

Gianna
Xander



Swords

Discovering the man who once rescued her meets all the qualifications of a monster, a young Eden flees. Pregnant and scared, she meets Edward, a knight in shining armor. But his promises aren't all they seem. As her hero turns into a villain, Eden again flees, this time in fear for her child's life. With luck and money fading, Eden is forced to return to the place she once fled—and the only man who can provide protection for her child.

Jake mourned the loss of his mate when she abandoned him and always hoped for her return. Imagine his surprise when she turns up at his birthday party like a long awaited present. Anger and hope war as he sorts through his feelings and comes to the only conclusion possible—until the truth of the child is dropped in his lap.

Will Jake offer the child the security and protection her terrified mother so desperately seeks? And does Eden have the courage to face a living, breathing werewolf?

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

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

Craving Eden
Copyright © 2010 Tianna Xander
ISBN: 978-1-55487-471-2
Cover art by Angela Waters

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.extasybooks.com

CRAVING EDEN
TAROT – THREE OF SWORDS

BY

ΤΙΑΝΝΑ ΧΑΠΔΕΡ

CHAPTER ONE

Eden McGuire tugged her daughter into the old diner, the scent of grilled cheeseburgers and spaghetti struck her in the face. She expected to see at least one person she knew from her past. She didn't expect to see over twenty in the midst of a party. The familiar refrain of a birthday song rang in the air.

As she stepped through the door, faces turned and people stared. The song, now forgotten, faded into oblivion as she and Chastity took off their coats and moved to sit in the nearest available booth. She nervously smoothed a paper napkin over her lap and moved the condiments from the end of the table to the center where her daughter could easily reach them.

Posters and streamers hung from the door and windows boasted signs with *Happy Birthday*, *Sheriff* emblazoned on them all. Some of the guests even held a few.

Norma Collins, the waitress in the diner when Eden lived here before, stepped from the center of

the crowd and moved forward with an order pad in her hand. Reaching up and back, she pulled a pencil from the tight bun at the back of her head. Eden couldn't remember a time when the older woman didn't have her hair slicked back in a severe knot and at least one pencil stuck in the thick bun.

Not much had changed over the years. The diner still boasted greasy paper menus, a puke green floor and harvest gold tables with matching upholstered seats. The wooden high-backed booths lining the outer walls of the dining area still afforded their occupants a measure of privacy and gave the place the unique odor of fried food and antiques.

The familiar scent of old wood permeated everything. It was just as she remembered. Eden couldn't stop her grin as her saw Chastity's expression. Her daughter sat in the booth across from her, her nose wrinkled and a frown on her pretty face.

"It stinks in here, Mom." She picked up the paper napkin in front of her and held it over her nose.

"What'll ya have," Norma asked in a brusque businesslike tone. Her expression spoke volumes. She didn't want to take their order. She wanted to get back to celebrating with everyone else and she didn't care if they knew it. One thing was certain.

There wasn't a glimmer of recognition on her face.

Eden knew there was a sure bet that if Norma *had* recognized her, she would have shamed her by pointing those bony, red-tipped fingers her way with the word tramp on her lips.

Norma never liked her and since she'd left Branson and left Jake Blackstone behind several years before, Eden was sure the older woman thought her only a step below the anti-Christ.

The older woman glanced over her shoulder for a few seconds, then turned her attention back to Eden. "Look, lady," she said, snapping her gum. "I don't got all day."

Eden cringed at Chastity's grin and shook her head. The movement was nearly imperceptible, but her daughter took the hint. She gave the eight-year old one last warning glare before turning her attention to Norma.

"We'll both take a cheeseburger all the way and an order of fries. I'll take an unsweetened iced tea and my daughter will have a glass of cola."

Norma moved off with their order as the partiers decided their show was over and started to talk amongst themselves again.

Eden rested her chin in her hand and stared straight ahead, not daring to look toward the group. There was no telling who was in that cluster of people. Nor was there any way of knowing if someone would recognize her. Besides,

what if *he* was there? It would make sense. The party was for the sheriff and last Eden knew, Jake was a part-time deputy. Staring through the front window, she hoped he wasn't in that crowd. She wasn't ready to face him. Not yet. Facing him, telling him, was going to be difficult enough without an audience.

How did a woman tell a man, an ex-lover, that she had hidden his child from him for nearly eight years? How could she explain to him why she had panicked and run, why she'd cheated them both out of so many years together?

She gazed at Chastity for a minute. She had his eyes. Emerald green and slightly almond-shaped, they looked so much like his it almost made her want to cry sometimes. Her sable brown hair was the exact shade of his and she had his smile. The little devil used that smile shamelessly to get whatever she wanted. Eden cast another quick glance out the window before returning her gaze to her daughter who watched her with wisdom well beyond her years.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

God, she looked so much like her father just then. Her real father. Not the jerk who had claimed her as his the day she was born. At the time they met, Edward had looked like a knight in shining armor. It wasn't everyday that a woman on the run found a man willing to take in and care

for a young, unwed mother-to-be—a man who promised to love her and her illegitimate child unconditionally. What she hadn't known was that what Edward had really wanted was a slave. A helpless child he could manipulate into the ideal trophy wife.

It had taken ten short months for Edward James Horton the third to show his true colors. After ten months, the honeymoon had come to a very final and abrupt end.

Eden spent the last seven years running with the money she'd withdrawn from the joint bank account he'd set up for her to shop with. Now she was broke with nowhere else to go. Out of money, her resources depleted, she must find someone to care for her baby. She couldn't allow Edward to get his hands on her. Cruel and manipulative, he would make Chastity's life a living Hell.

Chastity's biological father was her last and only hope. If there was one person whom she believed would protect her daughter from the animal Edward had turned out to be, it was Jake Blackstone, part-time contractor, farmer and part-time deputy of Branson.

Norma dropped Eden's drink on the table with a sharp crack of the glass against the Formica tabletop and an attitude that screamed she would rather be with her friends, celebrating. "Your lunch will be ready in a few minutes."

The glare the other woman threw their way made Eden wonder if the waitress was vindictive enough to people she perceived as strangers to spit in their meal. She hoped not. "Thank you," Eden murmured, then picked up her tea to take a sip as she watched Norma scurry over to the crowd in the back of the dining room.

"Come on, birthday boy," Norma said as she held her arms open. "Get your skinny ass over here and give your Aunt Norma a hug."

Aunt Norma? Oh, God, no! It can't be. Eden searched her mind frantically for the date, then closed her eyes with a sigh. *Shit, shit and triple shit.* "Come on, sweetie, we have to go."

"Before we eat?" Chastity gave her a look that promised a temper tantrum. Tears filled her eyes and she thrust her bottom lip out. "But I'm so hungry." She drew the last two words out in her most pathetic whine.

Eden tried not to look their way, but she couldn't help it. He drew her gaze just as surely as a moth seeks light. Jake hadn't just gotten older, by the looks of him he'd gotten better, much better. He didn't show his age as much as others would. As much as she did. He wouldn't. Jake wasn't entirely human. That was what had her running into the night eight years ago, scared and pregnant without a dime to her name.

Shaking herself from her reverie, Eden watched

as Jake pushed his way through the good-natured crowd of people. He grinned at Norma, then gave her a hug that lifted her off her feet. It wasn't too much of a feat. Norma probably weighed ninety-two pounds soaking wet in a sleeping bag. What would have impressed Eden was if he lifted her more substantial bodyweight off the ground so easily.

Eden couldn't help it, her gaze stayed glued on Norma, whose back was to them as she hugged the most handsome man Eden had ever seen in her life. Liquid heat rushed from her middle, straight to her core. She squeezed her thighs together, hoping her clit wouldn't begin to throb as it always had in his presence.

While time had been kind to Jake, it hadn't been quite so kind to her. She gained forty pounds while she was pregnant with Chastity and every one of those forty pounds clung to her like contact cement.

Eden knew the precise moment when he recognized her. Their eyes met and his smile faded. She watched as he sniffed the air in the room, no doubt finally catching her scent and separating it from the others. Something indiscernible filled his eyes as they glittered at her. Suddenly, she felt like the most insignificant kind of prey while he was the big, bad wolf.

Almost unconsciously, her fingers tightened

around her glass of tea. She fisted her other hand in her lap to hide the telltale trembling. If all of these people here were like him—and they must be—she couldn't afford to show them any form of weakness. She sat almost as if frozen as Jake turned, murmured something to his family and friends, then made his way over to her table.

"Eden Joy McGuire." The tone of his voice turned her name into more of an accusation than an inquiry.

He barely spared his daughter a glance before turning his accusing glare back to Eden. "You left me."

Of course she did. He had told her something outrageous, something she couldn't believe until she'd seen the evidence. "Don't start this here, Jake." She cast a meaningful glance toward the people who came to help him celebrate his birthday. She wondered how old he was now. He hadn't really aged a day since she left. He'd gotten thicker, more muscular, but nothing more. "Please, Jake. Let's not discuss this here."

The look he gave her spoke volumes. "Then where, pray tell, *can* we discuss it?" A muscle jumped in his jaw as he looked straight ahead, through the front window of the restaurant.

It was obvious he didn't want to look at Chastity again. Perhaps he couldn't bear to look on her child, whom he must think belonged to

another man. He had wanted to marry her all those years ago. She didn't entertain the idea that he still cared, but she hoped he could come to care for his own flesh and blood.

Eden placed her hand on his forearm, a gesture she had made often when he was angry before. She pulled it away when he looked down, the muscles of his arm jumping beneath his tanned skin. "How about the park?"

The park was in the center of town, near his parent's home, if they hadn't moved. It was the most logical place she could think of, considering he would most likely want to introduce his newfound daughter to her grandparents. She took a quick glance around the diner, wondering where they were. "How are your parents by the way?"

"Gone. Did you hope for an ally in my mother? If so, you're shit out of luck. They died not too long after you left."

She glanced pointedly at Chastity, who wasn't paying a bit of attention to them. She was too busy watching Norma carry their lunches over from the kitchen.

"Chastity can play there while we talk." She didn't say they could talk privately because she wasn't sure her daughter would take the rare opportunity to play and run off some pent-up energy.

"Here ya go, darlin'," Norma said, smiling

sweetly as she set their plates on the table in front of them. "If ya need anything, anything at all, just give me a call." Still smiling, she set the check on the table, then walked back to Jake's party.

"She sure was nice this time, Mom," Chastity said around the French fry in her mouth. "Why do you think she was so nasty before?" Leave it to a child to call out a person's rudeness.

Jake grinned at the top of her head as she bent toward her plate and took a huge bite of her burger. "That's just her way, sugar. You'll get used to her if you stay here long enough." He turned an accusing glare on Eden and raised a brow as if to say, *if you plan to stay for any length of time.*

Chastity took a sip of her cola. "Mom said we're gonna stay here for a long time if she can find a job and a place to stay cause my —"

"Stop talking and eat before your food gets cold, young lady." Eden gave Chastity her most intimidating be-quiet-and-do-what-I-say look.

Shrugging, Chastity made a face, then took another bite of her burger.

Eden ignored her meal. She wasn't hungry anymore, not now that she'd seen Jake again. Instead of grumbling from hunger, her tummy felt as though it was full of butterflies. He always had that effect on her.

