



CATHERINE BYBEE

EMBRACING  
the WOLF

Richard stopped Kate before she could follow. His dark eyes searched hers.

"How are you holding up?"

Richard appeared to be watching her like an uncertain child on their first day at school. "My life is spinning out of control." Her words expressed her frustration. "I don't know you, I don't know your family, yet here I am... At your mercy."

"If there was another way..."

"Is there?"

He shook his head. "None that I can see. You and Joey will be safe here."

"For how long, Richard?" Kate swallowed the knot in her throat. She didn't want to cry again. She was tired of crying yet her eyes burned all the same.

He moved closer, caught her chin, and forced her eyes to his. "As long as it takes."

"I don't want to impose."

"You're not an imposition," he assured her.

She could see the sincerity of his emotion. His caring eyes made her believe him. She didn't understand his motives. Why did he care what happened to them?

Richard stroked the pad of his thumb over her cheek, his lips parted as if he wanted to say something. He didn't. Instead, his head dipped lower, his eyes questioned.

Oh, God. He's going to kiss me, she thought. Part of her wanted to back away, a very small part of her. The bigger part, however, wanted nothing more than to feel his lips on hers. Butterflies warmed her belly. Anticipation rushed through her veins. How long had it been since a man had kissed her?



# Embracing the Wolf

by

Catherine Bybee

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Embracing the Wolf

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## Dedication

To Jeremy and Joshua, who may never read this  
book because let's face it...

"That's just gross, Mom!"

For everyone I've ever shared a graveyard shift with,  
you know who you are. From Diners to Emergency  
Rooms, it's a war zone out there. Oh, the stories I  
could tell... oh, wait, I just did!



## Praise for Catherine Bybee

**Nights and Weekends Reviews:** Satisfying and suspenseful, *Before the Moon Rises* has earned the distinction of being one of the top e-books I've come across in my journey to find the very best that the Internet has to offer.

**Romance Studio Reviews:** *Before the Moon Rises* has everything, great characters, a gripping plot, and some pretty hot love scenes.

**Long and Short Reviews:** The material is well written, provides a dash of humor and spice to keep things interesting.

**NYT Bestselling Author, Caridad Pinero:** A page turning mix of fast cars, sexy shapeshifters and paranormal suspense.







## Chapter One

Kate scurried around the worn out Formica counter with three bacon and egg breakfast platters, two orders of wheat toast, and an English muffin, without butter, in her arms. She stopped short in front of the pie case and the only thing that registered in her brain at two in the morning was...

*Why is a dog sitting in the middle of the restaurant?*

Then it seemed all hell broke loose.

"Hit the floor," the voice behind the knit mask yelled from the cash register.

Kate stared, not completely sure the man spoke to her.

"Hit the floor, bitch!"

Her eyes shifted to the customers who huddled behind their cushioned seats, eyes wide with terror, then back to the man who yelled. She opened her mouth to talk when the object in his hand leveled her way. "I said, hit the floor."

Kate froze. The deadly grey barrel of the pistol aimed directly at her face, slid fear deep into her soul. The plates she held crashed to the floor, and she took one giant step back.

Her only thought was of Joey.

The gun she focused on moved toward the register. The man hit the keys repeatedly but nothing opened.

His eyes shot her way. "Open it!"

Breath, coming in short gasps that resonated all the way to San Bernardino County, rushed from her lungs.

"Open it!"

*Go along with him, and you'll go home. Alive!*

"Hurry!" The gun twitched, or maybe the man. She swallowed the lump in her throat and wiped her damp palms over the polyester of her uniform skirt. Going against every instinct known to man, she stepped over the broken dishes and closer to the deadly weapon.

The gunman jarred her shoulder with his free hand, waking her from her frozen state. "Hurry." His voice wavered. Either his patience grew thin, or he had some doubt as to what he was doing.

Kate's shaky hand removed the key to the cash register from her pocket, dropped it into the lock, and opened the drawer with a ding.

She removed the twenties and tens and handed the cash to the thief standing over her.

"All of it!" His putrid breath rushed past her nose with his command. He thrust the money in a bag he drew from his pocket.

The animal at his feet snarled, baring massive teeth.

The hair on the back of her neck rose. Kate's gaze focused on the ice blue eyes of the dog. Although it didn't look like a dog at all, more like a wolf, maybe.

"Hurry up."

Reaching inside the till, her fingers scrambled to remove the cash. She handed the masked man every dollar and even grabbed the cash from under the drawer. "That's all there is," she told him, cringing away from the gun.

"Don't move," he ordered, backing out of the drab interior of the lobby without taking his eyes off her.

As if in slow motion, the side door to where the help took the dirty dishes opened, and Julio stepped through not knowing a robbery was taking place.

The gunman turned, Kate's mind raced ahead. She thought of Julio's four kids without their father.

On reflex, Kate pivoted, shoved the gunman away, and yelled a warning.

The explosion of the gun permeated the silence of the room. Something hit her and spun her around. Screams elevated over the blast.

Kate started to fall and heard the glass from the pie case shattering before her world went black.

\*\*\*\*

Something cold pressing against her forehead tore her from the blissful darkness that surrounded her.

*Damn, how could so many parts of my body hurt at once?*

Kate struggled to sit up, only to have someone she didn't know tell her to relax.

Her eyes fluttered open. The kid, or at least what appeared to be a kid, not more than twenty years old, held her down. Still confused, she watched his head turn to talk with a man dressed in a uniform beside him. A stethoscope hung from his neck.

He's a paramedic, she thought.

The memory of what happened came back in a flash. Kate jolted to an upright position.

"Julio," she called out, her voice crazed with panic.

"He's okay. Everyone's okay." The medic's concerned face drove away her fears. "You took the worse end of things."

Relief swept through her. Kate closed her eyes and sunk back to the cold, hard floor. The aches she knew instinctively were nothing, started to seep in. "What happened?" She peeked again at the kid taking her blood pressure.

The medic eyed the police officer at his side; their unspoken communication frazzled her already shaken nerves. "Do you remember any of it?"

The back of her head ached. No, it hurt. Really bad. She grimaced. "I remember a dog," she told

them.

"What else?" the cop asked with his pen poised in his hand and a small notebook ready for dictation.

"There was a man in a mask, holding a gun."

"What kind of gun?"

"I don't know—a gun. Big, black. I've seen guns on TV but never before in real life." She shivered with the memory.

"What else do you remember?"

"There was a dog with him. Vicious, barking." The piercing eyes of the animal would never leave her. How they followed her every move, the way he watched her was downright surreal. Just thinking about it brought moisture to her palms and quickened her heartbeat.

"What did the dog do?"

"He watched."

The cop slid a sideways glance at the medic, then back to her. "What else do you remember?"

"Julio came in from the back... The man with the gun pointed his weapon at him. I thought he was going to shoot. I panicked." Her chin trembled. "And then I fell."

"Is that all?"

"Yes," she replied in a small voice.

The cop, somewhat disinterested, took a couple more notes before walking away.

The medic took her blood pressure for a second time since she had come around. The sound of metal ground against the tile floor. She peered over his shoulder and saw a gurney being wheeled in. "I have to go to the hospital?"

"Yeah." The medic nodded, then he and his partner loaded her onto the gurney.

The chime on the door to the restaurant rang. Kate glanced over on impulse and focused on the person at the door. The number on the side of the threshold suggested he was well past six feet tall, his build large. He strode in as if he belonged, his

gait wide and confident.

"This is a crime scene." The police officer lifted his hand out to stop him.

"I know." The stranger pulled back his coat exposing his identification. At the same time, Kate caught a flash of the gun he had holstered on his hip.

Kate closed her eyes when the gurney started to move. "Is this really necessary?" she asked.

"You were shot," the medic explained.

Her eyes flew open. "I was not." Kate gaped down at her body and systematically started moving her limbs. Then she noticed the bandage on her left arm. Because she had fallen into the pie case, shattering the glass, she didn't think anything of it. But when she went to move her arm, searing pain radiated down to her finger tips. "Oh..."

"Excuse me." The man from the doorway approached.

"Yes?" Kate peered up and into chocolate brown eyes that stared down on her with concern.

"I'm Richard Ritter, with Ritter Securities. Can I talk with you for a minute?"

Kate glanced at the paramedics. Her mouth twisted. "I'm kind of busy, going to the hospital and all."

"This will only take a minute," he assured her.

The medics moved the gurney toward the door. "You can question her at the hospital. She's been here long enough."

"I only have one question." Mr. Ritter scrambled alongside the gurney. "There was a dog with the man that committed the robbery, right?"

"Yeah, I told the cops that."

"Did the dog bite you?"

"What?" Kate thought the question odd, considering the fact that a bullet had passed through her body. Or maybe still was in her body... *Damn, I've been shot!* Somehow, a dog bite seemed trivial in

light of the circumstances.

"Bite? Did the dog bite you?" he asked again his tone a bit more brisk.

"No. Wait, I don't know. I don't even remember being shot." Kate winced when the men lifted the gurney to the back of the ambulance. The burning pain grew more insistent. She moaned.

"You don't know?" He tilted his head to the side, as if he didn't believe her.

"That's what she said, mister. Now if you don't mind." The medic closed the double doors, rounded the front of the van, and jumped into the driver seat.

"Where are you taking her?" Kate heard the man yell.

"County General."

The sound of sirens filled the cavity of the van as it left the restaurant parking lot.

\*\*\*\*

The Emergency Room buzzed with a whirlwind of activity when she arrived. Nurses rushed her into x-ray before she had time to think. From there she landed inside the tube of a Cat Scan machine.

Everyone asked her the same frenzied questions over and over within the first thirty minutes of her stay. Yet, once the doctor came into the room and told her that her scans came out normal, and the bullet had gone through her body without touching the bone, everyone left her bedside. It was as if she no longer needed anything once the staff realized she wasn't dying.

Kate noticed the time on the institutional-style wall clock, 3:30 in the morning. She still had a few hours before she needed to get home to relieve the babysitter.

Before she could think about that, she needed to find someone in the department who could clean up the hole in her arm and cuts all over her body.

She carefully draped her legs over the side of the gurney and eased her frame in a sitting position.



Her head swam. Gripping the sides of the gurney, she closed her eyes to gain her equilibrium.

*What a mess.*

At first glance, it appeared as if she had suffered a catfight instead of armed robbery. Her hands, scraped and crusted with blood, where the small shards of glass cut into them from the fall, still shook. Her head ached, and her arm oozed blood from the bullet wound. There was blood everywhere. Even her legs didn't go unscathed.

The medics, in all their infinite wisdom, had sliced her clothing off before she regained consciousness. She sat now in a hospital gown that covered very little and couldn't help but wonder what she would wear home.

Standing on wobbly feet, she grabbed the overhead table for support. Big mistake, the thing moved. With a gasp, she found herself spiraling toward the floor without the ability to stop her fall. Pressing her eyes tight, she tried to anticipate the crash when her body jerked to a stop mid-fall. Large capable hands encircled her waist, catching her before she had a chance to hit.

"Whoa, where are you going?"

Kate caught her breath and glanced over her shoulder. "Mr. Ritter, right?"

"Richard," he corrected, while he guided her back to her bed.

She tried to ignore the fact that her gown gaped in the back, showing the stranger almost every asset she possessed. Heat hit her cheeks at the thought. The same thought must have occurred to him, because he graciously pulled her gown closed behind her keeping her modesty intact.

"You didn't answer my question."

Kate shook her head and waved him away.

"Where are you going?"

"Home, I've got to get home," she muttered.

He glanced beyond the door of the room. "You

don't exactly have the appearance of someone ready for discharge."

Kate eased back against the pillow and tried to clear her head. "I was on my way to find someone to help me get cleaned up."

"I don't think the doctor will be agreeable to sending you home if you can't stand on your own two feet." He moved a comfortable distance away and folded his hands across his chest. The stance, along with the way he watched her, made her realize he was used to being in charge.

Well, so was she.

"Are you a doctor, Mr. Ritter?"

"No."

"Good. Why don't you be helpful and get one in here so I can go home."

His smile took her by surprise. Straight teeth with a small cleft in his chin had her hiding her own grin. Whoever this Mr. Ritter was, he was cute. Annoying, but cute.

"Why the hurry?"

*Really annoying!* "Who are you?" she asked.

"I told you already. I'm from Ritter Securities; we monitor the alarm system at the restaurant."

"And you're here... why?"

He unfolded his arms and placed one on his head, giving it a small scratch. "I, ah, we, are always interested in the welfare of the customers we service."

*What a crock of shit.* "So you followed me to the hospital?"

"Yes." He seemed pleased with his answer, which told Kate he held something back. *He's probably worried about being sued.*

"Well, you've seen me. I'm fine. Now if you can just go get a nurse, I can go home."

Ritter made a grand gesture of scanning the room. "I don't see anyone here to give you a ride, and from what I've seen you're in no condition to walk."

She hadn't thought of that. Kate pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to ignore the growing ache behind her eyes. "I'll call a cab."

"I'll give you a ride."

His constant 'take-charge' agenda began to annoy her. "You don't let up, do you?" If she didn't know better, she would think he was flirting with her.

He shook his head and smirked. "Nope."

"Okay, whatever." She gave a wave of her hand dismissing him. "Can you get a nurse in here? My sitter has to go to work, and I need to get my son off to school." *There... that ought to puncture his sails.*

It did. He stood back. His expression went from smug to contemplative.

Figures, she thought, just another guy gun shy about kids. *At least now, maybe he will leave me alone.*

"Can't dad take him?" He stood up straight.

"Ha!" Her gruff laugh erupted so quick it made her headache pound. "Ah, no! Dad couldn't stick around through the first trimester, let alone get Joey off to kindergarten," she snapped.

"I see."

Doubt creased his expression, making Kate realize she had just gone off on a complete stranger. "Listen, I'm sorry. I need to get out of here. I've had a bad night..." *Understatement of the year.* "...and I need to get home to my son."

Ritter pushed away from the wall and headed for the door without further questions or commentary. Kate was a little surprised at how rapidly he left.

Outside her cubical, Kate heard him talking with one of the staff members. Laughter came from beyond her door before he and a very pregnant nurse walked back in.

The nurse smiled and tapped his arm. "Richard tells me you need to bolt."

Kate considered them both, then glanced down at the nametag on the nurses I.D badge.

Janet Ritter.

*What a schmuck.* The jerk flirted with her and his pregnant wife stood only feet away. Kate's eyes flew to his, her sneer pointed.

"Yeah, I need to get home." Kate's hackles rose.

"How are you feeling, Miss Davis?" Janet asked while putting on a pair of latex gloves.

"Fine, I'm fine." Even Kate heard the hostility in her short words.

Janet and Richard both glanced at each other.

Ignoring the mounting tension in the room, the nurse moved forward and removed the small piece of gauze covering the bullet wound. Kate took notice of it as well, and felt what blood had risen to meet her anger drop to her feet. "Oh my," she whispered. The room started to spin.

Richard moved forward, pulled her legs up and onto the gurney. "You look like you're going to pass out."

She *felt* like she was going to pass out.

Janet's swift movements leaned the gurney back and Kate along with it. With her head lowered, the room came into focus again.

"You're all right," the nurse assured her.

Richard placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure there isn't someone to watch over your son? You're not in any condition to leave."

Kate glanced at his hand, then back to his face. "Why don't you let your *wife* work? I can't imagine she likes having you hover over her patients."

"My what?" Richards's brow pinched together as he digested her words.

Kate turned her head to Janet who had stopped taking her blood pressure, her mouth opened. "Your wife... Janet Ritter."

Janet burst out in laughter. The corner of Richard's lips pulled into a smirk.

“Janet is my sister-in-law. Not my wife.”

Kate regarded them both. “Oh,” she said, somewhat embarrassed about the assumption she’d made. Janet continued to chuckle.

“Max is going to love that one.” Janet removed several packages of gauze and antiseptic from a cupboard and set them up on the rolling table by the bed. “Max is my husband and Richard’s brother.”

Richard’s amusement fell flat when Miss Davis glanced back down at her wounds. Her face went pale again, and for some reason he felt a need to distract her so she wouldn’t keep surveying the damage to her body.

He could see her wheels turning, realizing, maybe for the first time that night that she survived a brush with death. Her resolve to leave the ER in an effort to get home for her son, exceeded her ability to think rationally about her condition. Obviously, she was used to taking care of others before herself.

He dragged a chair alongside the gurney and made himself comfortable. “So, tell me about your son.”

“What?” Kate stared up at him, then back to her arm.

“Your son, Joey is his name, right?”

She turned her head his way and leaned back while Janet cleaned her wound.

“He’s six.”

“What does he like to do? Ride bikes, skateboards or build forts in the dirt?”

“He loves his bike, but our neighborhood isn’t the best.”

Richard listened while Kate went on about her son’s life. Apparently, video games ruled when you lived in an apartment.

He raised an eyebrow to Janet who noticed his antics and nodded her approval.

Kate was distracted. Something told him if he'd asked questions about her personal life, she wouldn't be so forthcoming with information. Talking about her son came easy, however.

It took almost an hour for his sister-in-law to clean up the mess made by the thugs who robbed the restaurant. By the time Kate held her discharge papers, she had no less than three shots, five bandages, and a dozen stitches.

Richard excused himself when Janet walked out of the room.

"Are any of those scratches bites?" he asked in a hushed whisper.

"Hard to tell," Janet said. "Her right leg was cut up by the glass. Did the witnesses see the dog attack?"

"Most of them cowered under the tables when the gun went off. One witness said the dog went ballistic and jumped on her."

Richard glanced back toward Kate's room. "Now what?"

Janet lowered her voice and stated the obvious. "Even if he turned her, we won't know until next month, Richard."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, but she has a kid. And if the wolf marked her, he may come back tonight to seal the deal."

"Maybe Max can track him?"

Richard nodded. *Yeah, but will Kate let him anywhere near her?*

## Chapter Two

Wearing nothing but paper scrubs, Kate walked out to the nurse's station and caught his eye. His lips pulled back into a small smile. Her straight brown hair came free from the rubber band holding it together. Her immobilized arm was swathed in bandages from elbow to shoulder. Small cuts on her wrists sported bandages and stitches.

In short, she looked like hell.

Still, beyond the cuts and gauze, Richard found a determined and beautiful woman. His mind flashed back to the sight she gave him through the hospital gown. Petite legs and a perfectly shaped ass met his memory.

Her eyes fluttered from his to the phone on the wall.

He stepped forward and stopped her before she could pick it up. "Where am I taking you?"

"You don't have to drive me home, Mr. Ritter."

"Richard, the name is Richard. My dad is Mr. Ritter."

She chuckled, shook her head. "Okay... Richard. Really it isn't necessary."

He glanced at his watch. It was almost six. "What time do you normally get home from work?"

"Six forty five."

"By the time the cab gets here you'll be late."

He watched her weighing her options, flashes of frustration visible in her eyes.

"All right."

Relieved to have won this battle, Richard led her out the back door of the ER and to his car parked in the spot designated for the police.

“Are you a cop?”

“No, but I know one of the nurses.” He gave her a cocky grin.

He held open her door and waited for her to buckle up.

She rambled off her address. He had to restrain his expression when he recognized the neighborhood. It wasn’t South Central or South LA as they called it now in an effort to change the image of gangs and violence, but it was close. No wonder she wouldn’t let her son ride his bike on the street.

“How long have you lived there?”

“Only a couple of months,” she admitted. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“I wasn’t saying anything.” *Not out loud anyway.*

“Bad neighborhood, bad place to raise a kid.”

“If you think that, why not move?”

“It’s not that easy when you consider rent, food, and gas prices where they are. Waitresses don’t make very much money.”

He wanted to ask about any family she might have to help her out, but didn’t.

“Damn!” She shot up in her seat, taking him by surprise.

“What?”

“I can’t work with this arm.”

“I’m sure temporary disability will pay.”

“Yeah, but not tips. They only go on estimated income, not actual income.”

Her good hand wreaked havoc with the paper gown she wore. Richard pulled off the freeway, already backed up with the morning commute. Her graffiti filled neighborhood didn’t suit her. His Lexus stuck out like a sore thumb. Or maybe people would view him as a drug dealer. Either way, he didn’t fit.

The sun had broken through the morning fog by the time he pulled up to the apartment complex. Bars covered all the windows, even those on the



third floor, giving the building a bleak appearance.

"You can drop me off here." She pointed to a space in front of the building.

"I'll walk you up," he said while putting the car in park.

"That isn't necessary."

"I insist." He eyed her paper scrubs and didn't give her room to argue.

Richard came around the car and helped her to her feet. She still swayed slightly, making him catch her around her waist for support. Her lithe little body pressed close caused him to realize just how fragile she was.

"I guess I'm still a little shaky."

"You had a rough night."

She chuckled. "Understatement of the year."

Kate pushed the buzzer at the door. Static, along with a Hispanic voice crackled over the intercom.

"It's me, Manuela," Kate told the woman.

"Why you not use key?" Manuela asked in broken English.

"My purse is at work."

"What?"

"Just open up, please."

A metallic click signaled an open security door. As they moved through, Richard glanced at the flimsy lock and knew he could bust into the door in less than two minutes.

So much for safety.

The broken elevator matched the rickety handrail on the stairway. Janet lived on the top floor. The sound of babies crying for their morning meal mixed with the blaring noise of TV's turned up way too loud. A piercing female voice yelled out, "Get your lazy ass out of bed, you good for nothing deadbeat. It is time you got to school."

Moving through the shadows of the dimly lit hall, they stopped at the first door on the right.

Kate's knock met with an eye from the peephole and several chain locks coming free. When it opened, the woman he assumed was Manuela stepped back; her dark eyes took him in before settling on Kate.

"Aye, aye, what happen to you?"

"I had an accident at work."

"Mommy, is that you?"

A bouncy, six-year-old boy attached to the voice, rounded the corner. His disheveled hair and Spiderman PJ's indicated he had just leapt out of bed.

Kate bent down to accept her son's hug, her groan muffled when Joey squeezed her too hard. *That must have hurt.* But she'd done a good job of hiding it.

"Hey, buddy. How did you sleep?"

Joey let go and stepped back. His head turned to the side and his eyes squinted before coming to rest on her arm. "What happened?"

Kate glanced up at Richard, clearly distressed over how much she should tell her son.

"I, ah..."

"She fell." Richard interjected with a white lie. "Some guy spilled his coffee and your mommy fell."

The child's discerning expression rested on him. "Who are you?"

"My name is Richard."

The boy marched right up to him and put out his hand to shake. Richard had to swallow his smirk. Little Spiderman, with dried up drool on his lips, seemed so serious.

"I'm Joey Davis."

Richard shook his hand and smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Joey."

"You need to get ready for school, sport." Kate stood and put a hand on her son's back to guide him away.

"Okay, Mommy."

"I go," Manuela said while gathering her purse.

She stopped long enough to extend her hand, palm up, in front of Kate.

Kate shuffled slightly. "I'm sorry, my purse is at work. Would you mind if I paid you tonight?"

Clearly irritated, Manuela placed her hand on her hip. "How I use the bus if I have no money?"

Richard stepped forward, his hand already fishing in his back pocket for his wallet. "Here." He thrust several bills at the woman.

Manuela's eyes grew large when she saw the amount. The money quickly disappeared into the pocket of her apron. Her scowl turned to a grin. "I like your man," she told Kate with a wink.

Kate turned her gaze on him, her expression unreadable. "He's not my... Oh, never mind."

Just as she had coaxed her son from the room, Kate placed a steady hand on Manuela's back, helping her out the door.

Once it closed, she turned on him. "Why did you do that?"

"She needed bus fare."

"I could have found something to tie her over. What you did wasn't necessary." Kate stood rigid. Her eyes never left his. "I could have managed."

"You can pay me back, if that's what you're so upset about."

"Oh, I'll pay you back all right."

"Fine." Richard stood back.

"Fine," she snapped.

They stood, face to face. Neither of them moving or saying more. Kate's breath came in short gasps, the temper hardly contained.

*Why is she so pissed? All I did was pay her sitter, and gave her a ride home. Hell, I've been a damned gentleman, and she looks like she wants to spit nails at me.*

Then he saw it, the flash of recognition. Her determination to remain mad started to crumble. Her lower lip started to tremble and her eyes

swelled with unshed tears. *Oh, God. She's going to cry.* Richard hated when woman cried. It always made him feel so useless.

"Hey, it's okay."

"Really? I don't think so." She shook her head and nodded toward her son. "I was shot last night, I can't work with this." She lifted her arm. "And I can't pay you back anytime soon because I won't be able to earn any tips until I can hold a plate."

"But..."

"I'm not done." Kate turned away and started to pace. "My car is at work, and I need to get my son to school."

"I'll drive."

"I don't even know you."

Her frustration bit out each word. Luckily, Joey arrived in time to spare her from continuing.

"What's for breakfast?" he asked.

Kate wiped one fallen tear from her cheek and smiled down at him. "Well, we have Cheerios or Lucky Charms."

"Duh," he said, rolling his eyes. "Lucky Charms."

Richard watched her composure return. She led her son to the small kitchen on the other end of the room. Her little outburst told him how on edge she felt. *Shit, she didn't know the half of it.*

While she prepared a simple breakfast for her son, Richard took the opportunity to call his brother.

Kate tried to ignore the man in her living room talking on his cell phone. It proved difficult at best. She couldn't remember anyone in her apartment wearing a suit. Even the landlord wore nothing but T-shirts and jeans.

Richard's voice rumbled low so she couldn't make out the conversation.

Who was he, and why was he being so nice?

Joey slapped his spoon against the bowl between

bites. His big blue eyes smiled along with his lips. She was glad Richard had lied to her son. Telling Joey the truth would have wiped that beautiful smile away. She didn't need Joey worrying about her any more than he already did. At times, she'd find him curled up on her bed when she arrived home from work. When asked why he was there, he'd say something about having a bad dream and her not coming home. No, telling him some ass had put a hole in her the night before would only give him reason to worry more.

Joey amazed her. His world wasn't like most kids his age. Being an only child with a working single mom meant he gave up a lot. He tried so hard to act grown up.

She couldn't afford many of the activities most kids Joey's age did. No Karate lessons or T-ball teams to meet up with. No Soccer teams or days full of practices.

