in, and unlocked it. It swung open, revealing the darkness of the closed mill.

“Not a problem, see?”

She nodded. Ben snuggled closer to her chest. Did he feel how hard her heart beat? Could he feel her terror? She needed to stay calm and just wait.

Jake, where are you?

* * * *

Trey drove down the blacktop drive toward the mill, then pulled onto the old trail that lead through the forest to the pond. He parked the truck far enough down it to not be seen from the road and got out.

He reached under his jacket for the gun he'd bought from Bryan, but it wasn't there. Fuck. He'd left it back at Bryan's house.

The only weapon he had was his wolf.

Even though it'd been a long time since he'd changed, he called his power. The first odd vibrations, once so familiar, traveled through his body. Then came the pain, blinding hot, and he slammed his eyes closed and let it take him.

The wolf shook himself and his dark grey pelt stood on end, his full tail held down. He sniffed the ground, his black snout buried in the moist leaf litter of the forest floor. With a soft *woof*, the loose leaves scattered and he raised his head to drink in all the

scents that floated on the air.

The mill was just down the road, but it was faster to cut through the forest.

He took off at a run, certain of the way, following almost invisible trails left by deer and by wolf.

* * * *

Jake knew he needed help. Cops or no cops.

He hit the speed dial for Barker.

“Hey, Boss. Shouldn’t you be in church?” Barker sounded groggy, probably had a late night on patrol.

“Listen to me. Someone’s got Rebecca and the baby.”

“What?” Now the voice was sharp and clear.

“He called me. Said he had Becca. Said he’d kill her if I called the cops.”

“You didn’t. You called your best friend.”

“Right.” Jake couldn’t help but smile. Barker was always there for him. “I’m on my way to meet him.” He checked his watch. “I’m supposed to be there in thirty minutes.”

“Where?”

“The mill.”

There was a low whistle. “Why the mill? Boss, any idea who this is?”

“Not Trey, that’s for certain.” Secretly, Jake was relieved.

“Did he mention Trey?”

“No. Not a word.”

“Okay, I’m almost dressed. I’ll meet you there. Listen to me. Do not go in without me. You’re going to need backup.”

“No cops, Barker. I can’t risk Becca and the baby.”

“No cops. No uniform. Just me, I swear it.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll be at the mill in fifteen.” Barker hung up.

Jake closed his phone and shoved it back in his pocket. He’d be at the mill in ten minutes. Once Barker arrived that would leave only five to ten to scout it out and come up with a plan to rescue his mate.

Damn. Shit. Fuck.

* * * *

Rebecca stumbled through the door, the man’s hard shove on her back propelling her forward.

“Stop that! I can’t see a thing.” She spun to face him, but there was only a black silhouette in the doorway.

“Shut up,” he growled at her.

The inside of the mill was a dimly lit cavern with huge stacks of wood disappearing into the back on one side. On the other, rows of machinery, saws, and planers stood like dark sentinels.

The air smelled like someone had spilled an industrial drum’s worth of pine scent mixed with the metallic smell of machinery and oil. It was an odd odor, and if she had been there under other circumstances, she might have liked it.

This was Jake's world. Her kidnapper had made a fatal mistake.

"Go on. Get over there." He waved at her and she moved farther back.

"Can't we turn on some lights?"

"No."

Becca looked around. Darkness might be her friend. Jake would be here soon, and the wolf would have his day. She couldn't wait to see the kidnapper's smug face when he met her wolf.

She tried to keep from smiling. If that bastard saw, he'd become suspicious. It might tip him off, and she couldn't risk losing the advantage of surprise. She just had to keep this guy calm, not rile him up, keep herself and Ben safe until her mate arrived.

* * * *

Jake drove down the mill's road as slow as he could to kill time before Barker showed, and they could scout things out at the mill. He knew it was pointless, but he opened the glove box in search of something he could use as a weapon.

Nothing there, not even a screwdriver.

He had no doubt Barker would bring his gun, and maybe one for Jake, too.

Up ahead, he spotted the turn-off to the old trail to the pond. He slowed, took the turn, and drove down the trail, branches slapping at the sides of his SUV.

Straight ahead sat Bryan's truck.

"Shit." He exhaled.

That could only mean one thing.

It was true. Trey was in on this.