Jake reached down and picked the check up off

the table. "The park it is then." He checked his watch. "What time?"

"Is thirty minutes too soon?"

"Nah." He glanced over his shoulder. "We were just finishing up here. Most everyone has to go back to work."

"That's *my* bill for lunch." She held out her hand and waited for him to give it to her.

Jake tightened his grip on the paper and held his hand out of her reach. "Consider it a welcome home present," he said as he turned and handed the check to another waitress with a twenty-dollar bill he pulled from his pocket.

Eden couldn't help but watch him as he strode away. Her tummy did more of those little flip-flops, the way it always did whenever he was around. His long legs ate up the short distance between their table and his friends. She tried not to notice how sexy he was and just how magnificently his ass filled out the tight jeans he wore. Jake Blackstone had always been a fine-looking, exceptional man and he had only improved with age.

"Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

Chastity waited until she looked at her before answering. "That was him, wasn't it?"

Eden didn't hide anything from Chastity, taking every opportunity to tell the girl about her

father every chance she got. She told her that her biological father was not the man listed on her birth certificate and that she would take her to meet him one day. She had hoped to hold out a bit longer, but the money had run out and she had just enough of it left to find a place to live and set up a household. Eden had faith that a job wouldn't be hard to find. Besides, her little girl had already had a few episodes having to do with her heritage that Eden found difficult to explain.

Sighing, Eden nodded. "Yes, sweetheart," she whispered. "That was him. But how did you know?" She watched as Chastity pushed her half-eaten plate of food away, wiped her mouth on the paper napkin, then set it on the table, her expression apprehensive.

"I...I know things sometimes." She looked down at her clasped hands as though ashamed to admit it.

Eden's heart raced. "You," pausing, she cleared her throat, pushed her unwanted plate of food aside and leaned closer to whisper. "What do you mean, *you know things sometimes?*"

Her daughter shrugged, then turned her attention back to her plate to pick at what was left of her cheeseburger. "Member when you were going to give that woman at that store a ride the other day and I told you she left with a truck driver while you were in the bathroom?"

A lump formed in Eden's throat and she nodded. "What about her?"

"She didn't really leave like I said." Chastity picked up her napkin and started to rip it into little pieces, rolling the bits into even smaller balls. "She went into the store. When you came out, I told you she left so you wouldn't give her a ride."

"Why did you do that?" Eden felt a spurt of anger at her daughter's selfishness. "You know I always try to help women less fortunate than we are. And she was just a girl, not much older than you are." She'd been fifteen or sixteen at the most—and all alone in the world. Eden had wanted the chance to convince the runaway to go home. Living on the streets was no place for a girl her age. Eden knew that from experience—hard won experience.

"Don't be mad at me, Mom." Chastity's eyes filled with tears. "She was bad."

"No, honey, she was alone and scared." Just as Eden had been after she'd run away from her...family and again after she left Jake. "I wanted the opportunity to convince her to go back home to her parents. You took that away from her."

"She couldn't go home." Again, Chastity both looked and spoke well beyond her years as she gazed at her mother, her eyes filled with immeasurable sorrow. "She killed her mom and

dad. I saw it when she shook my hand. She went into their bedroom and shot them both with her dad's gun. She would have killed us, too. She wanted to. I felt it when she touched me."

Eden felt sick. Not once in the years they traveled together had she thought of the danger of picking up a stray. She'd done it several times. Each time she convinced the girl to go home. Each time, she felt closer to her own family. The family she lost when a desperate couple kidnapped her off the street in front of her house at the age of seven. She didn't even know her real name anymore. The name she bore was the same as the couple's deceased daughter.

They could be dead now if not for her daughter's gift. "We need to go." She snatched up her purse and coat from the seat where she put them. She needed to think about how stupid she'd been. She also needed to revise what she said to Jake in the park. There were a lot of new questions to ask him about his kind. Like exactly what they could and couldn't do.

Eden refused to hold her breath that he would welcome her back with open arms. The lack of a physical relationship with him didn't even have a bearing on anything anymore. At least that's what she kept telling herself. Maybe one day she would believe it.

Hell, the man was hot. He could have any

woman in town. He could have any woman in the state, maybe even the country. He definitely wouldn't want her anymore. But that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was that he welcomed their daughter into his family, because sooner or later, Edward would finally catch up to her and, when he did, he would make good on his threat to end her life. Keeping Chastity safe and out of Edward's clutches was all that mattered.

Putting on their coats, they left the diner and headed for the car. The faded, blue sedan had seen better days. Hell, even its better days had seen better days. Covered in rust, they could no longer open the driver's side back door. She'd had to have it welded shut somewhere between Tulsa and Dallas or it would have fallen off. The trunk lid wouldn't stay open unless she propped it open with a stick, the white vinyl top leaked like a sieve and it sounded like the six cylinder engine only ran on four. Still, even though it ran horrible and looked worse, it had never failed to start and had always gotten them to where they wanted to go.

Eden hated that she would lose the car if things went as she planned. They'd all been through a lot together. It was like an old friend. If she found a job and a place to stay, she planned to drive her old dependable friend into the nearest, deepest lake. Without the car, she hoped Edward would never find them again.

Closing her eyes, Eden did something she rarely ever did, though it never seemed to work for her. Maybe her daughter would have more luck. Bowing her head, she prayed. *Please, God, let Jake welcome Chastity into his life. She needs him now more than ever. She has so many questions, as do I. Questions I don't know the answers to. Please give him the compassion to welcome her into his life. Amen.*

When she opened her eyes, she noticed that Chastity was already in the passenger seat with her seatbelt on. Sliding behind the wheel, Eden inserted the key into the ignition and smiled at the familiar chugging rumble when she turned the key.

"I hope he likes me."

"He's going to love you, sweetheart. Who couldn't?" Inside she was saying, *I do, too, honey. I do, too.*

* * * *

Jake's heart pounded in his chest as he fought to drag air into his lungs. He ran the entire distance from the diner to the park. It was seven miles. Seven miles he needed to run to take the edge off his wildness—his nearly uncontrollable urge to take Eden to the ground and fuck her from behind when she got here, daughter or no. He couldn't believe it. There really was a God. After all these

fucking years, his Eden finally got around to coming home.

He almost hadn't recognized his own mate. She had aged a bit. It wasn't surprising since humans tended to grow old a lot faster than his kind. He could slow the aging though, if Eden would allow it. He knew she wouldn't. Wasn't that the message his mate had conveyed when she hightailed it out of here as though there was a bomb up her ass and an explosive ordinance disposal unit in the next state? If it wasn't, the woman had a real strange way of showing her unconditional love and acceptance.

His mate looked the same, yet didn't. Older, more mature, she had an air of responsibility about her that wasn't present before. He should have expected that. She had a daughter now. She'd also gained a few pounds. The way people were these days about weight, Eden probably figured the pounds would keep her safe from him if she showed up carrying a little extra meat on her bones. Little did the minx know that his people regarded curves on a woman as sexy. Jake hadn't thought it was possible, but his mate was more desirable now than she had been eight years ago. He pressed his hand against his cock. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to run around behind some bushes and whip out his cock to take the edge off his nearly uncontrollable

lust before she got here.

He grimaced with self-disgust as his cock bucked behind his zipper at the thought. What did he expect? Just because his mate had finally gotten around to coming back home, it didn't mean she was going to drop to the ground and let him mount her. Eden, never one to let him stay above her for long, would never stand for a position of submissiveness, though that was just what he needed now. He needed his mate naked and below him while he buried himself balls deep into her tight cunt.

How many times had he dreamed of Eden over the years? How many times had he settled for the empty release of jerking off to her scent because she didn't have the courage to stick around eight years ago?

Jake shook his head. No. Now wasn't the time to think about shit like this. What he needed to think about was what made her leave, why would the woman of his dreams, his mate, feel the need to run from him, leaving town without a word – without a trace? What had he done to frighten her other than to tell the woman he planned to spend the rest of his life loving what he was? Was that so bad? He had never raised a hand to her in anger. In fact, he had taken care of Eden when he found her cold and alone, barely eighteen as well as living in the streets.

Another question. Who did she run to? Who took his place in Eden's life? Who gained his woman's trust enough to plant a seed in her womb so soon after she left while he sat here, his mate gone, living in the hell of forced celibacy? More importantly, who was the man he would kill for fucking his mate?

Jake thought about the little girl Eden had birthed in her absence. The child must resemble her dad. The girl didn't look like a bit her mother that was for sure. At least the color of her deep brown hair was nothing like her mother's lighter brown. He didn't remember seeing the color of her eyes, but was certain they weren't the same vivid violet that Eden had. No, the girl definitely took on her father's characteristics. The rat bastard.

Rage, unlike anything he had ever felt before surged, through him. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Eden was *his* mate, *his* woman. What's more, she should have had *his* child. By all rights, that girl should belong to him. Given his way, she would. The girl's mother belonged to him, belonged with him and, as such, Eden's children would become his own. For him, there was no other. He was Alpha wolf of the Night Forest Clan. He and his people mated for life.

He paced the parking area of the small playground near what had been his parent's home

and waited for his mate to arrive. For years, he'd waited for this chance. For more years than he would care to count, he'd gone to bed with an unbearable ache between his legs because he couldn't get it up, couldn't fuck another woman in her absence. How many times had he lain in bed, holding an article of the clothing she'd left behind in the hamper, pressed to his face as he jerked himself off?

No more. His mate had made a mistake. She'd come back to Branson. His mate wouldn't escape him again. He would mount as well as permanently mate her, preferably *with* her consent. He took a deep breath, then tried to bring his raging body back under control. God, he hoped Eden would consent because he didn't want to take her by force. However, he may have no choice. Years of abstinence could rob him of his control should she refuse him. He wanted nothing more than to feel his mate's supple body beneath him as he slid into her wet, tight sheathe and took them both to a heaven of their own making.

Jake promised himself he would try to give her time. Time to come to grips with what he was, in addition to time to accept him. But God help them both if Eden couldn't find it in her heart to welcome him into her bed.

He watched as the two beautiful females pulled up in the rattiest looking piece of shit car he had

ever seen. It looked as though it would disintegrate any minute. He wondered when the woman planned to get around to replacing it. He hoped it was before the damned thing fell apart. "Aren't you afraid that damned thing will blow up on you one of these days?" he asked as soon as they parked and got out of the car.

Eden shrugged. "What am I supposed to do? I don't have the money to replace it. Besides, it never fails to get me from point A to point B."

It probably never failed to smoke people out either. He just shook his head instead of making another comment. "About our talk." He held his arm out for her to take the lead. "I thought we'd best walk over to the wooden castle where Chas could have some fun."

"What's the wooden castle?"

Chastity gave him a look that said she practically worshipped the ground he walked on. Like he told his brothers while doling out advice to them about their women, never underestimate the power of the wooden castle when in the midst of mothers. He'd just never thought to find himself with a ready-made mother himself. All these years, he'd hoped that Eden would finally come to her senses, then get around to coming home. He never once thought she would come home in the company of a daughter—especially a daughter Chastity's age.