Working nights gave her the ability to be home with him during the day, which meant a lot to both of them. She tried to get him out of the nasty neighborhood as often as possible. With gas prices on the rise, even that proved difficult. Graveyard shift also meant she could manage to take one class a semester in an effort to climb out of her rut.

Richard stepped into the kitchen while putting his cell phone back in his pocket. "Are you ready?"

"Almost." Kate smiled at her son. "Go brush your teeth and let's get you to school."

\*\*\*\*

Within thirty minutes, Richard had her back in her apartment and propped up on her couch with a pain pill in hand.

He'd taken over her life in the past few hours, and she felt unable to stop him. Not that she had the energy to try.

"My brother will pick your car up and bring it here."

She wanted to argue, but the medication gave a warning about driving. Besides, she'd need a ride to work to get her car. This way she could get a little sleep before she had to pick up Joey. "It seems I'm going to be forever in your debt," she said, then popped the long white pill into her mouth.

"If it's okay with you, I'll stay here until he arrives. That way I can give him a ride home."

His request seemed reasonable, and not something with which she could argue. "It's the least I can do."

He took off his expensive coat. His dark hair was a little long for a guy in a suit. Once he loosened his tie, removed it, and tucked it into his coat, he looked downright normal. She smiled despite the pain traveling from her arm to her head.

"Would you like Cheerios or Lucky Charms?" He asked on his way to her kitchen.

"You don't have to get me anything."

"That bottle says to take it with food. I happen to know you haven't eaten anything since before three. It's almost 8:30, and besides, I haven't had Lucky Charms since I was a kid." He picked up the box giving it a little shake, "I didn't know they still made this stuff."

Kate laughed. "They still make it and with more sugar than ever."

He stumbled around her kitchen, opening and closing cupboards.

"Next one over," she called.

He removed two bowls, set them on the counter. "Well?" He held up both boxes of cereal.

"Cheerios, please."

"Good. These are almost gone, and I'm hungry."

He smacked his lips together after putting one of the colorful marshmallows in his mouth. Kate caught herself smiling at him. He was worse than her son, eating straight out of the box.

He poured the cereal into bowls and filled each

with milk before setting hers in her lap. Taking a seat across from her, Richard lifted his spoon in salute. "Enjoy."

Kate took a few bites before she spoke.

"Why are you doing all this?"

He stopped mid bite and smiled. "You won't believe me."

"Try me," Kate pressed.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well it's all those fairytales. I'm a sucker for a damsel in distress." His cheek twitched, lighting up his eyes.

What could she say to that? "I'm not sure of the damsel part, but I don't remember being more distressed."

"You've handled it like a pro."

"And what would you know about that?"

Richard sat back and put his feet on her coffee table, mimicking her motions. "Most people don't put in security systems until after they're robbed. In my line of work, I've seen a lot of people after they were assaulted or worse."

"Oh."

"My guess is that if the bullet missed you completely, you would have ended your shift and come home like nothing happened." He swirled his spoon around the bowl, avoiding the blue moons.

"You learn to take life's little punches being a single parent."

"I'd say last night was more than a *little* punch."

She noticed the blue speckled milk in his bowl. "True."

He smiled up at her. Her heartbeat skipped and her body grew warm. The cleft in his chin was even sexier than earlier.

"Are you saving the blue moons for last?"

He glanced at the evidence of his behavior and laughed. "Old habit."

Kate concentrated on her bowl. Even his laugh was sexy. She focused on putting her spoon to her

mouth and did her best to ignore her body's response to the man.

How long had it been since her body reacted to a man's smile? Joey's father, she reminded herself. He could charm the pants off a nun, and most likely earn a trip to hell in the process.

With a deep sigh, she put the empty bowl on the coffee table and leaned her dizzy head on the back of the sofa.

"Meds kicking in?" Richard asked.

"I think so."

"Good, you could use some rest."

Richard took both their bowls to the sink, grabbed an old faded afghan from the back of the couch, and proceeded to spread it over her.

Murmuring thanks behind falling eyelids, Kate let her body relax, and her mind rest. Before she fell asleep, she saw Richard pick up her paper and open it. She should try to stay awake, she thought. But dark bliss beckoned like a warm summer night.



### Chapter Three

Soft, even breathing from the sofa told him she had fallen asleep. He lowered the paper and watched her rest. The steady rise and fall of her chest had a way of tightening his.

God, she was beautiful. Sometime during the ride to her kid's school and back, she let her hair free of the rubber band. It fell in a long sheet to the middle of her back. He stared at her, feeling an uncanny desire to run his finger through it. *Would it feel like silk? And those plump sexy lips...*

Shifting in his seat, Richard ignored the heat between his legs and reminded himself that she needed his protection.

His brother Max told him her car held the scent of the wolf. Even if last night's werewolf hadn't bit her, he would return.

Tonight or next month, he would be back.

A light knock on the door signaled his brother's arrival. Kate stirred, but didn't awaken.

Through the peephole, Richard saw Max in the hall with his hands in his pockets. Richard opened the door as quietly as he could and let him in.

"Hey," he whispered in greeting. His finger went to his lips before pointing to the sleeping woman on the couch.

Max nodded and followed him into the hall between the two bedrooms.

"Did you find anything?" Richard asked in hushed tones.

"Only that her car was definitely marked. The witnesses couldn't confirm if she was bitten."

"And Janet wasn't sure."

"It wouldn't make sense for the wolf to tag her car if she was already turned."

Rubbing his eyes, Richard asked, "Why?"

"We can smell our kind. If she is going to turn next month, the wolf would find her like you find a good barbeque joint."

"Damn. So you think he'll be back?"

"Probably." Max peaked around the corner, his brow rose in appreciation. "I can see why."

"Your wife is pregnant," Richard reminded him.

"And I love her to pieces, but I still have eyes."

Richard smiled. Max's devotion to his wife and married life wasn't something he questioned. Janet loved his brother in spite of the fact that he turned furry three nights a month.

"You need to track him tonight so he can't get to her."

"I need more than one night, and you know it. It will take the better part of the month to find this one. We'll be lucky if I can. From what I can tell he doesn't run with a pack, which makes him even more difficult and dangerous."

"Then we'll get more of the family involved."

Max glared down at him, his mouth a thin line. "Mom and Dad are in the Bahamas along with Uncle Bruce and his family, or have you forgotten?"

"What about Jesse?"

"Utah, in the motorhome."

"Shit." Richard started to pace. "What can we do?"

"We've had this discussion before, Richard."

He turned to his brother, his jaw twitched with indecision. Yeah, they had it before all right. Max had suggested more than a dozen times that Richard should turn to ease the burden of the hunt. Only this time Richard's immediate refusal didn't spew from his lips.

Every other time he refused.

Every other time they had more options, he

reminded himself.

His gaze went to Kate who emitted a soft snore. The tough single mom couldn't be more vulnerable despite her strength. She had no idea what was coming after her.

Richard thought about Joey. If the werewolf from the restaurant turned Kate with a bite, then her nights of the full moon would be destined to reek of violence and evil.

Every full moon, Max and the other werewolves in the family would search out and protect innocent people from the werewolves who preyed on them. The Ritter family's ancestry had werewolves in their blood for hundreds of years. With every generation, several members of the family chose to turn and took on the form of a wolf.

As with humans, werewolves came in two categories: good and evil. The Ritter's used the strength and skills of the change to even out the playing field.

The wolf like the one who attacked Kate the night before was obviously from the seedier side of the food chain. A bite from an evil wolf was like a virus entering an open wound. It would fester and swell until it swallowed the humanity of its victim. Kate could fight it, but her nature would eventually change. Very few people could alter that path once it began.

However, if someone like Max turned her, then she stood a chance of keeping her morality even in K-9 form.

Up until now, Richard never considered taking the change. He didn't need to grow a long nose and pointy ears every full moon to help his family rid the country of evil. He helped in his own way. His human way.

"Well?" Max asked breaking his train of thought. "Dammit."

Max positioned his hand on his shoulder.

Richard's eyes darted up.

"You're really considering it, aren't you?"

Richard sought out the steel barred windows of Kate's apartment, the flimsy locks on her door, and the convalescing woman on the sofa. "She has a son, Max. Six years old with no father to be found."

"Even more reason to keep her from being turned."

Richard brought both palms to his eyes and rubbed vigorously. "I need some sleep."

Max patted his back before moving to leave. "Let me know," he said while dropping the keys to Kate's car in Richard's hand.

Richard went to his jacket, pulled his car keys from the pocket, and tossed them to his brother. "Bring it back before dark."

Max nodded before letting himself out.

\*\*\*\*

The alarm on Richard's watch sounded fifteen minutes before Joey's scheduled departure from school.

Truly surprised he managed any sleep at all with the noise coming from down the hall. Richard rubbed his eyes in an effort to wake up.

Kate slept with no sign of waking.

After finding a forgotten crayon and piece of paper, Richard scribbled a quick note explaining where he had gone along with his cell phone number. He set it on the table and left her side, her car keys in hand.

The school parking lot appeared less crowded then in the morning. Only the kindergarten kids left the campus at noon. The others still had three and a half hours to go until they escaped their prison of schoolbooks and exams.

He leaned against the stucco building along with the other adults waiting for the bell to ring. Before long, the kids piled out of the building.

Joey walked alongside his friends with his

backpack half on, half off his shoulder. The construction paper hat on his head attempted to model after Robin Hood brought a smile to Richard's lips.

It took Joey a minute before he recognized Richard. When he did, he waved enthusiastically, and walked right up to him.

"Where's my mom?"

"At home sleeping."

Joey put his hand over his brow shading the sun from his eyes, all the while scrutinizing Richard to the point he feared the other parents would become suspicious.

"My mom told me never to ride with a stranger."

He hadn't thought of that. It never dawned on him the kid wouldn't go with him. "Oh, well... I took you to school this morning. And I'm driving your mom's car." Richard pointed to the beat up old Nissan, which belonged in a scrap heap.

Joey glanced at the car, then him. "Okay," he said, much to Richards's relief. Just then, the older woman who led the children to the pick up line started walking toward them. Her gaze settled on Richard. Joey saw her, put his hand in Richard's, and tugged him away from the school.

Not wanting to battle the school's pick up policy, and knowing damn well they would call Kate's home and wake her, Richard started moving.

The woman he assumed was Joey's teacher stopped walking toward them when they stepped off the curb, obviously no longer interested in who picked the boy up.

Her lack of follow-through ticked him off. Part of him wanted to march up to the woman and tell her she should demand to know who was picking up the kids. Wasn't it her job to ensure their safety? For all she knew, Richard could be some pervert, or worse.

The teacher helped another student into a car, he and Joey completely forgotten.

"Hrmmmp," he moaned. A call to the district was in order.

Joey sat silently in the back seat. In the rear view mirror, Joey's eyes were glued to him.

"What?" Richard asked.

"Is my mom really sleeping?"

"Yeah, she is."

"She never forgets to pick me up."

"She didn't forget you," Richard told him. "She had a tough night, remember her arm?"

At first, Joey narrowed his eyes as if he searched Richard's face for any sign of deceit. Then he shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

The Elementary School was only a few miles from Kate's apartment, yet the drive took forever with the California traffic.

The supermarket on the corner reminded Richard of the lack of food in Kate's kitchen. "Do you think your mom will mind if we stop by the store and pick up a few things?"

Joey shrugged his shoulders. "I dunna know."

\*\*\*\*\*

*Kate ran as fast as her legs would take her through the thick lush forest. The full moon lit her way, but it lit his as well. Her chest ached with the pain of running for too long and too fast. She couldn't stop, ever.*

*Suddenly, the forest floor opened up. Her arms thrashed above her head trying to catch hold of something. Anything. But it was no use. She closed her eyes and prayed her death would come quick and painless.*

*Then, without notice, everything stopped. She stood in her apartment, only it didn't look like her apartment. The furniture, the paint, even the smell was different... New.*

*Richard came in the room. The smile on his face erased all the fear she felt from the terrible fall. He said nothing as he walked toward her. Even before*

*his arms gathered her close, she knew he was going to kiss her. How long had she waited for him to do it? Forever, it seemed.*

*He leaned closer, his breath on hers. His hands stroked away the lock of hair that had fallen in her eyes. He cradled her face in his heavy palms. "Let me take care of you," he whispered.*

*"Please. I've been alone for so long."*

*"I know."*

*Kate moistened her lips and laughed when he did the same. Her heart raced, her palms dampened. Kiss me, she cried in her head. Hurry, before it's too late.*

Kate sat straight up with a strangled cry. The room around her came into focus. The pain in her arm from the sudden movement reminded her where she was and what had happened.

"Damn," she said, tossing herself back onto the couch.

She scanned the room, listened. Something didn't feel right. Empty. Richard was gone. His almost kiss only a dream. One she hadn't wanted to wake up from.

She turned her head to the side to catch the time, then shot off the sofa with a muffled moan. "I'm late. Oh my God, I'm late." Kate rushed around the room searching for her keys and purse. Running to her bedroom, she frantically searched on her dresser and bedside table.

Nothing.

*Where is my purse?*

She shook her foggy head and remembered she'd left it at work. Back in the livingroom, she grabbed the phone and started to dial Joey's school. A breeze from the ceiling fan flipped the colorful note on the table and caught her eye. Kate picked it up and read:

*You slept like Sleeping Beauty. It would have been a shame to wake you. I'm picking up Joey.*

Richard had signed his name and placed a phone number under it.

Closing her eyes, Kate sat back down. She tossed the phone beside her.

Two things hit her at the same time. First, she never allowed anyone to pick up her son from school before. Second, she knew without a shadow of doubt, that she trusted Richard's intentions. Strange, she'd only known him a few hours, yet she trusted him entirely.

Why was that? She'd never placed her son in anyone's trust except Manuela's—ever!

Still groggy from the drugs she'd taken to ward off the pain, she relaxed into the sofa and contemplated the mess that had become her life.

\*\*\*\*

By the time they left the store, Richard understood why every mother complained about taking their kids shopping. Joey asked if he could have everything. Richard's "quick trip" turned into a shopping spree.

Lucky Charms and Fruit Loops were the least of the problem. The kid had taste. He pointed out two different types of block cheeses and four different types of crackers. He liked every fruit in the produce department, and even had a preference for the cut of steak he ate. "Rib eyes have more flavor," he told him.

Richard rolled his eyes and crammed the cart full. Kate's poor car hardly managed the weight of fifteen bags of goods by the time they finished.

Once they parked the car in front of the apartment, his phone started to ring.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?" Kate's voice was frantic.

"By the front door."

"Joey?"

"He's right here. Did you think I took him?"

Lifting bags from the car, he attempted to shut



the door with his foot. "Buzz us in, my hands are full," he said before ending the call.

Joey carried his weight and bounded up the stairs with the speed of a rabbit.

Kate stood in the hall with the door to her apartment open wide.

"Hey, Mom, Richard and I went shopping. You won't believe all the stuff he got."

Kate bent down and kissed her son's cheek before he went inside.

She stood and glanced his way but didn't meet his eyes. "Don't I get one?" Richard joked.

Her nervous laugh made him wonder about her thoughts.

"I, ah..."

"Just kidding." Not really, he thought, passing her and placing the bags on the kitchen counter.

"Come on, buddy," he called to Joey who had dropped his bags and started to pick up his Lego's. "You're the one who wanted all that stuff. You've got to help me bring it all in."

"There's more?" Kate's eyes widened in surprise, as she moved aside when Joey started back to the hall.

"Yeah, apparently Joey likes to shop."

It took three more trips to get all the bags. Kate was already putting stuff away when he settled the last one on the counter.

"Did you leave anything behind?"

"Duh," Joey giggled. "The store has more food than we do."

Richard watched her remove groceries out of the bags one-handed. Joey moved alongside her, opening and closing doors. They worked as a team, one knowing what the other one needed without words.

"Look at what I got ya." Joey thrust a jar of garlic stuffed green olives in her face with pride.

"You mean what Richard bought us."

"It was my idea."

Kate glanced up, caught his eye. He gave a little shake of the head and said, "Joey had a lot of ideas."

"I can see that. You didn't have to buy all this."

"I wanted to. Besides, I ate all the Lucky Charms."

Joey giggled again, this time Kate joined him.

Insisting on making them all sandwiches, Kate set about preparing lunch. Joey pulled out his Lego's and started showing Richard how to build a small space village, complete with Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker.

"Hand me some of those gray blocks," Joey demanded, his fingers flexing in the *give me* manner.

Scooping up a few and handing them over, Richard sensed the weight of Kate's stare. She swiftly averted her gaze when Richard glanced her way.

"I will destroy you." Joey spoke through the palms of his hands over his mouth. Darth Vader jumped on the building and down on Luke. All the while, Joey vocalized clashes and bangs.

"I thought Luke was supposed to win."

"Not always, that would be boring."

"Oh."

"Let's eat, space boy."

Joey chatted throughout lunch about his archrival from school. Apparently, Cody was the big kid on campus. His mom was head of the PTA and helped in the classroom once a week. Cody, from what Richard could tell, was the class bully.

"He took my ball at recess," Joey said between bites.

"Why didn't you grab it back?" he asked.

Kate shot him a glare, making Richard wish he could take the words back.

"I'll get in trouble."

"Did you tell the teacher?" Kate asked.

*Oh, yeah. That's a good idea.* Richard gave a sarcastic grin, class tattletales always got their asses

kicked.

“Cody’s mom was there, and Mrs. Ford wouldn’t listen.”

“Was Mrs. Ford the woman who walked you out?”

“Yeah, she’s my teacher.”

Richard stored the information away. The teacher sounded like a real piece of work.

When his cell started to ring, he excused himself and walked away while Kate and Joey finished their lunch.

Kate once again found herself listening to only part of a conversation. Several times, she caught Richard glancing in her direction with brows arched and eyes squinted in thought. Her mouth ran dry wondering just what she had gotten herself into. Why was he still there? She didn’t feel right asking him to leave after he’d brought Joey home from school. Making Richard lunch was the least she could do after he’d bought all the groceries.

Kate wondered what had motivated Richard Ritter to spend his entire morning babysitting her. It wasn’t as if he had an obligation to her. So, what if his company did secure the restaurant? It wasn’t as if they could keep criminals from committing their crimes. He wasn’t responsible. So why did he act as if he were?

Joey settled in the living room, and she clicked on the TV hoping to distract her from the man in her home. Unfortunately, Richard proved impossible to ignore. His obsessive pacing kept Kate’s attention the entire time he talked on the phone.

“Mom.”

Kate waved off her son, trying to hear what Richard was saying in the heated debate with whomever was on the other end.

“Mom...” Joey tapped her knee.

“What?” Kate asked, not taking her eyes off the

hallway where Richard stood.

“MOM!”

“What?” She snapped her head at her son.

“Isn’t that where you work?” Joey pointed to the old tube-style set.

Kate’s jaw dropped, the hair on the back of her neck started to stand long before she turned to look at the TV. Sure enough, there it was... The Eatery, in all its glory, with a bleached blonde reporter standing outside telling all she thought she knew.

“...according to an eyewitness, the restaurant was held up last night at gun point. One of the waitresses, suffered a single gunshot wound to the upper torso. The victim was transferred to a local area hospital...”

“Oh my God!” Kate struggled for breath.

Joey sent her a suspicious glance before staring back at the TV.

Without warning, Richard came up behind them and turned off the set. “Time to go.”

Having your life plastered all over the news had a way of knocking you back. Kate was no different.

“Mom, isn’t that where you work?” Joey moved closer to her.

“Hey, Joey? Do you like to swim?” Richard grabbed his jacket.

“Do I?” Joey jumped to his feet. His lips pulled into a tight grin.

“Tell ya what, I know a great place we can go and swim in a huge heated pool. What do ya say?”

“I’ll get my swim shorts.”

Joey headed off to his room.

“Kate?” Richard’s soft voice drifted into the fog of her brain.

“I can’t believe it,” she gasped. “I’m on the news.” Dumbfounded, she turned her head to the man standing over her.

“Kate, we need to get out of here. That was Max on the phone and the reporters are on their way.”

“So...”

“So, we need to go.” Richard reached down and brought her to her feet.

“Why?”

“Listen, the reporters might think they are doing their job. But what they’re really doing is leading the men who robbed you last night to your front door.” Richard lowered his voice. “They are leading the men who would rather have you dead than able to testify against them right to you.”

Dread washed over her in a steady stream of prickly ice. It wasn’t over. Her nightmare from last night wasn’t over. Her body trembled. The hot, little apartment suddenly felt ice cold.

“Pack a bag, Katie.”

His use of an old nickname brought her back to reality. “What?”

“Pack a bag,” his voice grew stern, almost cold and detached.

On autopilot, Kate stood and went to her room.

## Chapter Four

Richard maneuvered the car into the long driveway of Max's home after going through the security gates. Stalked by a plethora of camera holding media personalities, Richard inched the car to the front of the house deep in thought. Max's home would be the safest place for Kate and Joey until they found the men behind the robbery.

Until they found the werewolf that stalked Kate.

Joey jumped out of the car the minute it came to a stop. "Wow, is this a hotel?"

Richard pulled the suitcase from the trunk with a grin. "No, it's just a house," A house which stood a mere two stories with about seven thousand square feet of space. Every bedroom sported its own bath. Parties for their extended family of over fifty people gathered regularly, especially when their collective werewolf needs arose.

"Wow."

The kid had a one-word vocabulary. Kate was a little less impressed. "Why did you bring us here?"

"Max's home is safer than Fort Knox. He uses all the new technology from our business here first." What he really wanted to say was that Max built a fortress to keep unwelcome werewolves away. If any approached the perimeter of the property, alarms would blaze. But he didn't think that would go over too well with Kate.

He placed his hand on her shoulder and led her to the door. Joey bounded up the stairs.

The front door opened before he had a chance to knock.

"There you are," Janet said after opening the

door. She'd changed from her hospital scrubs to a bright yellow and white maternity sun dress and sandals. "I was starting to worry."

"Traffic," Richard explained, ushering them inside.

"This must be Joey." Janet ruffled Joey's hair.

He smiled and put his hand out, placing his palm on Janet's protruding stomach. "Are you going to have a baby?"

"Joey!" Kate growled at him while swishing his hand away.

"It's okay." Janet laughed. She caught his hand and put it back. "If I told you I swallowed a watermelon, would you believe me?"

"Duh, I'm not that dumb." Joey rolled his eyes in a gesture Richard had seen several times since he had met the child.

"Well, Joey, sometimes I feel like I swallowed a watermelon."

"I'll bet!"

His words made everyone laugh, even Kate who hadn't said two words on the entire drive over.

Richard set the bag down and helped her remove her sweater. Kate glanced around the huge living room; she did her best not to ogle. It must have been difficult not to, he thought. Max's home rivaled any Beverly Hills mansion. It sat atop the Hollywood Hills on just over five acres. Its seclusion was what made it the perfect place to hide. The perfect safe house.

"James?" Janet called out to their butler.

James came into the room, greeted him, and nodded to Kate and Joey.

"Come meet our house guests. This is Kate Davis and her son, Joey."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss." The butler's British accent boomed. "And you, young man." He winked at Joey who attempted to wink back but squinted his eyes instead.

"Will you take Kate and Joey's bags to the guest rooms?"

"Of course, Miss."

Richard watched Kate's eyes widen and follow the man up the stairs. "You have a butler?" she questioned in little more than a whisper.

"Crazy, isn't it?" Janet shook her head. "James is more like family. Wouldn't you say, Richard?"

"Yeah, James worked for my father before he came here with Max."

"Come along out back, Max was just finishing up our lunch. Are you hungry?"

"We just ate," Richard and Kate said in unison.

"I could eat," Joey announced.

"A kid after my own heart." Janet put her hand out to him, and Joey slipped his in. They walked away chatting about the way they liked their hamburgers cooked.

Richard stopped Kate before she could follow. His dark eyes searched hers.

"How are you holding up?"

Richard appeared to be watching her like an uncertain child on their first day at school. "My life is spinning out of control." Her words expressed her frustration. "I don't know you, I don't know your family, yet here I am... At your mercy."

"If there was another way..."

"Is there?"

He shook his head. "None that I can see. You and Joey will be safe here."

"For how long, Richard?" Kate swallowed the knot in her throat. She didn't want to cry again. She was tired of crying yet her eyes burned all the same.

He moved closer, caught her chin, and forced her eyes to his. "As long as it takes."

"I don't want to impose."

"You're not an imposition," he assured her.

She could see the sincerity of his emotion. His caring eyes made her believe him. She didn't



understand his motives. Why did he care what happened to them?

Richard stroked the pad of his thumb over her cheek, his lips parted as if he wanted to say something. He didn't. Instead, his head dipped lower, his eyes questioned.

Oh, God. He's going to kiss me, she thought. Part of her wanted to back away, a very small part of her. The bigger part, however, wanted nothing more than to feel his lips on hers. Butterflies warmed her belly. Anticipation rushed through her veins. How long had it been since a man had kissed her?

Forever.

She moved toward him only a fraction, but it was all the invitation he needed.

Richard's lips proved warm and inviting, just like him. His arms circled her back, pulling her close. She trembled and opened her mouth to his questing tongue. He turned his head and deepened their kiss.

Kate ran her free hand up his chest, fingers spread. His heart beat as rapid as hers did, faster maybe.

Her worries forgotten, Kate leaned into him and gave herself up to his touch.

His hand stroked her side, his mild, sweet kiss turned into something more desperate, more passionate. Had she ever been kissed like this before? With such passion? A shiver of desire danced over her limbs.

Rising voices from the other room broke them apart. Kate sprang back, not wanting to explain to her son why she was in the arms of a virtual stranger. Hell, she didn't know the answer to the question herself.

Kate glanced toward the sound, then back to him. A half smile covered his lips. Heat rushed to her cheeks in what she knew was a full-blown blush.

She felt sixteen all over again.

"Should I apologize?" he asked.

"Are you sorry?"

"No, I'm not."

His confident smirk along with his honest words excited her with his admission. "Neither am I."

He stepped in, took her hand, and led her to the other room.

\*\*\*\*

The Ritters acted as though they had known her and her son for years.

