



FB FREYA'S BOWER PRESENTS

DARK SUCCESSION

TRUE MATES, BOOK TWO

TERESA D'AMARIO

Dark Succession

by

Teresa D'Amario



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Culver City, CA

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For information on the cover illustration and design, contact
valerie.tibbs@gmail.com.
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Freya's Bower.com
P.O. Box 4897
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Dedication:

Dedicated to the wolves of Alaska, who are still fighting for their lives amidst not only the cold, but hunters.

Chapter One

Nora snarled and backed into the boulder. *Could this night get any worse?* First her car broke down, and then she discovered she'd left her cell phone back at her dorm. Her visit home had turned into her own little nightmare.

Now she was in her wolven form, stuck between a rock and teenage boys out for a joy ride. Just her luck they found her more fascinating than riding their dirt bikes in the sand pit to her right and behind. She'd been so lost in her thoughts while running through the forest that she hadn't paid attention when she'd heard them riding by. The next thing she knew, they'd herded her against the stone.

Males. She hated them. They made her skin crawl. It had always been that way for her. Sometimes she wondered if she were broken inside. However, these were worse than most.

The teens revved their motorcycles, laughing at her predicament.

While trying to find a phone to get an easy ride, she'd caught the scent of an unknown wolven male. She'd run out of the bar as if her tail were on fire, not ready to face an unknown wolven. Experience told her they were too hard to handle, too frustrating to deal with on a night like tonight. An escape had seemed like a good idea at the time. But, so had using the phone at the bar, and that hadn't turned out so hot. After hiding her clothes behind the bar's ugly green dumpster, she'd shifted, transforming into the animal she held at her core.

At times like this, she was glad she wasn't human. True, she had a human form, and she could no longer count the number of times she'd been mistaken as Native American. In human form, she could probably run a mile or two, but now, in her wolven form, she was set for up to fifty miles in a day. The problem was, home was more than fifty miles away, and, right this moment, fifty miles might have been five hundred for all the good it would do her.

If she jumped onto the stone, perhaps she could leap over their heads and run.

"Hey, Joe, do you think that might be a wolf?"

"Naw, there are no black wolves in North Carolina. Just red ones, and they're hundreds of miles from here. Probably just a big German Shepherd. Look how black it is."

It wasn't bad enough they had her trapped, but now they had her confused with a dog. She sneezed and growled, taking a step forward. *I'll show them what a dog I am.*

But they didn't move back. Instead, they laughed.

"Good, doggie," the boy on the right mocked, and they all cracked up again. Nora grumbled her displeasure, her lips curling.

"Cameron, that mutt thinks it can take us on. I say let's have some fun." The boy reached in his pocket, a flash of silver reflected beneath the moon's light. Nora's heart fluttered. A knife. Memories played in her mind, and fear bubbled in her throat. If she were in human form, she'd have cried. Shaking her head, she shoved away the dark images of the past.

Not now.

She sniffed the air. The tell tale scent of silver was absent. She breathed a sigh of relief. Steel. Damaging yes, but survivable.

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A quick flick of his wrist and a four-inch blade snapped into place, glistening in the light of the full moon. Nora bared her teeth, saliva dripping from her fangs.

"I'm telling you guys, that's no dog. Look at those teeth." The youngest of the boys revved his engine, turning to leave. "I say we leave it alone."

"I don't think it really matters," said the first one. "Watch this." Gripping the knife in one hand, he swung one youthful leg off his bike and stalked toward her. Nora glanced around, desperate for an escape.

There was none.

The roar of another motorcycle stormed toward them. *Great. All I need is another brat.* The sound thundered closer, and the teen in front of her cocked his head to listen.

The earth beneath her feet vibrated with the power of the oncoming machine, and it swung into view, barreling straight for the boy with the knife. The huge Harley spun about in the sandy surface between Nora and the teen, forcing the boy to jump back.

One black-gloved hand twisted the accelerator, revving the massive engine. The bike answered with a deafening roar, drowning all forest sounds, shocking the insects to silence, the animals having already taken cover. Disrupted sand slowly settled back to its comforting bed of earth.

He cut the engine, and the night reverberated in the sudden stillness.

One of the boys spun his bike and disappeared into the darkness of the trees. The others stood their ground, their eyes wide with fear at the impressive male's predatory glare.

Nora didn't need her enhanced senses to know it was the wolven she'd scented at the bar.

An alpha male.

Everything about him screamed of power. It showed in the aggressive set of his shoulders, in the white slash of a scar that could only be left by silver. The flash of damaged skin enhanced the harsh edges of his sharply angled jaw.

With deliberate confidence, he removed his gloves, plucking them off one finger at a time, his gaze sharpened on the boys. He was a male who clung precariously to the edge between wildness and civility.

He leaned back, his hand dropping to the tank of his bike. The boys shifted and shuffled on their bikes, glancing at one another, averting their gaze. The only one willing to meet the wolven's eyes was the one who held the knife in a tight fist.

"What are you boys doing?" He slapped his gloves onto the tank in front of him.

The boy swallowed. "Just having some fun."

One jean-clad leg swung off the bike, and he stood. Nora watched, her mouth tight in unexpected appreciation. Everything about him appealed in ways no male ever had. Before this moment, she'd never found aggression attractive. Though she didn't really wish to see the young boys hurt, her hormones found every step, every flex of muscle arousing. A predator so confident in his power. A soft rumble of approval rolled up her throat again. He ignored her, moving toward the leader of the group.

The boy stumbled back, his face pale.

"You're on my property," the alpha said. Nora watched him struggle to hide the fangs beneath curled lips.

The boy's throat convulsed, and he tipped his head to watch the male approach. The alpha towered above the young man. His huge frame blocked Nora's sight of the boy, but her nose worked fine, and she smelled his fear. Its rancid scent burned her nostrils and turned her stomach.

"Sorry, sir, we just—"

"Get off my land."

His voice resonated through Nora, like the vibration of thunder on a hot summer's day. So sexy. Decisive aggression radiated through the atmosphere, flipping some kind of switch deep inside her, some long dead part of her that uncoiled, hungry for more.

Whatever havoc the male was wreaking on her system, it had the opposite effect on the teenage boys. They scurried about, tearing off through the trees. Their bikes shrieked the high pitch whine of speed.

The male stared after them until they were gone, the silence of the night returning.

The crickets returned to normal, their song filling the cool night. The male, at long last, turned his head in her direction. Nora's breath caught as the heated gold in his eyes slowly faded to icy blue. His lip curled, and her heart thumped inside the wolf.

He swiveled to face her.

"Shift," he ordered.

Nora stopped herself just short of complying. *Clothes*. She whined and shook her head.

He smirked. "What's the matter, shewolf? Scared?"

She shook her head and again fought the urge to growl. A challenge of a shewolf to a male. The mating challenge. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

He moved to his bike but didn't mount. Instead, he flipped open his saddle bag and reached inside. The flash of cloth made her heart skip a beat. With exaggerated care, he drew out a blouse, hooked between his forefinger and thumb. He pulled out her jeans with his other hand. "You wouldn't be looking for these now, would you?"

His voice held a distinct condescension, and it irked her. Damn her wolf form. She couldn't do much more than growl.

"Shift, and I'll give them to you."

She shook her entire body, the way a wet dog shakes off water.

He laughed. The sound was rough and seductive. Nora bit off the whine threatening to escape. His voice matched everything about him, from the scar on his face to his leather jacket and worn jeans.

It wasn't uncommon for wolvern to walk around nude, but Nora wasn't about to shift and stand naked before *this* alpha. She had her own weaknesses to hide.

Gathering her courage and muscles, she leapt, her teeth snatching the blouse from his hand, one paw knocking the jeans from the other.

His eyes widened.

Yes. She gathered her clothes and charged to the boulder.

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“So it’s like that, is it?” he said, amusement in his tone. “Shift and dress, then we’ll go.” He stared at her, waiting. She didn’t move.

With a sigh of resignation, he threw his hands up and spun away, propping his fists on narrow hips.

Nora let out a sigh of relief. Drawing in a steady breath, she reached deep inside her mind for her human body. Magick poured over her skin and fur with a tingle. Long, furry hairs receded while flesh changed, reshaped and grew. A last shudder sizzled down her spine, and the magick faded. The wolf had receded, leaving the woman in her place. It was an easy process, to visualize how she looked this morning and become that person. She’d been doing it all her life.

She tossed the blouse over her head and scrambled into her jeans. Were her panties and bra in the saddlebag also?

Her fingers barely closed the button at her waist when he turned and stepped toward her.

“Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t tell you I was ready,” Nora squeaked.

“I have really good ears.”

“What do you want?” Nora was tall compared to most shewolves, at almost six feet, one inch, yet still he towered over her. He moved slowly, giving her every opportunity to run, his eyes watching her every move. Running almost seemed like a good idea. But then again, he might give chase, and she wouldn’t stand a chance. She tilted her head back to stare into his eyes. She lost her balance and was forced to step back.

“I want to know,” he leaned in, whispering, “why you were in the bar.”

“My car broke down.” His scent moved from her lungs to her blood. The mix of masculine power and leather worked like an aphrodisiac, striking with a force that nearly brought her to her knees. His heat burned against her flesh, though they were still inches apart. Nora longed to lean forward, hungry for more.