One thing was certain. It obviously didn't take Eden long to replace him. Her daughter was too old to have been very long in coming after she left Branson. The question that kept ticking in his mind was, whether or not Eden had been seeing the man while they were lovers. The thought made him growl. Eden glanced back at him nervously. "Don't worry. I don't plan on eating you...here."

Eden's face turned beet red as her daughter gave her an inquiring look.

"He won't really eat us, will he, Mom?"

"Of course not." She pointed to the structure all of the school kids called the wooden castle. Made of wood, it was huge. Big enough to accommodate all of Branson's forty elementary school students as well as a few more. With four sets of monkey bars, eleven slides, seven ropewalks and a large ball pool inside, it remained Branson's pride and joy for the last several years. No one, not even the children left this place without cleaning up after themselves. "When did the city build this?"

"After I designed it, turned the plans in, then everyone in town pitched in the funds and the labor to give this to our children."

Eden gazed at it with the awe of a woman who wanted to know the reasoning behind the design. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you design it, then suggest they build this?"

"Because I wanted somewhere for my children to play. Somewhere safe, where parents would hang out to watch each other's children while the kids had fun." He couldn't explain the way he'd felt back then. For some inexplicable reason, he'd needed to build this monstrosity for the town's children, for his children even though, deep down, he'd known he would never have any. They'd finally finished it three years ago. Right about the time, Eden's daughter would have been old enough to use it for the first time.

"Oh." Eden bit her lip, then cringed as her daughter climbed up the ladder of the tallest slide, waved, then dove down the thing, head first.

Striding over to the slide, Jake grabbed the girl by her upper arm and glared down into wide, fear-filled eyes. "If you can't use the equipment properly, you won't get on it again."

Chastity hung her head. "I'm sorry, sir." Tears ran down Chastity's cheeks and the girl ran to bury her face in her mother's shirt. "He doesn't like me."

Eden knelt down, cupped the child's cheeks in her hands, waited for her daughter to look up, then shook her head. "Of course he likes you, honey. He doesn't want to see you hurt. He wouldn't have said anything if he didn't like you

because he wouldn't care." She held her for a moment, then gently pushed her toward the wooden structure. "Now go play for a few minutes while we talk over there on the bench. Okay?"

Nodding, Chastity turned away, heading back for the large slide. "I'll go down on my bum, this time."

"See that you do that," Jake reprimanded softly as the child he felt too damned responsible for began to climb the ladder again. As soon as the child was out of earshot, he turned on Eden. "Do you let her do that kind of thing all the time?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "She has never done anything like that in her life. I think she wanted to impress you. I know she never expected you to jump down her throat like that." She turned, stomped to the bench, then sat down. "Not that I wouldn't have jumped down her throat. But coming from you, it just seemed more...harsh or something."

"Harsh? Why in the hell should my opinion matter? I don't even know the girl."

"Your opinion matters because she knows all about you. She wants you to like her."

"What the hell for?" It wasn't as though they had any sort of connection, besides loving the same woman for entirely different reasons. "You would think your daughter would care more

about the fact that you have obviously taken her from her father and have no intention of going back." If he could use the condition of the woman's car as any indication.

"Because *you're* her father, you ass."

CHAPTER TWO

Shit, shit, shit. Why in the hell did you break it to him like that? Eden watched the emotions chase across Jake's face. It wasn't as though he should have known. Hell, the last time he'd seen her, Eden had just found out she was going to have his child.

After purchasing three of those early pregnancy tests from the drug store, she snuck them into the house and used them three mornings in a row. When all three came up positive, she knew she had to tell him they would soon have a child.

Instead, he'd come home, his face so serious she was sure he was going to tell her he'd fallen in love with another woman. Eden remembered it like it was yesterday. How she sat in the living room, twisting her hands together as he showered off the grunge from the construction site where he'd spent most of his hours. Not waiting for him to tell her to pack, Eden tossed her meager

belongings into her backpack and set it by the door. She would hear him out. She had to. Listening to what he had to say, was the only way she would be able to live with herself afterward. No one could ever accuse her of not facing the ugly truth.

The truth had been ugly all right, but not what she suspected. What normal, red-blooded American girl would have believed there were werewolves in the world?

She ran. Eden waited until he fell asleep in his chair, exhausted, then snuck out into the night with nothing more than what he'd found her with. She left everything else behind. It wasn't hers. He purchased the things for her, but Eden knew she had no right to take them when she slunk away in the night like an abused puppy. It practically killed her to leave him, but she knew she had outstayed her welcome when her host began to make up fantastic stories like that to get rid of her. No one had to hit her over the head with a rock. What had finally convinced her to go was when he proved it to her. He hadn't been lying. He changed into a beautiful white wolf while she watched, her screams stuck in her throat.

Eden had been living on the streets for nearly six months and was practically starving when Edward found her and took her in. She was just what he'd expected. He'd expected a woman so

weak and thankful that he'd taken the time to rescue poor little her, that she wouldn't ask questions. Unfortunately for Edward, Eden loved asking lots and lots of questions. It didn't dawn that he was a snake of the worst sort until it was almost too late to do anything about it.

What would have happened if she had accompanied him on that flight to Croatia? She heard about horrible things happening there. Would he have sold both her and her daughter as she found he'd sold countless other women and little girls on the black market as hookers?

No. That month had been the most enlightening of her life. He'd gone on without her and she'd stayed behind and found out exactly what kind of sleazeball her *devoted* husband was. The day before he was due home, Eden made a trip to the bank, cleared out both her personal and the account Edward gave her for expenses and disappeared. At least she'd thought she disappeared. It hadn't taken long for his private detectives to find her working as a waitress in Looker's bar and grill in Sedona. She'd been running ever since.

The two of them never spent more than a few days in any one town. The running had gotten old a long time ago. Now she was broke. Without the ability to stay in one place and get a job, Eden knew the money she'd started out with was bound

to run out sooner or later. So here she was, back in Branson, looking for the one person in the world she trusted not to harm her baby.

If Eden knew one thing about Jake, it was that he would never harm a child—especially his own. Knowing she was financially at the end of her rope, she decided to come back to Branson, give her daughter and the man she'd never stopped loving a chance to get to know each other before she left them. Eden refused to put either one of them in any more danger than she already had. It was enough that she knew Jake would care for Chastity.

Edward told her the next time he caught up with her, she would wish that he sold her as a drugged out hooker to one of his business associates. She suspected that meant he would kill her for leaving him and turning him over to the authorities.

She often wondered what went through her *husband's* mind as the police and government officers swarmed around him just outside his private jet when he arrived back in the states, but she'd never cared quite enough to watch the news.

He looked toward Chastity and swallowed. "Mine? How can she be mine?" He turned back and pinned her with an emerald glare. "And if what you say is true, why are you just coming back now?"

Eden stiffened her spine and glared at him. "Don't you dare imply that I'm lying. You know damned good and well that it's possible." Gesturing toward Chastity, she added, "I dare you to take a good long look at that girl and tell me you couldn't have fathered her."

Eden watched as Jake glanced toward Chastity. He stood stiffly, hands clenched at his sides as he stared at his daughter. She bit her lip, nervously shifting from one foot to the other as her ex-lover studied his child, and wondered exactly what he thought.

A breeze swept through the park and she pulled her threadbare coat more closely around her. She knew he was angry. Who wouldn't be? Eden didn't blame him for showing his temper. After all, she'd been the one to leave him, running away like the child she had been.

It didn't matter that he'd scared her half to death with his crazy talk and stories of shapeshifters and other paranormal entities. In his mind, she deserted him, knowingly left him alone while she carried his child.

"Jake, I—" Eden clutched at her throat. It closed off when she tried to speak. *I'm sorry* just didn't seem like enough. It would never be enough. It didn't matter that he would never forgive her, never welcome her back into his life. All that mattered was that he welcomed his

daughter within the circle of protection she knew he possessed.

When he first revealed what he was, Eden thought him a monster. But not anymore. After so many years spent running out in the world he tried to protect her from her from, she had seen real monsters. Jake didn't belong in that category. Jake was just a man.

"Do you think I *wanted* to leave you?" she asked, clasping her hands against her chest, her heart breaking all over again. "Think about it, Jake. I was young and pregnant. You scared the hell out of me with your talk of werewolves, vampires and other things that go bump in the night. Didn't you think I would have rather remained blissfully ignorant?"

She started to pace in front of him, occasionally glancing toward her daughter to make sure she was all right. That she wasn't showing signs of getting too cold. It may not get very cold here, but the chill air was usually damp and tended to seep into one's bones. Though with werewolves, it may not matter. What did she know?

Turning back to face Jake, she continued, "Believe me, Jake, the last thing I wanted was to run from the only home I'd felt safe in since I lived with my real parents."

"Then why did you?"

His question seemed like an easy one, but if

there was one thing she'd learned throughout the years, it was that very little in life was ever easy. "Because I no longer felt safe anymore." She gave him a level stare. "You tell me, Jake. If I came up to you and told you something you found completely unbelievable, then proved it to you, what would you have done?" She paused for a moment, then held up her hand. "Never mind. Don't answer that. You have no basis for comparison when you've lived with this weird crap all of your life. Besides, you will never know what it feels like to want to protect the child you carry. You're a man and you will never know the fear and awe that comes with being pregnant." Stopping for a moment, Eden stared across the playground and watched Chastity in silence. She didn't know what else to say. By her estimation, they'd said it all already.

"I suppose what you've said is true," he conceded. "It still doesn't tell me why you ran to another man. Had you planned it? Was he there, just waiting for you to leave or did you find him after you left me?"

"I don't even believe you." Eden shook her head. "Of course there wasn't another man when I left. I loved *you*! I ran because I was scared. I was scared of what you would say about the baby and I was horrified to think that underneath it all you were some sort of monster." She looked down at

her clenched hands. "At least that's what I thought at the time."

"And now?" Pain radiated off him in waves.

Eden actually felt it. She'd hurt him when she said she thought he was a monster.

"Do you still think I'm a monster and, if you do, why did you bring your daughter here now?"

"Because she's your daughter, too. You have a right to know her as much as any other man who has fathered a child."

"Is that all?" He turned to stare into her eyes.

Eden felt as though he could see straight into her soul. "No." She shook her head as he turned his attention back to his daughter. "That isn't all. I think my ex-husband wants me dead and he wants to sell Chastity into some sort of sex slave ring when she's old enough." Snorting, Eden added, "Hell, she may be old enough for those sick bastards now. Who knows?"

A growl rumbled deep in his throat. Jake turned to look at her, the side of his mouth turned up in a self-mocking grin. "I apologize if I've frightened you. The...monster in me doesn't like the idea of some sick bastard selling *any* child into a sex slave ring."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. It was the only other indication that he was the least bit angry—it was the reason Eden knew Jake would make a good father. Once she'd come to terms with what he

was, she had been able to see that. Only by then it had been too late. She was already married to Edward. It may have taken a while, but she had finally seen just which one of them was the monster and it wasn't Jake.

Reaching out, Eden rested her hand on his forearm, pain squeezing her heart like a vise when he pulled away and stood. "I don't think you're a monster." She bit her lip, knowing she had called him that in the past. "Not anymore." Sighing, she reached up to wipe away the tears that spilled from her eyes. She hated crying, hated the way it made her appear so weak, so vulnerable when she needed to be strong.