Joey wasted no time jumping into the huge swimming pool. The waterslide kept him entertained for hours while the adults talked. Janet mixed Margaritas, but drank Iced Tea.

"How much longer?" Kate asked Janet, nodding toward her overgrown stomach.

"A few more weeks. If I can last that long."

Kate laughed. "The last month is the hardest. It seems it's never going to end."

"This baby is coming before next month one way or another."

"What do you mean?"

Janet took a sip of her tea before continuing. "If nature doesn't call, my doctor is going to induce labor."

"Why, is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. We want to make sure Max is here for the birth."

Kate glanced over at Janet's husband, deep in conversation with Richard by the grill. "Does he have a business trip planned?"

Janet's head shot up and paused while staring at her. Kate wondered if she'd speak. "Kind of," she said finally. Kate's brows pitched in. Which was it? Why did Janet suddenly seem nervous?

"Would you like another?" Janet started to get up and grabbed her glass.

"You don't have to wait on me. You're the one

who's pregnant."

"And you're recovering from a gunshot wound," Janet said.

"Good point." Kate motioned toward the men.

Janet cleared her throat and raised her glass. Kate followed suit.

Max and Richard exchanged smirks, then approached them to carry out their request.

After they walked away, the women burst out in laughter.

"So what's with you and Richard?"

Kate took a sip of liquid courage wondering if she had an answer to the question. The reality is she didn't. "Your brother-in-law is a very kind man."

"*Kind?*" Janet wasn't convinced. "The looks he keeps sending you are anything but pure."

Heat rose to her cheeks. She noticed his eyes travel over her frame once or twice since they'd arrived. Janet was right, his mouth curved in a way that spelled out his desire. The craving he sparked with their kiss had her body burning for something she hadn't had in a very, very long time. Sex and male companionship simply wasn't something she had sought once Joey came into the picture.

As if he knew they talked about him, Richard turned and narrowed his eyes at them.

Kate immediately turned her attention to her son in the pool. He was having a fabulous time diving after water torpedoes in the shallow end. When she turned back, Richard still watched. She felt her cheeks flame again. This was starting to get embarrassing.

"See what I mean?" Janet whispered over her glass.

"I admit, there is an attraction."

"Ya think?"

Thankful the men were too far away to hear their conversation, and even more delighted to have a woman to talk to, Kate turned her head in secrecy.

"Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had sex?"

"Considering I just met you, no."

"Forever. As in Joey's conception."

"Oh, really?" Janet's sarcasm quickly replaced with certain horror. The expression made Kate smile.

"Yeah, really, Joey's dad could charm the pants off a seventeen-year-old virgin," she paused. "Which is exactly what he did with me. I was young, stupid, and naive. Once he knew I'd become pregnant, he took off like a roach running from light."

The memory no longer left the void it once did. Even the anger diminished after time. Kate was almost thankful, at times, she had Joey all to herself. Christopher would have been a horrible father, had he stuck around. He was selfish and flighty, as evidenced by his hasty retreat. No. Kate had learned long ago that she was better off without him.

"Are you telling me there has been no one else?"

"Yep, that's what I'm saying."

"Wow, how do you do it?"

"With a little help from the energizer bunny," she joked. The words left her mouth so swiftly she almost choked, which was exactly what Janet did.

She laughed so hard small droplets of tea splattered on her sundress. Before Kate knew it, they had caught the attention of the men. Even Joey stopped playing long enough to glance over at them. Janet's laugh was so infectious Kate felt her insides start to buckle. Soon their laughter took on its own life. Misty-eyed, neither of them could stop.

Kate couldn't remember laughing so hard. It felt good.

Max walked over and sat beside his wife. "What's so funny?"

Neither of them spoke. Kate widened her eyes in a silent, *don't you dare say a word*, warning. Not

that she needed to.

“Nothing,” Janet managed.

Richard’s eyes shifted from each of them before settling on his brother. “Something tells me it’s a need to know basis.”

“And you don’t need to know,” Janet pointed out.

Richard didn’t press, thank God. Instead, he took a seat in the chaise lounge beside Kate and stretched out.

He had changed into a casual pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Apparently, he spent a lot of time at his brother’s home. Enough to have his own room.

Kate’s cell phone went off in her purse. The caller ID told her, her boss was on the line. “Excuse me,” she told them before walking away.

Richard let his eyes linger on her backside. His lips curved.

“Stop leering, her son’s right over there.” Janet hit his arm to gain his attention.

Max laughed.

“A guy can look.”

“Seriously,” Max lowered his voice. “What have you decided?”

Richard knew he referred to the changing. *What the hell am I thinking?* All these years he had avoided the family curse, although none of them considered it an affliction. To them it was a duty. A way to right the wrong of those werewolves bent on destruction and violence.

Richard glanced at Joey diving under water with a set of plastic goggles on the tip of his nose. What would the boy do without his mother?

Kate was pacing by the back door deep in conversation with her boss, concern etched in her face. An overwhelming desire to protect surged. He had made the decision the minute his lips had touched hers. Something inside of him sparked and sizzled. It wasn’t just chemistry either.

Richard never considered himself possessive. Kate was changing that.

His past relationships had all been mutually casual. Kate was different. She wouldn't tolerate casual. Which, for some reason, was fine with him.

Richard turned to his brother, leveled his eyes to his stare, and said, "You better not leave a scar when you bite me."

## Chapter Five

Richard peered down at his future. A long nose, pointed ears, four legs, a flapping tail and a silver-grey coat. Of course, there was no way of knowing how he would look once the change took place next month. His coat may be a sleek black or chestnut in color. Or silver like his brother's. There just wasn't any guarantee. Much like the gene pool, you couldn't choose the color of your coat any more than you could the color of your eyes at birth.

Trepidation engulfed him. He knew deep down this night would come. With the setting of the sun, the reality hit him hard.

In the span of less than twenty-four hours of meeting Kate, he would change his life forever. He would let Max sink his sharp teeth into his flesh, allow the saliva to enter his bloodstream, and forever be like his brother.

Once he let Max take a bite there was no turning back. No antiseptic, antibiotic, or even amputation would change what would take place.

He knew he was stalling. Janet had wished her husband well before "sending him off to work." Kate tucked Joey into bed, settling in for the night, as well.

A howl off in the distance caught Max's attention. The hair on his back prickled in alarm. Richard knew it was the call of his kind. Good or bad, it didn't matter. The howl remained the same.

The men who wanted Kate could very well be searching for a way to enter the perimeter to get at her. Their fortress would prove impenetrable. Richard's hand instinctively went to the sidearm he

carried. He'd loaded it with silver bullets, the only thing known to slow down and possibly kill a werewolf.

Next month, he wouldn't need the gun.

A second howl set his features firm. There was no way in hell he would let those bastards get at Kate or her son.

Determined, Richard knelt down next to his brother and stuck out his arm. "Do it."

Max cocked his head to the side, his eyes searching.

"Do it!" Richard met him stare for stare.

When Max's teeth rounded over his skin, barely touching, Richard closed his eyes and waited. With a final sigh, Max bit down, causing Richard to stiffen with the assault. He didn't flinch. Didn't cry out. Nerves quickly diminished with a sense of calm, like that of a homecoming seeping into his system.

Max let his grip go almost as quickly as he'd set in.

Blood trickled in the puncture wounds inflicted. It stung, but not as bad as Richard had imagined.

Another howl cut the night. Max backed away with his ears pinned toward the sound. He sniffed the air. Without provocation, he loped off in the direction he'd scented trouble.

Always on alert when Max turned beast, Richard stood by on the ready, gun in hand.

Not much later, Max returned and the howling from beyond the property diminished.

Richard jumped in one of the trucks while Max took the passenger seat. Together they headed out in search of the man who shot Kate, and the beast he served.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Sweat poured off her brow in the hallway to her apartment. Dreams and hope suffocated in the confining walls of the building. She walked with caution toward the door to her home.*



*The door lay open. Panic gripped her chest.*

*She dropped her bag of groceries. Joey's name erupted from her lips. Instead of a loud yell, her voice was hardly above a whisper. She cleared her throat and tried again. This time no sound emerged at all.*

*Kate ran through the door, certain to find something amiss. Certain Joey was in harm's way.*

*She stopped at the door. In the middle of the room, Joey sat next to an enormous dog with piercing blue eyes. Joey noticed her. As did the dog, which snarled while the hair on its back stood on end.*

*"Back away," she tried to scream. But the warning went unheard. Joey stroked the fur of the animal and smiled.*

*"It's okay, Mommy. He won't hurt me." Joey leaned down next to the animal's huge teeth.*

*Viciously, the animal turned and sunk his teeth into her son's neck.*

*Kate screamed.*

\*\*\*\*

Richard heard her from his room. He bounded to his feet and was at her side in seconds.

Her body drenched with sweat. Her screams grew frantic. Thankfully, she was asleep and not in danger. It was only a nightmare.

"Kate," he shook her shoulders in an effort to wake her.

"Joey," she cried.

"He's okay. Wake up, Katie."

By now, Joey stood at the door rubbing sleepy eyes. "What's the matter?"

Richard glanced at the boy then turned back to Kate and shook her again. "Katie, wake up."

Her panicked eyes opened wide. Their smoldering depth spooked him. "It's okay, Joey is right here."

"I'm here, Mommy." Joey moved toward the bed and accepted her desperate hug.

"Oh, Joey, thank God you're okay."

"Did you have a bad dream?"

Nervous, fearful laughter tumbled out of her lips. "The worse."

"Do you want me to sleep in here?"

"No, it's okay. Mommy's okay." Kate met Richard's eyes from over the top of Joey's ruffled hair. Something had scared her half out of her skin. "You should get back to sleep."

Joey yawned, tugged out of his mother's arms, and hobbled back out of the room.

"Come on, let's get you back to bed." Richard took him by the hand, led him to his room, and tucked him in.

"Is my mommy okay?"

Richard smiled at the concerned expression on the child's face. "Yeah, she's fine. Just a bad dream."

"I'd have bad dreams too if I was hurt like her."

Joey's eyes started to close before Richard snuck out of the room.

Richard returned to Kate's side and sat on the edge of her bed. Some color had returned to her face, but her breath was still rushed.

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"Don't be." He took her hand in his. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know what's gotten into me. I never have nightmares. Now I've had two in a row, one yesterday when you picked up Joey and now this."

"Was it the same dream?" Richard asked.

"No. The first one I was being chased, by what I don't know. But I knew if I stopped it would kill me." She took a deep breath and lifted her chin. "This one was different."

"How?" She was probably experiencing some type of posttraumatic stress from her ordeal. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if maybe one of those scratches were bites. Or that her dreams would clue her into the changes that would happen if she had been turned.

"It was just a stupid dream, it's nothing."

"Sometimes talking about them helps." He didn't know if that was true, but it sounded good.

Kate shrugged her shoulders. "Joey was in our apartment. There was a dog by him..." she broke off. Richard felt her pulse quicken as her hand squeezed over his. "The dog ripped into his throat. Then I woke up."

Richard jaw clenched. "Did the dog in your dream resemble the one from the restaurant?"

"Not really." A pensive smile met him. "I guess it's normal to have a few nightmares after being shot. Don't you think?"

"I'm sure it is." But are they memories? Or Premonitions?

"You should get back to sleep," he said. He rose to leave but her grip tightened.

"Richard, umm..." She caught her lower lip in her teeth. "Will you stay here until I fall asleep? I know it's childish but..."

"Stop, you don't need to explain." In fact, he couldn't think of a better place to be than by her side.

He dimmed the light and lay beside her. To his delight, she curled up next to him. Her cheek rested on his chest. If she noticed that he still wore the clothes he had left the house in hours before, she didn't say.

She, on the other hand, wore a thin cotton nightshirt. On its front, a teddy bear wore a hat, fuzzy slippers, and stood holding a cup of coffee that said 'I don't do mornings.'

Funny, most of the women in his life wouldn't be caught dead wearing something like that to bed. Their usual attire purchased out of a fancy lingerie magazine or store. Either that or they wore nothing at all.

Some of the tension left her body. Her tremors diminished and her breathing evened out. He

detected the fresh smell of strawberries and cream from the shampoo she'd used in her hair. He leaned back and stroked the silky expanse of her tresses. Her sigh sounded more like a purr.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"Below Malibu. I have a home on the beach."

"Why didn't you take us there?"

"I told you. This house is set up with a security system. Mine is less secluded."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No. I also thought you'd like the safety of other people around."

"Hmm..."

Her lids fluttered shut, her breath evened to deep silent waves.

"Richard?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"I'd like to see your home."

And for reasons which eluded him, he could hardly wait to show it to her.

\*\*\*\*

She awoke to find herself alone. Sunlight poured through the double-paned windows brightening the room. Kate gave her arm a tentative move, testing it to see how much pain it would give her.

Surprisingly, the throbbing had diminished to a dull ache. She made her way to the private bathroom and clicked on the light. Beautiful granite counter tops adorned the furniture style vanity. Antique bronze fixtures set the tone of the room. She ran her hand along the sink, appreciating the understated elegance. The Ritter home could easily feel stuffy if only for its sheer size. Whoever decorated it took away the museum feel by the simple touches that were always at arms reach.

Kate regarded her reflection in the mirror and groaned. Her hair flew wild in every direction, and the dark circles under her eyes would take two layers of liquid foundation to hide. "What must he

think?" Had she looked this bad last night when she practically begged Richard to stay by her side to ward off the boogieman that might have hid under her bed? She hoped not. Yet if she had, that explained why he wasn't at her side when she woke up.

Turning away from the mirror, Kate opened the shower door and turned on the water.

A nice shower, a hot cup of coffee, and she'd be as good as new. She reached over to pull a towel from the rack. Her arm screamed in protest. "Okay, maybe not new. Just slightly used."

\*\*\*\*\*

Joey was in the kitchen playing cards with James when she made her way down stairs.

"Got any eights?"

James narrowed his eyes, tugged a card from his hand, and tossed it on the counter. "Are you sure you can't see my hand?" he asked.

Joey giggled. "No."

"Well, if you say so." It was clear to Kate that Joey and James had already played many hands of *Go Fish*. And Joey was winning.

"I hope you don't have any money on that game, James. He'll rob you blind."

Her son eyed his cards and smiled. "James said it's called gambling when you play with pennies. And I'm not twenty-one yet."

"That's true." Kate went to her son, dropped a kiss on his head. "Good morning, sport. How did you sleep?"

"Okay, except for the dog that kept howling."

The mention of a dog drew the hair on the back of her neck to a stand. "What dog?"

"The one from last night, didn't you see it?"

Her mouth went dry. Her nightmare resurfaced in her mind. "No, did you?"

"Uh, huh. Do you have any sixes?" He continued playing cards.

James glanced up then told Joey to "Go Fish."

"Would you like some coffee, Miss Davis?" he offered.

"I'll get it." Kate walked around the two of them, and tried her best to keep her voice even, which wasn't easy. "Joey, where did you see the dog?"

"I dunno. It's your turn."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I heard it outside. Then I thought I saw it in the hall."

"Any twos?"

Kate filled a cup with the aromatic brew and leaned against the counter. "James, do the Ritters own a dog? I don't remember seeing one yesterday."

"Perhaps young Joey heard coyotes. We often get them here in the hills."

"Go Fish!"

"So there wasn't a dog in the house last night?" she asked.

"Do you have a Jack?"

James laid his last card on the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm sure you can see my cards."

"Now honest, I can't see 'em."

Kate shook her head. Joey must have been dreaming. Though it seemed strange they shared the same thoughts. She shivered. Maybe he had seen more of the news broadcast than she thought.

"Where is everyone?" she asked James.

"Mrs. Ritter is still in bed. Richard and Max left an hour ago for work."

"I thought Max worked last night."

"He came in earlier than expected."

"Oh." Kate glanced at her watch then up to her son.

"Are you ready to go?"

James stood up in alarm while Joey jumped off his chair.

"Where are you going, Miss?"

"I have to get Joey to school." Kate put her empty cup down and swung her purse over her good arm.

"Are you sure that's wise, Miss?" His eyes shifted from her injured arm to Joey. "Considering everything?"

*Considering what?* The media certainly wouldn't be staked out in front of her son's school. "We'll be fine."

Kate put a hand behind Joey's back and guided him through the living room. "Thanks for watching over him this morning."

"You're welcome." James walked behind them toward the front door. "I would feel better about you leaving if you spoke with Mr. Ritter first."

"Joey has to go to school."

"Yes, but..."

"We'll be back. I have a few errands to run, I'll pick him up, and we'll come straight here."

"But Mr. Ritter wanted you to stay here."

She pivoted, smiled, and patted the butler's shoulder. "Mr. Ritter must have forgotten today is Friday."

"What does Friday have to do with it?"

"It's a school day, James. Kids go to school on Fridays." With that, she opened the door and walked Joey to the car.

\*\*\*\*

Joey talked obsessively all the way to school. The Ritters were *really cool*, Richard most of all. Their house was *awesome*, and the pool was better than the one at the YMCA.

His rattling became a source of entertainment. His animated recall of their night in the Ritter home made Kate realize how much he missed not having an extended family in his life. Some things can't be helped, she reminded herself.

With no parking space in sight, Kate parked along the side street in the dirt. Joey lugged his

backpack over his arm and followed her toward the entrance of the school.

"We're going to sleep there again tonight, right?"

"I think so." Kate pivoted, certain someone called her name. A parent she didn't recognize walked a few feet away, but diverted her eyes when Kate searched hers. Not seeing anyone she knew, she continued walking.

"I hope so," Joey said.

Her hands chilled, the hair on her nape stood on end. A few more feet, and Kate stopped moving. The heavy weight of someone's stare kept her from taking another step. Wary, she turned around in a full circle.

Someone *was* watching her.

Parents passed her by, moving around her as if she were a big rock in a small stream.

Her spine stiffened.

"Come on, mom." Joey tugged her arm.

"Wait a minute." *I'm being paranoid.*

"I'm going to be late."

Kate started forward again. When her phone rang in her purse, she jumped. She retrieved her phone and glanced at the digital display. She didn't recognize the number.

She pressed talk and slowly brought the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

Static and wind brushed against her ear with the hum of the line.

Nothing.

"Hello?" she asked again, trying to keep her panic at bay.

The school bell buzzed, the sound echoed in her phone as if in stereo. Whoever the caller was, they were somewhere on campus.

Panic gripped her throat, threatening to choke it off. She closed the phone and threw it in her purse. "Come on." She pulled Joey away from the school, back toward her car.



“What are we doing?” Joey’s little legs ran to keep up with her, his eyes suddenly large and flooded with fear and confusion.

“We need to go.”

“What about school?”

The kids ran in the opposite direction, all of them scrambling to make it inside before the doors shut.

Kate ran to her car with Joey’s hand secured in hers.

“What’s the matter, Mommy?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Traffic backed up at the intersection before Joey’s school some thirty cars long. Richard punched in Kate’s number. Her voice mail picked up again.

Richard hit the steering wheel in frustration.

“We’re almost there,” Max said from the passenger seat.

They left early that morning attempting to trace the scent of the wolf that prowled the night before. It never occurred to him Kate would take Joey to school. Then again, she had no idea the danger that lurked.

Max lowered the window. The warmth of summer already gripped the southland.

Richard turned his face toward the heat. “Holy shit, what is that?”

“You smell it too?” Max asked.

“Yes, I smell it.” Although he had no idea what ‘it’ was. The combination of stagnant waters and sweat deluged his senses.

“That was fast.”

“What is it?”

“Fear.”

Richard cursed the slow moving cars. “How the hell do you smell fear?”

“You’re going to smell everything from here on out.”

“I always thought smelling fear was a myth.”

"It's not."

Richard leaned out the window trying to catch a glimpse of Kate and Joey. "Dammit. Where is she?"

"Use your nose, Richard. It is probably her fear you smell, otherwise, it wouldn't have hit you so fast."

He wanted to question his brother further on the subject, but traffic let up, giving them the room to maneuver the car and speed toward the school.

Air left his lungs in a rush when he noticed Kate standing by her car fumbling in her purse. The way her head kept popping up and her eyes searched the road, he knew she was startled.

After darting around the two last cars in front of him, Richard came alongside her, slammed on his brakes, and jumped out of the car.

She swung her purse in his direction, taken back by his approach. Her weapon of choice hit him square in the jaw.

"Mom!" Joey cried by her side.

"Oh, no." Relief flooded her face when she saw him. "I'm sorry."

Her hand trembled so fiercely she could hardly hold the purse.

"What are you doing here?" His relief at finding her safe quickly changed to anger.

"Taking Joey to school."

"It looks like you're trying to leave."

Kate glanced behind her then back at him. "I think someone is watching us."

The smell of fear started to subside, replaced by something else. He heard a branch snap in the vacant lot across from the school. His eyes darted to Max who had heard it, too.

"What?" Kate asked, sensing his alarm.

Max stepped out of the car with a pair of binoculars in his hand.

"Do we go after him?" Richard asked.

Max shook his head. "He's already gone."

“Who’s already gone? Richard...” she touched his arm. “What’s going on?”

Her alarm started to peak again. The smell returned.

“Get in the car.”

“What about school?” Joey asked.

Richard casually ruffled the boy’s hair. “What do you say you take a few days off?”

“Can I go swimming again?”

“Of course.”

Kate’s hand squeezed his arm. Her eyes questioned.

Leaning in close to her ear he said, “I’ll explain more in private.”

He went around her car and opened the door. She handed him her keys.

“Meet you back at the house,” he called back to his brother.

## Chapter Six

“Here.” Richard thrust the newspaper into her hands once Joey took to the backyard pool with Max and Janet.

“What is this?”

“Just read it.”

They sat in Max’s study where bookshelves lined one entire wall from floor to ceiling. A rolling ladder slid along its length to reach the books at the top.

Kate sat on the leather couch and opened the LA Times. “What am I searching for?”

“Page three, half way down.”

The article was hard to miss. In bold print, the title screamed, “The Wolf Strikes Again.” Kate glanced at Richard then continued to read:

A series of armed robberies with follow up abductions are on the rise.

The police have linked yet another missing person with an armed robbery. Officer Devon Moore stated in a recent interview that several armed robberies involving a hooded suspect brandishing a weapon is holding up unsuspecting restaurants and convenience stores in the middle of the night. Eyewitnesses state, the suspect is accompanied by a wolf.

Last month’s “Wolf at

Wallys" headline reported the stock staff of the store were held up and locked in a back office is the most recent connection with a missing person report.

Diane Michaels, mother of two, didn't come home from work Friday morning. The family and police suspect foul play.

Another such crime was committed early Thursday morning at a local restaurant. The suspect got away with under a hundred dollars, but in the process of his crime sent a waitress to the local hospital with a single gun shot wound. The victim, Kate Davis, was subsequently treated and released.

Officer Moore states his department has been in contact with a local security agency who have Miss Davis and her son under 24-hour surveillance.

Kate's stomach churned while she put the paper down. Richard watched her every move.

"Ritter Security... that would be you?"

He pushed off the desk and sat down next to her. "Moore called me late last night."

"Officer Moore from the article."

"Yeah. He suggested we keep you and Joey off the streets until we find the suspects."

"What do you mean, *we*? You're not a cop."

His chest rose with a deep breath. "Cops are sometimes limited by the law."

She listened to his slow and well thought out explanation. He hid something. Was he some type of vigilante, bent on revenge? Fear of the unknown kept her from asking what he meant. She moistened her lips, then spoke, "You're not limited by the law?"

He turned his eyes down, keeping her from seeing what lay below their murky depths. "A civilian, even a security guard, has the right to protect their loved ones from foul play."

The term, loved ones, didn't go un-noticed. Her heart skipped, even though her mind told her not to jump to conclusions.

"How is it you think you can keep us safe if the cops can't?" She fished for answers. From the expression on his face, he knew it.

Without speaking, Richard stood and moved behind Max's desk. He opened the right side drawer where a series of buttons sat atop a large black box. He flipped a switch and the bookcase started to move.

Kate watched in awe as the giant wall of bookshelves turned in small sections. With the transformation complete, a massive amount of monitors lined the room. Richard continued pressing buttons and one by one, the monitors flickered on.

Kate's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes widened seeing the entire Ritter property, including every room in the house, come into view. The pool where Joey splashed around sparkled in full color. Richard flipped a switch and sound came over the speakers. "...let's see you do a handstand, Joey." The voice belonged to Janet. And Kate heard it with an eerie clarity.

"Wow!" Was all she could say. *He wasn't kidding when he said his brother's home was secure.*

Richard moved from around the desk. He stood in front of her blocking her view of the wall. "I want you and Joey safe."

Kate had always prided herself with her self-

preservation gene. No one carried a bigger interest in her and Joey's safety than she did. Why did he? What was in it for Richard? After only two days and one kiss, why did she and her son matter to him?

"I could think of worse places to have to stay put," she finally said.

His shoulders relaxed. He reached out and pulled her to her feet.

Standing this close to him put her emotions and hormones on overdrive. She hated to admit it, but she could smell his masculine scent with a hint of spice and that drove her crazy.

His hand brushed aside a lock of her hair. Her breath caught with his touch. Without thinking, she leaned into his hand before he had a chance to pull it away. She starved for male attention. No, she thought, for his attention.

He left his hand on her cheek and leaned close.

His lips caught hers in a kiss so tender it brought tears to her eyes.

Instead of letting them fall, she closed her eyes and wound her good arm around his waist bringing him closer. His fingers fanned out in her hair and forced her head back. He angled his head and plunged his tongue into her hungry mouth.

Her head swam in a wave of dizziness. Good lord! Had she ever felt so dazzled by a kiss?

His hands skimmed down her neck and shoulders. His thumbs traced the outline of her breasts. Nipples pebbled instantly with his brief contact, and a moan escaped her lips.

Wet heat pooled between her legs. When he moved closer, his hardened body pressed against hers. His arousal lay nestled against her stomach. His heat engulfed her senses.

She broke away from his kiss only to have him move his lips to her neck. Small circular movements of his tongue had her fists clenching. Her body throbbing.

“Ohhh...” His mouth dipped above her breast, her hand reached for the buttons of his shirt.