“Why did you run?” He cocked his head, curiosity shining in those glittering eyes.

She wasn’t about to tell him it was because she’d caught his scent and had found it shockingly attractive, something that had never happened to her before. “I didn’t want to infringe on another wolver’s territory.” Well, it was true. To a point.

His nostrils flared, he inched closer, his breath whispered against her ear. He rumbled low in his chest.

“I don’t believe you,” he murmured. His breath played across her skin and goose bumps rose. “I think you’re like all the rest.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You’re like all the other shewolves who come through town, looking for an alpha to fuck, in hopes he’ll offer to mate.”

His words splashed over her like cold water. He was wrong. And she would tell him so.

Just as soon as her breath returned.

His sharp fangs grazed the side of her neck, and she fought the urge to tilt her head in offering.

She shook her head. “I’m not like the others.” Small, powerless words.

His soft, taunting laughter rolled through her, her muscles turning to water.

"You want me, you know you do. You can't hide it." He inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring. "So what's it to be, little rabbit? Do I fuck you and send you on your way?"

He was teasing her, pushing her, and, while she knew what he was doing, she couldn't stop the cold flush of anger. "I'm different from the others. I don't want you."

"Really?" He cocked his head and met her gaze.

Her hands drew up to his massive chest. Hard, powerful muscle lay beneath his black shirt. It was almost distracting enough to make her forget her goal. Higher and higher her palms slid.

His eyes narrowed, watching. Waiting.

"Yes, really." She gasped the words, took in a deep breath, and continued, her voice stronger. "Unlike those mangy bitches, I have a brain, and my brain says *no*." With her hands on his shoulders, she slammed her knee upward. He twisted to the side, and she just missed his groin. Nora drew her arm back and let loose, the sharp crack of her palm against his cheek so gratifying.

His eyes widened, and he stepped back, the dull red imprint of her hand evident on his face.

She braced for his retaliation. She'd struck an alpha, and that meant punishment, in any pack. But what she saw in his face wasn't anger, or even disappointment. Instead, his eyes flashed with amusement, and his lips curled into a grin. Her own lip curled in frustration, and his grin widened. *Jerk*. He was enjoying her anger.

Confident even in her rejection, he moved to his bike and swung his leg over. "Get on."

"I'm sorry? You expect me to get on that bike with you when I don't even know who you are?"

"Ryland Keegan."

Ryland. Where had she heard that name before?

"I'm Nora."

He grunted, giving a sharp nod that suggested her name was nothing but a nuisance. "Get on. You're in my territory, and I have every right to take you to my pack. It's wolverine law." He offered her a helmet from the bar on the back.

"Your territory? All the way out here? Since when?" The last few months had been a blur, and it was easy to believe she'd missed conversations, but not a new pack in the area. The bar had been miles from here, and she knew there were stories of wolverine there before. But not here in this part of the forest.

"Get on," he ordered. "We'll talk later."

"I want to talk *now*."

His eyes flashed yellow, and she knew she'd pushed her luck. Alphas didn't like others questioning them.

Even so, she still thought about refusing outright. Her first impressions of him weren't wrong. The cocky curl of his lip, the aggressiveness that rolled off him spoke of a male on the edge of control. If she refused him, would he let her go?

She watched his fingers tighten on the handlebars, and he revved the engine. Impatient. Wild. Possessive.

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“Fine. But I need to know where you’re taking me. I have some place to be. I’m expected.” She snatched the helmet from his hand.

“To my pack.”

“But—”

“I’ll see about getting your car on the road tomorrow.” He bared his fangs. “Whoever it is can wait. Get on.”

Nora’s pulse sped up. She should run. Run like she should have done that scary night a few months before. She’d thought she could stand up to humans. She was wrong. What made her think she could stand up to this alpha?

Ryland must have sensed the change in her, the indecisiveness. His eyes narrowed, and his nostrils widened, taking in her scent. “Get on. I’ll keep you safe. Or would you rather spend your time playing tag with teens on motorbikes?”

Her flare of fear was instantly replaced with a flare of temper. “Jerk,” she muttered under her breath. Resigned, she threw a leg over the bike, seconds before the engine thundered to life. No sooner was she situated than the monster roared and charged forward into the darkness of the night.

Chapter Two

Ryland's cheek stung, a satisfying reminder of Nora's palm. Strength. It was all he'd ever wanted in a mate, both physical and emotional. But he'd definitely gotten a lot more than he'd hoped. *She was beautiful, too.* Her muscles spoke of athleticism, lean and powerful. Tanned skin enhanced by shiny black hair trailing to her waist. He couldn't wait to run his fingers through it. Her dark brown eyes, soulful and feminine, had flashed molten gold in anger. Stunning.

His *True Mate*.

True Mates were rare in the world of shifters, and even more uncommon among wolverines. Ryland had never met a wolverine couple paired as *True Mates*. *True Mates* were made for one another, compatible on the most instinctive levels, deep in their souls. Stronger than soul mates, their bodies and souls cried out for one another, driven by instinct to join both physically and mentally. Rumor told how the wolf would always recognize his perfect mate by the scent of her soul.

The rumors were right.

To know he was one of the lucky few who would share such a union was exciting.

And scary. Having a *True Mate* was a weakness no pack leader could afford. For if she knew her status before she was fully bonded with him, she could use that knowledge to her advantage. With a twist of her hand and a smile on her face, she'd be able to rip away every iota of his control. Destroying everything he'd worked for, everything he was still working for. Ryland fought a growl of frustration in his throat.

The first time he'd caught Nora's scent had been on that fateful night three months before, seconds after the most humiliating moment of his life. The night Anna Callaway rejected him.

He'd turned away in disgrace, fighting the desire to howl his desperate challenge in another's territory.

At that moment, the wind had shifted. Nora's delicate scent had tickled his senses. He hadn't known who she was, but he knew who she would be. His *True Mate*. Her feminine perfume had exploded in his lungs, knocking the breath from his chest.

It had taken all his control not to storm through the Uwharrie pack until he found her, but common sense prevailed. He couldn't let his mate see him fawning over another female. Especially one who had just rejected his suit. So he'd left, intending to return once his own pack was in better control.

But she'd found him.

Was it chance or fate that had brought her to the bar where he waited? Whatever the cause, her expression when their eyes met hadn't been the joyous look of a female on the search for a mate. She'd looked surprised and frustrated.

Her scent told the story of a woman out of her element. Innocence and sweetness. Yet still it was sweet, thick and sensual and everything he wanted in a female. He'd rumbled his approval, but she didn't hear. She'd already spun about, charging out the door. Only the whiff of her body and the taste of fear remained.

He'd taken the time to finish his beer before following. He was so sure of himself, readying for the chase and savoring the anticipation.

The heightened excitement of a chase for one's mate stimulated the wolf. It made things more satisfying. It was natural. Had he known giving her the head start would put her in danger, he'd have been on her heels in an instant.

Dispensing with the wayward boys on dirt bikes had been easy.

Hiding his emotions was something else.

He'd nearly grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, furious at her for putting herself in danger. It had taken several calming breaths to slow his heart rate before turning to face her. And that's when the real fun had begun.

He relished the test he'd put her through. Her reaction was exactly what he'd hoped. The power of a true alpha shewolf, just coming into her own. When her first strike to his groin was foiled, she hadn't given up. Though it was open handed, the blow to his face would definitely have knocked a lesser wolver off balance. Ryland smiled. Yes, it would be nice to have a strong female at his side.

Now she sat behind him. Most of the time her arms were at her sides, her palms on her thighs, and she was perfectly balanced on his Harley. But when he accelerated, letting the bike lurch forward, she'd reach out and grab hold of him, the soft curves of her breasts pressing against his back. He growled softly at her touch, and a tremor ran down her body. He couldn't resist one more quick acceleration, a grin on his face. But it faded the instant her body pressed against his back. He ground his teeth to bite back the surge of desire.

He turned down the dirt road and touched the hidden button on the side of his helmet.

"Open the door," he murmured into the hidden microphone. "I have a guest," he added in afterthought. "Make sure everyone's where they should be." The sounds of the woods disappeared beneath the thunder of the bike.

Home, sweet home.

Only there was nothing sweet about it. Every time he entered the compound, he left behind the joy of nature, entering the cold, antiseptic world of his pack. He missed the forests and the animals. Even the chance to run and hunt. It was all in the past.

Wolver lived in a different world now. A world thrust upon them by humans.

Ryland's pack had taken a rag tag group step further. Rogues, driven from their homes for infractions of established wolver law. Each marked for death by their pack leaders, they hid underground, deprived of nature's power and beauty for the rest of their lives.

And now they were his, a pack joined by fate.

He slowed the bike and waited for the ground to shift before him and reveal a wide, yawning entrance beneath the earth's surface. Nora's hands flailed in surprise, grabbing at his waist, and her sweet body now wrapped around his.

The bike thundered as it descended into darkness.

Chapter Three

The earth opened, sloping into a dark abyss. Not for the first time tonight Nora blessed her wolverine instincts when her eyes adjusted quickly. The roar of the engine echoed, bouncing off hard cement walls. *A wolverine pack below ground? That wasn't unheard of, but in unnatural tunnels?* There were no trees to scratch beneath, no soil to sink their toes in, no chance to breathe fresh air.