Jake pulled up behind it and parked. After getting out, he opened the truck's door and inhaled.

Yeah. Trey had driven it. His scent was all over the driver's seat, and the steering wheel. Jake got out and scouted around the truck.

Kneeling, he put his hand out and touched the imprint of the wolf's paw, his fingers caressing the dents the toes had made in the soft dirt. Here was the proof. Forcing himself to admit that Trey had planned it all, he stood, and turned back to his vehicle.

"Come on, Barker," he whispered as he glanced at his watch. He walked down the trail to the main road, and waited next to the trees for his best friend.

Barker showed up early.

Jake stepped from the trees and signaled to his friend. Barker slowed, turned onto the track, and parked behind Jake's SUV.

"Think there are enough of us parked down here?" Barker, dressed all in black, grinned as he got out. "Who's in the pick-up?"

"That's Bryan's truck. Trey's scent is all over it. I found wolf tracks."

"Trey, huh?" Barker scratched his chin. "Now what's he doing out here?"

"Trying to kill Rebecca and Ben?" Jake didn't want to accept the truth, but all this left him no choice.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Barker slapped Jake on the back. "Let's go."

"Did you bring a gun?"

Barker unzipped his hooded jacket, exposing his shoulder holster and his Beretta.

"Got one of those for me?"

"No way, Boss." Barker shook his head. "If anyone is shooting that bastard, it's

going to be me. In the line of duty.”

Jake glared at his best friend. “He’s got my mate, Barker. Mine. Not yours.”

“Slow down, Boss. You’re not exactly defenseless, you know.”

Jake nodded.

“Here’s the plan. He wants you to show up. So you show up, but after we scout out the mill and I take my position. When you go inside, I’ll go in too.”

“The side door?” Jake grinned.

“The one behind the stacks? Yep.”

“Remember where we keep the key?”

“The most obvious place, of course. On top of the frame.” Barker shook his head.

Jake shrugged. “Hey, you don’t mess with what works.”

“Right. I’ll make my way up onto the stacks and get a bead on you guys from above. Do nothing until you see me signal, okay?”

Jake stared down the road, then took a quick look at his watch. “It’s time.”

“Jake? I mean it. Wait for my signal.”

“Okay.” Jake gave him a nod.

“Let’s get going.” Barker waved his hand. “Time to rock and roll.”

Jake and Barker headed down the road toward the mill.

* * * *

Rebecca bounced the baby, but his fussing only worsened. He’d be in full cry soon if he didn’t get fed.

“Shut him up.”

“He needs to eat.”

The guy grimaced. “Shit. Where’s his bottle?”

“He’s breastfed.” She regretted saying that as soon as she said it.

“Breast? Well, go ahead, feed him. I don’t mind watching.” Still pointing the gun at her, he leaned against the counter as if she were going to just rip off her shirt and bra and perform for him.

Rebecca turned away, raised her shirt, unhooked her nursing bra, and got Ben into position. After two swipes of his mouth against her nipple, he latched on and began sucking. Then she turned back, afraid to take her eyes off the gun for too long.

“Hey, I didn’t get to see any titties,” he complained.

She didn’t respond. No way would she let him ogle her breasts. Now, with Ben fed, he’d be easier to handle if something went wrong.

Becca shuddered.

She didn’t want to think about that. But even a wolf could be shot, couldn’t he? If Jake was shot, how fast could he heal? Fast enough to keep this guy from shooting her, too? And Ben? She didn’t think so.

Her gaze searched the dim building, looking for an escape route. Just in case.

Becca sighed and let her head fall back.

There was a catwalk stretching high over the floor of the mill. If there was a way up, and she could get there, she might be able to hide from him. Trying not to draw attention to herself, she walked in a small circle, cooing to the baby, but she followed the walkway to see where it started and ended.

There was a door at one end. Maybe to offices? Offices that might have phones?

Her gaze tracked the catwalk the other way. Against the far wall was a metal stairway going up to it. If she could just get over there, up the stairs and across the huge floor to the office door, and it wasn't locked, she could hide there. Use the phone to call for help.

No, Jake would make this end. She had to put her faith and trust in him. He'd take out this bastard. She knew in her heart, Jake would tear this guy from limb to limb.

Still, it couldn't hurt to have a fall-back plan.

Just in case.