He managed to lower her blouse and capture her nipple in his mouth. “Oh, Richard,” she moaned. Heat shot to her core and had his hand been anywhere near her center, she would have climaxed then and there.

There was no denying it. She wanted Richard in the most primal of ways. Naked, hard, and ready.

“I want you,” she said barely above a whisper.

He stiffened with her confession and moved his lips back to hers. After an earth shattering kiss he drew back until she opened her eyes.

“Let me come to you tonight.”

Her breath came in small pants. Joey’s giggle came through the PA of the security system telling them both that now wasn’t the time.

If she said yes, she knew there was no turning back. If she said no, she’d be lying to herself... And him.

“I’ll go to bed early.”

He dropped his forehead to hers, briefly brushed his lips past hers, and backed away.

\*\*\*\*

It proved one of the longest and most frustrating days of his life. Once Kate and Joey were safe and sound, Richard and Max left for the hunt.

Along the way, Max explained the subtle differences in scents. Kate’s car had been clearly marked by the wolf who now stalked her, which made her an easy target. But the scent could very well lead them to their enemy.

Max had mapped out all locations they knew the predator had been. Every target they hit in their six-month crime spree along with places Max had picked up with his nose.

They went back to the school and managed to trace their prey to a pair of tire tracks. Unfortunately, those tracks left a dead end.



"Now what?" Richard settled his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose and regarded the busy freeway.

"I think it's time for a trip to the station."

"You think Moore will have additional information?"

"Possibly. We need to get our hands on any physical evidence they've gathered. Maybe we can find a fresh scent and a new trail to follow."

Moore met them in a private room with bags of evidence spread out before them.

Max brought one piece up to his nose after another. "Damn, Devon, how many hands have touched this shit?"

Devon, a long time friend and confidant of the Ritter family, shook his head, "Too many to count."

Richard followed Max's lead and sniffed each article trying to distinguish the different smells.

Richard caught Devon watching him out of the corner of his eye.

Devon crossed his arms over his chest and smiled. "When did you take the change?"

Richard noticed the satisfaction on Devon's face.

"Last night."

"It's about time. We need more of your kind out there."

Max laughed, "Anytime you want to join the fold, Devon just let me know."

Devon unfolded his arms and moved from his chair. "Are you kidding? My wife would divorce me. We have too many pets as it is."

"And you're barely house trained as a human."

"Ha, ha!"

Irritated with the lack of ability to pick up anything, Richard tossed an apron back in the bag. "This is getting us nowhere."

"I agree." Max peeled off his latex gloves. Richard did the same.

Devon sighed and placed all the items back in

the bags. Casting a speculative glance at the two men, he spoke. "There is something I've been thinking about to entice our suspects."

Richard didn't like the sound of that.

"Kate Davis could be our bait..."

"Absolutely not!" Richard crossed to the garbage can, flung his gloves inside of it, and went to the door.

"Hey, wait...hear me out."

"It isn't going to happen. Kate and her son will not be put in any danger."

"No one said anything about putting them in danger," Devon explained.

"Yeah, the word you used was *bait*. I know where you're going with this and the answer is no!" Richard opened the door to the room and stormed out.

Max caught up with him in the parking garage. "Hey, what was that all about?"

Every protective bone in Richard's body was on stand by. "Don't you start," he warned his brother.

Max put his arms up in mock defeat. "I'm not the one who suggested it."

"Good." Richard glanced at his watch. "We should get back."

Lowering his arms, Max stood beside the car and stared at him. "Careful, little brother, you're starting to act like a man falling in love."

Richard's jaw twitched and his pulse began to return to normal. "She has no one watching out for her."

Max sent him a knowing grin, put his sunglasses on, and opened the door. "She does now."

Love? Who said anything about love? Protector, infatuated, even lust would be words to describe his feelings. But love?

He wanted her safe. That was all there was to it. Okay, maybe that wasn't all there was to it. Her image flashed in his mind. He also wanted her

naked and writhing with pleasure beneath him.

He shifted in his seat and stared out the window. The sun started to set. Kate would have Joey in bed by the time they got back to Max's. She said she'd turn in early. How much time should he give her before he snuck up to her room?

Since when did he have to sneak around to be with a woman? He wasn't a pent up teenager. Yet he didn't want to announce his intentions to Joey.

"Be careful." The warning came from Max who hadn't said a word since they got in the car.

"About what?"

"Kate is vulnerable right now and you're in the process of some very serious changes." Max maneuvered the car to the off ramp of the freeway.

"What are you saying?"

"I've been there, Richard. If you thought puberty was a time for hormones, you've haven't seen anything yet. You know how dog's will hump any leg they can get to?"

"Yeah."

"Our senses hit overdrive when a woman starts emitting pheromones. The sex is great, don't get me wrong. Between the increase in strength and endurance, you'll go at it all night and still be charged for more."

*Not such a bad side effect.* "So what's the problem?"

"Janet let me in on a little secret last night."

Max's silence had him wondering. "Don't stop now."

"Apparently, Kate hasn't been with anyone since Joey's dad. You don't want to hurt her."

"You know this how?"

"Women talk, Richard. Janet and Kate are fast becoming friends and already they huddle together and whisper. Kind of unnerving to think they are talking about you, huh?"

"Yeah." It bothered him that Max knew more

about Kate's love life than he did. He reminded himself that Kate confided in Janet, which all women learned to do from the time they're in Junior High.

"Are you saying I'll lose control?"

Max glanced his way. "Somehow I don't think *you* will. But what worries me more is *why* hasn't Kate been with anyone else? Her emotions are tight right now, and from the scent the two of you keep sending off you'll be in the sack before the end of the week."

Sooner than that big bro, he mused. "So..."

"A woman who saves herself like that will pack a lot of emotions into a simple night of sex."

Richard hated when his brother was right. He knew sex with Kate would be more than a physical release. In fact, he counted on it.

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Responsible adult? Shit, who was she kidding? Kate felt more like a child, at the moment.

She sat across the room from Janet watching TV. Twice she'd opened her mouth to ask her new friend if she had any spare condoms, and twice she shut her mouth without uttering a syllable.

The men were due home any time, and Kate still hadn't worked up the nerve to ask Janet for the simple form of birth control.

She never bothered with the pill, and since there weren't any men in her life, a supply of condoms wasn't on the list of things to buy when she went to the drug store.

"Oh, geez," she moaned in disgust.

"What?" Janet turned away from the television.

"I ah..." *I need to suck it up.* "Janet, do you happen to have... I mean could I borrow. No, not that."

Janet flipped the switch and turned off the TV. "What's the matter? Is there something you need?"

"Yes." Her words came out in a rush. "Do you

have any condoms you don't plan on using anytime soon?" That was lame. Considering Janet was eight months pregnant. She certainly didn't need any condoms now.

"Oh..." Janet's eyes lit up, a small smile peeked through her surprise. "You and Richard?"

"No, me and James. Of course, me and Richard!"

"Wow, that was fast."

"Well, do you?" Kate knew her cheeks flamed red.

"Yeah." Janet managed to get up off the sofa. "Follow me."

"I'm sorry to ask, I just don't want to be irresponsible, and it isn't like I could make a trip to the drug store."

Janet waved her off. "You don't have to explain."

Once in her and Max's bedroom, Janet opened a drawer to a smorgasbord of condoms.

"Holy cow."

"I can't take the pill," she explained. "Pick whatever you want."

"I don't know where to start."

Laughing, Janet grabbed four at random and handed them to her. "How long did you sit there waiting to ask for these?"

"Since dinner."

They both laughed. "Don't stew like that again. I'm not shy."

"I didn't know what you would think. Richard and I haven't known each other that long."

"Please, Max and I were intimate right from the start. Besides, who am I to stand in judgment?"

Kate sighed and sat on the edge of Janet's bed. "Richard is your brother-in-law."

Janet sat beside her. "Richard is a great guy and whether he knows it or not, he's falling for you."

"You think?" She wanted to believe the words, but how could Janet know?

"Richard has done for you more than he has ever

done for anyone, including his family.”

Kate smiled and nodded. “He is a great guy.”

Lights from a car splashed onto the house from outside. Kate’s pulse jumped. “Oh, God.” They were home.

“Come on, girlfriend. He won’t bite.” Janet stopped herself and started to laugh. “Well, maybe a little.”

Warm laughter eased her anxiety. Both women left the bedroom and went to meet their men.

## Chapter Seven

Completely tuned in to her scent, Richard could practically taste her before they made it inside the house. Both women stood in the doorway hiding behind smirks. Kate's face was crimson, a sure sign she hid something.

Janet moved in and kissed her husband hello. But before she moved away she winked at him. *What the hell did that mean?*

They walked to the den. Max went behind the bar and poured drinks for both of them. "Want one?" he asked Kate.

"No thank you."

"Maybe you should." Janet nudged Kate's arm.

The women exchanged a quick look and both tried to hide their grins. *What are they up to?*

"Well, how did it go?"

"Dead ends. Lots of them." Max handed the drink to him while he told the women about their day. He left out the part about sniffing all over the city to find the criminals.

"What about Devon? Did he have any more leads?"

Max sat next to his wife and took her hand in his. "He's working on it."

"It's kind of nice having another woman around the house. I hope you don't mind keeping me company," Janet said with a grin.

Richard's heart went out to his sister-in-law. She knew how to make everyone feel at home. Kate's distress over being an uninvited guest wasn't something she took lightly.

"Where's Joey?"

"Bed. He played in the pool so long his skin wrinkled like an old man. It's going to be hard for him to go back to our little apartment after all of this is done."

The thought of her going back to that hole left a bad taste in his mouth.

"You've got yourself a great kid there, Kate."

The proud mom smiled despite the worry behind her eyes. "I can't complain."

"He even asked if he could have his school work sent over so he didn't miss anything. Can you believe that?" Janet told Richard.

"That won't last." Max lifted his brows.

Janet nudged an elbow into his ribs.

"Hey... what? It won't, wait until Junior High. She'll be yelling at him to finish his homework."

"I have a few years before I have to worry about that."

Kate turned her head away when Max nuzzled his wife's ear. Richard caught her gesture and suggested a walk outside.

Alone.

A symphony of crickets, frogs and an occasional owl drowned out the silence of the night. He captured Kate's hand, wove his fingers with hers, and walked behind the pool to the manicured gardens beyond.

"How is your arm today?"

"Much better than I thought it would be. It aches, but the sharp pain is all but gone, except when I attempt to use it."

"Is that like, 'Doctor, it hurts when I do this?'"

Kate closed her eyes and gave into a deep laugh. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

"Joey seems to be adjusting."

"What's to adjust to, a big house, great people and a swimming pool at his disposal? He thinks he's on vacation."

Her voice was full of gratitude with her



assessment of the situation.

"Don't forget the 'not having to go to school part.' What kid wouldn't like that?" Richard added.

"Joey doesn't have many friends there. I think if he did it would be harder for him." A flicker of grief brushed her eyes with her comment.

"Doesn't Joey make friends?" Richard thought he would.

"He makes them. I'm the one with the issues. Most of the kids at that school come from broken homes." She paused and glanced up. "Hypocritical of me, I know. The difference is Joey's father isn't around to make trouble like so many of the kids he knows. Many of the kids are left home alone. Those are the lucky ones. I let Joey visit one of his friends for a couple of hours once. The mom told me to take my time, go to the store run a few errands. Sounded good to me until when I went to pick him up."

"What happened?"

"Mom was blitzed and yelling at her ex on the phone. I could hear the entire conversation from the driveway. Joey practically ran to the car and made me promise to never leave him at anyone's house again."

"And have you?"

"No. Never."

No wonder there weren't any men in her life. "What about your family? Joey's grandparents?"

She shook her head. For a moment, he thought maybe they had died and regretted bringing up the subject.

"I was seventeen when I ended up pregnant with Joey. My parents were grief stricken when I announced I was pregnant. Within a week, they blamed each other for my reckless behavior. Dad ordered me to have an abortion while Mom suggested I 'go away' and give the child up for adoption."

They found a cushioned, bench swing and sat

under the stars while she continued.

"My father refused. It was abortion or out. There was no way Mr. Jackson Davis would allow his only daughter to parade around pregnant."

Richard clenched her hand that tightened in his with her memories. "Wait. Jack Davis of Davis Enterprises?"

"Yep," she said with a nod. "That would be him."

"Elizabeth Davis is your mother?"

"Ironic isn't it?"

He would say so. Elizabeth Davis headed up a large charity auction every year to help a home for wayward girls who found themselves pregnant and scared. Her social circle praised her efforts. It wasn't unheard of for the high profile couple to end up in the papers society pages.

"My parents have no problem helping others."

"But not you."

"I refused to give up Joey. The fighting in the house escalated until I left. I packed my bags, found a home in Arizona who took in teens, and went there under an assumed name. I hopped around for the first couple of years and ended up back in Southern California working as a waitress. My parents' friends don't visit the diners I've worked in. They never looked for me."

"How can you be so sure?" Richard stroked her fingers with his thumb and wondered how difficult those first few years must have been.

"My parents are rich, Richard. If they wanted to find me, they would have. The fact remains they were thankful I left. The black mark I would have made on their reputations wasn't something they wanted to face."

Kate leaned into him with her head on his shoulder and let her words soak in. She'd never told anyone the truth about her past. Getting the details out in the open gave her a sense of relief. Not that she tried to hide anything, but there was no one

whom she wanted to tell... Until now.

Richard snuggled closer, his arm circled behind her shoulders. He leaned down, and she could swear he sniffed her hair.

"I'm sorry to have dumped all that on you."

"I asked."

"Still, it isn't the most romantic conversation." She gazed into his eyes.

"Is it romance you want?" He licked his bottom lip and moved in closer.

"I'm not sure what I want. It's been so long since I've concerned myself with my needs."

"Perhaps," he said a breath away from her lips, "you should put aside Kate Davis, the single mom and let Kate Davis, the beautiful young woman come out."

The warmth of his breath caressed her skin.

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Let me see if I can help you."

His kiss was gentle. A caress of his lips over hers, that sent a spasm of delight to the pit of her stomach. His male body dominated hers by pulling her into his arms where she felt gloriously lost in his embrace.

Oh yes, this was nice. Kate Davis, the woman, wanted this.

Kate deepened the kiss. Roaming hands found a gap in his shirt, and she reached for his skin beneath. His skin grew hot under her touch.

Richard was doing his best to remove her top. Their simple caressing kiss took on a new life. She arched forward but found the angle uncomfortable. There simply wasn't enough of her body touching his.

With a dominance she didn't know she possessed, Kate moved to his lap, straddling his jean-clad thighs. He was already hard and pressed against the material in an effort to escape. Unable to stop herself, Kate ground her core against him. The

friction sent an unexpected shiver of pleasure up her spine.

“Shit,” he said in frustration. “We’ll never make it inside at this rate.”

She hid a grin and nuzzled his neck. His pulse beat in a wild tattoo, matching hers.

“Isn’t that a pool house?” Kate nodded toward the separate building.

Finally freeing her of her blouse, Richard took full control of her aroused breasts. A wicked smile crested his mouth before he dipped down to devour them.

Lightning bolted with his contact made her rock against him again. She wanted him, all of him.

“Richard?”

“Humm?” he succeeded in removing her bra, unabashed by her naked torso outside where anyone could see, he continued to explore.

“Pool house,” she whimpered, “Now.”

His head came up. “Good idea.”

He stood in one swift movement. His hands held her straddled against his erection.

Kate giggled and wrapped her legs around his waist and continued kissing his neck and ear.

It wasn’t locked, thank God. Richard kicked the door closed behind them and headed straight for the bedroom.

There, he set her on the bed, but didn’t let her move away. He stayed between her legs, and kissed her fully. Dueling tongues searched each other’s mouths, unable to quench the thirst the other provoked.

His naked chest pressed against hers, his hands stroked her sides.

Kate brought both her hands around him, ignoring the pain in her arm, and squeezed his sculptured butt.

“Jesus,” he groaned.

“Take these off,” she demanded pulling at his

jeans.

He moved back, breaking contact long enough to put a hand to the buttons of his pants. "You get yours."

Kate lifted her brows and watched his eyes taking in every one of her movements on the bed. Purposefully moving slowly, she unsnapped and tugged down the zipper of her pants. She lifted her hips and wiggled her butt causing him to gasp, and her to grin.

Where this brazen hussy came from, she had no idea. The need to have Richard cover her naked body with his grew so powerful, she felt as if she had no control at all.

His eyes followed her fingers while she kicked off her jeans leaving only her panties.

Richard licked his lips, his own task of removing clothing forgotten. She traced the line of lace covering her sex and slipped one finger inside.

A predatory growl erupted Richards lips. His eyes swirled with passion. With only moonlight gleaming through the windows of the pool house, Kate saw his eyes changed color and shape.

Slightly startled but completely at his mercy, Kate moved back on the bed. "Your turn," she reminded him.

He was naked in a heartbeat, his penis jutting forward at an impressive length.

He crawled on the bed on all fours. After playfully knocking her hand away from her sex, he took its place. One long finger dipped into her folds and stroked her swollen nub. On a curse, he tore her panties away and lowered his mouth to just below her navel.

She bucked. Desire and need for his penetration clenched her body. From his expression, he had other plans.

"Richard, please..." She sat up and brought his lips to hers. "I want you inside of me."

With both hands, she found his cock and stroked his length, his groan sounded more like a growl, his quest to pleasure her with his mouth forgotten. Dueling tongues fought to dominate their kiss

He removed his lips from hers, grabbed his pants from the floor, and removed a foil packet from his wallet.

"Were you a Boy Scout?" she asked, thinking about the condoms she left by her bed in the house.

"Always be prepared," he said tossing her the condom.

Peeling away the wrapper, Kate took her time rolling it over his length.

"Your hands are lethal weapons."

"More like rusty from lack of use."

Fully gloved, he pressed her back against the bed. "If this is rusty, then I'm a dead man." He possessed her mouth again.

His tip edged outside her body. His breath caught when she pushed closer to him. Anticipation seized her soul until he finally descended with a low thick slide.

With one thrust, Kate felt the first waves of an orgasm. She clenched his shoulders, digging in her nails. Her body slick with passion rippled with pleasure when he plunged into her completely.

He was well-built, and God knew she was out of practice, but his penetration was so complete she didn't think she would ever feel this close to anyone ever again. Tears glistened in her eyes. Her joy of being with him tore her heart open, allowing him in.

His rocking hips stopped. She opened her eyes and saw him studying her reaction. "Are you all right?"

*All right? She was in heaven.* "I don't think this could be more right," she told him. She felt a single tear slip out and wished she could have stopped it. The last thing she wanted to do scare him off with unwanted emotions.

Something flickered in his eyes when they locked with hers. He started to move, setting the pace. Slowly he rocked causing her mouth to open in a gasp as tension built.

He bent and kissed away her tears. "You are so beautiful. I could stay like this forever."

Her heart lurched and her muscles tightened around him. Pelvis thrust against pelvis brought panting gasps from them both. "Oh, Richard."

Fire built and burned inside her body as she struggled beneath, him wanting his movements to quicken.

A low chuckle passed through him as he complied with her demands. Her nails raked into his back as he drove her closer.

He murmured her name.

On a strangled gasp, he pushed her over the edge. Spasm after spasm swarmed her inflamed body. He followed close behind until finally collapsing on top of her completely sated.

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*Holy Shit.* Richard shifted his weight enough so he wasn't crushing her, but not so far that either of them would chill.

While his breath returned to normal, his swirling head and thoughts did not. He didn't dare open his eyes, fearing she had been a dream—one very hot, erotic, wet dream.

His hand rested on her hip, his thumb moved in a slow caress. She was there. Real and alive. And he had had the most powerful sexual experience of his life.

Was it the change, or was it the woman?

Something told him it was both.

She nuzzled closer to him, her thigh moved and pushed between his legs. His body was already responding to her innocent touch.

Smiling, he opened one eye and then the other. She wore a grin. A very satisfied grin.

His ego grew and his heart swelled knowing he was the reason for her happiness. He'd put that smile there.

Then he noticed the blood. "Crap," he exclaimed jolting them both from the bliss they shared.

"What?" Kate asked, startled.

Blood soaked the sheet where her arm lay. Her bandages saturated. Guilt hit his gut like a suckers punch.

Max had warned him to be careful, that his strength had increased. Now her wound was open and spilling on the bed.

His eyes traveled from her arm to her face. She glanced over and saw the problem.

"Ohh," she sighed before bringing her other hand to the wound.

Richard jumped from the bed and went to the bathroom for a towel.

He took his time removing her bandage and putting pressure on her injury. He shook his head and cursed his actions under his breath.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't say that," she told him.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have been so..." What could he say? Animalistic?

Kate put a hand to his face and forced him to look her in the eye. "We were both here, Richard. We were both... excited. This is no more your fault than mine."

"I should have known better. Max told me..." Oops, better to keep that part to himself.

"Max told you what?"

His first instinct was to lie. Yet somehow, he knew he shouldn't. Kate wouldn't like a dishonest lover, she didn't deserve that. "Never mind," he said instead, "I should have been easier on you."

Her arm forgotten, she moved closer and kissed his swollen lips. "I've never felt so needed. I wouldn't change a thing we did."



Ego surged again as did his body. This woman was intoxicating.

One soft hand traveled down his torso and rested on his hip. She rubbed her knee against his erection. "Some of you isn't sorry in the least."

"Never mind him, he doesn't know when to quit."

"Humm," she trailed her fingers along his thigh, causing his penis to jump to attention. "Neither do I."

"You're bleeding," he reminded her.

"I'm sure Janet has something here to tie it over until we're ready to go back to the main house."

"You're not ready to go back?"

In answer to his question, her hand wrapped around his erection.

He groaned.

"No, I'm not."

After one crushing kiss he pulled her to her feet, marched her naked to the bathroom and opened every cupboard until he found what he needed.

Dressing her wound was erotic. She sat on the counter with naked breasts thrust in his face. He cleaned the blood away while she did her best to distract him. His hands were busy and thank God, so were hers.

She plucked his nipples, traced the dusting of hair on his chest down the path to his erection. Little swirling fingers traced his shaft.

"You're making this impossible."

"Want me to stop?"

"No."

He needed to hurry so he could bury himself inside of her. He dried away the water around her wound.

Nails scraped him ever so gently.

"Antiseptic," he murmured finding it and swabbed her wound with the oily liquid.

She moved on the counter and spread her legs

drawing his eyes to the curls between her thighs. Pheromones enveloped him. His ears picked up the subtle sound of her body clenching. As if her womb beckoned him.

“Bandage,” he stopped thinking about her throbbing tight body and hurried.

She giggled.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Moving forward so the tip of his erection sat against her heat, she lifted her hips, taking in his tip.

Once, twice... he wrapped her arm. Three, four...

There wasn’t any tape so he circled her arm one last time before tucking the end inside.

Practically throwing the supplies aside he place one hand on each side of her, locking her hips in place.

“Vixen.” With that, he drove himself home.

## Chapter Nine

Reminding her of her youth, Kate and Richard snuck in the house before the sun came over the horizon. They had made love no less than four times during their hours in the pool house, leaving them sore and exhausted. Thrilled and rejuvenated.

"I want to go in there with you," Richard confessed at her bedroom door.

"If Joey crawls into bed with me he will be a little more than shocked."

"I won't mind." His wicked grin disappeared as he found a spot behind her ear that drove her mad. He had only discovered it in the last hour and already he was using it for his own personal gain.

Trying her best to concentrate on the conversation, and not the delightful things he was doing with his tongue, Kate murmured, "Joey needs time to adjust. His life is upside down right now. Finding us together could be difficult for him. "Ahhh... You don't play fair." Her body responded to his touch, despite her fatigue.

Richard moved away, lazy, brown eyes half-mast with passion. "Tomorrow."

The thrill of knowing he would be there was so much more than she expected. "Tomorrow."

One last series of kisses, and he walked away. Part of her left with him.

Closing the door behind her, she floated to her bed, fell on the pillow, and slept soundly.

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As expected, Joey was by her side when she opened her eyes, his little arms clenching a blanket he'd owned since birth. His mouth open, and his

breaths came in quiet little pants.

Kate brushed a lock of hair away from his sleeping face and watched her son sleep.

He was beautiful.

With a heart full of love and a body satisfied with passion from a night with Richard, Kate slowly moved off the bed.

She was right to keep Richard from sleeping in the same bed as her. Joey wouldn't understand.

Kate turned on the water to the shower and checked the temperature. Inside the steady stream of water washed away her lover's scent. But the feel of his fingers gliding along her flesh was still present.

His ability to bring her pleasure repeatedly would never be forgotten. And it wasn't over yet. Their time together had just begun.

Smiling, Kate went through the ritual of washing her hair and body with warm soapy water, careful to keep her arm out of the direct path of the spray.

Her body ached, and not all because of the trauma of her arm. She felt like a woman again. Not just a mom, although she knew deep down inside that being a mom was the most important thing in her life. Richard's affection and desire made her more a woman than ever before.

She sent a silent prayer to whoever might be listening and requested that her relationship with Richard would last.

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Breakfast was a quiet affair, with knowing glances full of laughter. Max watched Richard, who gazed at Kate. Janet raised her brows in question to Kate who gave non-committal shrugs of her shoulders in reply.

Richard hardly slept. His body didn't seem to have the need to fall into a deep oblivion even

though his mind could use the break.

All he could think of was her. Kate. Smiling, laughing and screaming out in ecstasy.

His life had changed. Somehow he knew that becoming a werewolf had very little to do with that change.

Kate was there, slicing through her French toast and replying to comments and questions from Max and Janet. All the while oblivious to the effect she had on him.

"Well, bro, you ready to go?" Max smacked him on the back and got up from the table.

No! He wanted to scream. Instead, Richard pushed his chair back. "Fine," he conceded defiantly.

Kate got up and started clearing the table of plates.

"I can get those," James stood from the end of the table and removed the plates from Kate's arms.

"It's all right. I can manage."

"Kate." Richard spoke out, more forcefully than he expected.

Her eyes moved to his in alarm.

"Your arm, remember." He sent her a knowing look. "You don't want it opening up again." Her cheeks started to flame assuring him she understood his meaning.

Kate lowered her eyes to the floor.