He stopped the bike outside a door, its dark wood construction reminding her of her own dormitory. He cut the engine and motioned for her to get off. Her legs quivered, but she stood with her back straight, ears ringing in the sudden silence. Her nose wrinkled at the musty, chalky scent filling her lungs.

Her race loved the fresh air. Being indoors was akin to being caged. That sensation of being captured and studied was why so few joined the human's military. The barracks were just so uncomfortable.

Here, this entire pack lived in a hard concrete structure underground?

She yanked the helmet off, wincing when her hair caught. So much for impressing him with her beautiful hair. The long locks were starting to feel like a snarled mess. Good thing he saw it before, or he'd probably wonder what her deal was.

Why do I even want to impress this jerk? Her inner voice refused to answer.

Great.

Not only was she talking to herself, but she was upset when she didn't answer.

Ryland unlocked the door, one of many checker boarding along the hallway. With a glance in her direction, he stepped forward, blocking her entrance. He inhaled and glanced around. She knew he was ensuring the room was safe. A typical alpha move, as if there was anything to fear in his own den. She rolled her eyes, though a twinge of appreciation stole through her while she waited. His consideration for her safety was so different from the human males. Those at her school thought the way to a woman's heart was to let her enter first. Let her do everything first. Their lack of respect had taken some time to get used to. It was nice to see a male of worth treat her with protective respect.

She followed, struggling to take in the unusual feel and smell of the subterranean quarters. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something felt... off.

A firm hand relieved her of the helmet, and they entered what looked like a normal, human apartment, with one important exception: no windows. Wolverines typically lived in dens, or homes they could convert into a den-like state. Wolverines preferred a dark, comfortable décor: warm, fall colors like browns and golds. Her own pack used cabins in the woods, with darkly treated wood. There, the fresh smell of the outdoors and wildlife gave comfort in a world run by man's city streets and neon lights.

In contrast, Ryland's living room walls were painted white. Nora examined the living space, suppressing a shudder of distaste at the sharp-edged brightness. As a wolverine's den, it was a massive failure. The only sign of comfort was the clutter of daily living. A big screen TV hung on one wall with a large leather recliner positioned directly before it. Nora half expected to see crushed beer cans on the floor, but there were none.

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An overstuffed dark green sofa took up another wall, along with a chair and love seat across from it. Cardboard boxes lined the room. Some sealed, some open with their contents spilling out.

"I've just inherited the place, and haven't made it mine yet." He set the helmets on a shelf beside the door, draping his leather jacket on one of the hooks beneath it.

She sniffed, hiding a grimace, and nodded.

He cocked his head, the golden mass of hair falling to his shoulders. "You don't like my den?"

She pulled her eyes and hid the look of revulsion she knew flew across her face. Never could she live in a place like this. She could lie and save his feelings, but why? She had been coerced to come here in the first place.

Mechanical equipment kicked on in the distance and the stink of recycled air pumped through small vents just visible along the ceiling. "I don't know how you stand it."

She caught a glimpse of a scowl on his dark face while she looked around. A sparkling clean kitchen sat to one side, and what appeared to be small home office. The furnishings were equally clean and neat. She shook her head. Who designed a building with such meticulous detail to mimic above ground, yet left out the most important parts? Fresh air, and sunshine. Thankfully, she was only staying one night. She could have her car fixed and be on her way.

"This way." He grumbled. He wasn't happy with her reaction. *Good*. That made two of them. It hadn't been her idea to come here in the first place. She wanted to go home. This was one wolverine law she wished would disappear. She hated having to rely upon an alpha she didn't even know just because she was female. Who's to say Ryland was any safer than finding her own way home? He may have saved her, but she had yet to know why. In their world, it was kill or be killed. Rescuing each other was saved for pack mates.

She followed him through the apartment. With his back to her, Nora took the opportunity to get a good look at the male who'd driven her to equal levels of anger and arousal. There was something hot about a male who was tall. Not many men even matched her height of over six feet, but Ryland towered above her. From behind, she watched him move, smooth and easy, a wolf in his prime. Ready, alert, confident and sure. With each stride, his bulging muscles called to her, from his shoulders to his thighs. The uncharacteristic urge to reach out and squeeze the cheeks of his butt to test the steel beneath was almost too much.

His scent teased her senses through the canned air. Provocative and sensual, it stirred her femininity and she felt her hips sway in response. She bit back the growl before it escaped. She really needed to get a grip.

* * * *

He flipped a switch in the hallway, and light brightened the space, glistening off the white cement walls. Ryland struggled to keep his breath even. His *True Mate* stood behind him, in his den, overpowering the air processors with her sweet, spicy scent.

He turned the knob on his brother's former bedroom door. Just his luck, it refused to budge. The wood had swollen shut. "This door sticks sometimes." He shoved hard, and it popped open.

She didn't answer, but he caught a whiff of amusement mingled with the spice of her scent. A tiny muscle in the corner of his eye twitched. He'd hoped she'd appreciate at least something in his pack's residence. However, he hadn't wanted her only enjoyment to be at his expense.

The instant he entered the bedroom, he wished he'd taken her to his, but it was too late to change his mind. Joshua's room was cold and unwelcoming. She scented the air and grimaced. He knew what she smelled. Joshua.

His brother's scent lingered like an ivy vine that refused to die, poisoning everything. The same way he'd been in life. Ryland's desire dissolved, replaced by a surging need to purge everything that was Joshua.

Nora stepped to the center of the room, turning to look at everything. "This isn't your room."

Ryland followed her gaze. The room looked like Joshua had left just this morning. Every item still in its place. The bed was still made with military corners. The dresser was bare, and the end table held only a lamp and a clock. "No, this was my brother's room."

Her eyes widened, and she glanced about the room. "Your brother? Where is he?"

"Dead."

Her brows lifted and her voice softened. "You weren't kidding when you said you inherited this place, were you?" She walked around the room, her finger wiping the dust from the dresser. "How long has he been gone?"

"Three months."

She stiffened, whirling to meet his eyes. "Three months?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said, confused.

Her face paled, and her brow furrowed. What was so special about that time frame? Whatever it was couldn't be good. Not the way her color disappeared.

She finally sighed, shaking her head. Her gaze traveled around the room, taking one last look before resting again on him. He could almost feel her touch as her eyes lightly caressed his body, until her gaze moved upward to his face. He knew exactly what she was looking at.

His scar.

He forced himself to remain still. Few people, wolveren or human, stared openly. Their expressions of disgust told him what they thought when they were unable to do more than avert their gaze. Scars meant failure.

He braced for her rejection. Her eyes softened, and, for the first time, he couldn't guess what someone thought. It wasn't exactly pity he saw in her expression, but it was close enough. He grew uncomfortable beneath her scrutiny. While struggling for something to say, she beat him to it.

"So your brother was the one who built this place?" she asked, returning to their conversation.

He nodded. "Yes. He wanted to create a utopia for rogue wolveren, males kicked out of their own packs for one reason or another, who had no place to go."

“Rogues?” Emotions sparked behind her eyes, shadows he couldn't understand. He could anticipate her thoughts. Shewolves were taught to fear rogues, to despise them at the very least. She wouldn't take to finding out she was his mate lightly and that he was rogue.

“Yes. Joshua's hope was to keep them safe, find them mates.”

Nora frowned. “Find them mates?”

“His dream,” he said shrugging. “Not mine.”

“And where are the rest of these rogues?” Her voice sounded tense, but he knew why. An entire pack of rogues would be considered dangerous to those who didn't know them. Most believed them to be killers, though most often, the reasons were a mere disagreement between pack leader and member.

But to the rest of their world, Ryland was the leader of a pack of convicts.

“In their dens. You can meet them tomorrow if you like.” He paused. “The bathroom's in here.”

Her lips pursed at the sudden change in conversation, but she followed. The strained conversation bugged him. This was his *True Mate*. He should be able to communicate with her without all the sidestepping and hiding of emotions. He turned. “If you need anything—”

“Could I have a toothbrush?”

He paused, his hand on the doorknob. “Sure. I'll be right back.”

He escaped and strode across the hall to his own. Inside, he closed the door, leaned against it, and shut his eyes. *Now what?*

Meeting his mate hadn't exactly been on today's agenda. He wasn't sure how to proceed. Just like their wolf cousins, shewolves chose their mates, despite the rare paring of *True Mates*. And like the wolves, they usually chose the strongest in a pack. But it wasn't always the case. Sometimes, they chose entirely by their heart. That's what scared him. Ryland didn't know how to court a female. They'd always come running to him. And since none of those females had managed to touch it, he was sure he didn't have a heart.

To make matters worse, females didn't recognize the *True Mate* bond in the beginning. Not like the males did. The females tended to assume other more mundane events were taking place, like their bodies taking over and going into heat.

Telling her they were *True Mates* would resolve everything. She'd understand and know she had no choice. Or would she?

He ground his teeth.

That would be the easy way out. As appealing as that seemed, he wanted her to accept him for himself, not because some deep-seated instinct demanded it.

He inhaled and strode to the dresser. She would need something to sleep in. He grabbed a T-shirt.

His.