* * * *

Trey trotted up to the mill, then around the corner to the back. Rebecca's car was parked at the Sales entrance. He padded over to it, sniffed, and then looked at the door.

Shattered glass lay on the ground. He checked out the door. Several sharp pieces blocked his way on the lower half, but the upper half had completely shattered and fallen away.

He could change back and go through the door, or make a run for it and try to jump through the top. He sidled up to the door, and stuck his nose through a gap in the remaining glass shards and sniffed.

Rebecca and his baby were in there. And someone else.

Someone familiar.

The guy from the bar.

He cocked his ears and heard voices. Not far away from the door. Sticking his head as far inside as he could, he searched for the voices.

Rebecca stood near the rough saw, holding the baby. The man from the bar stood with his back to the door as he leaned against the counter.

Perfect. He'd never see the wolf come in.

But she might see.

Didn't matter. He'd have to take that risk.

He watched for the right moment. She was bouncing the baby, then walking around, and the man watched her.

The wolf backed up, judged the distance, and crouched. Every muscle tensed as he hunkered low to the ground, then silently, he sprang.

His head and front paws cleared the glass, but the tallest shard caught his chest, slicing a thin line through his pelt. He snapped his jaws together to keep silent, and landed, without anyone seeing him.

Padding off to the machinery, he found a place to hide and sat. The cut on his chest stung, but wasn't enough to slow him down and it would be healed before long.

He kept low to the ground as he crept closer to Rebecca and his son.

Chapter Seventeen

Jake walked up to the mill and gave Barker a quick nod. Barker, at the other end of the building, slipped around the side, to the door.

Jake headed to the rear of the building, turned the corner, and halted. Becca's car was parked in front of the door. He approached slowly, careful not to make any noises, checking out the door that had been smashed.

There was blood on one of the sharp fragments of glass still stuck in the door. A shiver ran through him. No way could that be Becca's blood. Had to be the kidnapper's, he would have broken the glass.

This guy was stupid. But Trey wasn't dumb. Trey knew the layout. Knew about the side door. But he couldn't be sure Jake would bring Barker. Jake couldn't think about what Barker might or might not find waiting for him, he could only think about his part.

He trusted Barker to take care of himself.

Jake pulled open the door and stepped inside.

* * * *

Trey crouched behind the saw. Rebecca and the baby were still unhurt. He could be there in two leaps, at the guy's throat, tearing it out. Tasting his blood, making him pay for threatening his...

His gaze was drawn by movement at the door.

Jake.

What the hell was he doing here?

And was he alone?

Where Jake went, Barker followed, like some lap dog. It'd been that way since they were kids and Trey had tagged along after the two older boys. One thing was sure, if Jake was here, Barker would be around.

The guy with the gun moved to Rebecca, grabbed her by the arm, and held the gun to her head. Trey suppressed a growl at the threat.

"Freeze, McCallan," the man shouted.

Jake put his hands up. "Whatever you want. Just don't hurt her."

"You came alone?"

"That's what you said, right? No cops."

"Turn around. Slowly."

Trey watched as Jake, hands still in the air, walked in a small circle. No weapons. What the hell was Jake playing at?

There was no way Jake could change and get this guy. The transformation was the most vulnerable time for a werewolf. Although it took less than a minute, it was a time when the man-wolf could do absolutely nothing to protect himself.

Sure, Jake might take the guy by surprise, but he might just get shot.

Trey wasn't willing to take that chance.

Staying low, the wolf crept toward his prey in the shadows.

* * * *

Barker let the door close behind him and his eyes adjust to the darkness. The stacks weren't lit, but he could remember exactly where he was. Same as all those years ago, when he and Jake had worked at the mill.

He moved forward to the nearest low stack and climbed up. He reached the top, about fifteen feet above the ground, and started forward, keeping silent, making sure his feet were as well placed as possible.

When he reached the end of the stacks, he'd be able to look down on the mill floor, take his position, and take out this bastard who had Rebecca and Ben.

* * * *

Becca's heart nearly stopped as her gaze swept over her mate. He stood there, hands in the air, but with no trace of fear or worry.

"Jake," she whispered.

"Shut up." The kidnapper's growled words burned in her ears and the cold metal of the gun touched her temple, sending shivers through her. Despite all the relief of seeing Jake, tears welled in her eyes as she held onto her son.