"Ohh..." Janet exclaimed under her hands that hid her grin.

"Is your arm okay, mommy?" Joey asked between bites.

"It's fine."

"Can I talk to you a minute?" Richard asked Kate nodding toward the livingroom where he could corner her for a kiss goodbye.

"Umm, yeah."

As soon as the others were out of sight, he pulled her in his arms. He pressed his lips against hers, and fell into the depths of her mouth.

Once breathless, she pushed him away. "Don't be late," she told him.

His heart surged with her words. She was as desperate to return to his arms, as he was to get her there. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

The clearing of Max's throat broke them apart. "Ready?" he asked.

One last brush of his lips against hers, and he turned to leave.

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"Give it up, girlfriend." Janet sat with a cup of decaf perched to her lips, a glimmer of humor hovered beyond her eyes.

There was no way out of kissing and telling. Truth be told, Kate didn't mind the invasion of her privacy.

"All I can say is... Oh. My. God!"

Laughter took over the room and kept Janet from drinking more of her coffee.

"That good huh?"

"Four times, Janet. Four times. I need to visit your bedroom pharmacy before he comes home."

"Maybe I should make you an appointment with my OBGYN."

Kate shrugged. "Maybe I should let you. He was amazing... we were amazing."

"I think it's great. Richard needed someone like you in his life." Janet reached over and patted Kate's hand. "You've given him purpose."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I do."

"I hope it lasts."

Janet's pointed stare made her wonder if she should have voiced her fears aloud. "Don't you think it will?"

"It doesn't take a psychologist to know I have separation issues. I hope all of this emotion isn't because of my current circumstances. That Richard isn't simply playing the hero, and when all is said

and done he will ride off into the sunset... Alone."

Janet rolled her eyes. "Man, I thought I was the drama queen. Richard isn't like that. Oh, I think all men like to play hero, but Richard has never taken helping others to this extreme. He isn't the kind of guy who uses a woman's emotional weakness for sex. Especially a vulnerable woman."

"I don't think of myself as vulnerable. Is that how I appear?"

Janet's wan smile said more than words. She did think of her as helpless.

"Okay, maybe I am... just a little. I don't like being in such a powerless position."

"I wouldn't say you're without power. More like temporary shut down. Max and Richard will find the guys responsible for the hold up."

"Why does everyone keep saying guys? There was only one man and his dog."

Janet's lips rounded, her brows lifted. "Well, the police think there are two men involved. Maybe someone was driving a get away car."

Kate had a fleeting thought that Janet knew more than she was telling. Yet a driver made sense.

"I hope they find them soon, whoever they are. I'd like for Joey to get back to school."

Janet smiled sipped her coffee and changed the subject.

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"I say this is a stupid ass thing to be doing. Do you know who we are up against?"

"Don't be a chicken shit." L.J. grabbed a handful of his French fries and popped them in his mouth.

"Can't you find another chick to calm your urges? This one is too much trouble."

"I'm getting mighty tired of listening to you bitch, Cutter." If he didn't put a lid on it, and soon, L.J. would need to remind him who was boss around here.

The abandoned house sat on about ten acres on

the backside of Acton, a good fifty miles from the scene of the crime. Here L.J. had room to stretch out with no one the wiser to the strange activity he and Cutter engaged in.

Under the house was a rare basement, complete with cages where he kept his new 'family' until they had made their first change.

Once the full moon turned them, L.J.'s carnal activities took away all their dignity and urge to return home. Hell, he was another Manson in the making. His women were set up all over the desert. Not a night went by that he couldn't get a piece of ass.

They loved him. All of them.

His threats to Cutter were unfounded. He wouldn't turn the bastard. No way did he want to share his gift with another man. He didn't want the competition.

L.J. had enough on Cutter to keep him quiet. One call to the police and Cutter would be the one behind bars. No one would believe his story about werewolves. Cutter would end up in a crazy house pissing on himself if he so much as uttered one word about men and women turning into wolves.

Best of all, Cutter knew it. That was why he stayed. Not to mention the fact that L.J. would hunt his sorry ass down and rip his throat out if he tried to run.

"Ritter is said to be an expert in his field. A damn vigilante against werewolves."

"So?"

"Don't you think you're barking up the wrong tree, man? You saw him going after that woman at the school. He's likely to take it personally if you mess with her."

Biting into his burger, L.J. chewed with the grace of a dog. "So?"

"You're getting cocky. Cocky lands you in jail."

Sucking down the coke with a straw and wiping



his mouth with the back of his hand L.J. spit. "That's why we're lying low for a while. Chicks don't like being cooped up for long. She'll be itching to get out within the week. First couple of times she does her confidence will grow, and that's when we'll nab her."

"He'll track her here. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he's just like you."

"Nawh, too much of a candy ass." Still, L.J. held the thought that maybe Ritter was more than a suit wearing security guard.

He shook his head. Couldn't be.

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"When are you coming back to work?"

Kate's boss sounded a little more than ticked on the other end of the phone. The graveyard shift proved difficult to staff, and her absence didn't go unnoticed.

"The doctor told me not to lift as much as a feather for at least a month. Can't you get someone to cover?" She couldn't afford to lose her job.

"It's very inconvenient," was all he said.

*Inconvenient is being shot*, she wanted to yell at him. What a jerk. Kate held her tongue and counted to five.

"Well?"

Her hair rose on the back of her neck and her teeth ground together. "Tell me, Mason. Is it The Eatery's policy to bully their employees to go against doctor's orders after being injured while on duty?"

"Ahh..."

That put him back on his heels. "Perhaps I should have the officer on the case call you on my behalf. Better yet... a lawyer."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"I'm sorry you're not more understanding. That man shot me, Mason. I could have been killed."

Silence met her as a reply. Did she push him too far? Would he fire her right then and there?

"We'll see you when you're better," he finally said.

Kate let the air she had held in her lungs go. "Good."

She hung up without saying goodbye.

It had been one hell of a week. In so many ways, life was wonderful. Richard snuck into her bedroom every night, making love to her for hours. By morning, he snuck into his own room to keep Joey from seeing them together.

They took their quiet moments of heavy petting and deep kisses in hallways and dark corners. Smug smiles from Richard overwhelmed her with joy. She'd missed being in a relationship. Having someone to talk to about her day, her worries, her life.

Her arm was healing well, but the thought of going back to work raked her nerves. Max and Richard were no closer to finding the man who shot her than they were the first day.

He'd vanished. Richard insisted Joey stay out of school and she stay under constant security.

Janet took her maternity leave and waddled around in misery. Kate noticed the baby drop over the last couple of days but kept the information to herself. It wouldn't be long before the baby came.

Although she hadn't known the Ritters for long, she looked forward to the birth like an expectant Auntie. Even Joey ran around asking if it was time yet.

One early afternoon, two and a half weeks into her stay, Kate suggested they get out of the house to shop for the baby.

"Come on, it'll be fun."

Even Janet felt the pinch of staying home. "You think we should?"

"The guys haven't seen or heard from the punk who held me up. He's probably long gone by now. Besides, take it from me. Shopping after the baby

comes is much more complicated.”

“All right, but we’ll bring James along.”

“Whoo hoo. I’ll get my purse.”

Even Joey bounced with joy when they left the house.

James was a little more reserved.

Janet called Max and left him a message on his cell saying they were leaving and giving him a detailed plan as to what they were going to do.

The mall was crowded with busy shoppers. The temperatures outside were reaching into triple digits, bringing in several people for the sole purpose of cooling off.

The four of them hustled through department stores, searching the baby departments for clothing and little trinkets for the room. Janet and Max opted not to know the sex of the baby until delivery day. Therefore, their choices were green and yellow.

Janet held up a package of white T-shirts and cooed over the size. “What about these?”

“Not white, Janet. It will stain after one wear.”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“Trust me, white is a wear once color for infants.”

James had Joey in a secluded corner, pulling the strings on mobiles that hovered over cribs.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I would have bought way too much.”

“I am the queen of thrifty. I had to be doing all of this on my own with Joey.”

“It must have been hard.”

Picking through the sale rack, Kate lifted up a striped blue and white jumper that would work for both a boy and a girl. A quick nod from Janet had her stashing it in the keep pile. “I’m happy I didn’t have a girl. Just look at all of the clothes they have for girls opposed to boys.”

“I noticed. The little hats and sweaters are so stinking adorable.” Janet picked up pint size shoes

that matched the pink purse. "So cute." Then she noticed the price. "Fifty bucks? They have got to be kidding."

"See what I mean. Boys are way cheaper."

"That is crazy." Janet put the items down and went the next isle.

T-shirts and jeans, Kate mused. Boys were easy when it came to clothes.

For one brief minute, she wondered what it would be like to be like Janet, pregnant and married to the man of her dreams, with enough money in the bank to buy a silly purse and shoes for fifty bucks.

Would Richard be appalled if she came home from a day of shopping having spent hundreds of dollars on silly things? Or would he kiss her deeply and say 'Anything for you, dear.'

Kate shook her head dismissing the thought. She was jumping way too far ahead.

She and Richard were mutually enjoying a physical relationship. Neither of them spoke of love and forever yet.

Arguably, she couldn't even say they were dating. More like roommates with separate bedrooms.

At the sound of Joey's voice, Kate glanced up to see a woman standing next to him talking.

As if sensing her stare, the woman turned, glanced at Kate, then turned back to her son. Blocking him from Kate's view.

James had stepped aside with a book in his hand. He didn't seem to notice the woman with her son.

Not liking how the woman was talking in low tones, Kate moved toward them.

Another glance over her shoulder and the strange woman left Joey's side.

"Who was that?" Kate watched the woman walk away. Long black hair hung down her back, her steps quick and decisive as if in retreat.

"I dunno," Joey said.

"What did she say to you?"

Joey fiddled with a bright red Elmo. Its giggle stood in dark contrast to the icy tension that crawled up Kate's spine.

"She asked why I wasn't in school."

Scanning the department store, Kate noticed that the woman was gone. Then Kate realized what was bothering her about the woman. She didn't carry a purse. Nor a bag of any kind.

Joey pushed the button again, sending Elmo into another fit of laughter.

Pushing the doll aside, Kate bent down to her son. "What did you tell her?"

"Tell who?"

His six-year-old mind was already on to the next thing. All the while, Elmo kept giggling.

Frustrated, Kate pulled the stuffed toy from his hands and forced his eyes to hers. "The woman, Joey. What did you tell her about you not being in school?"

"I told her I couldn't go to school till the bad guys are caught."

An honest answer that anyone would question. Swallowing the lump, which formed in her throat, Kate continued her interrogation. "What did she say?"

"Nothing, she gave me him." He reached for Elmo. Kate kept it from him. "Is it mine?"

It wasn't right. Call her paranoid, but who would ask a kid about his school and say nothing at a reply like his. "No, Joey. He isn't yours. Do you remember what I said about talking to strangers? If anyone comes up to you and starts talking, I want you to walk away."

"But she was nice, she gave me Elmo."

Kate placed both hands on his shoulders, her fear kept her hands rigid, and her voice firm. "I don't care if she gave you a million dollars. You should

never talk to strangers.”

“But...”

“No but’s. Never! Do you hear me?” Her voiced reached higher octave, almost a shout. James dropped his book and Janet started her way.

Joey’s lower lip started to tremble, his eyes filled with unshed tears. “I’m sorry, Mommy. I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

“What’s the matter?” Janet put down her bag, concern etched in her face.

“A woman was just here quizzing Joey about school.”

Seemingly unconcerned, Janet asked, “What woman?”

“She walked off that way.” Kate pointed to the retreating woman’s path.

Hearing their conversation, James left their side in search of the stranger.

“Most kids are in school, Kate. I’m sure it was nothing.”

She stood up, taking Joey’s hand in hers. “I don’t think so.” Less assured of being outside the safety of the house, all Kate wanted to do was get back.

*Someone’s watching us.* All around them, women and the occasional bored husband shopped the store. No one watched them. Still, Kate felt the weight of someone’s eyes.

“I think we should leave.” The fun in the shopping trip was over. Fear of losing her son returned like the first day after the shooting.

Perhaps if Richard were at her side she wouldn’t be so anxious. Without him, she felt wide open. Vulnerable.

## Chapter Ten

Max flipped his phone closed and tossed it on the dash. "They're on their way home."

"Why, what happened?"

"Kate got spooked. Janet didn't think there was a problem, but Kate wiggled out when a strange woman started asking Joey about why he wasn't in school."

"Maybe we should head back."

Folding up the useless map in his lap, Max tossed it next to his phone. "It's not like this is getting us anywhere."

"I could use a break anyway. Maybe I should take Kate and Joey to my place for a few days. Give you and Janet a few days of peace before the baby comes."

"You guys aren't a bother. If anything, Kate and Joey have been a blessing. I would never have been able to talk Janet into taking her maternity leave if it wasn't for them being at the house."

Richard merged onto the Golden State Freeway and left the Santa Clarita Valley. Their leads were coming up cold.

Both men talked of throwing in the towel until the next full moon. With the light of the full moon, and the changing of their human form to wolf, tracking would be much easier.

"I'd like to show Kate where I live."

"You just want to get her alone."

"Since the boys upgraded my system, my security is almost as good as yours."

"Not to mention you won't leave her side." Max sat back and closed his eyes.

Richard concentrated on the road for a while, keeping his thoughts to himself.

He wanted her alone there was no denying that. He also wanted to show her his life. Not his brother's. He wanted to pull out the boogie boards and hit the beach with Joey. Build a sand castle or two and have a bonfire on the beach. Then curl up next to Kate and watch the sunset.

Plainly put, he wanted Kate Davis and all she brought with her. He enjoyed tossing Joey around in the pool and coloring crazy pictures of pirates and maps.

He even snuck out and bought a pair of Nintendo DS's with a half a dozen games for Joey's birthday. The gift was burning a hole in his pocket, and the big day wasn't for another three weeks. Richard could hardly wait to see his face when he gave it to him. Buying two meant he could play with him.

Kate gave him a reason to come home. And it wasn't only about the mind-blowing sex, although he wasn't complaining. Just the thought of her shot heat to his groin. Since the change, his will power to ignore his urges was nil. Max was right about his libido. Lucky for him, Kate proved as explosive in bed as him.

Merging onto the 405, Richard thought of Kate's dingy apartment as he crossed the valley. Streets, overrun with the crimes of drug dealers and addicts, weren't where Kate belonged. He didn't want her going back. Ever. She didn't belong there anymore, and Joey deserved better.

Was he falling in love, or was it the change?

Trying his best to ignore the nagging voice in his head, Richard straightened behind the wheel and went around a slow moving SUV in a rush to get to Kate.

"Why the frown?" Max asked from the passenger seat.



Cursing his brother's ability to read him, Richard tried his best to relax his shoulders and sink into his seat. "Nothing."

Max grunted.

"Tell me..." Richard rubbed the stubble on his cheek, unable to form the question he had for his brother. Not completely sure he was ready to hear the answer.

"Tell you what?"

"About that soul mate thing. You know, when a werewolf meets their soul mate they know it. How did you know with Janet?"

Max lifted his brows and pulled his sunglasses from his eyes. "I think I knew the minute I laid eyes on her. With our first kiss, I knew."

"How did you know?"

"I don't know, I just did."

"Well, thank you very much for all the details."

"Geez, give me a break. I just knew. I couldn't be apart from her without feeling it, even for a few hours. Imagining life without her to come home to hurt, you know?"

He did know. That's what scared him. He was getting a very clear picture of what Max described.

"You think Kate is the one, don't you?"

Richard wasn't ready to admit it to himself, let alone his brother. "I don't know."

"Well, if she is... take it from me; tell her sooner rather than later about the wolf thing. Janet wasn't too happy to find out about it the way she did."

Max had changed in front of Janet before she knew he was a werewolf.

She left the next day and refused to see or talk to him for over a week. Richard remembered his brother's obsession during those days. He didn't sleep, didn't eat. Max reached stalking status and cornered his father-in-law to get Janet to come around. According to Max, Janet wasn't upset about the werewolf deal as much as she was the lies.

If Kate was the one, Richard knew he would have to tell her soon. Keeping your identity from your mate was impossible, and even dangerous.

If she wasn't the one—he dismissed the thought. He couldn't even go there in his own mind.

What did that mean?

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"Pack up." Richard tossed a suitcase on Kate's bed and turned to open her drawers.

"What?"

The alarm in her voice had him spinning toward her and gathering her in his arms. "We need to get out of here for a few days. You and Joey will love my place on the beach."

She sagged against him in relief. "Sounds good."

"You didn't think I was asking you to leave did you?"

"Well..."

Richard lowered his mouth to hers, wiping the worry from her face. Her hands clenched his shirt and her lips parted to accept his probing tongue.

She was honey, thick and sweet. He could taste her all day and never bore.

He reluctantly moved away when he hardened. "We can finish that later," he promised.

A light knock on the door turned their attention to James. "I'm sorry to interrupt. There's a Mr. Davis at the gate to see Miss Kate."

Kate's hand went instantly still and cold in his.

Pivoting, he brought both her hands to his. "You don't have to see him if you don't want to."

Sending him a quick shake of her head she said, "It's okay. I knew this day would come eventually."

Richard nodded to James who left to let Kate's father onto the property.

She shuddered and took a deep breath.

"I could send him away."

"No. I could use a minute. Would you mind

showing him in?"

*Oh, wouldn't I? "No problem." I'd like to give Mr. Davis a piece of my mind. Maybe even give the man Kate's current address and ask if he would allow his dog to live there, let alone his daughter and grandson.*

He turned to leave.

"Richard?"

"Yes?"

"Stay with me... when I'm talking to him. Please?"

Saddened by the forlorn expression on her face he stepped to her side, took her hands in his again, and kissed her fingertips. "I won't leave you."

The chime of the front door told them both that he stood outside.

"Take your time."

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Her hands shook while she splashed water on her face. *Why was he here? What could he want?* She leaned against the cold porcelain pondering the thoughts while the water ran freely into the sink. She had to pull it together. This self-defeating behavior would get her nothing but heartache. Pushing away from the counter, she cut the water off and reached for a towel.

Looking into the mirror, Kate saw the seventeen-year-old girl she once was, pregnant, scared and completely alone. Her father's voice booming over the halls, he laid blame for the pregnancy squarely on the shoulders of her mother.

*"It's your fault! She never would have ended up this way if you didn't choose that stupid charity to dedicate so much time too."*

*"Calm down, Jack. She can go away to have the baby and return after the adoption. Everything will be fine."*

*"See what I mean. You're talking about our daughter, Elizabeth. Not some whore on the street*

*that has babies like cattle."*

*"Stop yelling. She'll hear you."*

*Kate lay on her bed sobbing into the pillow while her parents went at it.*

*"I don't care. She is just as irresponsible as you."*  
*Jack slammed the door. Footsteps pounded in the hall as her mother chased after him.*

*"Well maybe if you were around once in a while instead of hung up at your precious office all the time, you could have been more of a father for her. Maybe she wouldn't have slept with the first boy who showed her some attention. Don't lay this at my door."*

Kate pressed her eyes closed and shook the painful memories from her head. She was twenty-four years old. The time had come for her to face her demons. Below her the wooden floors creaked, she cast a pained glance at the floor. One of those demons was currently downstairs talking with her lover.

She dried her hands, straightened her shoulders, and left the sanctuary of her room.

Jack Davis's voice traveled up the stairs, stopping her in place. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Once I learned who you were, I saw no need to own any stock in your company." Richards's voice was thinly controlled. The tension in the room grew thick. "Do you have any idea how your daughter has been living, Mr. Davis. *Where* your daughter has been living?"

Kate's eyes widened and her hand flew to her throat in surprise.

"If it wasn't for the newspaper article I wouldn't have found her," Jack said.

"Right."

Kate's feet moved faster. She hurried downstairs. The sounds of her steps echoed on the hard floors. From the steps, she could see into the living room. Her father stood by the door. Richard

gave him very little room and appeared as if he was about to pounce on the man.

His desire to protect her sent a small shimmer of pride straight to her heart. Still, she didn't want him coming to blows with her dad. Stepping off onto the floor, the boards squeaked announcing her presence.

Jack's head popped up. He had aged. His dark hair now sprinkled with grey and silver. His eyes narrowed when they found her watching them.

Kate swallowed the lump in her throat and with an unsteady voice said, "Hi, Daddy."

His shoulders slumped. He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came.

Finding strength in Richard's eyes, Kate stopped beside him. He laced his fingers with hers, giving no doubt as to their relationship to her father.

"I see you've met Richard."

"Yes, yes I have." The mighty Jackson Davis skirted his eyes to Richard. "Would you mind if I spoke to my daughter... alone."

Kate felt Richards's fingers grip hers.

"Anything you have to say can be said in front of Richard," she told him.

"Very well. Can we sit?"

The three of them moved over to the two large sofas that sat in front of a massive fireplace dominating the room.

Jack stared at them both.

"Why are you here?" Kate asked after a minute of awkward silence.

"I wanted to see you. Make sure you were all right."

Was that concern in his voice, or were her ears playing tricks on her.

"I'm fine."

"I read in the paper that you were shot."

She glanced down at her arm, which only wore a large bandage at this point. "It was nothing serious."

“Good.”

Odd, her father, the master negotiator, owner, and CEO of one of the largest companies in Southern California was reduced to one word sentences.

He was just as frazzled as she was.

“Why are you really here?”

“Can’t a father check on his daughter?”

“You lost that right when you shunned me,” she snapped

“You ran away.”

“I wasn’t going to give up my baby.”

“So you ran,” he argued, not about to give up the point.

“Yes, I did. And you never looked for me.”

Jack shook his head. “That’s not true. I knew you went to that house in Arizona. Your mother spoke with the staff nearly every day while you were there.”

Kate felt a tingle race down her arms. She had no idea. But a simple admission to knowing where she was wasn’t going to erase her pain.

“Liz sent checks.”

Everything ended with that... money. Jack Davis solved everything with money. The sorrow within her turn to anger. Eyes flaring, she hissed out in blind fury, “Money,” she spat. “What I needed was loving and supportive parents, Daddy.” Her finger poked toward her chest. “To stand by me! In case you didn’t know, money doesn’t comfort the soul.”

Jack lifted his chin. His voice cold, “We did what we thought we should do. Maybe it wasn’t right, maybe we could have done more. It isn’t like there is a manual on what to do when your teenage daughter gets pregnant.”

Kate felt Richard’s arm tighten when her father’s voice started to rise.

“Then you disappeared. Once the baby was born, the staff refused to talk with us. They said you were

emancipated, or some such nonsense and we were no longer responsible for you. I know we had no right to interfere in your life. We traced you to Nevada, but lost track after that. It wasn't until Phyllis tossed a newspaper in my face and asked if the article was talking about you that I learned you were back in California."

She remembered Phyllis, her father's secretary, a crotchety old woman who had no qualms about telling her father what to do. Kate would have liked to have seen Phyllis lay into her dad. No doubt she did when a reporter could locate her when he could not.

"I'm sorry I disappointed you, Katie."

His apology took her back to the little girl who once crawled up on to the big lap of her father and snuggled.

"Your mother and I want you back in our lives."

Kate hated the tears that sprung to her eyes. She didn't know how to feel. Part of her wanted to rush into his arms and make the years apart disappear. But the other part, the lonely part that needed a family during the difficult years wasn't sure if the man sitting in front of her deserved her forgiveness.

"I don't know," she murmured.

Around the corner Joey's voice called her out. "Mommy? Mooommy!"

"In here."

Kate wiped away a fallen tear and watched her father when her son ran into the room.

Jack went perfectly still. He watched every move his grandson made before piling into her lap.

"Are we leaving?"

"In a few minutes."

"Hey, are you crying? What's wrong?"

She smiled, shook her head, and said, "No, something got in my eye."

Good with that, Joey bounced up and regarded

the stranger in the room. "Who are you?"

Jack glanced up at her, unsure of how to answer.

"This is Mr. Davis, Joey." She wasn't ready to introduce her son to a long lost grandfather. Perhaps the time for that would come, but not today.

Joey walked up and extended his hand to her dad. New tears swelled when she saw her father's eyes gloss over.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Davis. My name is Joey."

Jack took his hand and covered it with the second. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hey, my last name is Davis, too. Isn't that strange?"

Jack nodded and sent him a brief smile. "Strange."

Joey stood back and looked him up and down. He then turned to her and Richard. "So, are we going?"

"Why don't you finish packing?" Richard stood. "And we'll say goodbye to Mr. Davis."

"Okay." Joey ran to the stairs.

"Walk young man." Kate yelled out.

Joey slid to a halt, smiled, and moved as if he were a cat stalking a mouse.

Jack chuckled. "Looks like you have your hands full."

"Joey's a great kid," she told him as she stood.

"It seems you're doing a fine job with him."

It was the closest thing to a compliment as any from her father.

They walked Jack to the door. Kate held Richard's hand with a vice grip.

"Can I visit you again? Elizabeth would love to meet Joey."

"I don't know," she said honestly. She didn't know anything right now. Having her father pop back into her life wasn't expected. She needed time



to think, to absorb his presence.

Jack pulled out a business card and handed it to her.

“I know the number.”

Richard took the card from his hand and tucked it in his shirt pocket. “She’ll call when she’s ready, Mr. Davis.”

Both men sized each other up.

“I understand the man who shot you is still a threat,” Jack said.

“It’s one of the reasons why I’m staying here.”

Jack stared at Richard and said, “Keep her safe. If there is anything I can do, let me know.”

“Nothing will happen to your daughter or grandson,” Richard spoke with absolute conviction.

With that, Jack turned and left.

## Chapter Eleven

Kate walked back through the two-story, beachfront home after tucking Joey into bed. His poor little six-year-old eyes simply couldn't stay open for a minute longer. He even forgot the ritualistic bedtime story in the rush to fall asleep.

The morning marine layer had burned off long before they made it to Richard's house. The sun poured over the beach with a mild intensity, heating the air to a nice comfortable 79 degrees.

Richard now sat on the back balcony overlooking the vast ocean vista. Beautiful hues of orange and red streaked the sky with the setting sun, the sliding screen door ground along the track bringing her presence to his attention. His thoughtful expression swiftly morphed into an endearing smile. Kate felt her insides warm. How did he do that? With only a glance, her body turned into a big pile of goo.