Not Joshua's.

He sniffed it. Clean.

Ryland lifted his shirt and rubbed the soft cotton cloth over his chest and stomach as he strode into his bathroom. The fabric swept across his heated flesh, and he closed his eyes. Would her hands feel this delicate?

Dark Succession

He grimaced. Now wasn't the time to let his own desires play with his head. Fisting the cotton t-shirt, he dug through a drawer until he found a new toothbrush, and a few other odds and ends.

Returning to Joshua's room, he found Nora sniffing near the closet door, her nose wrinkled in distaste. God, he hoped his brother hadn't left anything incriminating in there. It was bad enough he'd not cleaned the room out already, but now his mate was nosing around inside.

"Here, something to sleep in." He handed her the shirt and toiletries and waited.

* * * *

Nora chewed on her lip. Riding with Ryland didn't seem like such a great idea after all. Her judgment was skewed. Since the day she'd received a message telling her to meet her father at the Uwharrie camp, everything had gone wrong. Staying the night in a strange wolverine's home, a self-acknowledged rogue, was just another of those poor decisions. Compound that with her unprecedented attraction to the male, and she was in real trouble.

He'd almost bit her head off when she asked whose room this was. Okay, maybe she should have caught on he'd had a death in the family when he said he'd inherited the den, but he hadn't looked broken up or anything. Typical of an alpha.

Even so, he was all male, and there was no doubting he was interested in her. He'd already said he'd been willing to take her, out in the forest, if she so desired. The problem was she'd almost been willing. Thank heaven for common sense. She wasn't about to be another notch on his belt. Nor would she strip in front of him and show off the scars on her back. His scar made him look rugged and masculine. Hers made her look pitiful and weak.

"I'll just go," she motioned toward the bathroom, "and take a shower. Thanks." She turned and forced herself to move slowly across the room. Once inside, she closed the bathroom door between them with a soft click. Nora rested her burning forehead against the cool wood door and groaned.

Her body had turned traitor. The longer she breathed in Ryland's scent, the higher her arousal built. She wasn't naive, but she also wasn't the kind of shewolf who got a thrill over power either. Maybe everything that had happened to her in the past few months had sent her into an extra heat.

A shudder ran through her at the memories of captivity at the hands of madmen. She closed off her mind to the images with a shake of her head.

Instead, she turned her attention back to the male with the most fascinating eyes: clear ice blue when calm, sparkling, yellow when primitive wolverine instincts built. In her imagination, she saw them darken to honey gold with desire, matching the ragged locks of his hair.

Most shewolves took a look at an alpha and dropped all their inhibitions, vying for his attention. Not Nora. In fact, not once had she been aroused by any male, human or wolverine. She'd always thought she lacked something important. Her mother would just shake her head and tell her how it would happen one day.

Dark Succession

She'd spent years pushing wolven males away. Now Ryland showed up, and she battled the urge to either rip off his clothes or melt into a puddle on the floor.

But today would not be that day. Whatever instinct he had awakened would not win. Not when she was staying under the roof of one of the sexiest males she'd ever met.

She pushed off the door and scanned her surroundings. A specially designed globe muted the harsh glare of the light bulbs above the mirror. Interesting. Care had been taken to acknowledge the wolven's sensitive eyes.

The appearance of the den-like attention to detail wasn't the biggest problem. The lack of the natural was. She'd kill for a window to open and to breathe in fresh air that would calm her nerves. How could any wolven live like this? Trapped in concrete walls, buried beneath tons of earth.

Nora yanked her blouse over her head and unzipped her jeans. In seconds, warm air caressed her naked body. She stepped into the tub, reached for the knobs, and hesitated before spinning only one. It was time for a very cold shower.

Like a cool spring rain, the water fell softly over her skin. She glanced up. A shower massage. Her lips curved into a smile. Now that was nice. For long minutes, she let the freshness cascade over her, dousing her hair in the soft cleansing feel.

Her imagination was on a roll, filling her mind with lustful images despite the cold water. She pictured Ryland behind her, his hands roving over her body. Her skin tickled, and, for a moment, it felt like he stood behind her, touching and caressing her. A gasp escaped her throat. She shook herself. This was getting out of hand.

She wanted him. There was no doubting it. A shame really, because she would not be like the shewolves he bragged about.

Never. She ground her teeth.

The memory of his words in the forest brought a new wave of heat to her cheeks. His explicitness had embarrassed her; his intent had not. The idea of him touching another woman was almost as insulting as the way he'd taunted her. But it was that sudden surge of jealous rage, not anger, that had caused her to strike out at being touched. It was best to recognize jealousy for what it was.

Slapping an alpha could lead to death, yet he'd taken it. Even laughed about it. Embarrassing her again. Despite his attraction, he saw only a child when he looked at her. Someone to amuse him.

What was it she found exciting about him again? It surely wasn't his asinine arrogance.

* * * *

Still in Joshua's bedroom, Ryland worked furiously. He stuffed clothes from the closet into duffels and bags. He stripped the bed and tossed the sheets in as well. Minute by minute, the few traces of his brother disappeared.

He moved to the dresser and opened the first drawer. The t-shirts within were folded, neat and tidy. *Every item has its place*, Joshua had said. Ryland was one of those items, and he'd fought to break from the strict rules his brother had imposed.

Dark Succession

After their parents' death, Joshua had dragged Ryland away from the Uwharrie forest pack where his parents had made their home.

Life had changed.

Newly orphaned, he only had his older brother to look up to. A brother as hard and unforgiving as any male he'd ever met. And now he was dead. Killed in a battle of good over evil. And though he hated to admit it, good had won, leaving Ryland to pick up the pieces.

Ryland stared into the drawer.

Joshua had a plan. One which would build their species from the tiny packs scattered across the world, bringing them together. They would be a force to be reckoned with in both the shifter and human communities. The problem was the plan had been not only unnatural, but wrong. Dead wrong.

Once Ryland understood what Joshua had in mind, he'd run. He'd taken an apartment across town, refusing to live beneath his brother's roof. Even now, guilt ate at him for his decision. Joshua had persisted, insisting he couldn't lead the pack alone, that he needed his family with him. At last, Ryland had relented, hoping he could throw a wrench or two in his brother's plans.

It hadn't worked. His brother had implemented his distorted vision of the future, relegating Ryland to the sidelines.

To make matters worse, Ryland hated the compound. The same way he sensed Nora hated it. There was nothing natural to the construction. In town, he had windows to open, somewhat fresh air to breathe. The compound's only plus was its safety.

Shaking off the memories, Ryland returned to the task at hand. He grabbed a handful of shirts, readying them to toss into the duffle. A sharp edge caught his hand, and his fingers closed over a small square item. He frowned. Joshua didn't hide things. Not that Ryland knew. He withdrew the item from beneath the clothes. It was a small black notebook, like those used by college kids to list weekly assignments.

Odd. He flipped through the pages, his brow furrowed. Though not written in English, it was definitely his brother's handwriting.

The sound of running water turned off, and he stuffed the little black book into his back pocket. *Later*. He tossed the last of the clothes into the bag at his feet.

He clutched two of the now filled duffels and trudged down the hall to his own room. There he grabbed some sheets and pillows and headed back, stopping to snatch an air freshener. If he couldn't kill his brother's scent, he could at least bury it.

* * * *

Nora slipped Ryland's T-shirt over her head. The scent of masculine spice, hot and wild rolled over her, and her body trembled. Like the flames of a forest fire, heat swept through her. *What had he done?*

The shirt smelled like he'd taken it off right before handing it to her. Her imagination took over, visualizing the soft cotton clinging to his broad, muscular body, and another sudden rush of heat surged through her blood. Her breasts

swelled, and her nipples sensitized. She shook her head. *This would not do.* She couldn't just walk out there like this. His wolverine senses would tell him everything. Nora closed her eyes and took several deep, cleansing breaths in hopes to clear her mind.

There was one other thing she needed to hide from him. Nora gathered up her hair, dragging it to the side. She peered over her shoulder at the mirror. At least there was no sign of the scars on her back through the lightweight shirt. Thank heaven for small favors. Every time she saw them, she felt the searing of the flesh all over again, just like that fateful day.

She'd been used. Tortured to get her father to bend to a mad man's wishes. To this day, no one was sure what the hyena thought he would accomplish. But she'd borne the pain, struggling to bite back the screams when the thin silver blade had sliced her flesh.

Her uncle Kieran's mate had saved her from sure death and later had become Nora's best friend. Not only had she helped Nora and her father escape, but Anna had also discovered a way to coagulate the wounds left by the sharp blade. There were so many she would have died from blood loss before the typical wolverine healing did its job.

Nora straightened, letting go of her hair. It landed with a splat against the t-shirt. All that was in the past. Now she had to learn to deal with the damage. She expelled a heavy sigh, finishing with a deep inward breath.

Ryland's warm, masculine scent washed over her, inside her, around her. It permeated everything around her, so powerfully that she could almost feel him behind her, his arms clasping her waist. Damn him.

He was probably thinking like every other male she'd ever met. Ownership. Possession. Typical of their species, the male always had to find a way to mark the woman he wanted.

With a toss of her head, she grimaced. Ryland Keegan was in for a big surprise. Aroused or not, she, Nora Hunt, belonged to no one.