"I've seen real monsters, Jake. Real monsters make you trust them, then hurt you for it. They make the world believe they're some wonderful philanthropist while the real reasons they visit and give money to orphanages is so they can case them, find the beautiful children and sell them to the highest bidder." She shook her head, reached into her pocket for one of the napkins she always carried for Chastity and blew her nose. "I may have called you and your people monsters years ago when I didn't know the difference, but I know better now."

As was habit, Eden scanned the area for danger—for anyone who appeared to watch her daughter before turning her attention to the

playground. She waved back at Chastity who stood ready at the top of another slide, then continued, "I brought her here because she deserves to know her father just as much as her father deserves to know her."

"And there's nothing in it for you?" He raised an incredibly perfect brow.

The expression on his face told her he didn't believe the only reason she returned was for them. He was right. She did want something. She wanted to know that he would protect their daughter above all else. It was what she wanted. It was all she ever wanted.

"You want something from me. What is it—money?"

The look on his face, so heavy with disdain, nearly brought Eden to her knees. If only things were so easy. She didn't blame him for expecting the worse. It was obvious to anyone who cared to look that they were broke. No, they were more than broke now. The word destitute came to mind. Even if she managed to find a job and a place to stay, they would be stuck here for a long, long time, unless she left her daughter here in the safe presence of her father.

"No," she said, shaking her head as she gathered the courage to look at him again. She wasn't sure she could take the look of disgust in his eyes again. It was one thing to tell herself she

could do it, but something totally different to look into those beautiful and sexy eyes, knowing the revulsion in them was aimed solely at her. "I didn't come for money."

"What then?" He turned his penetrating gaze on her. "It's obvious you're near the end of your proverbial rope." He turned away to watch their daughter.

Chastity was having fun, real fun, for the first time in weeks.

A dull pain in Eden's chest felt as though a fist closed around her heart. How would she ever leave her here? Even knowing that Jake would protect their daughter with his life didn't help with the ache that began to form in her chest. Jake was lost to her. She knew that. Nothing would change the fact that she'd run from him eight years ago, taking his only child with her. The thought of losing her daughter was almost too much to bear. Though she knew, for Chastity's safety, she must find a way.

"I—" Swallowing, Eden took a deep breath and tried to tell him the truth of why she'd finally brought her daughter home. "I brought Chastity here for your love and guidance, but mostly, I brought her here for your protection." Eden stared down at her worn shoes and licked her lips.

No one could protect their daughter the way he and his people could. They weren't human, not

fully. They lived their lives with a different set of rules, rules that stated they protect their own above all others. Chastity needed that. *She* needed that for her daughter.

"It's only a matter of time before Edward finds us now that the money is gone." Reaching out, Eden grasped his arm with desperation, her grip tight in case he decided to pull away again.

Eden willed him to look at her, to see the desperation, the determination in her eyes. "I'll leave if that's what you want." Her voice caught as she held back a sob. "I wouldn't blame you a bit if you *do* want me to go. You only have to promise me you will love and protect your child."

* * * *

Jake stared down at the only woman he had ever loved and cursed the genes that made him what he was—that made them what they were to each other.

A part of him wanted to take his daughter and tell Eden to get the hell out of his town, but he couldn't. He knew the anger he still felt at finding out he'd been a father as well as a mate for the last eight years he'd spent alone made him feel that way. He also knew he could never tell her to leave.

His every pore welcomed her scent, soaking her

in as she stood near him. She smelled as sweet, as intoxicating as she had all those years ago. It was a bit different now that she had a child. A female's scent always changed once she'd had a cub. Legend said a mother's scent was sweeter to her mate. The legends were true.

Jake took a deep breath, his body wanting to move closer, to wallow in her unique scent. He wanted nothing more than to rub himself all over her, coating her with the magic and scent of his wolf, marking her as his mate once and for all. He wouldn't warn her this time. He wouldn't give her the chance to run. No, this time he would merely take what was his and damn the consequences because the alternative was too grisly to bear.

Nearly every waking thought over the last eight years had been for her. He'd spent years searching for her once he had gotten over his original grief and anger. Now she was here and he basked in the scent and light of his mate. Every cell in his body both screamed with joy that she finally returned and wailed at the injustice of their separation.

"Of course I will love and care for my child." Reaching up, he rubbed the center of his chest, the place where his heart had been before she'd ripped it out and stomped on it all those years ago. He had hoped Eden had returned to replace it, but now he realized she didn't plan to stay in Branson. Instead, she intended to rip out what was

left of his heart and leave. Not again. He was ready for it this time. "How long will it be before you run again?" Jake knew he guessed right when remorse filled her expression.

"Just long enough for you two to get to know each other."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll leave. I don't want to draw any more danger to Chastity or to you. If I leave her here, maybe Edward won't know where I left her and will leave her alone."

Leave? She couldn't leave him again. He couldn't allow her to go, to run off and abandon their daughter here without a mother the way she'd deserted him all those years ago, leaving him without a mate. His wolf sat up and snarled at the idea. It just wasn't going to happen. "You can't just leave her here with a man she doesn't know, even if he is her birth-father, Eden."

"She knows you." Eden shrugged. "I made sure of that. At least she knows of you. That's almost as good. And Chastity knows what you are. I never kept that a secret from her, so she won't run from you as I did." Eden gave him a wan smile. "She thinks it's cool and she can't wait until you show her how it's done."

Agitated, he ran his fingers through his hair. He didn't believe for a moment that the only reason she planned to leave was for her daughter's safety.

She was still running scared. He could smell it. "So you're just going to keep running? Why not stay here and face your problems head on? How do you expect our daughter to accept me if you can't?"

He refused to go easy on her. There was no easy for him when she left. There was only waking to an empty house with no trace of the woman he loved. A note on the stove told him not to search for her because she couldn't bear to live with a monster. That's what hurt the most. The woman he loved above all others thought him a monster.

Jake's gut clenched as tears filled his mate's eyes. Eight years ago he would have done almost anything—said anything—to keep her tears at bay. He sighed, knowing not much had changed. Even now, he knew he would move the heavens to keep his woman from the pain he saw mirrored in her eyes.

Sadly, no matter how much he longed to help, Jake knew there was nothing he could do to hold her fear of him at bay. Eden's anxiety over his heritage was something she must overcome on her own.

Every muscle in his body tensed as Eden moved closer. He could feel the warmth of her body, smell the intoxicating mixture of fear and arousal that surrounded her. If she moved any closer, he would never be able to stop himself

from pulling her into his arms and holding her against his side, where she belonged.

Stopping just short of invading his personal space, Eden looked up at him with tearful remorse. "I'm not afraid of you, Jake." She hid her hands behind her back as though afraid to reach out and touch him. Eden may say he no longer frightened her, but her actions and her scent spoke louder than words. "I'm not afraid of you." Her voice was stronger, as though repeating made it true. "I'm more afraid of drawing danger to you both. If I leave, the danger will go with me."

"And if I won't let you go?" Jake saw a flicker of what looked like hope flare in her eyes before the light left them again.

"You must."

CHAPTER THREE

Jake gave in then. He surrendered to every want, every desire he felt since he saw her sitting in the diner, her head bowed close to her daughter's. She turned his life upside down again. But this time, it was a good thing. She came back knowing, trusting, that he would protect her and her daughter.

She may say she planned to leave, but if she did, she wasn't the woman he thought her. She could leave him all those years ago, but even then, as she said, she'd been thinking about her child, protecting her child. Nothing would stop her from doing so now. Even if it meant staying with the man who frightened her away all those years ago.

"I won't," he growled the words into her ear as he grabbed her and pulled her close. "You've come back to me, trusted me to protect our daughter. Trust me to protect you as well." He reveled in the feel of her body pressed tight

against his. How many times had he dreamed of this moment? How many times had he hoped she would return to Branson and give him the opportunity to finally make her his? Giving in to the temptation, Jake covered her lips in a searing kiss.

Jake pulled her closer, pressing his body against hers. She fit against him perfectly, as though made for him, for his touch. It would have been easy to forget they stood in the park, but it wasn't easy to dismiss the sound of his daughter giggling and chanting.

"Mommy and Daddy sittin' in a tree K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Jake reeled both from her kiss and the fact that Chastity had called him daddy for the first time. It was amazing how that one little word could rock his world the way it had.

Eden pulled away. She held her head down, her eyes looking at her feet.

What happened over the last few years that turned his spunky mate into someone so afraid of him, of everything?

"That's enough, Chastity." Eden glanced toward her daughter, never lifting her head to meet his gaze.

"Sorry." The girl grinned up at them, not in the least repentant. "Does that mean we get to live with you?"

"No. It doesn't," Eden answered for him. "He was just happy to see us and to find out he has such a beautiful daughter." She glared up at him as though daring him to contradict her words.

"Of course you can live with me."

"No, Jake, we cannot."

"Where will you stay then? The boarding house is full and the bed and breakfast closed for renovations last week. It's my house or nothing, honey." Torn between laughter and anger, Jake opted for humor. He didn't want to scare his instant family off. Not again. Fate had decided to give him a second chance. The last thing he wanted to do was fuck it up.

He could tell by the look on his mate's face that she wasn't happy with her only option. She had to know that no one else in this town would take her in. Not after what she'd done all those years ago. Hell, half of his family and friends wanted go search for her and drag her back, kicking and screaming, if that was what it took. But he wouldn't have it. She made her choice and they both had to live with it. Not that living with it would have been difficult for her. Not in the same way that it was for him at any rate. Another woman would never arouse him. He would have lived the rest of his life without a mate.

He took a deep breath, drawing her scent into his lungs. Providence had seen to giving him a

second chance and he was determined to convince her to stay. Hell, if the rock-hard erection he'd sported since he'd first scented her in the diner couldn't convince her to stay, he just may decide to go with her. A life on the run with his mate was infinitely better than the half-life he had lived without her for the last eight years. Gazing down at the child, he looked deep into perfect replicas of his eyes, gently patted her head and smiled. "You will stay with me. I have a large house with enough rooms for you both to have one of your own."

"Can we, Mom? I've never had a room of my own. Can we?"

Jake wasn't sure when Eden changed her mind. One minute he was sure she would break her daughter's heart, the next, she sighed and shook her head.

"I suppose. If there really isn't anywhere else we can stay." She knelt down and took her daughter's chin in her hand. "But we need to try the other places before we decide for sure." Standing, Eden leaned closer, her eyes narrowed, and whispered, "You'd better be telling the truth."

After about fifteen minutes and two phone calls, he would be. He just needed to call the two businesses in question and rent their rooms before she could ask for one. He would never survive losing her again. His sister had barely stopped

him from committing the *cara'voh* the last time. He would have ended his existence had his sister been of age, but his parents died in a plane crash the day after Eden left. With no other close family but him and Norma, it had been his responsibility to raise her to maturity. Luckily, Jake had finally come to terms with his loss by the time his sister had come of age. Pulling out a pad of paper, he wrote down his address and directions. "I'll meet you there in thirty minutes. I have to walk back to town and pick up my car."

Nodding, she glanced at the directions, then stuck them in her pocket. "Thirty minutes."