"Are you okay, Becca?" Jake's voice sounded so good. Thank God, he was calm and completely confident. She breathed it in and it quieted her, soothed her. Gave her hope.

"I'm fine. Ben too."

"I said shut up." The man squeezed her arm and she winced.

"What do you want?" Jake called out. There had to be at least fifteen feet between them. How would Jake ever make it across the distance in time? As long as the man had the gun pressed to her head, Jake couldn't do anything.

"Money, of course."

"How much? I'll give you anything."

"Good, because I want it all, but not from you. Your brother Trey is going to be paying me for the rest of his life."

"Trey? I don't know what Trey told you, but he doesn't have any control over the mill. It belongs to me," Jake shot back.

"Not if you're dead."

Becca felt the gun leave her head and in that moment she knew. He was going to kill Jake. He'd always meant to kill Jake.

"Jake!"

Jake frowned, took a step back as his hands came up, and she knew he realized it too. All too late.

From out of the darkness, a blur of motion ran forward with a deep growl that reverberated through her body.

The kidnapper saw it too. He spun towards it, bringing the gun to bear, but still had her arm in a tight grip. She tried to move away, jerking the man backwards, throwing him off balance.

The wolf sprang. Its jaws gaping, teeth bared as its lips pulled back in a snarl, and its amber eyes glowing in the dark, like a demon sent straight from hell.

The man screamed and fired.

The wolf's body jerked in mid-air, then crashed to the floor.

Another shot rang out, and the hand that held her spasmed, letting her go. Her kidnapper fell forward with a sharp cry, face first at her feet.

Ben started wailing.

“Becca!” Jake’s shout brought her attention up and to him. A wave of relief rushed through her and her knees almost gave out. She stiffened them as Jake’s gaze met hers and then she let out a pent-up sob.

“Jake!”

Closing the distance between them, she fell into his arms, careful not to crush Ben.

* * * *

All Jake knew was that Becca, his mate, and her child, his nephew, were safe. He looked up as he held her, and spotted Barker at the top of the nearest stack as he shoved his gun back in his holster.

“Trey.” Barker pointed behind Jake.

Jake turned and all the spit in his mouth dried up. His stomach fell into a deep well, as he looked down. The wolf was gone and Trey lay on his side, blood seeping from his chest forming a dark pool beneath him.

“Oh, shit.” Jake moaned. “No. Trey.”

He let Becca go and went to his brother. Kneeling next to Trey, Jake looked up at Barker. “Call an ambulance.”

“On it.” Barker pulled out his phone as he started to walk away to get down from the stacks.

Jake sighed. “Shit, Trey. Why? What the hell were you thinking?” He looked up at Becca. “I need a towel to stop this bleeding.”

* * * *

She nodded and ran to the car. Deciding that Ben was safe now, she strapped him in his car seat, rifled through his diaper bag and pulled out a blanket. Then she left the car door open and ran back to Jake’s side.

“Here, use this.”

Jake took it from her. He’d ripped open Trey’s shirt and she stared at the younger McCallan’s wound. The hole was small, dark, and blood covered most of his smooth chest. She had to close her eyes against the image of that hole in her Ben’s body. In her body. She shuddered.

Jake pressed it to Trey’s wound and leaned against it.

“Trey? Hey, man. Can you hear me?” Jake’s eyes shimmered as he tapped Trey’s cheek.

Trey moaned and his head turned toward Jake’s voice. With a soft flutter of dark lashes so like Jake’s, Trey opened his eyes. Rebecca thanked God. Trey may have done something unforgivable to her, but she’d never wanted to see him dead for it.

* * * *

Jake gave a half-laugh of relief and gathered Trey into his arms. Trey moaned, clutched Jake’s arm and gave it a weak squeeze.

“The baby?” he whispered, his gaze searching Jake’s face.

“Safe. Becca’s okay too.”

Trey sighed, closed his eyes, then opened them. He looked past Jake’s shoulder.

“Rebecca?”

“I’m here,” she answered.

“Where’s the baby?”

“He’s safe.”

“Can I ... can I see him?” Trey licked his lips. “Please.”

Jake brushed hair from his brother’s brow. It was damp with sweat. Trey shivered in his arms. Oh God, he was going to lose Trey without ever setting things straight between them.