Chapter Four

Ryland opened his brother's bedroom door and froze. Nora stood, dressed in his white shirt. *God, she was beautiful.*

Nora swung to face him, her mouth drawn in a tight line of frustration. "Don't you knock?"

Ryland shrugged, letting his gaze follow the muted light over his t-shirt where it hugged her curves. Her dark hair slicked against her head, shone like wet, polished ebony. The white cotton clung to her breasts, their peaks barely visible. His gaze traveled down, past where the cloth draped over feminine hips to long, muscular thighs. The image of her body beneath his flashed through his mind. Her lying beneath him, her legs wrapped around him while her body trembled in ecstasy.

He swallowed hard. "Brought you some fresh bedding," he said, his voice gruff. He tossed sheets and blankets onto the bed.

"Thanks," she said, her voice chilled.

She glared at him, her eyes hard as glass. He didn't care. Her musky spice told him everything he needed to know. She wanted him. Taking a shower had done nothing to change that. If anything, the scent filling the room had intensified.

"Do you mind?" she demanded, breaking into his thoughts.

He arched a brow and folded his arms across his chest. Actually, he did. He wasn't about to leave this room before he was ready.

"I think I'll stay for a bit."

She sighed. "Fine. It's your house."

He smiled at her exasperated shrug. His mind twisted and turned over the many possibilities for the future. One mating was all it would take to bind her to him. If she left tomorrow, the way she intended, he'd have to begin the process of winning her all over again. Convincing her they were meant to be together from a distance would be difficult. Especially if someone told her more about his pack. She was here in his home now, and he wasn't prepared to let her go.

She snatched the sheets and yanked the pillows from the head of the bed and tossed them on the dresser.

Every sway of her body hypnotized him. Her legs moved with fluid grace. Her moves were quick and efficient. Her hands flicked the fresh sheet into the air—it snapped and floated to the bed, encasing the mattress with clean fabric.

When she bent to tuck in the sheets, the neck of the shirt hung low, revealing the curve of a delicate breast. The small, soft globes teased his mind and body. His mouth watered with a desire to fasten his lips about those hardened peaks.

A low rumbling filled the room. His. Hunger built inside him with her every move. His fingers itched to caress her delicate skin while his mouth ached to taste every inch of her.

She glowered at him from across the bed, her hands frozen on the clean sheets.

"Stop staring," she said, punctuating her command with a snarl.

Ryland showed his teeth. "Put on a bra."

"I would if I had one." She scowled accusingly.

Ryland grinned. Maybe he'd give her the bra and panties he'd found with her jeans. Tomorrow.

She ducked her face, but not before he saw her eyes darken and her cheeks flush red. How hot her flesh would burn beneath his caress.

She snapped the sheet sharply to the edge of the bed and tucked it beneath the mattress. Her gaze darted toward his.

Damn. He wanted to touch her. He shoved his hands into his jeans. Time. Just a little more time to let her get to know him before he touched her. He'd already seen her aggression, and while she may be alluring as hell when she was mad, his newly formed plan didn't include turning his suit into a battle. Maybe some wolverine thought that was the best way to win a mate, but not him. He liked the idea of touching a lot better than fighting.

"Knock it off, Ryland. I'm not part of your shewolf fan club."

He raised a brow in surprise. He rubbed his jaw, hiding a smile, remembering the strength of her blow in the forest, and how he'd taunted her just moments before. His callous comment about shewolves had hit harder than he'd thought.

"They no longer matter."

"Can't prove it by me," she scoffed, straightening, her eyes sparkling in the muted light. "Don't you have something better to do than stare at me?"

"Nope."

She snorted and moved toward him. Her piercing gaze held him still. She was magnificent. A tall, potent shewolf confident of her power.

Ryland forced a swallow down his dry throat.

He was in trouble.

Never in his life had his control wavered. Many thought it had, but he always maintained a firm grip on his body's needs. Yet now, his fingers ached to grab her and drag her feminine curves against his body.

His childhood had been rife with stories of *True Matings* in history, when males were left groveling at their mate's feet. He'd laughed, refusing to believe any female could control a powerful alpha male.

Now he understood.

Now he'd do almost anything to touch her.

A weakness. Urges he must control.

With slow, even steps, she advanced. He held his breath, eyes glued to her progress. Her hips swayed with each stride. She held his gaze with hers, careful in her movements as though approaching a wild animal. In that instant he *felt* like a wild animal.

She reached around him and grabbed the pillows from the dresser. Ryland reached out, receiving a sharp slap on his hand for his trouble, before she darted back to the bed and slipped pillowcases over the softness. Her hands smoothed the material with a delicate caress.

He could almost feel that feminine caress over his hot flesh. He swallowed hard and ignored the urge to adjust his tight jeans.

She now worked with her back to him. Ryland swallowed his disappointment. Not because she moved away, but because she avoided his eyes. It surprised him just how much he enjoyed her eyes flashing and her direct gaze. Maybe it was the

hint of gold in her otherwise soft brown orbs. Maybe it was the challenge they held.

Unlike the other shewolves he'd known, she didn't have the trademark heart shaped ass. Instead, her hips were narrower than most. Her body didn't bear the wide curves he'd always desired up to now. Instead, her sleek muscles spoke of power and strength. She was tall and lean, a body built for speed. Surprise jolted inside his chest. Surprise because he couldn't wait to test her, to run through the forest with her at his side, in either form, wolf or human.

She bent at the waist to position the pillows at the head of the bed. Primitive instinct invaded what remained of his mind, and he stepped quietly behind her.

Nora smoothed the last pillow and rose to stand, slamming into Ryland. She spun about to face him, losing her balance in the process. A squeal escaped her throat, and she tottered, struggling for equilibrium. Ryland reached out, wrapping his arms around her, and drew her close.

"Sorry," he murmured.

* * * *

Nora knew he didn't mean it. He'd been staring through the eyes of a hungry wolf, stalking her like prey for the last ten minutes. Ignoring him hadn't worked, though she'd certainly tried. Instead, her body felt his gaze like a physical touch. The wolf within had awakened from her slumber, sniffing the air around her while Nora had made the bed. Power rippled over her skin, and instincts threatened to overtake conscious thought.

She'd teased him, moving closer as he'd stared at her hungrily. She could smell his arousal sharp in the room, and with every step toward him, it had heightened. All her life she'd watched shewolves torture males, and she'd sworn to never do the same. Yet after only an hour in his presence, she acted like she planned to bed him. She was way too civilized to act like a hussy, yet her wolveren instincts threatened to take over. For the first time since she could remember, she hungered to mate.

This had to stop, this taunting and teasing. He wasn't for her, no matter what her wolf side thought. Strong and powerful, he would hate her ingrained cowardice. Bending over had been a bad idea. She'd known it the instant she'd done so, but she'd been so caught up in his scent she'd been unable to resist.

And now his hands burned her hips where he held her close to his body.

"Ryland," she protested softly, her hands tugging at his wrists.

He rubbed his face in the hair along her neck. "So nice," he murmured.

Nora couldn't move. She was mesmerized by his heat.

He nuzzled her throat, his lips searing her flesh. She tipped her head to the side. *God, what am I doing?* But the wolf inside refused to pull away, relishing the masculine scent and the feel of the male holding her. Fangs scraped along her throat, and a tremor ran through her body.

His breath quickened. "You like that," he murmured.

Stop. Nora tried to say the word, but it wouldn't come. She swallowed hard.

Her eyes fluttered open. His tanned flesh was so tantalizingly close. All she had to do was lean in, and she could taste what she knew would be heaven. Saliva pooled in her mouth.

Sharp fangs scraped along her throat again, and she groaned. Her own gums itched in response. She had to stop this. She would not be another in his pack of shewolves.

Searching for anything to distract her line of thoughts, her gaze rested on his scar. The mark on his face extended from below his left eye to his chin. Fine and straight, resembling the slice of a knife. Only a powerful male could survive a slice to the face. She knew firsthand how silver burned the blood, boiling beneath the flesh, hindering the clotting process. The puckered skin looked soft. She reached up, her fingers aching to touch, just once.

Quick as a snake, Ryland's fingers snapped about her wrist.

"Don't."

From off in the distance, she heard his single command, but it held no meaning. The pressure on her wrist only sent her deeper into the dark abyss. Picture after picture flashed in her mind. For an instant she was transported to another time and another place.

She struggled against the silver chains that bound her to the wall. Pulling with all her might, she groaned, but the heavy links only clanked their laughter, her wrists burning where her struggles had torn the flesh. Her face was shoved against the raw wood of the cabin wall. Her shirt hung in tatters along her back, the cool breeze her own reprieve to this horrible nightmare.

The man approached. He smelled of human sweat and filth. He chuckled. In his hand, he held a silver scalpel.

Nora slammed back to the present, her body shaking. She twisted from Ryland's grasp, scrambling around the bed until she was on the other side.

Ryland jerked back. "Did I hurt you?"

She struggled for control. Her heart pounded painfully in her chest, in time with her shallow gasps. Post Traumatic Stress disorder. A human condition few wolverines understood. Weakness was unacceptable in the eyes of an alpha like Ryland. Cowardice was a weakness, no matter the cause.