In reality, she knew why he had that affect on her.

She was falling in love.

Every day by his side ate away at her independence. Oh, she knew she could make it on her own, but did she want to anymore?

"I took the liberty of pouring you a glass." Richard held up a stemmed glass of white wine. "After today, I thought you could use it."

He referred to the visit from her father. They hadn't spoken of it... Until now.

Kate took the glass from his hands and brought it to her lips. Sweet liquid trickled down her throat.

Richard patted the space next to him into which she quickly settled. She felt his lips touch the top of

her head and his arm circle her shoulders.

“Feeling better?”

“Am I so obvious?”

Richard gave the swinging love seat a little push and set them into motion. “Seeing your father after all you’ve been through is bound to leave an impact.”

“I don’t know if I can trust him again, although he did sound so sincere.”

“If it makes a difference, I think he was. He appeared rather lost when he saw you. When Joey came in, it seemed he would burst into tears. Men don’t normally do that.”

No, she knew they didn’t. She couldn’t ever remember a time her father cried. Today was the closest he’d even come to it.

“After all these years on my own, it’s difficult to think of them back in my life, in Joey’s.” She took another sip and continued, “I’ve been the only person in Joey’s life.” After her brush with violence, her thoughts often wavered to what would happen to her son if something happened to her. Maybe the time had come for forgiveness. For healing.

“You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

For a brief moment, Kate wondered if Richard referred to himself. She vanquished the thought as soon as it emerged. He spoke of her parents, not him.

“This is beautiful.” She changed the subject.

“More so, because you are here.”

“Careful, Richard, I’ll start thinking you want me here.”

He chuckled and asked, “What was the other reason?”

Her eyes narrowed in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“The other reason. Today, with your dad, you told him that *one* of the reasons why you were staying at my brother’s was because of the threat. What was the other reason?”

He caught that did he? Kate set her glass down and turned her gaze to him. His laughing eyes sobered at the intensity of her stare.

She spread her hand on his chest and worked her way down his torso.

His eyes turned smoky right before she caught his lips to hers. His arm circled her waist drawing her closer. On a deep sigh, he opened his mouth and plunged.

Before he had a chance to deepen their kiss, Kate drew back. "Does that answer your question?"

"You want me for my body?" he teased.

Kate moved her hands over the bulge between his legs. "There is that."

Richard pulled back and let her hands take charge. He folded his own hands behind his head while a wicked smile crested his face. "What else?"

Delicate fingers went from tracing the outline of his erection to his vast chest. When she moved to his muscular arms, she gave his biceps a little squeeze.

"For the muscle?" he asked.

"Your ability to protect," she corrected.

"What else?"

He was enjoying their little game. The question was how far should she go? Was it only a game to him? Would he push her away when he finished playing?

Her hands traveled over his neck, fingers wound in his thick, dark hair.

"My mind? You want me for my mind?"

"Intellectual men are quite a turn on."

"Hmmm..."

Kate dropped her hands to his shoulders and rested them there for a brief moment. On its own, her hand descended over his chest and rested above his thumping heart.

His eyes caught hers and locked.

Neither of them said a word.

Richards smirk slid into something much

deeper. More powerful.

Kate's heart pounded so hard she thought she heard it.

Richard covered her hand with his before crushing his lips to hers.

While his tongue swirled the inside of her mouth and his hands roamed her back, Kate wondered at his thoughts. What would he say if he knew he was wiggling his way into her heart? That she wanted a piece of his.

A full palm cupped her aching breast and squeezed.

She moaned into his lips. Her head fell back. He attacked her exposed neck and continued to travel south.

"We should move this upstairs."

Breathless she moaned, "Your bedroom would be more... oh, God." He found the spot behind her ear. His breath came in a panting gasp while he worked the sensitive spot that drove her wild with passion. "...private."

"Come on." Richard stood and grabbed both glasses of wine.

Once inside the house, he gave her the wine and closed the sliding door. After locking it, he went through a series of steps of setting the house alarm.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm setting the motion detectors on chime and alarms on all doors and windows except one."

"Which one?"

He finished with the electronics and removed the glasses from her hands. "Let me show you."

Kate walked behind him up the stairs to the second floor. Passing Joey's room and Richard's, she followed along to a second staircase she'd not noticed when he'd showed her through the house earlier.

The dimly lit narrow staircase had an extremely steep passageway. A small door with a tiny pane of glass sat at the end.

"Where are we going, the roof?"

"You'll see." Richard smiled over his shoulder.

It was the roof. Instead of asphalt shingles and stucco, a beautiful oasis awaited them. Richard had a virtual garden on his roof, complete with every potted plant imaginable and several trees granting privacy from lurking neighbors. In the middle of the mirage sat a large hot tub that could seat eight people without effort. Across from the tub sat a flat screen television covered by large black canvas. Over the entire rooftop, a covered balcony kept the direct sun from damaging all the plant life and property.

"It's amazing."

Richard went through a few motions of uncovering the television and turning it on.

Surprised, Kate asked, "We're going to watch TV?"

"Do you want to watch TV?"

"Ah, well... I thought..." I thought we were going to make love she wanted to scream. Her body still hummed from the interlude downstairs.

Richard flipped on a separate box and his large flat screen held a grid of images, all of which showed different angles of the house.

They could see the welcome mat and porch light of the front door. The back door illuminated only by the setting sun. Both hallways in the house were visible as well as Joey's bedroom door. Then the garage and the door they just came through flickered on the set.

"It isn't as elaborate as Max's, but my home is much smaller and easier to watch."

"You've thought of everything."

"One can never be too careful."

It seemed a little overboard, but considering she was the one under fire, Kate was happy for the effort.

Richard reached over and turned on the Jacuzzi. Steam and bubbles erupted from the tub. The scent

of chlorine grew evident in the air.

“Should I get my suit?” she quizzed.

With a tilt of the head he asked, “Do you think you’ll need it?”

His question sent a tingle straight to her sex and a smile to her face. Looking around the rooftop, Kate noticed the absolute privacy Richard had created. With the sun only a memory on the horizon and the glow of light from the TV set and hot tub she realized no one could see them.

They could make love outside and no one would know.

Thinking about it gave her a thrill.

After taking a sip of wine and setting the glass on the table, Kate reached around her waist and pulled her top from her chest.

“That’s my girl.”

Kate smiled and kicked off her sandals. Within seconds, she stood in only a bra and panties.

“Two can play at this game,” she told Richard who was inclined to watch with a heated stare instead of joining her.

“Oh, I don’t know... I’m thinking of pulling up a chair and kicking back.”

The heat that would normally flood her cheeks, instead heated her insides.

*He wanted a show did he? Well who am I to argue?*

Turning so Richard had a view of her backside, Kate reached behind her and undid the clasp on her bra. Slowly she slipped her arms from the restraints, before tossing the undergarment at the happy voyeur.

He groaned but made good on his threat and sat in the nearest chair.

With a chuckle, and more self-confidence than she knew she possessed, she walked over to the steps of the hot tub and placed one slender foot on the first step. Testing the water with a finger, she

brought her hand back up and let the liquid drop onto her breast.

He still only watched.

Wanting him to do more than stare, Kate traced the edge of the silk panties with her thumbs before bending at the waist and methodically removing them. With a flick of the wrist, the panties followed her bra and ended up in Richard's lap.

Climbing the steps fully naked, Kate heard his breath pull in. It sounded painful. She picked up one leg and stepped in, pausing briefly so he had the perfect view of the curls between her legs.

The soothing water settled at the level of her nipples when she leaned back and spread her arms along the back of the tub.

"Aren't you coming?"

He lifted a brow at her pun. Within ten seconds, he stood by the tub naked and erect. Her gaze stayed on his sex. No matter how often she saw him, she was always impressed.

In the Jacuzzi, he covered her body with his and captured her lips. She moaned. Lips and teeth found her buoyant breast. He feasted on them as if they were a meal. Each sensation heightened by the warmth of the water and feel of the jets pulsing between her legs. A small tug and her body's awareness skyrocketed. His hands traced her side before slipping between her legs. On impulse, she reached for him and stroked his length. His fingers plunged and circled causing desperation within seconds.

She wanted this to last, wanted his pleasure to soar to new heights. When he moved closer, Kate placed both hands on his chest and pushed him away. He moved his hands to her hips and questioned her with his eyes.

"Not yet." Guiding him back to a circulating jet, she took over.

She removed his hands from her hips and placed



each one to the sides of the tub.

“Keep them there.”

“Why?”

She traced her lips with her tongue. “You’ll see.”

Leaning back on her heels, she ran the length of his body with her fingers. Hands circled his tight butt and lifted. Balancing his hips on her knees with little effort because of the weightlessness of the water, she had his penis protruding from the steam.

Her hands quickly covered him and began to move. His head leaned back but his eyes never left hers. She moved her head forward until she felt his heat against her cheek. Her tongue stroked his length, all the while their eyes locked. His breath held. Lips wrapped around his smooth tip. Once she buried it in her mouth, his breath escaped in one harsh roar. His head fell back, unable to hold itself up with the pleasure she knew she gave him.

Wanting him completely, she relaxed the muscles in her throat and took him to the hilt, drawing back with a slight suck and plunged him in again. His hips buckled and started to pulse. One hand held his base and caressed his sack, while she kept him on the edge of completion.

His fingers clenched and his face grimaced as if he were in pain.

“Stop or I’ll lose it.”

Kate hummed and moved faster. Making it clear she had no intention of stopping until she was done.

Richard’s white knuckles clenched but he never moved his hands from the side of the hot tub.

His body tightened. She took him completely over and over until he pulsed into her in one hot and steady flow.

Her mouth went numb with his taste. As his body and his sex settled, she let him slip away. She licked her lips and savored his essence.

“Can I move my hands now?” he asked with a grin.

"Yes," she whispered.

He moved in and pulled her close. "You are incredible. You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to."

"You swallowed. I can't tell you how sexy that is." He nuzzled her neck. "No one has ever swallowed before."

"Why is that such a turn on for men?"

He moved her to the steps on the inside of the tub. "It just is!"

Her bottom rested on the top step, her chest started to chill, and her nipples grew taut. After capturing one of her hands, he placed it on the side of the tub, as she had done.

"Two can play at this game."

*Oh please!*

As if sensing her desire, he pushed her other hand to the edge. "Stay," he commanded.

Richard kissed his way down her body. The stubble of his chin grazed her belly and had her knees falling apart in anticipation. Her frame floated to the surface giving him the access they both desired.

He grumbled a laugh. "Anxious are you?"

Moving lower, she felt his cool breath hovering above her.

He hesitated.

"Please," she begged.

"Ah... it seems I've found something you like." He pulled one of her legs up and rested it on his shoulders. She lifted the other to match.

His laugh vanished when he buried his head between her legs.

He knew right were to go, and thankfully knew what to do once there. He sucked her into his mouth, assaulting her sex with wicked delight. Her head fell back on a cry of pure pleasure. With every stroke of his tongue, her pleasure mounted until the weight of her release was too much to bear. His fingers slipped

inside her clenching body throwing her over the edge.

She called out his name as her body shuddered with her release.

Panting, she noticed her hands on his head. How had they got there? She moved them away quickly, as if he burned.

"Tisk, tisk. I told you to keep your hands away." But he was smiling.

"Something came over me."

He shook his head. "I think you need a time out for your disobedience."

Richard lowered her body back to the water.

"A time out?" Why did his punishment sound more like a promise?

"Umm..." Richard watched her expression shift. She was beautiful. And he wasn't done with her yet.

His body had grown hard during her orgasm. As if it fueled his desire. Her scent saturated his senses, making him desire her in the most primitive of ways.

Lacing his fingers in her damp hair, he crushed his lips to hers. He knew she could taste herself on his lips and that made him even harder.

Would he ever get enough of this woman? Her hands stroked his back and clawed at his flesh.

"Do you trust me?" he asked her between kisses.

A flicker of concern crested her face. "Completely."

"Good."

In a quick motion, he turned her around and bent her over the edge of the Jacuzzi. His hands stroked her back until her butt arched in the air toward him. Now this was an even bigger turn on than before.

He clenched her hips, found her wet heat, and plunged. With each stroke, he wondered if the animal was already in him. He knew it was, but this dominating position had him harder than he could

ever remember. Her mewling moans proved she enjoyed it as much as he did.

With quickening breaths, they both reached their peaks together, and then he fell onto her back, completely spent.

It wasn't until hours later that he realized they hadn't used a condom.

## Chapter Twelve

The phone rang and a foot caught him squarely in the chin before his eyes drew open. Richard wasn't sure what was more alarming. Without opening his eyes, he reached for the annoying interruption of his sleep.

"This had better be good," he told the caller.

"Labor! Oh my God, she's in labor!" Max's voice held horror and dread. Richard bit his tongue to keep from laughing.

Surprised, but not as much as his brother, Richard shook the sleep from his head and sat up. The foot kicking him in the face belonged to Joey, and Kate was slowly waking from the noise of the conversation. When had Joey joined them?

"Are you there?" Max yelled into the phone.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Did you hear me? Janet's in labor... She's having the baby!"

"Yeah... well, we knew that would happen." Unconcerned, he flipped on the light and moved to the edge of the bed.

"Now! She's having the baby now!"

"Calm down. Geez, Max, considering what you go through every month you'd think you would have it together with something as natural as childbirth."

"The baby. My baby! She's moaning..." Max trailed off but Richard still heard him talking to his wife. 'Breathe, the doctor said to breathe.' "Get here... no, get to the hospital. Now."

The phone disconnected with a thudding click.

Richard laughed at his always-together big brother and placed the phone back on the charger.

"Was that Max?" Kate asked from the other side of the bed.

"Yeah, Janet's in labor."

"Well, we should get up."

"Yeah, I guess we should get over there. It sounded like Max was losing it."

"How's Janet?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" she said in alarm.

"What? He was losing it," he explained.

Kate flipped the covers off and marched to the bathroom.

Joey hardly stirred.

Richard followed her. She ran a brush through her hair in her semi naked state of dress. In only a T-shirt and panties, she pulled herself together.

"Why are you standing there? Your sister-in-law is having a baby. We need to go."

"Where?"

"The hospital," she said exasperated.

"Why? The doctors can handle it." He didn't see the need. Besides, the sight of her ass hanging out under her skimpy excuse for a shirt was turning him on.

She pivoted and dropped the brush to the sink with a loud clank. "Your brother called you. You need to go... We need to go!"

His head snapped up from the view and met her eyes.

Then it hit him.

Janet was having a baby. A brief wave of panic washed over him.

Max sounded so worried, so stressed.

"We should go," he said in alarm.

He rushed to his dresser, pulled a pair of shorts from the drawer, and tugged them on.

Kate waltzed in the room, cleared her throat, and pointed at him.

He had tugged his shorts on over his lounging

trunks he put on to traipse around the house. Removing them, he turned to the closet.

Within second he was dressed, although haphazardly, and ready to go.

Kate hid a smirk and helped get Joey out of bed.

“Hey, Sport.”

Joey grumbled.

Richard shook his head and said. “Forget it.” He lifted the boy in his arms and made for the door.

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The Lobby was empty when they arrived at County General. Joey, who rested over Richard’s shoulder and still asleep, didn’t even bat an eye when they paused at the information desk staffed by a security guard.

“We’re having a baby,” Richard told the man in a rush.

The two hundred plus pound African American man glanced over his newspaper and scanned Kate’s thin body with a slow eye. He ruffled the paper and brought it back up with a laugh.

Confused, Richard glared, and Kate hid a grin.

“No, *we* aren’t having a baby. My brother is.”

The man’s shoulders folded in with his chuckle. “Your brother?”

“Well, his wife. Yeah, that’s it... his wife. Janet Ritter.”

In painfully slow motion, the man put down his paper and turned his attention to the old green screen monitor sitting in front of him.

Richard tapped his foot in frustration.

“Relax,” Kate encouraged. “The first baby always takes time. Joey took 18 hours.”

A slight tug hit his heart thinking of her going through that alone. No husband, no father. At least Janet had Max at her side.

“Labor and Delivery room eight,” the guard announced. “Up to the fifth floor, there is a door on your right. They’ll buzz you in.”

"Great." Richard turned toward the elevators.

"Wait up."

The guard unfolded from his chair and moved around the desk while removing a wand style metal detector.

"Oh geez, I don't have time for this," Richard complained.

"Standard operating procedure, sir. I gotta do it."

"Fine." Richard lifted his left elbow. "I'm carrying, my ID's in my back pocket."

Suddenly on alert, the guard placed his right hand over his holstered gun. "You a cop?"

"Private security."

"I'll get your wallet," Kate offered.

"No, ma'am, I'll get it," the guard said in a stern voice.

Kate pulled her hand back as if stung.

"He doesn't want you to pull my gun on him," Richard explained.

After checking his ID and clearing them both, they finally made it to the elevators that took forever to reach the ground floor.

After seemingly hours, they stood in the Labor and Delivery waiting room doing what everyone else was there doing... waiting.

They propped Joey on a pillow provided by one of the nurses so he could continue to sleep. Richard paced the room.

He could hear Janet's cries from beyond the closed doors. His nose, quickly assaulted with the smell of pain and fear, might never recover. He wished his brother had given him better warning about how sensitive his olfactory nerves were going to work after the change. He glanced at Kate sitting next to Joey with a magazine in her lap. Even armed with more information, he still would have made the same decision. With the baby coming, Max's priority would be at home. Capturing the wolf who hunted



Kate depended on him. Then again, maybe his father could help.

"I'm going to call my parents, let them know what's happening," he explained to Kate who smiled.

"You know where I'll be."

He leaned down, brushed his lips to hers, and left the room.

The conversation with his father was brief. The vacation in the Bahamas would meet a quick end and his parents would be at the hospital long before Janet's discharge. Their excitement of their first grandchild buzzed over the long distance connection.

Watching Richard pace was almost comical. Kate didn't know if he could be more nervous if he were having his own child. She tried to calm him several times during the early morning hours, but now it was going on noon and he seemed down right haggard. The five cups of coffee weren't helping.

Somewhere during the waiting process, she realized their previous evening's activities could possibly put him in the position of being a father. Caught up in passion, neither one of them used the precautions they normally did. Although she had gone on the pill with Janet's suggestion, she was supposed to use two types of precautions for the first month.

Perhaps a side trip to the ER to obtain a morning after pill should be in order. She didn't want to tax Richard with her worries, worse she didn't want him to think her irresponsible. She considered her options while appearing to read old copies of parenting magazines.

Joey munched on a bag of chips while coloring pictures of Scooby Doo. Once the baby was born, she could sneak downstairs and check in to the ER. How long could it take? She only needed one little pill.

Richard gave up the pace and sat down beside her. "I don't think it will be long now," he said.

“Why do you say that? Max hasn’t given us an update for over an hour.”

Richard’s face grew pale and he gripped her hand. “Don’t you hear... never mind. I just don’t think it will be long.”

She patted his cool hand. No, he didn’t need the added stress of worrying about her possibility of being pregnant. If he was right, and the baby came soon, she could slip downstairs and see a doctor quickly. He would be none the wiser.

Not that the thought of having Richard’s baby wasn’t pleasing, it simply wasn’t the time.

Thirty minutes later, Max staggered through the door with wide eyes and a silly grin.

Richard stood and met him at the door. “Well?”

“It’s a girl.”

Kate clapped her hands together and jumped up to hug the new daddy. Richard roared and pounded his brother’s back. Even Joey got up from his intense coloring session and joined in.

“How’s Janet?” she asked.

“Amazing, she doesn’t even seem tired anymore.”

Kate remembered the first moments of Joey’s life. How exhausting it was during the labor and how thrilling it felt to hold the fruits of that labor in her arms.

“Can we go in?”

“Yeah, the doctor just left.”

They filed into the large Labor and Delivery Suite. Kate could see Janet’s worn eyes behind her smile. She wouldn’t last long before falling asleep.

In her arms was a seven-pound bundle all wrapped up like a little burrito in hospital issue blue and pink striped blankets. A splatter of blonde hair and piercing blue eyes peeked through the little package.

Janet’s proud smile met hers. “See what we made?”

"She's beautiful," Kate reached out and stroked her tiny head. "Ten fingers, ten toes?"

"Pink little button for a nose. Yep, I already checked."

"Uncle Richard?" Janet called him closer to the bed. "Come meet Brandy Marie Ritter. Brandy this is Uncle Richard and Auntie Kate."

Kate moved away when Richard came beside the bed. Janet's linking of her as family engulfed her heart with joy, even if it wasn't true.

Janet held little Brandy out for Richard to hold.

"I don't know if I can."

"Of course you can."

"She won't bite," Kate told him.

Richard's big hands lifted the bundle with complete caution. Once Brandy sat in the crook of his arm, he stared down in awe. There was something about the expression on his face that Kate didn't think she would ever forget, the power of life being held in your arms where it wasn't there before. The amazing ability of life to duplicate itself. The complete need of protection from the big bad world. These and many more thoughts came to mind when holding a baby less than an hour old in your arms.

Richard made a little cooing noise and wrinkled his nose at his niece. Kate didn't know what was cuter, the baby or the man.

"Amazing, isn't she?" Max asked at Richard's side.

"You're a lucky man."

Max placed a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Yes, yes I am."

Kate took the opportunity to excuse herself a little while later when the Ritter's talked and the nurse took Brandy away for her first bath. Joey wanted to watch through the thick glass while the nurses did their morning rounds, and Richard agreed to keep an eye on Joey.

It was one o'clock and the ER was packed. A quick trip didn't seem possible by the amount of people in the lobby.

The receptionist wasn't impressed with her 'emergency.'

"I know it isn't life or death, but if I could just slip in and have the doctor give me the pill, I'll be out of your hair."

The clerk thrust a clipboard from under a small opening of the bulletproof glass.

"Sign in."

Kate noticed over a dozen names above hers. This was going to take forever. "Can I come back and see if my name has been called? A friend of mine is upstairs."

"Whatever you want, lady, if the nurse calls your name and you're not here you'll just wait longer."

Kate scanned the room and took a seat. After ten minutes she was up and pacing. Richard would start to wonder where she was. She couldn't wait here without him knowing what she was doing.

She turned back toward the lobby without looking and walked into the chest of the man in question.

"What are you doing in here?" Richard asked in alarm.

Kate opened her mouth but didn't know what to say.

"Are you sick?"

"No, I..."

"Then what?"

"Ahh," Kate lowered her eyes and moved away from the crowd in the room. "Last night... we were a little careless."

"Careless?"

"You know..." She pleaded with her eyes and lowered her voice to a whisper. "We didn't use any protection."

When her words registered, his concern shifted. His eyes darted around the room where several people watched their exchange.

His grip tightened on her elbow, and he pulled her toward the doors leading outside. Alone, he dropped his hand from her arm and took a step back.

Anger swirled in the depths of his eyes. Why was he so pissed?

"You came here for one of those next day pills, didn't you?"

Why did it sound so wrong coming from him? "I thought, in light of the circumstances..."

"Didn't you think I might want to know?"

"Richard, it's no big deal."

He shook his head and ran his fingers through his ruffled hair. "After what we just saw upstairs you think it's no big deal?"

"It is just a simple precaution," Kate insisted.

"No it's not. The pill you want stops any pregnancy from continuing if a child is already conceived."

"I know what it does, Richard."

He turned on her, his face red with tightly controlled emotion. "That's what you want?"

"We've only known each other a short time. I don't want to compromise our relationship. Try to understand. I've had one pregnancy without the support of a father. I don't want to ever go through that again."

His eyes met hers with cold steel. His jaw went rigid. "Do you think so little of me that I would allow that to happen to you again?"

Her heart took a giant dive. Why was this so important to him? Why did she have the sudden feeling he was going to turn away and never come back? "No, I just thought..."

"I don't think you thought at all, Kate. I'm not Joey's father. I would never have left you if he were my son, ever."

And her sneaking to the ER to keep him out of this decision had scorned his ego. His honor.

"I'm sorry. Maybe I should have told you."

"Maybe?"

*Oh, God. Bad choice of words.* "Okay, I should have told you."

He walked her back into the ER lobby. "It isn't safe for you to wait here alone. We can come back down after we go get Joey."

"The lobby's full of people, I'm sure no one will bother me."

He leaned over and spoke into her ear. Each word felt like a slap. "Anyone could walk in here with a gun. I just did."

Their silent ride in the elevator drove a wedge between them. In the course of one conversation, their relationship had changed.

What had she done?

Joey sat in a chair in Janet's postpartum room. The baby was in daddy's arms and the room was bustling with people.

Janet's colleagues from the ER had gotten word that she had delivered and it was quite literally 'standing room only.'

The happy parents accepted congratulations and listened patiently to several pieces of unsolicited advice. It was near to impossible to slip out of the room. Even with the crowd.

Janet tapped the side of the bed suggesting Kate sit down. A small amount of concern etched itself upon her face. Kate slid a glance to Richard who was busy talking to one of Janet's friend just outside the door of the room.

"Is everything okay?" Janet whispered.

Not wanting to burden the new mother she lifted the corners of her mouth and said, "It's been a long night. I'll bet you're tired."

"I am about to hit the wall."

"Want me to push everyone out?"

"In a few minutes."

A few minutes turned into thirty. Richard and Max successfully removed all visitors, promising they could come back the next day.

"Can we bring you back anything from the house?" Kate asked before they left.

"No, we have everything."

Kate kissed Janet's cheek and told her to get some sleep before the three of them left the room.

Richard said very little as they walked through the halls of the hospital. Instead of returning to the Emergency Room, he reached into his pocket and handed a foil wrapped pill to her.

"What is this?"

"One of the ER doctors visiting Janet was able to get this for you, without the wait," he said without emotion. "It's what you wanted, right?"

Joey pulled away and pushed the down button on the elevator.