He looked up at Becca. She nodded and went for the baby.

Jake looked down into Trey’s eyes. “Trey. I thought...”

“That I did this?”

Jake nodded.

“I did.” Tears trickled from Trey’s blue eyes. “I hired that guy. I was mad, drunk. Stupid.” He shivered again and Jake pulled him closer.

“But you never meant to do it, did you?”

“No. I tried to stop him. Gotta believe me.” Trey’s hand squeezed Jake’s arm.

“I believe you. I never really believed you’d do this.”

Trey gave him a small smile, but it became a grimace of pain.

“Hold on. The ambulance is on the way.”

“Don’t worry. Us wolves are tough.” Trey gasped, his body stiffened. “It hurts.”

“I know.”

Trey frowned. “When did you get shot?”

“Point taken.” Jake hugged him.

“Jake. Take care of my boy. Promise me.” Trey gave Jake’s arm a tiny shake.

“Hey. Don’t talk like—”

“Promise me.” Trey stared into Jake’s eyes, begging him.

Jake nodded. “Sure. I promise.”

Rebecca returned with the baby. “Here he is.”

“Can I see him? I want to see him. Just once.”

Rebecca kneeled and turned the baby to face his father

Trey sobbed, “God, he’s so beautiful.” He reached out his hand to touch the baby’s hand and Ben curled his fingers around Trey’s finger. “So strong.”

Jake let the tears in his eyes spill. This couldn’t be it. This couldn’t be the way it all ended. His father dead. And now Trey?

“I’m sorry. What I did to you, Rebecca. I’m sorry,” Trey whispered, his gaze never leaving the baby. He let the baby’s fingers go, then lowered his hand to rest on the floor, as if he didn’t have the strength to hold on any longer.

“I know,” Becca said. Jake caught the tremble in her voice. He glanced up at her. There were tears in her eyes too.

“Thanks for letting me see ... my son.” Trey’s voice was barely audible, his tears stopped, his eyes closed, and his breathing labored and shallow. Jake felt the moment his little brother’s body went slack, and his gut ached with the knowledge that Trey was dying.

Jake looked up at Barker standing off to the side, his cell phone pressed to his ear.

“Where the hell is the ambulance?” Jake growled.

“On its way, Boss.” Barker’s hand gripped his shoulder. “Trey’s strong. He’ll make it.”

Right on cue, in the distance, Jake heard the wail of the sirens. He shifted Trey in his arms, and willed him to live.

“Stay with me, Trey. I need you.” Jake ran his hand over his face, wiping away the moisture that covered it. “Your son needs you.”

But Trey was gone.

Chapter Eighteen

Trey opened his eyes, blinked, and licked his dry lips. His chest hurt and he had no idea where he was. He turned his head and found his mother sitting in a chair by his bedside, smiling at him.

“Mom?” His voice sounded like someone else’s, distant and far away.

“Hi, baby.” His mother stood, came to the bed, and took his hand. An IV had been inserted into the back of his hand, covered in tape. He was in a hospital.

“How did I get here?” In a fog, he couldn’t remember anything. “I parked Bryan’s truck off-road near the mill.”

“Do you remember going into the mill? Changing to a wolf?” She leaned close and gazed into his eyes.

Closing his eyes, he tried to remember. Snatches of pictures came to him, like images between the bright glare of repeated camera flashes.

Rebecca.

The hit man.

His son.

The bullet tearing into the wolf’s chest.

“Is everyone all right?” He squeezed his mother’s hand.

“Everyone but you.” She brushed his hair from his forehead, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You’re doing fine now.”

“I remember.” And he did. He remembered it all. Being pissed at himself for being drunk and stupid enough to have unprotected sex with a total stranger he’d picked up in a bar; finding out he’d gotten her pregnant; telling Jake, seeing his big brother’s contempt so evident in his eyes. Being kicked out of the pack. And the worse. He remembered the worse thing of all. Hiring someone to kill the girl and the baby.

Trey groaned.

It was all true. And he deserved everything he’d get for it. Being shot was the least of it. His body could heal. His soul? That would be forever poisoned by his actions.

“Are they going to arrest me?” He wanted that. He wanted to be punished. Being put out of the pack, well, as bad as that might be for Jake, for him, it wasn’t so bad. Trey needed to pay for his actions. And for once in his life, he was ready to own up to them.