The heat of shame burned in her skin. She held onto the dresser, her white knuckled grip hiding the trembling of her hands. "No, just leave, please."

Nora heard Ryland inhale. He would smell her terror. The scent of her fear hung heavy in the room. *What must he think of me now?*

He didn't move. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Please, leave," she whispered. "It's not you. I just need...." What did she need? She didn't know. She certainly didn't need to see Ryland's face filled with disgust.

"So be it."

Ryland spun on his heel and exited the room, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter Five

In a white knuckled grip, Ryland grasped the doorjamb after closing the door between them. He rested his forehead against the cool wood and took several deep breaths, struggling to calm the ferocious anger and heat burning in his blood.

He'd searched for years, looking for a mate to match him at every turn. A shewolf who was powerful and strong, one who could stand by his side as alpha. One like Anna, the human woman who'd not backed down when he'd partially shifted with her in his arms. The woman who'd rejected him, taking Kieran for her mate.

Instead, he got Nora.

The second the thought coalesced, the ingrained protective instincts inside him infuriated him. She was his, damn it. With a final shove from the door, Ryland stormed to his room and slammed the door. His body throbbed with hunger for his mate. *His True Mate*. The words echoed in his mind. He ran a hand through his tangled mop of hair and paced across the floor. She was a female who masqueraded as a shewolf, but was a terrified rabbit. He snorted, fighting the urge to slam a fist into the wall. Ryland could still smell her terror. It clung to his flesh like a bacteria. A shudder of disgust ran up his spine. His hands balled into fists. Ryland threw his head back and howled in frustration. The sound bounced off the concrete walls, reverberating through the night.

He didn't care who heard or what they would think.

The echo of his cry dissipated. He rubbed his face, and the lustful fog slowly lifted from his clouded mind. Nora wasn't some young pup he could send packing because he didn't want her. Whether he liked it or not, she was here for the duration.

He prowled the confines of his room. The urge to run free dragged at his heart, mixed with his desire to pound on her door and force her to explain. She was in his home, with only a single wall separating them.

The instincts of his species pushed through his pain, driving him to accept the one fact that cut deep. Nora was his *True Mate*, and while she might be a coward, she was his coward, and that would have to be enough. She was the one matched to him by nature. His to protect and defend, and that's exactly what he would do.

Ryland took a deep, shuddering breath. She had shown just the slightest taste of fear when she'd poked her head into the bar, but none when she confronted the young men in the forest. Oh, she'd been wary and got herself backed into a corner, but she was no more fearful than any other shewolf in the same predicament.

Then it was him.

What was it about him that had frightened her so? He'd watched her make the bed, and while he sensed her discomfort, she emitted no smell of fear. But then everything had changed. Could he have done something without realizing it? Was he too rough? Should he apologize?

He circled the room like a caged wolf, hungry for what was beyond his reach.

What he needed was a cold shower. Shake off his desire, and maybe he could think more clearly. He strode into the attached bathroom and unzipped his jeans. His hand felt the bulge in his hip pocket.

The diary.

Glad for the distraction, he pulled it out and flipped through the pages. The writing looked more like a code rather than English.

What else had Joshua been up to? Why had he felt it necessary to encode his diary? The more Ryland looked into the affairs of the pack, the more worried he grew. Nothing was the way it seemed. And in some cases, it was worse than he'd thought.

There were times he'd wondered if his brother was criminally insane. Insanity wasn't impossible. Now and then a wolverine was born missing important traits, such as honor and compassion. Yet, when he was a boy, his brother hadn't seemed wild or controlling.

Ryland flipped through the pages of the small book. Joshua could have put his notes in longhand, in a safe. They each had one in their rooms. Instead, he'd coded them and hidden them in his clothes.

Ryland returned to the bedroom and stuffed the notebook in the safe over the bed. It didn't matter. He had bigger worries. For one, the dark-haired beauty down the hall.

The phone by the bed trilled its high-pitched ring. Yanked from his internal concerns, he snatched the receiver from its cradle. "Ryland here."

"We've got a problem," the masculine voice announced.

"On my way."

He didn't need Nora learning about his problems today. Not yet, anyway. Ryland dressed and headed toward the door. He hesitated as he passed Nora's room, his hand raised to knock, but he dropped it to his side.

No need to disturb her. His howl had probably already shaken her. Ryland found living underground taxing, more human than wolverine. His ever present streak of wildness tugged at his control, and he hungered for the joy of the hunt, the thrill of chasing down prey. Howling made him feel normal again.

He strode through the kitchen, opening the door into the compound. The call had come from Brogan, his right hand man and second in pack command. When Joshua had insisted Ryland move in with the pack, Brogan had joined him, leaving behind ties to his own family to be with his friend.

Ryland inherited the pack when Joshua was killed by another wolverine. As Joshua's second, it was Ryland's responsibility to take over when the victor didn't. The victor being Kieran, the protector of the Uwharrie pack.

Several of the males in the pack, including Devlin, were not happy with the way he'd stepped in as leader. Devlin had been Joshua's right hand man until Ryland had returned.

Upon taking the mantle of alpha, Ryland had usurped Joshua's leadership in hierarchy its entirety, putting only those he trusted at his side, and there was none he trusted more than Brogan.

The hall opened into the central courtyard, and Ryland heard the commotion. Voices shouted, both male and female. He grimaced and moved down the hallway into the fray.

“Get him out of here.” He’d know that voice anywhere. Kirsten. Ryland shook his head in disgust. There were times he hated the responsibility of pack leadership. Make that he hated the responsibility of leading *this* pack.

The sounds continued until he reached the open door, and all fell silent.

Five women stood, tears streaming down their faces. Devlin had his fingers wrapped around Kirsten’s delicate arm, tugging her toward him. Others stood by, half of whom were laughing and cheering him on. Others just observed quietly. Only Brogan made the effort to put a stop to the ruckus, his body between the pair.

“Stop,” ordered Ryland. He didn’t need to raise his voice. The soft word carried through the room with precision, straight to the man for whom it was intended.

Devlin turned, his teeth bared, a soft growl emitting from his throat. Defiance screamed from Devlin’s taut muscles. His eyes flashed yellow, and the scent of his anger and lust filled the room. One day, he would have to take Devlin down.

There were plenty of “one day’s” on his plate but his first priority was the women. Five *human* women, each kidnapped by Joshua and hidden beneath the ground. Intended to be nothing more than breeders.

For months, he’d struggled to find a way to release the women without hurting the wolveren species. So far he’d been unsuccessful.

“Somebody had better tell me what the hell is going on.” Ryland demanded. The room remained still, the only sound the heavy breathing from Devlin and the snuffles of the women around him. And then, as though a magic switch was flipped, the five women spoke at once.

“He did it—”

“You can’t let him—”

“You promised—”

“Someone has to do something—”

“He—”

Ryland raised his hand, and they silenced.

“You,” he said, meeting Kirsten’s eyes. “Speak.”

Her lip quivered, tears in her eyes. Her face was red with shame, and her scent was dark with fear and embarrassment.

“Devlin. He... he wanted to....”

“He wanted to rape her,” finished Brogan, snarling in disgust. “Again.”

Devlin’s lack of control ripped at Ryland, anger searing through his blood. He welcomed the power accompanying his fury. His muscles bulged, and he let a partial shift ripple over his flesh. Fingers turned to claws, his voice lowered to a rumble.

“Is this true?” Ryland advanced toward the male.

“It’s what they’re here for, isn’t it?” snapped Devlin.

Ryland growled menacingly. He struck without mercy, his fingers pinning Devlin’s wrist. The male snarled his response, his eyes flashing his challenge. With ever increasing pressure, Ryland squeezed until the male released the woman.

Ryland shoved hard until Devlin stumbled back. The wolver's face was dark with fury. Ryland lowered his head, advancing, his fangs piercing his own lip, drawing blood. His growl reverberated through the room with deadly intent.

"If I catch your hands on one of these women again, you'll be out on your ass."

Devlin snarled his response, his teeth bared.

Ryland shoved again, slamming his back against the wall. "No one touches these women without their permission. *Ever*." He leaned in, his face mere inches from Devlin's throat, his lips curled, fangs sharp and deadly. Ryland knew his eyes were yellow with rage. "Do I make myself clear?"

A quiet rumble sounded in the male's chest. Ryland didn't back down. Devlin glared a moment longer before finally lowering his eyes, but not before Ryland caught one last flash of defiance within their depths.

"The reason they are here has changed. They are no longer yours to touch. Soon, they will be sent home. Now get out."

With one last shove, he stepped away from the male and waited while Devlin and his cronies slunk from the room.

He bit back the sigh threatening to release. This wasn't over. Only a fight would settle things. Devlin's designs on the pack were going to get him killed.

He turned toward the women. None met his eyes, though one, Diane, snuck glances at him from the corner of her eye. She was different. Ryland couldn't quite pinpoint what it was, but her scent was unlike the others, and she acted more sure, despite the circumstances.

While the others stank of fear, her scent remained clear, unblemished. She watched him the way a flirtatious shewolf might.

Ryland scowled. He had his own shewolf to worry about.

"Everyone back to bed. Brogan, I want this door locked at night." He glanced around and spotted Gerard, the security manager. "You, Gerard, and I are the only ones to have keys. This will not happen again."