She lowered her eyes and tucked the pill in her purse. Right at that moment, Kate wasn't exactly sure what she wanted.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Heat came in the form of sweat beading down her face and neck like the flow of a river. She had to hurry! Why, she didn't know. If she didn't her life would change forever, and not for the better.*

*She had to find him, quickly before the others did. He would die if left alone.*

*The sky was dark, illuminated only by the light of the full moon. The air was thick, humid like a summer day in Ohio.*

*Kate stopped. Her lungs struggled for breath. Her chest heaved with every ragged bit of air she pulled into her body. She twisted in circles trying to hear him.*

*Nothing.*

*Then, a howl went up, shattering the silence.*

*"Oh God, no!"*

*She started running again. He had to be close. The wolf told her he was...*

*Kate shot up in bed, her breathing erratic.*

*"Dammit!" She shook the dream from her head and tossed back the covers of her bed. Her empty bed.*

*Every night since Richard left her side, she had the same dream, each one more intense than the last.*

*She went over to the window, opened it, and tried to catch a night breeze. The still air coming through her window wasn't enough to erase the nightmare that woke her.*

*Grabbing her robe, she opened her bedroom door and silently walked down the hall to the stairs.*

*The backdoor would chime, but only three little*



beeps. Kate didn't care. She needed air, and she needed it now.

Outside the night fell around her. The cool late spring evening wasn't cold by any means. Refreshing was a better definition.

Kate walked over to the night blooming jasmine and took a deep breath. The sweet smell of flowers calmed the rapid pace of her heart.

Her life was out of control. It didn't take a psychologist to analyze her dreams. Useless and unable to get out of her current situation left her feeling vulnerable and unsure. Kate remembered similar dreams before Joey was born, dreams of running, hiding, and fear.

They had returned, and with them the same sense of dread and trepidation a pregnant teenager faced.

She needed to get her life back. Kate closed her eyes and ran a hand through her hair in frustration.

The sound of a twig snapping on the backside of the pool caught her attention and had her straining to see the cause.

Kate searched the darkness, her heartbeat started to rise.

Crickets chirped or did whatever it was that made their noise, and the occasional hoot of an owl kept the night from complete quiet.

Off to the right, a blur of movement had her swallowing hard. Something was there.

Her breath caught, her eyes grew wide.

*I'm losing it. It's probably nothing more than a rabbit or a raccoon.*

Still, the uneasy feeling of someone or something watching, weighed upon her like the thick dark of night.

\*\*\*\*\*

He couldn't sleep. Three days and three nights had passed since their argument. They said very little to each other in that time. During the day, the

house overcrowded with family and friends, all wanting to see Brandy and to congratulate the new parents.

His parents met Kate and Joey. Both, separately, gave him their approval. Not that he'd asked for it, but his parents had never mastered the art of staying out of his personal life.

Avoiding Kate's bed to clear his mind was a challenge. Finding her in the Emergency Room sent him a message of uncertainty.

Oh, he understood *her* motives.

What he didn't understand were his own.

Kate didn't do anything wrong 'taking care of their careless behavior,' in fact she simply did what Richard had hoped many of his past lovers would have done in the same situation. But with her it was different.

Wrong somehow.

Tossing back the sheets, he reached for his boxers and pulled them on.

Outside his door, he heard the soft chime of a door opening.

Instantly on alert, he turned on his monitor and scrolled through the video surveillance of Max's home.

Outside on the back porch, he saw her. Both hands rested on the wrought iron rail. Her head hung between her shoulders in a defeated stance.

Glancing at the clock, he noted the time, 2:30 in the morning.

He walked down the hall and heard footsteps behind him. Turning, he saw Max coming his way.

"Did you hear the door breach?"

"It's Kate, she's out back."

Max nodded and glanced back toward his bedroom.

"Go back to bed. The baby's bound to be up anytime."

"All right." Moving like a zombie, Max retreated.

Neither he nor Janet had recouped from the delivery before Brandy started making demands on their every hour, Richard thought.

Richard smiled and made his way down the stairs.

The smell of fear and scent of a stranger hit his nose long before he made it out the back door.

Kate peered off in the distance and didn't hear his approach. A sixth sense told him they weren't alone.

He placed a hand on her shoulder.

Kate's scream pierced the air as she turned in his direction. "Don't do that," she yelled.

Movement in the bushes beyond the perimeter of the yard caught his eye. Without a word, he pulled Kate into the house and hit the floodlights illuminating the whole yard.

He stepped out and lifted his nose to the air. Turning his head, he heard the faint sound of running. He considered giving chase, but from the scent, the man was too far away to catch.

After walking back inside, he shut off the lights and closed the door behind him.

"Was someone out there?"

"Yes. You shouldn't have gone outside at night without someone with you. What are you doing up anyway?"

Kate ignored his question and peered through the glass of the door. "How could you tell? I didn't see anything. I thought it was a rabbit."

"It was a man." Only a man, he added for himself. Not a werewolf. "If I hadn't heard the door chime, he could have snatched you right off the porch."

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"He won't be back."

Kate put a hand to her chest and took a deep breath. "How can you tell? How do you know it was a

man?"

"I just do. You have to trust me." Now wasn't the time too explain his 'soon to be furry existence.'

His eyes met her pinched brows.

"I'm not a child, Richard. I would appreciate you not treating me like one," she scolded.

"When are you going to realize the threat to you is real and stop taking unnecessary risks?"

She backed away, eyes flaring. "What risks? I've done everything you said for almost a month."

"Not when you snuck down to the Emergency Room."

"Oh, so that is what this is all about? You're still angry about that."

Moving away, he did his best to keep his elevating temper at bay. Yeah, he was ticked about it, but not for the reasons she thought. He almost wished she would end up pregnant so the decision to keep her by his side would be easy. Maybe it was a coward's way out of admitting his feelings for her, but he didn't care. Somehow marching up to her and saying, 'Well, okay you're pregnant. Guess that means we're getting married,' would be easier than asking and possibly being rejected.

"Just stay inside."

"For how long? My arm's nearly healed and my rent is due. Sooner or later I need to get my life back."

He swallowed hard. A life without him wasn't an option. "I don't want you going back to that apartment."

Her mouth gaped open. "Who died and left you boss?"

"I mean it, Katie. You're not going back to that rat trap."

"Who the hell do you think you are? Sleeping with me doesn't give you the right to dictate my life." A quick pivot and she moved toward the living room.

He grasped her arm and turned her towards

him. "You can't go back there."

Tugging her arm free, she met his glare and lowered her voice to an icy pitch. "I can go where I want, when I want. If there is such a threat to me here, maybe I should just pack Joey up and get the hell out of Dodge."

This conversation was digging a very deep hole, and he started to realize what the woman in front of him was capable of doing. The last thing he wanted was her disappearing into the night.

Alone.

"I didn't mean..."

A small voice reached them from the stairs, "I don't want to go away, Mommy."

Joey held his life-long blanket in one hand and wiped away tears with the other.

"Oh, Joey." Kate rounded the stairs and knelt by his side.

"Are we going away?"

Richard watched while she pulled her son into her arms, lifted him, and went down the remaining stairs. Once seated on the couch she leaned back to consider his tear-streaked face.

"We can't stay here forever. The Ritters have been very gracious, but this isn't our home."

"Can we stay with Richard?"

Kate glanced beyond her son directly at him. Uncertainty crossed her face.

"Of course——"

"No, Joey," she interrupted him. "Richard and I are friends, but that doesn't mean we can live with him."

He wanted to correct her, but doing so would confuse the child and make matters worse.

"Can't Richard move in with us? You like me and Mommy, don't you?"

Everything was simple in the eyes of a six-year-old.

"You and Mommy can sleep in the same bed like

you did at your house. That would be okay, right?"

Kate sent Richard a pleading look.

"It's really late, sport. How about we talk about this in the morning?" Richard knelt down next to them both and placed a reassuring hand on Joey's shoulder. He was trembling. "Every thing is going to be okay."

"But you and Mommy were fighting."

"We were talking, Joey. Sometimes grownups talk a little loud, but that doesn't mean we're fighting. Come on. Let's get you back to bed."

Kate stood, put Joey's tiny hand in hers, and led him up the stairs. She glanced at him over her shoulder, lowered her eyes, and left him staring after her.

\*\*\*\*

"That was stupid, fucking crazy."

L.J. ran his finger through his hair and wished his partner had more of a backbone. Putting fight into Cutter proved fruitless. She was standing right there, no one around, and nothing to stop them from nabbing her. Then Mr. Dickhead showed up. All Cutter could do was moan.

"Pick another broad!"

"Shut up! Just shut the hell up!" He had to think. Time was running out. With only two days until the full moon and no chance at bagging the chick his monthly quota wasn't met. By now he normally had them pegged, bagged, and caged if they weren't already turned.

L.J. took the curve at a high rate of speed, putting distance between his soon-to-be conquest and himself.

"Sally was giving you the eye. Why not stay with her for a while? She has big tits and everything," Cutter called from the passenger seat.

Sally did have a set, but an old set by his standards. He'd already seen them and done them, he needed someone new to get him going. It was

time for new.

Ideas formed in his head. New, fresh ideas.

Tomorrow would be a better day.

A much more fruitful day.

\*\*\*\*

Kate snuck out of Joey's room as quietly as she could to keep him from waking. It had taken over an hour to get him back to sleep.

In the hall, beside her bedroom door, Richard had fallen asleep. She stopped and stared at his head fallen back against the wall, his hand limp in his lap.

What was she going to do with him? Just when she thought he was the most unreasonable person in the world, he goes and does something like this... sleeping in the hallway waiting for her.

Kate gave his shoulder a little shake. He came to life immediately.

"Is he asleep?" he asked, trying to act as though he hadn't been in slumberland himself.

"Much like you. What are you doing out here, Richard?"

He stood and signaled for her to follow. Inside his room, he flipped on the light and motioned for her to sit.

"I don't think he needs to hear us argue."

"I agree," she wiped the tired from her eyes. She was sick of arguing, too.

"Listen..."

"Listen..." they both spoke at the same time. Kate smiled and lowered her head. "We're both tired. We can talk in the morning."

Richard watched as she stood but didn't move away from the door. "I've had a lot of things on my mind, a few of which I need to tell you about."

Something in his voice kept her wondering exactly what he was thinking. "Can it wait, until we're both awake?"

He nodded, "Yeah, it can wait."

Kate moved around him, shoulders touching. He stopped her with his arm, gazed into her eyes. In one stealthy move, he placed his lips to hers, which sent her heart to flight. He wanted her. God help her she wanted him, too.

Pulling away before a simple kiss turned into something more, he stood back. "Try and get some sleep," he told her.

Fat chance. "You too," she said instead.

\*\*\*\*

Kate stretched her limbs with the first rays of sunshine that poured through her window. Surprisingly, Joey wasn't at her side. Then again, most likely he still slept after his late night drama.

Sleep was near to impossible for her as well, and eluded her until nearly five o'clock. Visions of Richard, Joey, and the dratted wolf from the hold up kept her awake.

Kicking off the covers, Kate padded her way to the shower and turned on the water. In the few hours she lay awake, Kate had made some decisions.

Living with the Ritters indefinitely was not an option. Joey was starting to confuse the situation and push Richard into a role he simply wasn't ready to take on. Oh, his chivalrous *I'll take care of you attitude*, was nice and all, but to her son, Richard's gallantry was developing into fatherhood.

Shaking the water off her limbs proved pain free. A sure sign her body had healed from her ordeal. It was time she got her life back. Of course, the possibility of a man hiding on the Ritter's property the previous evening and stalking her slipped her conscious mind. She had already excused it away as an animal.

Kate nestled her cell phone to her ear and made the call that should put her back in the driver's seat of her life. It was a risk, but one she needed to make. As the phone rang, her anxiety increased. The person picked up, and Kate swallowed hard and



prayed she wasn't making a huge mistake.

\*\*\*\*

Kate went downstairs to gurgling noises coming from the kitchen. The unmistakable sounds of adults making baby talk brought a smile to her face.

Janet appeared exhausted and hunched over a cup of coffee while she watched Uncle Richard ogle over Brandy. Glancing at her when she walked in the room, Richard's already grinning face lit up further.

"Good morning," Janet said.

Kate reached for the coffee pot and helped herself.

"Good morning. Where's Joey?"

Janet put her cup down and went to the refrigerator. "I thought he was with you?"

"No, he didn't come in my room last night," Kate said. "Richard, have you seen Joey this morning?"

"He's probably not up yet."

It was after seven. Joey was up at six thirty religiously. Unease slid up her spine. The coffee forgotten, Kate went back upstairs and pushed open the door to Joey's room with a little nudge. Expecting to see his small head resting on the pillow, she was more than a little alarmed to find his room empty.

She stepped inside and said his name. Her heartbeat sped up. "Joey?" her voice called louder. His closet was empty.

Down the hall where he used the bathroom the door was open, the room dark. "Joey?" Shivers ran down her spine. "Joey!" she was yelling now and just this side of panic.

The hallway loomed in front of her. Her recent nightmares unfolded into reality. "Joey!"

She ran down the stairs, everything blurred as terror took over. Richard stopped her flight out the front door with a questioning stare.

"He's gone."

"He's not up in his room?"

"No. He's not." Pushing past him, Kate moved to the front door, opened it, and yelled at the top of her lungs. "Joey!" She flew off the porch.

Richard followed and restrained her. "Shhh... It's okay, we'll find him."

Kate struggled against his hold. Her lips trembled. "This is like my dream. Oh, God, my nightmare's coming true."

"What are you talking about? What nightmare?"

"Joey's missing or taken. The wolf or dog or something has him."

Richard put a hand to her cheek and forced her to look into his eyes. "Katie, you need to calm down."

By now, the household watched from the door. Max approached and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Go inside and search the house. Richard and I will search out here."

Unable to hold still, Kate nodded and followed Max's suggestion.

Out of sight, Richard turned to Max and said, "He didn't go far. I can smell him."

"Search around here, I'll check the back." Max walked away, and Richard followed his nose.

"Joey! Come on, sport, you have your mom worried."

The garage, although full of cars, didn't have any little boys camped out in it. Around back where a small shed for tools and lawn equipment stood was also empty. Richard stopped, lifted his nose to the air, and closed his eyes. Small waves of Joey came from beyond the pool. Richard listened intently straining his ears to pick up any sound they could. The house air-conditioner hummed; the clock for the sprinkler system ticked, and a neighbor's dog barked far beyond the perimeter of Max's home.

A slight flutter behind the paned glass of the pool house caught his eye.

*Of course, the pool house.*

Slowing his pace, Richard called out Joey's name again to see if the little guy would come out on his own. Small eyes peeked over the windowsill and then quickly disappeared causing him to grin.

Tapping on the door of the pool house, Richard waited to see if Joey would open it.

He didn't.

"Joey, you in there?"

"No," a tiny voice called out.

Richard twisted the knob slowly, opened the door, and let himself in. "Come on, Joey, everyone's searching for you."

Joey's head popped up behind the sofa. In his small trembling hands, he crushed a worn out blanket to his red eyes brimming with tears. His hair was pillow combed, and he still wore his pajamas from the night before.

He was too cute for words, but from the serious expression on his face, telling him so wasn't the right approach to finding out why he left.

"Boy, am I glad to see you. You have everyone searching all over for you."

His lower lip stuck out before he managed to say his first words. "I d-don't wanna leave."

"Who said you're going to go anywhere?"

"M-my mommy d-did, last night."

Richard gave his head a quick shake and made a big show out of sitting down.

Just as he thought, Joey wasn't running away so much as he was trying to stay. Patting the space next to him, Richard waited until Joey sat by his side.

"Do you want to tell me what you're doing here?"

Joey shrugged his shoulders took in the fully furnished guesthouse. "This is almost as big as our apartment. My mommy and I don't take up much space. We can stay here. Then we can be with you all the time."

"So you thought if you stayed here, maybe you won't have to go back to your home?"

Joey nodded and said, "I like it here. I don't wanna go back. When you started fighting last night I got real scared that my mommy would take me and leave."

His lips started to quiver.

"So you hid here so she wouldn't?"

"Yeah."

*Good plan, wish I'd thought of it.* Somehow, Richard didn't think hiding would make Kate search for him. "What about my home, Joey? Do you like it at the beach?"

His eyes opened wide and an enthusiastic nod shook his whole body.

"Do you think your mommy would like it there, too?"

With a little less assurance, Joey nodded again.

"Well, I think we should ask her. First, we need to let her know you're okay. She got really scared when you ran off."

"Am I in trouble?"

"Naw, mom's have a hard time being mad when they're excited to see you. But you need to promise not to run off anymore. All you had to do was come to your mom or me and tell us how you're feeling. We can solve almost anything by talking it out, sport. Promise me you won't run off again."

Joey gave a wan smile, rubbed his sweaty palm over his chest, spit in it and held it out for Richard to shake. "I promise," he said with a drop-dead serious voice.

Gritting his back teeth and not so much as breaking into a grin, Richard repeated Joey's actions and shook on it.

"Come on; let's go get your mom."

"Okay."

Joey gathered his blanket, stuffed dog, and pillow, then walked alongside Richard back to the

main house.

The door chimed, and Kate ran around the corner. Her hand flew to her open mouth. She gasped in relief. Joey nearly disappeared as she gathered him in her arms. Tears streamed from her eyes.

“Thank God, thank God,” she cried.

Kate pulled back, smoothed his hair away from his face, and asked. “Where have you been?”

“I-I just went to the little house by the pool.”

“Why, Joey? Why did you scare me like that?”

Joey sent a nervous glance up at Richard and back to his mom. “I didn’t wanna leave, not without Richard.”

Kate crushed Joey to her chest again. “You scared me, Joey. What would I do without you? You can’t run away like that again, okay?”

“I won’t, I promised Richard I wouldn’t. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well you did.” Richard knew she wanted to scold him, but she didn’t. Instead, Kate held her son and refused to meet his eyes.

Exactly what that meant, he could only guess.

## Chapter Fourteen

Kate slipped out of Joey's bedroom as silently as she could manage and tiptoed down the hall. Joey had snuck out of the house after her and Richard had finished their argument. He was too afraid to sleep alone in the guesthouse only feet away from the family. Now, exhausted and apologetic, Joey was making up for lost time.

His explanation for hiding the way he did reaffirmed Kate's need to sever their relationship with Richard and the Ritters as soon as humanly possible. Not that she really wanted to, but Joey was growing too attached. Without a promise of a future, Kate had little choice. The separation could lead to a much bigger problem than Joey running off to the house next door.

Kate found Richard alone on the front porch. Janet and Max were nowhere in sight.

"Where is everyone?"

"Janet's dad insisted they bring the baby over." Richard lifted a cup of coffee to his lips, took a sip, and then said. "How is Joey?"

"Sleeping. Poor kid, last night was quite traumatic for him."

"And mom too, I think."

Kate took a seat across from him and set her gaze upon the vast landscape. "I could never do that again and that would be too soon."

"If it helps, I don't think Joey will run off twice."

"No, I don't think so either."

For a while they didn't talk, just watched the birds splashing around the bath set in the middle of a small rose garden. Hummingbirds fluttered

around the climbing jasmine on a small trellis. How free the birds appeared flying from flower to flower. How different her life was from theirs.

"Richard," she took a deep breath before she started her speech. A speech she rehearsed in the early hours of the morning long before Joey had disappeared. "We need to talk."

He set his cup down. "Nothing good ever came out of that statement."

A smile flashed on her lips, but didn't stay. "No, I guess you're right."

"Before you go on, I have something to say."

Here it comes, she mused. *I like you but things are just too complicated. Joey is getting too attached and I don't think it's good that we keep seeing each other.* She was ready for it. Still, her heart ached enough to know she cared deeply for the man across from her, enough to want him not to say those words.

Biting her lip, Kate managed, "Go ahead."

"I think Joey is getting attached."

A huge lump started to build. Kate pulled it to the back of her throat and kept her eyes on the water flowing from the top of the fountain, the birds fluttering around it. *Here it comes. Maybe I should make it easier for him.* "Yes, he is." Was all she could manage without bursting into tears.

"So am I."

Her breath held for the blow that didn't come. Instead, her eyes skirted toward his. Uncertainty stared back at her. She waited for him to elaborate, afraid to make assumptions.

"Last night you said some things that made me take a long hard look at what's going on between us."

"And?"

"And... I don't want you going back to that dank apartment. You don't belong there anymore. You and Joey belong with me."

Kate pulled her lower lip inside her mouth and opened her eyes wide. "What are you saying, Richard?"

He stood and started pacing the deck. His hands rang out his nerves. "Move in with me, Kate."

Now it was Kate's turn to lower her eyes and wring her hands. Moving in was a huge step. If she only had herself to think about, she would likely tell him yes. "Richard..."

"I'm not finished."

"All right."

"Joey needs some stability. This last month has been tough on him."

"I know."

"I want to make it easier, on him... and you."

"Richard." Kate stood up and went over to him, placed a hand on his arm. "You want to protect us. I get that. But Joey needs more than just a change of address. Moving in with you, although tempting, isn't the answer."

His brows arched with her words. "You're saying no?"

"I'm saying," oh hell, what was she saying. "I'm saying, when I decide to move in with a man, it will have to be a permanent move. Joey wouldn't understand if something happened and we had to leave." Oh, please let him understand without having to spell it out. The only way she could move in with Richard was to do so as his wife. They hadn't known each other long enough for that.

Something in his eyes changed as understanding dawned on him. Instead of moving away, which was what Kate thought he'd do, he gathered her in his arms and pressed his lips to the top of her head.

His heart beat against his chest and flooded her ears with its rhythm. He smelled so good.

"It must be hard on you always needing to think about tomorrow. About the affect your actions will



have on your son.”

“Being a parent changes you and your priorities.”

“Nothing needs to happen today,” he said under his breath.

“Things will have to change soon, Richard.”

He pulled away and watched her. “For Joey’s sake.”

“Yes. Joey and I will have to go back as soon as the man responsible for shooting me is behind bars.”

Richards jaw clenched, but he didn’t disagree. “That might take a while.”

Sensing his game, Kate shook her head. “I’ll need to consider different options if he isn’t caught soon. Joey’s stunt proves I have to do something.”

Richard nodded, turned away. “We have a lead. Max and I will be out the next three nights following up on it.”

“Why at night?”

“It seems to be when this man strikes,” he explained without meeting her eyes. “Janet could use your help while we’re away.”

Something about the way he spoke spooked her. “Do you think you’ll be able to find him?”

“We’ll find him.”

His certainty caused alarm to course in her veins. “How can you be so sure?”

“I... there are things about me you don’t know.”

“What things?”

He glanced her way, the chocolate depths of his eyes swirled. “Things I’ll tell you about after we catch the ass that’s following you.”

*Was he doing something illegal?* She wanted to ask, but was too afraid of the answer. Instead, she murmured a simple okay and didn’t press.

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“I’m not doing it!” Cutter tossed his empty beer can at the wall. “You’re taking too damn many risks for one broad.”

He turned in time to see L.J.'s fist before it hit. Pain exploded between his eyes. Stars threatened to engulf his clouded brain. Before he could react, L.J. grabbed his shirt and hit him again.

"I am tired of your bitching. Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

With every word, his body slammed against the wall. Cutter thrust his hands out, pushing L.J. away. He couldn't win, he knew that from experience. Only a day away from the change and L.J. had the strength of three men. Provoking him was stupid, but Cutter had had enough of his shit. A sixth sense told him he wouldn't be coming home after the next job.

He needed out, and he needed out now. "Get off of me," he shouted.

"You done flapping your gums, chicken shit?"

"Yeah. I'm done." *And as soon as you turn your back, I'm outta here.*

L.J. let go, pivoted on his heel, and paced the room. "I've got a plan."

A dumb shit plan Cutter knew wouldn't work.

"Right, tomorrow night we coax out the kid and catch the girl."

"After the men get word of a heist, they'll come after us. Leaving the women unprotected."

"Don't forget the butler."

L.J. went to table full of opened pizza boxes, took his gun in his hands, and rubbed the barrel against his leg as he spoke. "I haven't forgotten him."

"No reason to kill the man, we could just knock him out." Not that Cutter planned on being there when it all went down.

"Yeah, whatever." L.J. sat back, opened another beer, and didn't put it down until it was half empty.

Maybe if L.J. got drunk enough he'd pass out. "I could use something stronger." Cutter went to the kitchen, poured two glasses of Jack, and brought the

bottle back in the room with him.

"That's more like it."

Cutter watched L.J. tip the glass back with a grin.

This would be easy.

\*\*\*\*\*

The changes were already happening. It started days before when he twisted the cap off a bottle of coke and he broke the glass. Strength was one thing, but the pull of the full moon weighed on him like a tornado. His body knew the night of the full moon approached. Smell enhanced, sight sharpened, and every twig snapped by the soft feet of rabbits and squirrels sounded like firecrackers on the Fourth of July.

A thousand questions surfaced that he pushed to the back of his mind. Asking Max now, in the eleventh hour, was a sure fire way to be roused for the rest of his adult life.

Still, he wondered if the transformation would be painful. Would he be able to communicate with his brother in wolf form? Would he howl at the moon and eat grass because he felt the need?

Then there was Kate. As much as he wanted to appease all her fears, he had too many of his own with the unknown on the horizon. He couldn't come out and tell her about his new found change. Not until he knew what it was all about.

Devon called when Kate tucked Joey into bed after his night all alone. There was a lead, and the possibility of Kate's attackers facing justice was high. As long as he and Max could track them in wolf form, Kate would be free to live her life.

A life he wanted to live with her.

Her unspoken words of commitment didn't come as a surprise. In fact, the ease in which his mind went from living with him to marriage was more of shock.

She was right. Marriage was the only solution.

Thinking about it calmed his frazzled nerves. He couldn't wait to put all the nonsense of the men that tracked her behind them so he could pop the question.

He loved her. All of her. She belonged with him, forever.

Within the hour, the first of many full moons would work its magic on him. He welcomed it.

He and Max would meet Devon at the gates after sunset. There, Devon would take them to where he believed the culprits hid.

\*\*\*\*

Kate stared out into the setting sun and wondered if she was doing the right thing. The idea was hers, but now she had second thoughts.

Richard wouldn't approve, which was why she kept it from him. But she needed to get her life back.

She found Richard in the kitchen talking with Max and Janet. Silence hit the room when she entered, making her wonder what secrets they held. Downcast eyes and quick hellos added to her uncertainty.

"We were just about to leave," Richard said, walking around the counter and putting a reassuring arm over her shoulders.