Not much had changed about his mate since he'd seen her last. He could practically see her brain working, just like before. She was thinking of running again, but knew she had no money and nowhere to go. If only he could have seen those signs eight years ago. If he had, perhaps she wouldn't be on the run now.

Jake glanced down at his daughter and winked. "See you then." Turning, he headed to the woods and the shortcut to town. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his phone and hit the speed dial for the bed and breakfast. "Hey there, Katie. I have a favor to ask." Cell phones were such beautiful things...

* * * *

Eden pulled into the driveway of the large house and looked up at the three-story monstrosity. "Goodness. Who cleans this place for him?" She was relatively certain it wasn't him.

"It sure is a big house." Chastity looked up at it, her eyes wide. "Is he rich?" She smiled wistfully. "I hope he's rich. It would be neat to have a rich dad."

It wasn't a surprise that Chastity would think so. So far, she'd grown up with so little. She had very few toys. Those she did have were precious to her, taken care of with a loving hand—washed, brushed, petted...loved.

"I don't know, honey." A lump formed in her throat as Eden realized she had to stay here. As much as she wanted to run—would rather run—than face Jake's inevitable rejection. She knew she had to stay at least long enough for the father and daughter to get to know each other. She couldn't deprive Chastity of the safe and comfortable life that her father could so obviously give her.

Jake wasn't wealthy when she knew him all those years ago. He had been a young man struggling to make ends meet as he worked his way through college. He'd been out of school for quite a long time, but decided to go back when the mantle of leadership for their people unexpectedly passed to his father when his uncle died.

"He wasn't when I knew him before." Eden's eyes burned and her throat closed up as she thought of everything that could have been if only she would have been brave enough to stay all those years ago. If only they could find a way to make up for all the lost time.

Taking a deep breath, she blinked her tears away, looked at Chastity and took her hand. "Whatever else he may be, he is your father first." Eden almost couldn't bear the hopeful look on her daughter's face. What had she done? When she ran so long ago, she'd done it with the protection of her child in mind. Now she was back, asking the person she'd once feared more than death itself, to protect the child she'd been so desperate to keep from him before.

Even now, when she knew he wasn't the monster she once thought him, she still wanted to run. Only this time, she wanted to run because she was a coward. She didn't know if she could take living in the same house with him and not want to jump in bed with him at the first opportunity.

Closing her eyes, Eden prayed for the strength to keep from throwing herself at his feet and begging his forgiveness. The look in his eyes at the diner told her all she needed to know. The father of her child despised her now and there was no going back.

Suddenly, the driver's door opened and Eden

practically screamed. Holding her right hand to her throat, she turned and glared up at Jake. "You just took ten years off my life with that stunt. The least you could do is warn a person next time. Knock on the window or something."

He just grinned down at her, the jerk. He was loving every minute of this. He loved the fact that she had to come back here, to him, to beg for help. He probably couldn't wait to rub her nose in it. Well, she'd be damned if she would let him. She may be nearly out of money, but she didn't have to come here to him and the sooner he realized it, the better off everything and everyone would be.

"Sorry." He didn't look sorry. He looked like he wanted to laugh. "Uh...did you want to tell me something or are you just happy to see me?"

He cast a glance down toward his leg where she'd dug her fingernails into his thigh when he first opened the door and scared her half to death. Jerking her hand away, Eden made a show of rubbing her palm on her leg. Damn, the man was infuriating. Why didn't she remember him being so damned sure of himself before? "I wanted to tell you that you're a jerk for scaring the heck out of us the way you did."

"I wasn't scared."

Eden closed her eyes at Chastity's comment. "Well, I was." She glared up at him. "Your father needs to learn that with two women living with

him, he can't just go sneaking up on people." No wonder he was the sheriff now. He excelled in sneaky. Hell, he *was* part wolf. It probably came from his genes.

"Would you ladies like to come into the house?"

Glowering up at him, Eden nodded. "We have a few things to get out of the trunk."

Jake glanced toward the back of the car. "If you'll give me the keys, I'll get it and bring it to your rooms. Just go on in and I'll be there in a minute."

Pulling the keys from the ignition and fisting them in her hand, Eden shook her head. "I don't think so. We've been carrying our things in and out of apartments for the last eight years. We can continue to do it here." She slid from the driver's seat and glanced back. "Come on, honey. Let's get our things inside."

When Chastity came around the back of the car, Jake knelt down and took her hands in his. "Welcome to my home, sweetheart. I hope you'll like it here." He looked away for a minute and swallowed several times. "I wanted you to know that...if I'd known you were out there, I would have come looking for you."

Pain knifed Eden's heart. He would have gone looking for his daughter as he should have, but he had never gone looking for her. Apparently, she

wasn't worth the hassle.

Chastity moved away from her father and tugged on Eden's coat, a sure sign that her fearless daughter was unsure of herself.

Turning, Eden glanced down into the child's wide green eyes that were so much like her father's. When Chastity motioned her closer, Eden knelt down and pulled her daughter into her arms. "What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"I gotta pee," she whispered. "Do you think he'll let me use his bathroom?"

Eden glanced up at the man in question. She wasn't sure what kind of game Jake was playing. He acted as though there was nothing wrong between them, as though the last eight years had never happened. It brought her defenses up. The last thing she wanted was to stay here with him, under his roof, at his mercy, but he needed to get to know his daughter. Staying here may be what was best for them, but she knew it was bad for her heart. If there was anything Edward taught her in the months she lived with him, it was that payback was a bitch. There was no doubt in Eden's mind that she deserved payback for what she'd done to Jake. Her only question was what price he would demand.

The last thing Eden wanted to do was to stay here with him, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Since she had never fallen out of love with him,

the last thing she needed was for him to manage to worm his way even further into her heart. While Eden wanted her daughter to fall head over teakettle for her father, she knew the best thing for her was to keep the man at arm's length. If only he would let her.

Eden couldn't seem to keep her gaze off him. Jake was even more handsome, more compelling, than he had been before. Something about his eyes drew her. She didn't know what it was about him. He hadn't really aged much. Just about the only thing she did know about his kind was that they lived longer lives than humans. She wasn't sure how much longer, only that they stopped aging once they reached the human age of thirty-five.

Dressed in button-fly black jeans and a dark blue t-shirt, he looked as he always had—good enough to eat. The work boots he wore gave him an extra inch he didn't need. He was tall enough at six-foot four. And, as always, he kept his dark hair cropped short. Just the way she liked it.

The stubble on his jaw told her his need to shave twice a day hadn't changed over the years and the fact that he hadn't shaved again today, gave her at least some insight. He never forgot to shave the second time. At least he never used to. What changed that? Was it just her bombshell that made him forget, or was there something else going on in his life to keep him from his habit?

"Go on into the house," Jake said, waving his hand toward the front door. "I'm sure you both would like to freshen up before dinner." He turned to the trunk and waited for her to push the button to release the latch. "There's a bathroom in the hall to the left of the kitchen when you enter. You can't miss it."

Chastity walked quickly in front of her, holding her legs together while she walked. Eden tried not to smile at the picture she made as they climbed the porch steps.

Eden tried not to think about how odd the front of the house looked as they entered the door until she found herself in the kitchen and realized they had entered through the back door. Turning to her left, she saw the hall and an open door that she assumed was the downstairs bathroom.

Chastity reached it first, ran inside and slammed the door behind her. It gave Eden some time to inspect Jake's home. She walked back to the kitchen and looked over the breakfast bar into the great-room. The house was huge. The downstairs had an open floor plan that made the home look even larger. "God, I'd hate to be the one to clean this place."

"I've got a housekeeper." Jake set their bags down with a frown. "This is all you have?"

She shrugged. "It's easier to move on when you don't have much." Most of what he'd carried in

from the car was Chastity's, but he wouldn't know that.

He looked around. "Where is..."

"Your daughter?"

Nodding, he swallowed. "That's going to take a bit of getting used to."

Yeah, she'd just bet. "She's in the bathroom. She'll be out in a minute. I told her what you are. Have I told you that yet?"

It was his turn to shrug. "No. Yes... Hell, I don't know. I'm still trying to assimilate all of this."

"It's kind of like having someone tell you they're a creature you were certain doesn't exist, isn't it?" She bit off a smile, then turned when she heard the sound of the toilet flushing get louder behind her. "You didn't wash your hands."

Chastity mumbled something as she walked up behind her.

"Here, use this sink."

"I washed my hands already." Chastity walked up to the sink and washed her hands anyway. "Geeze, Mom. I'm not a baby anymore." She looked at her father. "She treats me like I'm three or something."

"It's because you are all she has."

"She has you."

Eden put her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Chas."

"Yes." Jake nodded. "She does." Bending, he picked up their bags and headed for the stairs. "Just let me know which bags belong to whom and we'll get you settled. Carlotta should be here any minute to start dinner. I'll just have her order us some pizza until she can do some shopping to feed us all."

CHAPTER FOUR

They had been staying with Jake for a week when the sexual undertones of their relationship finally got the best of Eden. Normally, she was an easygoing person, but if Jake brushed up against her or found a way to squeeze behind her one more time, she was sure she would explode.

“What’s the matter, Mom?” Chastity skipped into the kitchen and sat at the table, waiting for her breakfast.

It was her first day of school. Literally. Having been on the run for most of Chastity’s life, Eden had homeschooled her until they moved to Branson. Her nerves were shot just thinking of her daughter going to a public school where Edward could find her, take her—not to mention worrying about what she would do with her spare time. She certainly had no intention of taking up knitting. What would she do with so much alone time?

It had been so long, too long, since she had any time to herself. She wasn't sure what she would do with seven hours alone every day. And Eden dare not think of being alone with Jake for any length of time.

Scraping Chastity's scrambled eggs onto a plate, she picked up three slices of bacon from the dish next to the stove, then set the food on the table in front of her daughter. She sat down, resting her chin in her hands and smiled. "Nothing's wrong, sweetie. I just keep thinking of how much I'm going to miss you while you're in school."

"Mom," pausing, Chastity rolled her eyes. "It's not like I'm going anywhere. I'm going to school."

"And you can't wait, can you?" Eden's heart almost broke when her daughter shook her head. Gone were the days when they would spend hours over her lessons, discussing history or the proper way to put a sentence together.

Chastity sighed. "I've always wanted to go to school." She frowned down into her eggs. "Do you think the other kids will like me?"

Sighing, Eden pulled her brave little daughter into her arms and squeezed. "Yes, sweetheart. They are going to like you very much. What's not to like?"

Jake walked through the door, his nose obviously leading him to the bacon. "Something

smells great.” Grabbing a slice of bacon, he popped it into his mouth and closed his eyes. “God, I love bacon. I don’t get it much anymore.”

“Doesn’t Carlotta cook it for you?” It was difficult to keep her voice even. Eden knew she had no claim on Jake. She had no right to be jealous or make assumptions, but the hot little housekeeper he had cooking his dinners made her see red. The woman was constantly batting her eyes at him and wiggling her over-proportioned ass his way.

Jake, man that he was, couldn’t see that the housekeeper had the hots for him. He shook his head and snatched another slice of bacon from the plate before pouring himself a cup of coffee. “No. She doesn’t fix breakfast. Carlotta only fixes my dinner. My breakfast is usually a bowl of cold cereal and a cup of coffee.”