"No problem, boss," said Brogan.

"And keep inside tomorrow, ladies. I need you out of the way."

"What's the matter?" asked Diane. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, wisps escaping their bonds, framing her strong, yet still feminine face. She stepped in front of the others. "Afraid we'll try to escape?"

"Stay put."

"Let us go, Ryland. It'll solve all your problems. Let us go back to our families."

"I can't, Diane. Not yet."

He'd inherited more than his brother's pack. He'd inherited his brother's crimes as well. Five women, each kidnapped, kept against their will for months, even years. Of all of the former pack leader's crimes, this was the worst. Stealing women from their homes, dragging them beneath the ground, all under the guise of furthering the wolver race. Breeders. Designed to give a half wolver, half human child.

Joshua had intended to turn the children when they were old enough, making them full wolver. Since most mixed children were female, Joshua had hoped to give his pack more females to breed.

Dark Succession

Now it was Ryland's duty to find ways to repatriate the women without destroying the wolverine race.

"Or won't."

He turned to leave. "If one of you steps out of line, I'll lock this door for good." Ryland swallowed the guilt building inside him. Three months, he'd searched for answers, but he had none. The bitter fury in the women's hardened eyes told him all he needed to know. The instant they were released, they would run to the police. His race was more important than five women. Yet no matter how many times he told himself that, he still couldn't assuage the guilt.

There had to be a way.

Ryland stormed outside, slowing once he hit the courtyard. He ran one hand through his hair and sighed. He didn't need this shit. Too much was going on. If the women and Devlin's designs on them weren't enough, he had his own mate to complicate matters.

"Boss."

Ryland turned to see Brogan trotting down the hall. "The door's locked up."

"Good."

"So how did the meet go?"

"It didn't. I left before Ian arrived."

"So you still don't know what he wanted?"

Ryland shook his head. "No. But I'm betting it had something to do with Sarah."

"Do you think he wants to take responsibility for the child?"

"I'd bet on it."

"What if it's—"

"Let's hope it's not." Ryland didn't want to think about the possibility the child was Joshua's. Even if it was, and Ian was willing to take the child, he'd let him. One thing he wasn't ready for: raising his brother's child.

"So what's up with making the women stay put?"

"For their own safety. Devlin is on a rampage. Besides, I have a guest."

"Who?"

"Not now, Brogan. It's a long story, and I need some rest."

The male sniffed, and Ryland knew Brogan had caught Nora's scent. He'd never made it to the shower. Brogan's eyes widened, and he grinned. "You brought a woman back."

Ryland shrugged, uncomfortable with the direction this conversation was headed.

His friend slapped him on the back. "You stud, you. So do we get to meet her?"

"Not now," Ryland snapped.

* * * *

Glancing to ensure no one was watching, fingers closed over the doorknob and twisted. The metallic snick said everything. Locked. As if a simple locked door could keep anyone in this place safe.

Dark Succession

No, the alpha was hiding something. Or someone. But he didn't matter. His plan wouldn't help. Ryland would still lose everything. No one in this compound was safe, human or wolver. Soon, they would all pay. Every last one of them. Soon.

Chapter Six

It was morning. Or at least Nora thought it was. Without windows she could only believe the clocks around the house. Already her body was terribly confused.

Nora opened the cupboards in the pristine kitchen for the third time. At least she understood now why it was so clean. *Damn*. What the hell did this male eat? The only things in his cabinet were a box of pancake mix and a loaf of bread. In the refrigerator were a dozen eggs. Nora grimaced and pulled out the pancake mix. She'd much rather have a pack of sausage or bacon for breakfast. But pancakes would have to do.

Mixing took no conscious thought—just add water. So she stirred and set up the griddle she found resting on the stove.

She frowned and poured batter onto the hot griddle. How Ryland and his pack lived without the sun and the moon to help monitor their internal clocks was beyond her comprehension. The unnatural, harsh environment was so different from the heart of the beast. The animal soul within all shifters preferred the soft comfort of nature, with the soil between their toes and the sun or the moon shining on their backs.

Although, everything about Ryland was unusual, not the least of which was the strength of her attraction to the male. He was hot, rough, and powerful. Everything a shewolf desired in a mate.

Mate.

She rolled her eyes. Now there's a word she'd never uttered aloud, much less considered. Yet when he'd accused her the night before of wanting him for her mate, she hadn't argued. Instead, jealousy and repulsion twisted her gut to learn he'd taken other shewolves to bed, and then kicked them to the curb. Shewolves who had been looking for an alpha. Not that she minded him kicking them to the curb, she just didn't like the idea he'd touched other females in such an intimate way. And that disturbed her on many levels.

Memories from the night before burned behind her eyes. She was such a wimp, not just feeling the terror, but reacting as if she'd stepped back in time. There was no doubt she'd disgusted him. He'd even cleaned out the room she slept in, as though afraid she might touch something she shouldn't. Trust was definitely an issue.

A sound whispered behind her, and she stiffened, nostrils widening.

Ryland was there, watching, stalking. His scent rolled through her lungs, pumping into her bloodstream. Heat coiled deep in her gut, muscles melted, weakening her knees in the process. Her fingers gripped the counter until her knuckles turned white. His power vibrated like a living entity, undulating through the otherwise still air between them.

She needed to turn and speak. Anything to stop him from getting too close. Yet her muscles refused to obey, waiting for his inevitable touch.

His heated breath feathered across her hair. One hand moved to rest on the counter beside her, the other reached for the cabinet above.

"Allow me." He drew two plates from the cupboard, placing them on the counter beside the steaming griddle. "Smells good," he murmured, his nose buried in her hair.

"It's just pancakes," she scoffed.

"I'm not talking about the pancakes."

His scent darkened, hot and sensual, a male ready to mate. The urge to lean back against him burned inside her. It took every ounce of strength she had to stand still.

After her burst of fear the night before, his interest surprised her. Maybe he seduced every shewolf he met, out of habit. Maybe he needed another boost to his overblown ego.

Regardless, she had never thrown herself at a male, and today wasn't the time to start. Not with a male she barely knew. She closed her eyes, searching for inner strength.

"Is this how you greet all of your overnight guests?" The words came out almost a squeak.

He laughed softly. She fought back a shiver of hunger, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Maybe," he murmured.

If he touched her, she'd be lost. What was it about this wolverine she barely knew? How could he destroy her self-control so easily?

"Back off, or your breakfast will burn."

He chuckled low. "Maybe I don't care. Perhaps I like that idea."

"And perhaps I don't." Nora said sharply, stepping back, purposely elbowing him in his rock hard gut while angling around him. He got the message and moved. "Thanks." She grabbed a plate and loaded on a stack of pancakes. "Sit and eat."

He quirked a crooked grin and took the plate from her while she prepared her own.

They sat at the small kitchen table in uncomfortable silence. She forced herself to gulp a swallow of her coffee, scalding her throat. Through veiled eyes, she examined the man across the table. The strong, powerful body dwarfed the small table.

"Look," she began, humiliated by her embarrassing display of fear, wanting to get things over with, "about last night—"

"I don't want to talk about it," he spat.

Nora shrugged, hating herself for the cowardly relief in the pit of her stomach. "Ok. We won't discuss it." She reached for the syrup, nearly knocking it over. *Damn*. Now she was clumsy to go with her cowardice. "So tell me about this place," she commanded, without looking up.

With her pancakes thoroughly soaked, she cut off a bite and popped it in her mouth. When she glanced across the table, Ryland watched her with hungry yellow eyes. A small thrill shot straight to her toes. *Damn*. She shouldn't be so pleased to know of his arousal. Ducking her head, she hid a smile and cleared her throat.

Ryland jolted in his chair. "What did you say?"

"This place. Tell me about it."

With surgical precision, Ryland cut into his pancakes with his fork. "My brother wanted a safe haven, so that's what he built. We aren't like your Uwharrie pack. We don't own an entire forest."

Nora caught the subtle sound of sarcasm in his voice and swallowed her flare of anger. She raised a brow and popped in another bite of pancake. "It's not like that happened in my lifetime. Our pack just thought ahead is all." She glanced around, struggling to ignore the sensuous way his lips moved as he ate. "So why underground? Why not just buy homes in one of the housing districts? Aren't there some protected wetlands near here? Why not buy property near there?"

His fork froze, and he studied her. At long last he spoke, his head shaking. "I can't tell you why he made his choices." His eyes glinted with a touch of anger. *None of your business*, they seemed to say.

Arching a brow, she nodded. He was right. It was none of her business. There was also the possibility he didn't like this place either. Nora remained silent while he cleaned his plate. When he set his fork down, she took their plates to the sink.

She turned on the water and reached for the dish soap.

"I'll clean them."

His proprietary tone reminded her of the night before when he'd cleaned out the room while she showered. She whirled around, slamming the bottle of soap on the counter. "I know you were afraid I'd steal something last night. Why else would you pack and move everything from the room you put me in? I promise I'll only wash the damned dishes. I won't invade your space, and I won't take any of your precious memories of your brother. Then you can take me to my car."

His brows raised, and he cocked his head to one side, a surprised smile playing upon his lips. "I only meant you are my guest. You aren't here to cook my breakfast and wash my dishes."