“No. They got the kidnapper.”

“But ... Rebecca knows...”

“Rebecca is a smart woman.” His mother frowned and gave him a hard stare. “She doesn’t want any taint of your ill-conceived plans to touch Ben. As far as the police know, that man kidnapped her and the baby to get to Jake.”

Trey turned away, disappointed. Once again, like so many times in his short, pathetic life, Jake had fixed his fuck-up. He supposed he should thank his brother, but that’s not what he wanted to do or needed to do right now.

Right now, he needed ... not to be let off the hook.

“I understand you saw your son.” His mother looked at him, her head tilted like she always did when she was observing her kids. What did she want him to say?

“Yeah.” He turned away, looking at the stack of medical machinery beeping, and the

bags of whatever dripping into the tubes running to his veins. Anywhere but at her. He didn't have anything to say to her.

She sighed, let his hand go, and sat back down. "You'll see him again once you're home. Doctor Fellows said he'd release you in a few days."

Trey closed his eyes and pretended to fall asleep.

Home was the last place he wanted to go.

* * * *

Jake sat on Becca's couch and bounced Ben on his knee. The infant gurgled, his tiny sweet mouth open and bright eyes looking into Jake's face.

"That's my big boy. Where's mommy? Where is she?"

"She's trying to put the finishing touches on these canapés for your mom's board meeting," Becca called from the kitchen.

"She's in the kitchen. Hear that, boss?" Jake chuckled. Christ, before he'd met Becca he'd never held a baby, now he was bouncing Ben on his knee and talking baby-talk like a pro. He was proud of the fact he could change a diaper without gagging and had even learned how to work the car seat.

Being a dad was not so bad.

When Trey got home from the hospital, he'd show him how to do all that.

Becca walked in, wiping her hands on her apron. "Your mom said Trey would be discharged in two days and that he's coming home. Is that wise?" She leaned in the doorway, watching him and Ben.

"It's his home. He's healed, but Mom and I think it's best if he take some time out before going back to Baton Rouge."

"Have either of you talked to Trey about this?" She walked over and held out her hands.

Jake stood and gave her the baby. "Well, not discussed it. Mom's told him about coming back to the house."

"Uh huh." She shook her head. "If there is one thing you McCallans suck at, it's communication."

Jake sat on the couch and frowned at her. "What?"

"This is just like before with Trey. You and your mom are making plans for him and you haven't even had a conversation with him to find out if that's what Trey wants."

"You're right. I'm doing it again." Jake sighed. "I'll go to the hospital tomorrow and I promise, Trey and I will have a heart-to-heart." He patted the seat next to him.

Becca sat, cradling the baby. "Good. And promise me, if he wants to go back to LSU, you won't give him any grief. It's going to be hard for him, Jake. I have a feeling this isn't how he'd pictured his life turning out."

She looked down at Ben. "No matter how adorable Ben is, he wasn't Trey's dream and I'm not Trey's mate. I'm yours. Trey has to find his own mate, make his own way in the world."

"I know."

"But if you're going to tell him he's back in the pack, that's fine with me."

"Really? You're sure?"

Becca shrugged. "I have a feeling Trey won't be around much and we won't have to deal with Ben asking questions about his father for some time."

“Right. That will give us plenty of time to figure out what to say when he does start asking.” Jake leaned back and put his arm around Becca. “I love you.” He’d been waiting for the right time ever since he’d bought the ring two days ago, and he didn’t want to let any more time pass.

“I love you.” She leaned her head back, nestling closer to his body, completely unaware of what he had planned. He couldn’t wait to hear her say yes, see the light in her eyes.

“Becca, it may be just a formality, but…” Jake pulled her tighter, kissed her temple, and then released her. He slid off the couch to his knees, took her hand in his, and with his free hand pulled out a small black velvet box.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. “Oh. Jake. Oh.”

“Rebecca, will you marry me and make me the happiest man on earth?” He opened the box and the diamond engagement ring he’d picked out glittered like the rock it was.

“Jake,” she whispered. She put Ben down on the couch and then reached for the ring. Holding it up, she bit her bottom lip and then her gaze flicked to meet his.

“Are you sure?”