“And I’m just supposed to believe she’s never spent the night here? What kind of fool do you take me for, Jake?” Shaking her head, she stood and moved over to the stove to fix him some eggs. *It was* his food after all. The least she could do was make sure he had a decent breakfast. She cracked three eggs into the pan and put some bread in the toaster.

“How are you doing today, squirt?” he asked Chastity who usually remained quiet around him.

Eden hoped she would soon overcome her

shyness toward her father. "Well?" She prompted their daughter to talk. She hadn't said more than a handful of words to Jake since that first day.

Shrugging, Chastity stared down into her meal. "I'm okay, I guess."

"Nervous about school?" Jake looked genuinely interested. He knew Chastity both wanted to go to school and worried that the other children wouldn't like her.

"A little."

Jake looked to her to make things better as he always did. His expression was a mixture of *what did I do* and *help me please*.

"I think she's just afraid that the other kids won't like her." Eden set his toast in front of him and went back to the stove to finish scrambling his eggs. "She's been worried about that all week."

Of course she had. The poor girl worried about what the others would think about Jake suddenly acquiring a daughter. His daughter wasn't worried about herself, she was worried about what others would think of her dad. Chastity didn't want others talking about him.

Eden had only just learned of that herself. She had no idea what got into her little girl's mind to make her think any of that would make a difference.

"Of course the other kids will like her." He picked up his coffee and took a sip. "I am the

Alpha—”

“Jake!” Eden couldn’t let him finish what he was about to say. To tell their daughter that the kids would like her because he was the Alpha and they were obligated was worse than thinking they wouldn’t like her at all. “I think I just saw a wolf in the backyard. Do you have...visitors often?” Eden knew that would get him outside and she desperately needed to talk to him alone.

* * * *

Jake knew he had done something wrong, just the look on Eden’s face was enough to tell him that. Since he figured admitting it was a step in the right direction, he stepped outside to look for the *wolf* Eden said she saw and waited for her to join him. When he felt her presence and smelled the sweet scent of her fear and arousal behind him, he turned, keeping his hands behind his back. “What did I say?”

“It’s not what you said, but what you were about to say. Do you want to give her a complex or something? For God’s sake, do *not* tell a child that the other kids *have* to like them.”

“I figured it would set her mind at ease.”
Women! Would he never understand them?

“Of course it won’t set her mind at ease. She would always wonder if they liked her for her or

because you're her dad. She's already worried about what everyone will say about your suddenly acquiring a daughter." She bowed her head and twisted her hands together. "I know that's my fault, but...she's just a baby."

Jake pulled Eden into his arms. He couldn't wait until he took his daughter to school and came back home. After a week of getting to know each other again, he wanted her more than ever and he could tell she wanted him, too. He could smell her arousal every minute of every day. Her scent was enough to drive him wild. He needed this alone time with her. He craved it. His mouth watered with the need to taste her again, to kiss every inch of her body, stroke it with his tongue and bring her to a shuddering climax again and again.

Cupping her face, he sank his fingers into the thick silk of her hair and stared deep into her eyes. "It's not your fault." Sighing, he rested his forehead against hers. "I should have found a better, less frightening way to tell you what I am. It's my fault you were so scared. It was my fault you ran."

Eden began to tremble. She tried to pull away, to look down.

He wouldn't allow it.

"I should have trusted you."

"You should have trusted someone who kept what he was from you for months? Someone who

lied by omission?" Jake shook his head. "No, baby. You had every right to do exactly as you did." He meant what he said. It had taken the better part of the last week to come to terms with what she had done, what they both had done. "I am just as much to blame as you, if not more." He tucked her head beneath his chin and reveled in her warmth pressed against him. "We should get inside. It's time to go. I'll drop Chastity off at school and go to the office. You'll have the whole day alone. Enjoy it while you can because it will be spring break sooner than you think."

Releasing her, he turned and started for the house. Pausing, he reached back, grabbed Eden's hand and pulled her along behind him. She needed to tell her daughter goodbye. He had no doubts that Chastity's sendoff would be tearful. From the way he understood it, the two of them hadn't spent as much as ten minutes apart for as long as Chastity could remember. Today was going to be a hard day for them both.

The drive to the school didn't take long. Chastity's anxiety over attending was nerve wracking to say the least. Her little legs kicked the dashboard of his SUV over and over until he wanted to yell at her to stop. He managed to hold his tongue though. If there was one thing he knew about her, it was that blowing up would have only

made matters worse. He needed that like he needed another hard-on in her mother's presence.

Hell, he was lucky the damned thing went away when he left the house. Otherwise, this last week at work would have been pure hell. More than it already was. The time spent away from Eden was enough to drive him mad and the time spent with her was driving him to drink. The only way he managed to get any sleep over the last few days was drinking himself into a whiskey stupor. Things had to change soon or he was going to turn himself into an alcoholic.

Things would change today if he had anything to say about it. He had every intention of beating Chastity home from school by about three hours. Three hours should be plenty of time to rub himself all over his mate and let her know there was no way he would tolerate her leaving him again. Now if he could only make it through the next few hours.

* * * *

Eden didn't watch them leave. She couldn't bear to look out the window and watch her baby get farther and farther away from her. What would she do with herself now that Chastity was in school?

After about three hours of pacing, Eden

thought doing some laundry seemed like a good bet. She managed to wash everything of hers and Chastity's over the last few days. The only laundry left was Jake's. Dare she go into his room and remove the dirty clothes? He kept telling her she was his mate and there were no others, but what if there was evidence to the contrary in his bedroom? Could she face it like an adult or would she scream with jealous rage that he hadn't been faithful to her?

She shook her head and sighed. Hell, she wasn't even being reasonable anymore. He had every right to have sex with other women while she was gone. She'd had sex with Edward. Her skin crawled at the thought of it. She hadn't wanted it, hadn't wanted him, but he had been her husband and she couldn't deny him his conjugal rights.

Trudging up the stairs, she stopped just outside Jake's room, wondering if she should go in. Eden didn't know how long she stood at his door, her head resting against the cool wood, but finally, she gathered enough courage to enter.

Releasing the breath she didn't realize she'd held, Eden stared at the room. It was just as it had been eight years ago. His king-sized bed sat between two large windows covered with the medium-blue lined drapes she'd purchased when she lived with him before. The bureau he

purchased for her stood against the right wall with her brush set and perfumes set on a round mirrored tray. And the bed still boasted the sheer curtains around it with the maroon and gold spread she talked him into buying. The furnishings were almost as though she'd never left.

Crossing the room, she entered the bathroom. It was where he always kept his hamper before. It was there and filled to the brim. Smiling now that she had something to do, she pulled the clothes from the hamper and carried them to the hall and the basket she had waiting just outside her door. Dropping the clothes in the basket, Eden turned to go make his bed. She was staying here rent-free, the least she could do was clean up a bit. His *housekeeper* Carlotta didn't seem to do a lot of housekeeping. She cooked and waggled her ass in front of him, but Eden had never seen her pick up a broom or mop. She'd also never seen the little tart make a bed.

It wasn't until she was next to the bed that Eden saw the t-shirt sticking out from a box under the bed. It was one of hers from before, along with several pairs of underwear and socks. Apparently, Jake had never gotten rid of her things. Had he always hoped she would come home someday?

Bending down, she pulled the covers up, fully intending to make Jake's bed. Instead, she got a

whiff of his cologne in the sheets and sat down. Pulling his pillow into her lap, she closed her eyes and inhaled. God, how she loved the way he smelled. Taking another deep breath, she thought of all the years that separated them now. She wanted nothing more than to pick up where they left off eight years ago, but it wasn't fair to Jake. Not when she knew she was leaving next week. She had to leave. Two weeks in one place was her limit. Gone was the idea that she would lose her car in a lake. Eden wasn't selfish enough to put her own wants and needs before her daughter's, but God knew she wished she was.

Tears dripped down onto his pillowcase as she sat thinking of what could have been. What should have been, if only she would have had the courage to stay all those years ago. "You made your bed, Eden. It's time you learned to lay in it."

"It looks like you were making my bed, not yours."

Eden jumped and swiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Jake! What are you doing home so early?" She hadn't expected him for another three hours at least.

"I finished up a little early and decided to come home." He unbuckled his gun belt and draped it over the back of the chair next to the closed door.

Eden eyed the closed door and swallowed. "I—I was just getting your laundry and decided to

make your bed.”

“I see that.” His expression was unreadable.

Was he angry?

He moved slowly as though the slightest sudden movement would send her into some sort of frightened tizzy.

Eden sat mesmerized as he continued to remove his clothes and slowly close the distance between them. She licked her lips as he unbuttoned his shirt and wished that he wasn't wearing a t-shirt beneath his uniform. She wanted to see his smooth chest. Run her hands over his rock-hard abs and caress the three-inch scar on his shoulder. He'd gotten that scar the night they met. He saved her from an abusive man who intended to rape her and had gotten cut. Though he never blamed her for the ugly white line that ruined the perfection of his skin, Eden had always blamed herself.

She got her wish when he decided to pull both of the shirts over his head and threw them toward the chair where he left his gun. Every inch of his chest was just as she remembered it. It did little to stop the idea she had of plastering herself to him and kissing every exposed inch of his sun-bronzed flesh.

Eden didn't have to go to him. He unbuttoned his slacks, his hand hovering over the fly for a moment before he took the three remaining steps

between them. She couldn't resist when he pulled her to him, his hands gripping her shoulders lightly for a moment before slowly sliding down her arms in a sensual caress. Her breath came hard and heavy as Jake's hands moved lower to cup her behind and he pulled her to him, grinding his erection into her mound.

She couldn't help the whimper that escaped when his mouth closed over hers. The feel of his lips caressing hers was just as she remembered it. Just as she dreamed, longed for, over the hundreds of lonely nights since she left town.

Heat spread through her, searing her body where their pelvises met. It was almost as though something intended to weld them together so they could never part again. Blood that felt nearly molten moved slowly through her veins, driving every thought from her mind but the man in her arms.

Ever so slowly, his hand crept between them, unbuttoning her jeans and sliding sinuously into her panties, between her legs. Wanton, needy, Eden spread her legs for him. Wanting, needing, this before she left. Needing to know that they could have made a life together if it weren't for her stupid, childish mistakes in the past.

Desire, want, need roared through Eden as his fingers found the moist flesh hidden between the folds of her sex. She continued to kiss him, her

arms wrapping firmly around his neck as she pulled him to her while his fingers slid through her heated flesh.

She wanted him, needed him more than she ever thought possible. What would she do, what could she do, but allow this to happen—it was right, natural, something they should have been doing for years. She would give him, give them both, this next week, then she would leave and, hopefully, take the danger with her.

Eden knew she would come soon if he didn't stop. It had been so long, too long since she had been with a man. It had been nearly eight years since that fateful night when she'd given herself to Edward and became ill and it had been more than eight years since she had enjoyed a man's touch—*this man's touch*.

His lips left her mouth, moving to her jaw, then her ear as he continued to hold her up with one hand and ravish her sex with the other. If he didn't stop, she would come soon. Too soon and her senses may return. She didn't want that. She wanted him. Only him.