"So soon?"

"Devon seems to think tonight is when he'll strike again."

"Devon's the police officer?" she asked, knowing full well who he spoke of.

"Yeah."

"Come on, bro. Night is fast coming." Max kissed his wife and winked at Kate when he walked by.

"Be careful," Kate whispered when he drew her close.

His lips met hers with such tenderness, moisture gathered behind her lids. It felt like goodbye. She'd been in tears for one reason or another ever since they met. More would come. Of

that, there was no doubt.

"We'll talk in the morning," he said when he pulled away.

Kate nodded. Her heart ached. "Be safe."

They walked out together in the direction of the garage.

Janet turned to her and said, "How about a movie?"

Kate shook her head. "You don't have to entertain me. Brandy is sleeping."

"So."

"Please, I remember what it was like with a newborn. You're exhausted, tired and did I say exhausted?"

They both laughed.

"Go to bed, Janet. Brandy will be crying for food in a couple of hours. I can help with the changing, but you're in charge of the milk department."

"Are you sure?" Janet asked, obviously torn.

"I insist. Joey is already asleep, and Richard is gone for the night. I'll watch the news and hit the hay myself."

"But I..."

"But nothing." Kate turned Janet's shoulders in the direction of the stairs and gave a little shove. "Bed!"

\*\*\*\*

The florescent lights of the garage flickered on. Neither of them moved toward any of the parked cars.

"It won't be long now," Max told him.

"I can feel it."

Max patted his back, smiled, and said, "You've done the right thing. We'll catch this bastard tonight. Between the two of us, he doesn't stand a chance."

"I hope you're right."

"I am."

Richard felt his heart accelerate, his vision

sharpened. "Max..."

"Yeah?"

His breath came in pants. Bones shifted. "I'm going to ask Kate to marry me." It was a confession and a distraction. Anything to get his mind off the unknown.

Max smiled, shook his head. "About time."

"Yeah. I think so, too."

All of a sudden, the air thinned, and breathing became a chore. As if completely intoxicated, Richard hit the floor at the same time Max did. The inability to stand erect tossed all of his equilibrium out the door. Gelatinous arms and legs shimmered under his skin. His mouth opened to yell but no voice came from his vocal cords. Instead, a howl started at the bottom of his morphing lungs and found its way out. Popping, stretching and pain exploded while teeth elongated and ears came forward. The pain was brief, and replaced with a need to shake.

On four legs, Richard's head seemed to spin while his body adjusted to the change. Although the level of his sight was lower, his senses made up for the loss. None of the new abilities he had experienced since Max bit him compared to the change. Where he heard the snapping of a twig from a running bunny, he now heard the fast flutter of the hare's heart. The fear he smelled from Kate was enhanced ten fold. He wondered if it was Kate he smelled now, or the scent of others in neighboring homes.

Richard glanced at Max, and opened his mouth to talk. He barked. Max shook his head, mouth pulled back in what looked like a grin.

Ass, he thought. *He's laughing at me.* Richard's bark turned into a growl, but the hair on his back was down.

*I heard that.* Max's voice echoed in his head.

*What the...*

*Oh, didn't I tell you? Max's wolfish grin grew bigger. Telepathy is alive and well. In this form, we can talk to our kind. Hear the thoughts of those like us.*

*Damn! That must be a bitch when you're on a hunt with Dad.* Richard shook out a leg, surprised how normal it felt.

*Oh, Bro... You just wait. You haven't seen anything yet!*

Max nodded toward the door of the garage and started walking.

The desire to take off in a run was overwhelming. Without words, Max yipped and took off in a sprint. Richard followed his lead.

\*\*\*\*

Kate stretched her arms over her head and settled into the large couch then grabbed one of the many remotes on the coffee table. She pressed the red 'on' button and the TV came to life. The satellite system required a second remote to operate the channels so Kate picked up another gadget thinking it was the right one. Instead of turning on the satellite, the bank of monitors Richard had shown her on her first day in the Ritter home swiveled into view. Each flickered on until Kate saw no less than twelve different views of the estate. The baby's sleeping face brought a smile to Kate's. She saw James sitting in his room reading. Even the pool glistened as the last rays of sun stretched across its surface.

Movement from the monitor of the garage caught her attention. Richard stood with Max in deep conversation. Although Kate couldn't hear the words said, she still felt as if she were eavesdropping. Her finger hovered over the button of the remote to turn off the monitors when Richard fell to the floor.

Kate jumped to her feet, ready to run to his aid when she noticed his body start to change.

Eyes wide, she saw movement from under the skin of his face. Hair grew over his arms, arms that shrank before her eyes.

Kate closed her eyes, rubbed them, then forced them open again. Richard still thrashed on the ground. The same changes were happening to Max. "Oh my, God," she choked out.

Fear coursed through her. Every hair on her body stood on end. She couldn't breathe. She opened her mouth to scream but only a squeak came. Her hand flew to her lips but her eyes never left the unbelievable scene unfolding before her.

"Oh my, God," she whispered to herself. *This isn't happening. I'm going crazy.*

Richard, or what had been Richard, stepped out of his tattered clothing and shook.

Kate's lip trembled, her eyes filled with moisture.

He was the exact image of her nightmares.

He was the black wolf.

Unable to hold herself up, Kate slumped down to the couch.

Richard's words came back to her. *"There are things about me you don't know."*

Max and Richard headed out the door of the garage at a run. Afraid to move, Kate closed her eyes and listened. Remembering the surveillance, she opened them and watched as they ran across the grounds and toward the gate. There, lights of a vehicle shined in. Both wolves scaled the wall and jumped into the waiting car.

Time stood still in those minutes following the shock of a lifetime. She knew the Ritters had secrets, but turning into animals wasn't something she expected. It would have been easier if they said they were part of some big mafia, she thought.

Could Richard turn to a wolf at any time? Was the wolf in the restaurant like him? She ran her fingers through her hair and tried to clear her mind.



They lied to her, all of them. Janet, Max, James, and Richard. Now the question was what to do about it? She glanced at her watch.

After turning off the set and monitors, Kate rushed to the stairs as silently as she could.

## Chapter Fifteen

Richard scrambled into the unmarked car and waited for Devon to pull away. It took effort to filter out the unwanted noise and listen to the cop's words. Once he did, he wasn't happy with what he heard.

"We have a problem," Devon said as he drove.

Unable to communicate back, Richard only stared.

"A call came through with a tip. The thing is we don't know if it's a hoax," he explained. "The caller said a hold up like the one last month would take place within the hour in Porter Ranch. If it's a hoax then our man might be trying to lure us away from your place, Max."

Devon pulled off the road just outside Max's estate.

*Son of a bitch!* Richard said to his brother.

*He's hiding something.* Max nodded toward their trusted friend.

*Yeah, I think so too. Damn does he know we can talk like this?*

*No, it's the only secret we keep from those who aren't like us. Except for family.*

*You never told me.*

*You never asked!*

"I think you two should split up. One of you should stay here and keep an eye on things. I have an officer stationed behind the pool house and another by the gate." Devon told them.

Both of them would want to stay close to home.

Max pawed at the door. *I'll stay. Something*

*doesn't smell right anyway.*

*Watch your back*, Richard yelled inside his head.

Devon opened the door, Max jumped free of the car.

"We'll check out the lead, if Richard doesn't sense anything, well head straight back," Devon told them both.

Max ran from the car back toward the house.

Richard sat back and waited for Devon to drive him away.

\*\*\*\*

Kate silently packed her bags and tiptoed around Joey's room collecting his things.

She glanced at her watch. Twenty more minutes and she would walk outside, as planned, knowing the cop she spoke with earlier watched.

It was a risk she had to take. The man or wolf or whatever it was that stalked her would have to come out of hiding eventually. She called Officer Moore, and suggested a set up to catch the man who shot her. He was more than happy to go along with the plan. He did ask that she tell no one, especially Richard. Did he know what Richard was?

What was he exactly?

Kate brushed the thoughts from her mind and checked her watch again.

*Ten more minutes.*

She sat down and waited.

With a small knife hidden in the palm of her hand, Kate disabled the chime on the door and walked through the threshold.

A full moon peeked through the white clouds that shone down on her. Fear of what was coming threatened to engulf her.

Taking one hesitant step after the other, she listened to every sound of the night. Santa Ana winds were forecasted for later that night, but already the wind started to blow. The muffled sounds of the night floated away with them.

Five minutes alone in the dark felt like five hours. A squeak of wood had her neck stiffen and pulse speed up.

If the dog or man showed up, Officer Moore told her to retreat to the safety of the house and lock the doors.

She tried to act normal, but knew she failed miserably. The moon caught her eye again. It was fully a month ago when she was shot. Her mind wrapped around the fact but couldn't place its importance. Her eyes squeezed together in thought. Like a name or a word on the tip of your tongue, her frustration mounted. *Why is the moon important?*

Then she went perfectly still.

Her eyes shifted to her right. There he stood, on all fours. The wolf from the restaurant watched her every move.

Somehow, while she watched the moon, she'd moved closer to the rail and farther from the door. Could she reach it in time? Without losing sight of the wolf, she took one hesitant step away.

He growled.

She moved fast, but he moved faster. With one jump, he placed himself between her and safety.

Behind her, another growl came from the shadows. Her body tensed, afraid to move. Was there more than one wolf? Was it Richard or Max? Would they harm her?

A third noise came from another direction, but Kate wouldn't take her eyes from the wolf in front of her. Sweat pearled on her face, her hands clenched at her side. She felt the blade of the knife as it nicked her skin. She lifted her hand up bringing the knife before her eyes. It was only slightly larger than the fangs of the animal.

A gush of air escaped her lungs in a nervous laugh.

Her hands shook. "Back!" she yelled at the beast. "Get back!"

He moved forward.

She stepped away.

Then, from the east of the porch, a voice yelled out. "Hey!"

There, a uniformed cop stood with his gun drawn.

*Ahh, come to the rescue, huh, hero?* L.J. shifted his gaze from his prey to his foe.

*You don't stand a chance in my home, ass wipe. You might as well leave now.*

*So, you're the big brother. I noticed lil' bro walking behind you on the way out. Together the two of you don't stand a chance against me.* L.J. lifted his ass off the ground and licked his chops in confidence. *Maybe when I'm done with this one, I'll claim yours for me as well.*

L.J. bit back a bark when Max's hair stood on end. Kate stood staring at him, terror stricken on her face. This was going to be easy.

\*\*\*\*

Devon's cell phone rang. Devon's body tensed.

"Dammit," he cursed turning the car around. Several cars swerved to avoid a crash, tossing Richard to the floor.

"He's at the house." Devon placed a portable light on the dash and hit a switch. Sirens blared and oncoming traffic moved to the side giving them room.

At over 90 mph, they raced back to Max's home.

All the while, Richard cursed himself for leaving.

\*\*\*\*

"Lady, back away from the dog."

"I'm trying."

The wolf moved between her and the cop with one pounce. The cop could miss him and hit her if he fired his weapon.

The growl from behind grew louder. She tilted her head in the direction of the noise. A shadow

figure of another wolf appeared, its coat covered by darkness. Was it friend or foe?

The cop aimed his gun toward the other animal. His eyes twitched between the two.

"Shit," the cop cursed.

Just then, a light from a window above illuminated the outside. The squeal of a baby crying grabbed everyone's attention.

Kate took her chance and leapt for the door.

The wolf turned and ran at her.

Her foot tripped over the welcome mat and landed her face first on the planks of the deck. The wolf from behind attacked.

Flashing lights indicated that more officers were on their way.

Kate tried to roll away from the fighting animals, but something caught her pants and kept her from moving far.

One of the wolves had her by the leg. They blurred together.

She kicked with all her might. One shoe caught the animal's leg. He let go. She crawled to the door, panting. Terror overtook every cell of her body.

Janet appeared in the window. She yelled from beyond the plane of glass, "Don't shoot!"

Kate scrambled to her feet. Barks and growls saturated the night. A car sped up the driveway. Once stopped, the driver side door opened, Officer Moore and another wolf jumped out.

\*\*\*\*

*Max!* Richard yelled, if screaming in your head counted, he thought.

*Over here!*

His speed was massive, his strength enhanced by the light of the moon.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kate slip between the folds of the front door. Momentarily startled, Richard stopped and stared. *What is she doing outside?* He thought.

Behind him Devon yelled, "What the fuck are you waiting for. Get him!"

In an instant, Richard knew Devon had used Kate to lure their prey. His first desire was to pounce on the man, his hair rose and bile flowed in the back of his throat.

His friend. His colleague. What right did he have to go behind his back?

Then a howl from Max brought his attention to the fight at hand.

Richard's sight leveled on the wolf who had Max pinned to the ground.

Animal hate burned from the pit of his being and emerged in a threatening growl.

He leapt. All fours caught his enemy moments before the bastard could sink his teeth into his bother's neck.

Within seconds, the two wolves converged on the one. He managed to get free and bound off the steps. Kate ran to the door, Janet opened it then slammed it again once she was safely inside.

Without words, they both watched through the window. Moore yelled at his men to hold their fire while the animals fought.

The unmistakable sound of a wounded dog screamed in the night sent horror through her body. Janet grabbed Kate's arm, her expression pained. Was it Richard or Max who yelped?

Dear god, what was she thinking? Two men turned into animals before her eyes and were now fighting for their lives with another of their kind.

Moore's flashlight flickered on the beasts. As if on cue, the light went out. He shook the maglite, cursed and tried again.

*Two against one?* L.J. managed between bites and yelps. *Chicken shit of you.*

Richard caught his leg in a death grip.

*Is that all you've got?* L.J.'s mental words started to waver. His partner in crime had left, and he knew he was on his own. He blocked the thoughts from his mind, trying his best to make the werewolves around him fear for their lives.

*You've pissed off the wrong pack.*

*And threatened our women. No one gets away with that and lives.*

L.J. sunk his teeth into Richard side. He recoiled in pain.

*Once I'm done with you. I'm going to sink my bone into that bitch of yours. And she's going to love it. She'll beg for more.*

Richard stood up, teeth bared. *Over my dead body!*

*If you insist.*

The officer outside managed to turn on the light. This time when he aimed toward the fighting wolves, only the figure of a man, naked and seemingly dead, lay on the lawn.

Kate peered into the darkness.

The thin man, in no way resembled the Ritter brothers. And they were nowhere to be seen.

Relief poured from her limbs. Janet slumped against her.

"It's over."

Kate heard Janet's words from a distance.

James came up from behind them and opened the door when one of the officers knocked.

Uniformed officers crowded the house.

Moore pulled Janet and Kate aside, away from ears. "They aren't harmed. Animal control will make a sweep and ask for descriptions. Be vague."

Janet searched Kate's eyes. Kate said nothing.

Questions came from several officers. "Do you own a dog?"

"No," Janet told him.

"Have you seen these dogs before?"



"Only the one from the hold up at The Eatery," Kate said.

"Do you recognize the man in the yard?"

"No."

All the answers were honest. None indicated that Richard or Max had morphed into animals. Why would they? Saying she saw such a thing would land her in the nut house and Joey in a foster home.

She sat back, followed Janet's lead, and waited for the cops to leave. Joey woke at some point scared and confused. Kate did her best to ease his fears and put him back to bed.

It was after two in the morning before the majority of officers left. Moore stayed behind with two set of ears who obviously didn't know the truth.

Kate excused herself to bed, Janet followed.

Alone in her room Janet eyed the packed suitcase. "You're leaving." It wasn't a question. "I can't blame you. I ran too when I first found out. Max scared the hell out of me."

Kate sat down and let her talk.

"You did see, didn't you?"

"I accidentally turned on the monitors in the den when I was trying to change the channel of the set. Richard and Max were in the garage."

"Then the moon came up."

"I don't understand, Janet. What are they? Why..."

"Werewolves."

Of course, the full moon. Kate shook her head, "How?"

"I think Richard should explain this to you."

"Well Richard isn't here, so you get the honor."

Kate wasn't letting her off the hook.

"I don't think..."

"No!" Kate raised her voice to a yell. "You've all been lying to me for a month. You knew all along the man I am sleeping with turns into an animal and you said nothing. You owe me."

"I knew he would turn, like Max has for years. But the thing you need to understand is Richard turned for you. Only for you."

"I don't understand."

Janet sat on the bed next to her and lowered her voice. "Being a werewolf, turning every month, is something Richard and Max have chosen to do. Richard did it for you. To help find the man who shot you."

Kate still didn't understand. Janet must have sensed her confusion so she went on.

"The Ritter family lives their lives protecting innocent people from being turned into evil. See, if you were bitten by the man who was after you, every month you would have turned into a creature like him."

"And if I were bitten by Max or Richard?"

"You would turn, like them, but you wouldn't be evil."

Kate stood, walked to the window, and peered out into the night. "Werewolves don't exist."

"It takes some time to get used to. I didn't believe it at first either," Janet sighed. "The bottom line, however, is Richard never chose this life until you came into his."

"I don't like the responsibility of knowing he made the change for me. I didn't ask him to."

"I know you didn't."

"Can he change back?"

"No."

Kate squeezed her eyes shut, shook her head. "When did he do this?"

"The night after he met you."

"Why do something so drastic for someone you hardly know?"

Janet walked over to where she stood and met her eyes. "Max knew we were meant for each other almost immediately. He calls me his soul mate."

"Oh, Janet. I don't know what to do."

“Then do nothing, for now.”

She needed to think. The question was could she do so while staying under Richard’s nose?

## Chapter Sixteen

*I have to go to her.* Richard panted, and adrenaline surged in his veins.

*We wait.*

*Did you see her face? She knows. She knows it was me, us. Shit. How? How does she know, Max?* Richard paced the wooded area behind Max's estate.

Cops swarmed the yard. Flashes of cameras lit up the night sky.

Already the moon was low on the horizon. The second change of the night was coming.

*Wait. It won't be long. You can talk to her then.*

Richard knew his brother was right. Still, he hated the waiting.

By morning, she could be gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Richard and Max came in after sunrise. Devon sat with a cup of coffee and a newspaper at the kitchen counter. The rest of the officers had left.

Richard marched over to Devon, wrapped his fingers around his throat, and pinned him to the wall. "You used Kate as a decoy, didn't you?"

"Settle down. She didn't get hurt."

"You bastard." Richard pulled his arm back, fist clenched. Max stopped him before he made contact.

"She could have been killed, or worse," he yelled.

"That didn't happen."

"No thanks to you!"

Around the corner, Kate and Janet ran into the room. Kate's eyes held dark circles, evidence that she hadn't slept.

"Everything okay?" Janet asked.

"Fine." Devon shrugged away from Richard,

putting distance between them.

“Good, we’ve had enough violence for one night.” Janet went to her husband and kissed him.

Richard watched Kate. Her gaze never left him.

“Did he call you?” Richard shrugged toward Devon.

“I called him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Kate’s eyes narrowed to thin slits. “A bit hypocritical of you, don’t you think? Seems you’re the one with all the secrets. Being bait to catch a werewolf is minor compared to being one yourself.”

“I think it’s time I go.” Devon moved for the door.

“I’m not done with you,” Richard said, his eyes never leaving Kate’s.

“Yeah, yeah... you can kick the shit out of me later. By the way... nice work last night. The bastard dead on the lawn turned five women before he went down. He wanted his own harem according to his accomplice. Kate would have been number six.”

Richard saw her shiver with the information.

“It’s a good thing we got him when we did,” Max added. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

They left with Janet on their heels.

“We need to talk.” Richard gestured toward the back door. He half-expected Kate to walk in the opposite direction, when she led the way outside a small measure of relief washed over him.

The feeling didn’t last.

“I’ve packed my bags,” she told him as soon as they sat.

“Kate...”

She held up her hand. “Let me finish. I packed my bags before I found out... before I knew what you are.”

His heart slammed into his chest. He smelled his own fear. “I see.”

“I don’t think you do. I thought it would be best

for Joey and me to break away. His attachment to you grows daily, and I didn't want you to feel pressured by him. When you asked me to move in with you, I wanted to throw myself at you and scream yes. If it wasn't for Joey, I would have."

A sliver of hope started to build. He knocked it back and prepared for the worse.

*She's setting me up for a fall.*

Kate caught his eyes and cast a slight grin. "I thought if we left, you'd be able to know for certain if you wanted us in your life. Not only to protect us from the man who stalked me, but for the right reasons."

"What reasons?"

"Love." She swallowed hard. "You see, I've fallen in love with you. But I promised myself a long time ago, not to fall into the trap of one way love ever again. Last night I realized I never really loved Joey's dad. I may have been torn up when he left me, but I think now it was more about being alone and pregnant than anything deeper. My feelings for you are so much stronger."

The pounding of Richard's heart accelerated.

Kate went on. "Then last night happened. I couldn't believe what I saw. Even after it was all over and Janet explained to me what you are, I couldn't believe it. You scared the hell out of me, Richard. I wanted to run away as fast as my legs could carry me."

"I wanted to tell you," he took her hand in his. She didn't pull away.

"I wouldn't have believed you. I know that now. Janet said you made the change for me. I need to know why? Why did you do it?"

He pulled her hand up to his lips, brushed them with a kiss, and nestled them against his cheek. "Because I love you."

Her pulse quickened.

"I knew from the beginning you were the one for

me. I'd never considered the change before. My family tried to talk me into it for years, but until you, I never saw the need. I love you, Kate."

She opened her mouth to talk. It was his turn to cut her off.

"I'm not done. I know you have a responsibility to your son. Asking you to move in with me was a cop out. I know that now. I want you to marry me, Katie."

Her eyes grew wide with surprise. Her mouth fell open.

"You need to know that I'm a werewolf. I will always be a werewolf."

"I know." A faint smile met her lips.

"I'm not the best catch in town. I'm going to turn furry three nights a month and possibly bring fleas into the house. But I promise not to pee on the rug, or hump your leg."

Kate let out a giggle. Her bottom lip curled into her mouth, tears started to well.

"Richard."

"Oh, and I won't lick myself. Although I have to tell you..., the urge was there last night," he laughed.

"Oh, Richard," she burst out laughing.

"Say yes. Marry me. I've already given you my heart. I changed for you, only for you."

Kate paused, and for a brief moment, he thought she was going to deny him. Then her head started to bob up and down.

"Yes, Oh, God. Yes! I'll marry you."

Relief burst in one rush of air from his lungs before he pulled her into his arms and captured her lips. She melted against him. And for the second time in his life, he knew he'd made the right decision. She was his mate. For life.

She pulled her lips away from his and asked, "What are we going to tell Joey?"

"The truth. Kids understand these things much

more than adults. I knew about werewolves since I was in diapers. I got a kick out of people thinking they didn't exist. Joey will understand."

Kate leaned in and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Did you really want to..." she glanced down between his legs. "You know?"

He grinned. "You know how they say; why do dogs lick their balls?"

"Because they can," she finished for him. "Well, let's see if I can make sure you never have to."

His eyebrows lifted, "Sounds like a plan to me."

"I love you, Richard."

He smiled, nuzzled her neck, and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, we have to wake up Joey and give him the good news."



## EPILOGUE

Perfect. Everything was absolutely perfect. White rose flower arrangements adorned every table along with glimmering opaque candles. The band played and everyone danced.

Joey made her proud, standing between her and Richard while they said their vows. His little eyes twinkled with unshed tears when the minister pronounced them husband and wife. He even shouted out, "And Daddy and Mommy, right?" The church burst into laughter.

After sealing their vows with a kiss that reached the very depths of her soul, Richard picked Joey up in one arm and walked them both down the aisle.

As they walked past the pews holding those that watched, Kate saw her father and mother openly weeping.

It had been three months since Kate decided to bury the hatchet and rekindle her relationship with her parents.

It seems with forgiveness comes absolution. Their heated talks in the beginning gave way to screaming over each other to be heard. In the end, they all had their say and resolved their differences.

Now, along with grandparents, Joey had a father. And for the first time in the child's life he had an Aunt, Uncle and a baby cousin. The Ritter family was huge and all of them accepted Joey and Kate with open arms and open hearts.

"Hey." Richard returned with a bottle of unopened champagne and two clean glasses for the limo ride to the airport. "Why such a serious face?"

Kate turned to her husband and fanned her

hands around his waist, pulling him close. "I was just thinking about how happy I am."

"Good," he said with a sigh. "I wouldn't want you having second thoughts now."

"Never." Kate pointed to Joey who was dancing on his grandmother's toes. "I can't believe how much he's changed since you've come into his life."

He moved closer to her ear and whispered, "Does he still ask you if I'll bite him for Halloween?"

"Daily. He thinks his costume would take first prize."

"I hate to tell him that there isn't a full moon this year on Halloween. He's going to be disappointed trick or treating with just plain old me and you."

Kate stared up into his eyes, her smile radiating off his. "He will never be disappointed in you. You, Richard Ritter are his number one hero."

"I may be his hero now, Kate Ritter. But you were his first."

Just then Joey scrambled up to them, his tie loosened, his hair ruffled. "Are you going now?"

"Yep, it's that time," Richard told him.

"You be good for grandma and grandpa, okay?"

He shuffled his feet and wiggled his nose. "I will. They are taking me to Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm and Magic Mountain. I'll have more fun then you will on a stuffy old island."

Kate bent down to give her son a kiss. "Are you happy, sport?"

He smiled, nodded, and whispered in her ear. "I only want one more thing."

"He's not going to bite you."

"I know, that isn't it."

"What then?"

He put his little hand up to her ear, "A baby brother."

Richard leaned down and put his arm around him. "I'll see what I can do about that."

“Wow, you could hear me? Mom, you gotta let him nibble on me. Think of all fun I could have.”

Kate laughed, whipped away a little tear, and hugged her men. “Oh, boy do I have my hands full.”

“Just wait until I get my baby brother. Then we’ll both drive you crazy!”



## About the Author

Catherine Bybee has been addicted to books for as long as she can remember. With the love of reading romance novels came the desire to write them as well. Creating worlds where passion and intrigue collide gives Catherine the perfect balance.

Catherine currently lives in Southern California with her husband and two growing sons. If she isn't busy at her computer or with her family, you'll find her volunteering for any number of organizations or working as a RN in a busy Emergency Room.

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