“You’re my mate. How much more surer can I get?” He took it from her and slipped it on her finger.

“It’s gorgeous, Jake. I love it.” She grinned and held her hand out, staring at it.

“Well?” Jake cleared his throat.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” She fell off the couch and into his arms. “I’ll marry you, Jake McCallan.”

* * * *

“I think this is a bad idea, Trey.” Bryan sat on the visitor’s chair and shook his head as Trey dressed in the clothes he’d brought.

“Best idea I’ve ever had.” Trey shoved the rest of his stuff into the duffel bag and zipped it up. If his mom and Jake thought he was going home, pretend nothing ever happened, they were out of their minds.

“But you got shot, man. You’re not healed, are you? Checking yourself out against doctor’s orders,” he shrugged, “that’s just plain dumb.”

“Well, it won’t be the first time I’ve done something dumb, will it?” He straightened, gathered up the hospital papers, and put them in the pocket of his jacket. “Look, are you taking me back to Baton Rouge, or not?”

Bryan stood. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

“Great. On the way, can we hit a burger place? I’m starving for some real meat.”

Bryan clapped him on the shoulder and Trey winced. “Oh sorry, man. My bad.”

“Don’t worry. By tomorrow I’ll be good as new. I’m a fast healer, remember?”

Despite being Trey’s best friend in high school, Trey had never shared the family secret with Bryan. Unlike Jake and Barker, he’d never trusted Bryan’s friendship enough to stand up against the knowledge that Trey was a werewolf.

As they walked down the corridor, Trey knew he was doing the right thing. Getting out of Jake, Rebecca and Ben’s lives was the best wedding gift he could give them. Trey trusted Jake to care for Ben and he was positive Jake would be a better father than he could ever be.

Besides, how could he ever face them? What could he possibly say to Ben?

His stomach ached at the thought of leaving Ben, never seeing his son again, never getting the chance to see him grow up, go through his change, run with him in the woods, teach him about being a bad ass wolf. Shit, this time, he'd fucked up everyone's life, not just his and this was the only way he could think of to make it right.

"You're sure about this, man?" Bryan opened the truck door and slid in.

"Yeah. Surer than anything I've ever done in my life, Bryan." He got in, slammed the door closed and sat back in the seat.

Trey pulled his cowboy hat low over his forehead and watched the town disappear in the side view mirror.

* * * *

Jake punched in the number for his mother's cell phone. She picked up after three rings.

"He's gone."

"What?"

"Trey. I'm at the hospital and they just told me. He checked himself out last night." Jake leaned against the window and looked out at the hospital parking lot from Trey's second floor room.

Well, it used to be his room. Now there was an old woman with a broken hip lying in the bed.

He nodded to her and the nurse and left the room.

"I bet I know where he's gone." Bryan would know where he'd gone, Jake was sure of that.

His mother had been silent for a long time.

Jake stopped at the elevator. "Mom? Are you still there?"

"Let him go, Jake." She sighed.

"What? Are you serious? He's hurt. Injured."

"He's a wolf. He'll heal."

Jake growled. He leaned against the wall and gathered himself.

Rebecca was right.

Coming home had been his and his mom's idea, not Trey.

This is what Trey wanted and Jake needed to respect that.

He put the phone to his ear. "You're right, Mom."

"I'll see you later, Jake. I want to see Becca's ring."

"What? How did you know about the ring?"

"Becca called me, of course." She sounded smug. "So, have you set a date?"

"As soon as possible, as far as I'm concerned."

"I want to hear all about your plans for the honeymoon."

"We haven't talked about that yet."

"Well. Sounds to me like you two have a lot of talking to do." His mother hung up.

Jake smiled. It had started. Until he and Rebecca said "I do," his entire life would be consumed by the upcoming wedding.

And as much as the man in him rebelled against that thought, the knowledge that he would spend the rest of his life with Becca, his mate, made it all worth it.

Once again, the McCallan house would be filled with love, laughter, and, whether Trey was there or Tori returned home, their sons would run the wild woods together,

learning how to be good men and wolves.

The End

About the Author:

Lynn Lorenz lives in Katy, Texas with her husband, two kids and a sweet, but neurotic dog. She's been writing with her heart set on publication for three years. To her, it's the heart that matters, and she believes that if you open your mind, the heart will follow.

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