"I need you, Eden."

She needed him, too, she thought with a nod. "I—I know. I need you, too, Jake. God, I need you, too." The last came out on a sob. She didn't want to need him. She didn't want it to hurt when she left again. The last time almost killed her. Eden

knew she had to leave. She didn't have a choice. None of them had a choice. They had to live without each other and Chastity would have to live without her mother. It was the way it must be.

If only things could be different. If only she hadn't run from him so many years ago. Maybe, just maybe they could have built a life together. But not now. Now there were too many years and dangers between them.

The words had barely left her lips when he pulled her t-shirt over her head and tossed it across the room. "You'll never leave me again, Eden. Never again. So get that idea out of your head right now." He moved closer, forcing her back toward the bed. "I can't go back to that half life. Jerking off while holding your clothes to my face, dreaming of you, craving you."

Eden stared at him with wide eyes. Was that why her clothes were in a box under the bed? She couldn't help the small glance she took at the box, still sticking out from its hiding place.

"Yes, baby," he breathed the words against her neck as he moved even closer, bearing her down onto the rich comforter she remembered so well. "I've kept your things close to me, driving me mad with your scent as I held your things to my face and dreamed."

"You—you mean—"

"Yes. I have never been with another woman

since you left." The right corner of his mouth cocked up in a grin. Don't you remember my telling you that we mate for life? No other woman can arouse me. Only you. Without you, my life is nothing. I have no reason to go on." His voice was strained as he spoke, his breathing harsh.

"You have Chastity."

He shook his head. "I will not subject myself to another half life, living with the memory of your soft skin touching mine, sliding against mine as we make love." He propped himself on his elbows to look down into her eyes, then slowly leaned down to press a kiss between her breasts.

Moving to the left, he suckled her erect nipple through her lacy bra, the one thing she splurged on for herself over the years.

* * * *

Jake meant what he said. Nothing would stop him from committing the *cara'voh* if she left him again. Not even his daughter. That was why it was imperative that he find her ex-husband and show him that she was completely and irrevocably out of his reach.

He gazed down at the woman lying beneath him, her breath coming in short, harsh pants. That could wait. Now, he needed to reclaim his mate and when he was through, there would be no

doubt in his woman's mind just where she belonged.

She belonged to him. Their scents didn't lie. He marked her all those years ago and he would mark her again. He could still see the small scar where he nipped her before. This time it would be no small nip. This time he planned to tie her to him whether she liked it or not. If she submitted to him today, he would take what was his and damn the consequences. "Do you agree?"

She frowned. "Agree? Agree to what?"

"To mate with me, to fuck me. To allow us both the release we need." Jake knew it was unfair to add more to his explanation than mating, but he didn't care. He was beyond caring. The need he felt deep inside for this woman went far beyond need or lust. It was a deep, insatiable craving to feel her against him, to be inside her, to see her carrying his cub.

"Yes." She sighed and squirmed beneath him, causing his cock to throb and beg for release.

"Then it's past time to remove these." He released the front clasp on her bra and watched her breasts tumble free. He loved the feel of them pressed against his chest. Clothed or unclothed, he reveled in the feel of her body pressed against his. True mates were rare among his people. Never would he take Eden for granted, never would he lose sight of the gift he had been blessed with

when he found her.

One hand cupped her swollen breast, the hard nipple jutting into his palm. He pressed his lower body deeper between her legs, feeling her heat seep through their clothes. Leaning down, he captured her other nipple in his mouth and suckled voraciously. Nothing could appease the hunger in him the way having his mouth on her flesh did.

Eden groaned beneath him, her head thrashing on the bed beneath her. She squeezed her eyes closed, her breath coming in short erratic pants. "Please, Jake."

The sound of her voice was his undoing. Suddenly, he could no longer withhold the beast. His hands shifted just enough to bring out claws strong and sharp enough to tear denim. With a low growl, he stripped the offending garment from her body.

Jake needed her more now than he ever had. He craved her more than he ever thought possible. It seemed that craving Eden had become a way of life for him. He thought of her every day, wanted, needed her every minute of his life. He inhaled deeply, loving the scent of her arousal. He wanted nothing more than to bury his head between her silky thighs and wallow in her very being.

"You next," she said, panting as he ripped the last of her garments from her beautiful body.

Leaving her for but a moment, he ripped his slacks off, shreds of it going everywhere as he lowered himself to his knees. Grasping her legs, he drew them apart and, fitting himself between them, he leaned forward and took one long, slow swipe at her creamy flesh. He smiled when she groaned and fisted her hands in the comforter.

He needed this, had needed it for so long he was half-afraid it was a dream. Driven by the need to mark her, to make her irrevocably his, Jake buried his face between her thighs and snaked his tongue up her waiting channel.

Eden let out a small scream before she thrust her hand in her mouth to muffle the sound and Jake was determined that she would make that sound again and again. He wallowed in her scent, in her taste, as he continued to lave her silken flesh.

* * * *

Eden was lost in sensation. She could barely breathe her pleasure was so intense. Jake always knew what to do, how to move to cause the most pleasure, to drive her screaming into orgasm.

She could feel it building even now. The warm tingling of her flesh moving up from her feet to engulf her in flames of ecstasy. No one had ever made her feel the way Jake did. No one ever tried.

She put such thoughts from her mind as he continued to suckle her clit and drive his tongue deep inside her. She supposed if she would have thought about it before, she would have realized that he wasn't entirely what he seemed. He always had an exceptionally long tongue. That should have told her something. That same tongue never failed to bring her to a screaming orgasm, which was what she was headed for now.

Emotion that she had long since denied swamped her. How could she ever leave him again? She loved Jake, had always loved him and now when she left, she would leave another part of her behind. She would leave so much of her behind in Branson, she wasn't sure there would be anything left to carry her through the trying days to come when she would lead Edward and his people away from here. She wanted Jake, needed him, with an intensity she never thought possible and didn't know she possessed.

When Jake began to suckle her clit again, her body stiffened and arched, her back rising up off the bed as she screamed out her release. She screamed his name over and over as he tunneled his fingers up her channel and pressed upward toward her navel. It intensified the sensation and sent her over the edge once again.

When Jake crawled up her inert form, she could see that his teeth had grown. His incisors were

longer, sharper than a human's, and she could also see he intended to bite her. Eden closed her eyes, accepting what he was, what he intended to do. He wanted to mark her. He'd done that already, eight years ago, the night she left. She still bore the small scar on her shoulder. It had been a constant reminder of all that she had lost the last few years. This time, she wouldn't sneak out while he slept. This time, she would stay and let him take her again and again, as many times as he wanted in the next seven days.

"I didn't think you would want me after so many years, after...everything." She gazed up into eyes that seemed to worship her and knew she would be the luckiest woman alive if she could stay here with him and their daughter.

Jake settled his hips between hers and growled against her neck. "Did you think the few extra pounds you added would detract from your allure? If so, think again, sweetheart. It only makes you more attractive in my book. You're a strong, healthy female. Not one of my people will complain about a little extra meat on a woman's bones." He licked the mark he left on her before. "I told you when I gave you this mark that I was yours for life. That nothing could ever come between us. As much as I would love to punish you for running away that night, I can't. You are my mate and my wolf wants nothing more than to

take you in every way imaginable and make you mine."

"Please, Jake," she whimpered and closed her eyes as he lowered himself between her spread thighs, his erection resting hard and thick against her mound. Her empty sex clenched with the need to have him inside her.

"Keep your eyes open, baby." His voice was rough, demanding. "Watch me as I fuck you. I want you to know it's me driving my cock deep into your tight pussy." He moved lower, pressing his shaft against her opening. "Say my name when you come, tell me you want me and no other."

His voice was little more than a growl by the time he finished and Eden knew this was no mere request. She took it for the order it was. The wolf in him, the Alpha needed, demanded to know she didn't want another man. She couldn't blame him for his worry. After all, eight years ago she *had* run from his bed and almost straight into another man's arms though it had never been what she intended.

Liquid heat pooled low in her middle, her womb clenched, driving the moisture lower still as it slid sinuously from her channel. Eden felt herself grow wetter as he stared down at her, his expression unreadable, his eyes so dark and intense. A small part of her wanted his dominance. She wasn't sure she could give in to

him, but a tiny part of her wanted him to try just the same.

The longer he stared down at her, the more aroused she became. His gaze alternated between her breasts and the spot where her shoulder met her collarbone and she waited for the pleasure-pain of his bite.

The last time he marked her, his bite drove her over the edge, into an ecstasy she didn't know was possible. Her orgasm had been so forceful, their passions running so deep, it scared her and she ran. This time she invited it, knowing she would take whatever part of him he would share with her and cherish each memory he gave her after she left. She knew he hoped to hold her, keep her here with him and Eden also knew that in seven days, she had to leave. She had no real choice.

* * * *

Jake wanted to growl with triumph when Eden released a shuddering breath as he continued to caress her breasts and nibble the mark just above her clavicle. He found every touch, every light caress caused another sigh of pleasure and he craved those little noises almost as much as he craved her.

He wanted her to put voice to her pleasure, needed to hear her soft moans and breathy sighs.

The wolf in him wanted his name on her lips as he gave her another orgasm. Most of all, Jake needed to feel his cock repeatedly sinking inside her as he thrust them both to oblivion.

Nothing could describe the sensation when his lips met hers again, unable to keep from sipping the sweet nectar of her lips. He thrust inside, her tongue soft velvet against his. Her arms snaked around his neck, drawing him closer and he deepened their kiss.

When Eden's hand slid down his arm, then slipped between them and grasped his shaft, stroking his length, Jake was certain he would lose his mind. One thing was sure, if she didn't stop, he would embarrass himself. Jake's hips jerked involuntarily at the feel of her soft hand gliding over his thick cock. His balls drew up tight and heavy against him and he wanted nothing more than to drive into her and spill his seed deep into her womb.

Eden gasped when he nibbled his way down her neck and his mouth closed over the erect tip of her right breast. The sound of her intense pleasure ratcheted his arousal higher and higher. It was an aphrodisiac all its own.

Jake pulled back, releasing her breast and giving the pouting nipple one last long swipe of his tongue before meeting her gaze. "Tell me you want me," he said before turning his attention

back to her breasts. His tongue teased, his teeth giving sharp little nips, causing her skin to pebble. "Say it," he ordered. "Tell me how much you want me."

"I want you, Jake." Her head thrashed on the bed as though she didn't want to admit it. "I've wanted you more than anyone, needed you more than I have ever needed anyone."

Cupping her breasts, Jake alternated between them, first suckling on one then the other while he sank his fingers deep between her legs. Eden arched up, thrusting her hips, silently begging him to enter her. He wanted this. He needed to make her want him, crave him as much as he craved her. Only then would he enter her and give them both what they needed.

"Please, Jake. Come inside me."

"Why, because you want me to fuck you? I can do that with my fingers." He thrust three of his fingers deep inside her. "See?"

"Because I need you to come inside me. To make love to me. Mate me." Pausing, she looked up into his eyes and bit her lip. "Mark me."

That was what he had been waiting for. She needed to accept him. Later, she could not say he had taken the choice from her. It didn't matter that she had no idea what she had just done and later it would be too late.

Jake thrust himself inside her, groaning at the

feel of her tight channel closing around his hard cock like a wet velvet fist. Nothing in his life had ever prepared him for how he would feel with his mate's tight cunt clasped around his hard shaft as he pistoned in and out of her. He nearly lost it when she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, changing the angle of his entry and drawing him deeper.

* * * *

Eden knew Jake was the best. At least he was for her. She also knew he could be merciless when it came to doling out pleasure. He could have kept her on the edge for hours until he had her shuddering with need, begging him to enter her and put an end to the torment. She half-expected him to do just that. To punish her for leaving, to make up for all the lost and lonely years between them that they could never get back. He didn't though. Jake gave them what they both wanted, his eyes closed, groaning as he repeatedly pounded his thick shaft into her.

He was bigger than she remembered him, bordering on huge. Every inch he gave her stretched Eden more than she thought possible as he worked his cock in and out of her, building a rhythm that would soon leave her screaming. She gripped his shoulders, her fingernails biting into

his skin as she waited for the pleasure-pain of his mark. Each breath she took became a gasping cry. Each thrust he made drove her closer and closer to the edge.

Little shocks reverberated through her body as he bent his head to lave and suckle her nipples. Eden continued to keep her eyes open as ordered and came repeatedly with his name on her lips. Every thrust of his cock drove her closer and closer to an orgasm that would somehow complete her. She didn't know how, she only knew that once she came in his arms again, she would belong to him, with him and nothing would ever take her away again—even her own irrational fears. This was where she belonged and Jake was the man the fates decreed she should spend the rest of her life with.

Jake's face changed a bit. His mouth elongated, his teeth protruded from his mouth, showing her a bit of the being that frightened her so many years before. "Jake," she whispered, feathering her fingers through his hair, then turning her head to the side. "Mark me. Mate me. Make me yours."

A split second of fear gave way to the most intense pleasure of her life as he leaned down and sank his incisors deep into her flesh. Nothing could have prepared her for the sensation or the emotion that swamped her. This was his mark, his gift to her and she need never fear his kind again.

Warmth spread through her sex as Jake threw back his head and came with a howl of the man-beast he was, his shaft continuing to swell and thrust inside her. When their passions cooled and Jake lay on top of her panting, his body relaxed, Eden stroked his back, knowing that nothing would ever be the same again.

EPILOGUE

Eden pulled the last of her things from her beat-up sedan and carried them into the house. With all of the things that happened over the last few weeks, she'd almost forgotten Jake wanted to give the car to one of the local boys as a birthday gift. It wasn't much, but it was okay for a first car. At least it would be as soon as Jake and his deputies finished repairing it.

She smiled, thinking how far she and Chastity had come since returning to Branson and went upstairs to put the box of clothing in a spare bedroom closet. The things were threadbare and something she knew Jake would take issue with if she tried to wear them, but she wasn't ready to get rid of them just yet.

When Jake marked her for a second time, he had made her more than she had been before. Her lifespan now matched his, which could be counted in centuries instead of decades and she would shapeshift on the next full moon. After her first shift, she could shift and use her powers at will—

once she learned to use them.

"I'll get it," she called out to anyone who listened and skipped down the stairs when someone rang the bell. She threw the door open, expecting to see one of Jake's deputies coming for the keys to the car so they could fix it up. She didn't expect to see Edward with two of his henchmen. She didn't think he would have the guts to show up at a police officer's home, let alone the sheriff's.

"What—what are you doing here?" She stepped back a pace, her hand moving defensively to her throat. Why couldn't he have waited another ten days, after her change, when she could have defended herself?

Eden realized her mistake when Edward stepped through the doorway. Had she been smart, and she rarely was when it came to dealing with her ex-husband, she would have slammed the door in his face.

"I could ask you the same question, wifey."

Eden stepped back again. She couldn't help it. She hated that term and he knew it. He only used it when he planned to punish her for some imagined infraction.

She had to keep him talking. It was only a matter of time before Jake wondered what kept her. She merely needed to stay free of Edward's clutches until her mate came to investigate.

"You ceased being my husband years ago, Edward." He never was a husband in the true sense of the word. There wasn't a loving bone in the man's body until you were talking about his business or his bank accounts. Besides, Jake had always been there between them, driving a wedge they could never overcome. A wedge she never wanted to overcome. Eden had never been able to stop loving Jake and Edward had hated her for it.

"I've never seen any divorce papers." He sneered. "That makes any divorce you've gotten illegal." He looked around her and up the stairs. "Where is my daughter? It's time she went to the boarding schools I had picked out."

"The whorehouses you mean." Eden moved to block the stairway, barely aware that she had placed her body between Edward and the stairs.

"You mean *my* daughter, don't you?"

Eden sagged with relief at the sound of Jake's voice descending the stairs behind her. He would never let Edward take their baby.

"That's not what her birth certificate says." Edward bristled.

His body language told her he was itching for a fight. She may not have stayed with the man long, but she'd stayed long enough to recognize a temper tantrum brewing.

Jake grinned, his expression saying, *just try to take her*, louder than words ever could. He made it

more than obvious that Edward and his lackeys didn't intimidate him a bit. "Perhaps her birth certificate says otherwise for now, but the paternity test tells another story." He raised a beautiful glossy brow. "Would you like to see the results?"

Edward's face mottled with rage. "How dare you presume to subject my daughter to a paternity test."

Jake, obviously through with playing, drew himself up to his full height, a good four inches above Edward or either of his lackeys. "How dare *you* try to lay claim to *my* daughter. Chastity is *my* child. The test was conclusive. You see, we knew we needed it to keep your filthy hands off her. She is *my* child. She and her mother shall remain here, in Branson with me. Under *my* protection and God help you if you attempt to harm either one of them because no one else will."

"How dare you threaten me? Just who do you think you are?" Edward, sure of the protection of his guards, threw a right hook at Jake.

Jake barely moved. He merely reached up and caught the blow by grabbing the other man's fist and squeezed.

The two men stood staring at each other for what seemed like an eternity, but couldn't have been more than a few seconds.

Jake kept hold of Edward's fist and growled

low in his throat. "Who I know I am is mate and father, sheriff of Branson and Alpha of the Night Forest Clan. But mostly..." he paused and bent closer. "I am your fucking worst nightmare." He glanced over at Eden, then up the stairs to where Chastity stood, her eyes wide, her fingers gripping the railing so hard her knuckles turned white.

Eden wanted to send her to her room, but she needed to see this, to know her biological father would protect her, how he would protect her. It was time she learned everything about who and what she was.

Jake gave her a sad smile, obviously afraid he was about to alienate his daughter, then turned back to face Edward as both his voice and shape changed. "These two females are lost to you. Either come to realize that or die."

Eden watched with horrified fascination as Jake changed into his wolf. Her brain barely registered her daughter's stunned exclamation.

"That is *so* cool!"

Now that she wasn't scared half out of her mind, Eden could appreciate the rare beauty of the snow-white wolf that was his other half.

Jake continued to glare at the three men who looked on with disbelief. He bared his teeth with a growl and crouched low, ready to pounce.

Two men entered the foyer behind Edward and his cronies, their guns drawn and pointed at the

men who didn't belong in the house.

"I think it's time you left, mister," the taller of the two, Darren Murphy, said as he moved farther into the house and away from the door.

Edward pointed at Jake. "What the Hell is that thing? It was a man just a minute ago, now it's a wolf! Kill it!"

"I hope you're picking this up, dispatch. This guy is as loony as a toon. He may be a danger to himself or others. You might want to send an ambulance out to pick him up," the second deputy, Tyler Hanson, said into his radio.

Edward blanched at the implication. "You'll keep them either way, won't you?" He waved his arm toward Jake who had moved closer to Eden, but still remained between Edward and the stairs as he leaned against her thigh. "That...that *thing* will keep her and my daughter with him, regardless of what the law says."

Jake shifted back to his human form, fully clothed. He strode to the hall table, pulled a packet of papers from the drawer and tossed them to Edward who caught them instinctively. "Edward James Horton, you have been served. Both with your divorce papers you claim to have never received and a custody suit." Jake's mouth lifted in a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "You can either sign the papers, releasing any claim to Eden and my daughter or I can drag you through court and

give you a legal battle the likes of which you have never seen."

Edward drew himself up with a smile. "I will keep you in court until your money runs out, you backwoods bumpkin."

Jake laughed out loud over that. "No, Horton, you won't. Don't let the modest size of my home fool you. If you continue this...useless prattle, I will ruin you. You have no idea who, or what I might add, you are dealing with. I am Jacob Jarrod Blackstone-Farnsworth, heir to Night Forest International."

Edward staggered back and shook his head. "No...no. Jake Farnsworth is sixty-two years old. You're..."

Jake grinned. "Looking great for my age, thank you." He stepped forward, stalking Edward as he stepped back. "If you leave now and drop your claim on my females, I will let you keep your piddly fortune so long as you drop your flesh peddling."

Eden knew Jake could smell a lie. *If* Edward wasn't sincere, he was a dead man. She only hoped he didn't kill the man in front of their daughter.

Jake grabbed Edward by the tie and half-lifted him off his feet. "Don't think to cross me, Horton. I will be watching you. Your next black market deal will be the last."

"Yes...yes, sir." Edward swallowed visibly and adjusted his tie when Jake released him. "I will sever all underworld ties immediately."

"See that you do or I will sever something a bit more critical." Reaching out, Jake tapped his tie.

Eden turned to Jake after everyone had left and Chastity returned to her room. "I can't thank you enough for giving Chastity a safe home."

Jake turned to her, his expression blank. "I can't thank *you* enough for giving me such a beautiful daughter."

Smiling, Eden had news for him. Not long ago, she had planned to leave her daughter here, to live her life alone and he had just given her the means to do so. But she wouldn't be alone. She would never be alone again. Dropping her hands, she rested them over her belly.

Again, she stood facing the man she loved, who loved her in return, faced with a difficult situation and a difficult choice. Smiling, she made up her mind. She may have found herself in a similar situation as before, but this time, she was not a child. She could take things one day at a time and one step at a time. Today was step one. The first day of the rest of her life.

Giving her slightly rounded belly a squeeze, she stepped into Jake's waiting arms. "I have something to tell you."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tianna Xander is an eclectic author of numerous paranormal, sci-fi, time travel, romance erotica books. Gaining inspiration for her characters and dialogue through her family and her addiction to the internet, she never fails to amaze readers with each new book she creates. As a reading junkie herself, Tianna has no problem reading whatever is available at the moment from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias to books on solar energy.

Tianna's life wouldn't be complete without a "happily ever after" of her very own. She resides in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs and an intimidating bunny. Never one to fail to give credit where it's due, she commends her family for their constant support. After writing many books and receiving rave reviews, her family is just as proud of her. Always full of ideas, Tianna rarely puts the pen down, so readers can look forward to many more exciting stories in the future.

Tianna can be reached at this email:

tiannaxander@yahoo.com

Tianna's website is located at:

<http://www.tiannaxander.com>

www.Myspace.com/Tianna_xander

and her yahoo group page

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TiannaXander/>

Sign up for Tianna's newsletter at www.tiannaxander.com and entering your information on her newsletter link.