"Oh." Humiliation twisted her stomach, and heat suffused her face. *Great. Like I didn't embarrass myself enough last night.* Avoiding his penetrating gaze, Nora focused on the shadow of his unshaven jaw. "And last night?"

His jaw twitched, his muscles fighting the smile she could see threatening. "I removed Joshua's things because I wanted to. I didn't want his scent around you, making you uncomfortable. I didn't do it because I thought you would steal."

"Why didn't...." Already that dark expression had returned to his face. The one that said *don't question me. Typical alpha.*

She sighed in exasperation, turning back to the sink. "I helped dirty the dishes; I can help clean them." She snatched the dish soap again and squirted a healthy dose into the running water. She dipped her hands into the suds, ignoring him.

A phone rang in the other room, and he left as quietly as he had arrived. She dried her hands on a towel and stepped closer to listen. She could hear her mother now. "*Stop that young lady, if it was your business they wouldn't leave the room.*"

When she did something she knew her mother wouldn't like, she could hear Laura's voice in her ear. Sometimes, she wondered if maybe the voice did belong to her mother. But this time, Mom wasn't going to win. Eavesdropping might be bad form, but curiosity about this male piqued with every passing moment and she wanted to know all about him. It wasn't like he would be open and share. No alpha did.

"I'll be right there," Ryland announced into the phone.

Dark Succession

He turned, saw her standing in the doorway, and hung up the phone. "I've got to handle some issues. When I get back, I'll take you to check on your car."

"And just what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

He stopped and stared at her a second, before shrugging and motioning to the TV. "Why not relax? There's a TV and some DVD's over there. I won't be long."

Before she could say another word, he disappeared through a side door off the kitchen.

Nora surveyed the empty den. Great. Just great.

* * * *

Ryland stormed to his office and found Brogan waiting by the door. He unlocked the room and stepped inside.

"What the hell's the problem?" Ryland demanded, moving behind his desk.

"My, aren't you in a mood today!"

"I was busy. What's so damned important? Has anyone hurt one of the women?"

"No—"

Ryland raised his hand, stopping his second in command mid sentence. He scanned the contents of the desk. At first glance everything appeared to be right where it belonged, but a memory tweaked inside his brain. His pen. It had been by his right hand, where he always laid it. But now, it was lying on top of the sheaf of papers.

"Have you been in here?" he asked before Brogan could answer his earlier question.

"No, Boss. Not till you unlocked the door. Why?"

Ryland studied his desk and sniffed. Nothing. No scent seemed out of order. Maybe he was wrong. "Never mind." Ryland sat behind his desk. "So what's the problem?"

"It's the water, boss. There's a problem with one of the tanks."

"So, fix it. Isn't that what Devlin's job is?"

"Yeah, which is why we need to talk. I think he's the cause of the problem."

Shit. All he needed was one of his pack undermining his position of alpha. Especially one with Devlin's influence. He peered at his friend above papers he had in his hand. "Explain."

"Since Joshua's death he's had a bone to pick with you, Ryland, and he'll do anything he can to make you look bad."

"And you think he'd go so far as damaging our water purification system?"

He shrugged. "You never know about Devlin."

A knock sounded at the door. A dark wolverine poked his head into the office. The head of security, Gerard managed the locks on all the doors and kept tabs on anything out of the ordinary. Younger than both Ryland and Brogan, he was a few inches shorter than Ryland, with dark skin and even darker eyes. Hand picked by Joshua, Gerard did a good job, and Ryland could find no reason to release him from his position. His loyalty remained true to the pack, if not its alpha. "Boss, you need to come see this."

"In a minute."

“Now. It’s important.”

Ryland sighed. *Now what?* This position as pack alpha had turned into a mess of paperwork and interruptions.

“On my way.” Ryland pushed past Brogan, spearing him with his eyes. “Get Devlin on the water problem now. This place stinks bad enough without worrying about the lack of water for showers making it worse.”

Gerard waited for him just outside his office.

“What’s the problem?” The dark look on the security manager’s face did not bode well. Ryland followed the male through the courtyard and down Bravo Hall. When Joshua had created this massive compound, he’d let his Marine background take over. Each hallway was assigned a phonetic alphabet identifier. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, etc.

“Got some bad news. We’ve had a killing.”

Ryland’s heart thumped. “Someone challenged to the death?”

Gerard shook his head. “No. No such luck. Murder. Kyle is dead, in his den.”

Ryland stopped and stared at the man. “Dead? How?”

“His throat was cut. With silver. His neighbor smelled the blood and broke in the door. He found Kyle in his own bathtub. Dead.”

Kyle had been one of Joshua’s staunchest supporters. The male was a vile, vicious wolven who loved to use his powers to invoke fear on the human race. He’d been evicted from his old pack for multiple vicious rapes, and he’d found himself a haven beneath Joshua. While Ryland despised the male, he was part of the pack, and therefore entitled to the same protection as the rest. If he was murdered, it would not go over well.

Kyle occupied one of the larger dens at the far end of the wing. The closer they drew, the stronger the coppery scent of blood grew. Fresh blood. Perhaps from early this morning.

The splintered front door hung on one hinge, teetering ominously. Ryland pushed past.

Silence met his ears. Order met his eyes. The oily scent of Pine-sol mixed with the overpowering scent of fresh blood as he approached the bathroom. Someone had tried to clean up their mess.

The wolven lay in the tub.

Like all shifters, Kyle had shifted back to his wolven animal form. Most shifters believed this return to animal shape helped save the wolven from discovery by humans. It might be true, since most humans dismissed things like unusual clothing lying near an animal. It didn’t fit their picture of reality.

The frustrating part of the change was it did nothing to help find a killer, changing the circumstances of death. The victim’s neck fur was matted and the last of his blood congealed beneath the gaping wound in his throat. A river of dark blood seeped down the drain and into the outgoing sewage. The smell of death and wet fur filled the small room.

Whoever had cut him had done a good job.

Ryland glanced around. White porcelain sinks and a toilet sparkled. The mirror, however told a different story. Dark crimson dripped from letters written with what smelled like Kyle’s blood. *Paid in Full*. Ryland sniffed. Nothing. No trace of any scent other than blood, Pine-Sol and Kyle himself.

Dark Succession

He turned to his head of security. "What have you got?"

"Nothing. Not a damned thing. I can't find a single scent except his in the place, but we know he couldn't have slit his own throat. There's no weapon near the body. And, whoever killed him used a very sharp, thin knife."

Gerard lifted the head of the wolverine in one gentle hand. "Here," Gerard pointed to the gash in Kyle's throat, "you can see the cut is narrow, but the blade did its job and hit the jugular."

Ryland peered close and sniffed, ignoring the dark, roiling anger within his own heart. The faint scent of silver remained. He looked at his security manager. "Any ideas?"

"None, yet. I can't tell if the killer did the deed elsewhere, or if he was transported. There's a hell of a lot of blood in the tub, and if he was attacked in one of the other rooms, someone had to do a major clean up job. With the smell of Pine-Sol everywhere, there's no way to know. I'm going to get with a friend of mine, a local sheriff. See if he'll let me borrow some of his crime scene equipment to search for traces of blood in the den."

Ryland ground his teeth. "Do it. But Gerard...." The man spun to face him. "Be careful. Don't tell them why."

Gerard's lip curled at the command. "I'm not an idiot. I've been with this pack longer than you."

Ryland nodded.

A feminine scream pierced the silence between them. *Nora!*

Chapter Seven

After finishing the dishes, Nora moved through the silent den. In the doorway of the bedroom she'd slept in, she scrunched up her nose. That awful smell. The sour remnants of Ryland's brother's scent still permeated the room. Not pleasant at all. Not like Ryland's.

A soft smile curved her lips. Ryland had definitely smelled good, standing behind her in the kitchen. The memory invoked a fantasy of him ignoring her demand to move and dragging her against him, the spicy erotic scent he radiated enveloping her.

She shook her head. *Damn*. This had to stop, this daydreaming. She was too old to daydream, and he was too dangerous to let her imagination get away with her. He'd tried to hide his pent up energy beneath meticulous, civilized behavior. The way his hands held the fork and knife with manners fit to impress a queen, or the cleanliness of the den. It was so *unwoven*. Almost *human*. No wolvern could maintain such a façade for long.

She scanned the bedroom. Four walls. Like before. Nora suppressed the sudden memory.

Okay, so this wasn't a basement with a tiny window like the one she'd been held prisoner in. Ryland's den was bigger, and yes, cleaner. But one thing made the room worse: There were no window.

Nora rubbed her arms, wishing she could fight off the urge to run. Since her kidnapping two months ago, she had difficulty sitting still. The need to constantly move, to have freedom to go in or out nearly overwhelmed her at times. The scars on her back were nothing compared to the emotional pain. Her entire world had collapsed, cheating her of her confidence and trust.

Her mom didn't understand. Instead of letting her deal with pain her own way, her overprotective mother had encouraged her to stay inside the family residence at the Uwharrie pack. At her parents' insistence, Nora had lived for weeks in that tiny log cabin, pacing the floors like their friend Petey, the only real wolf in their pack, did sometimes.

Petey was a wolf who'd escaped transport to the local zoo. No one quite understood how he'd escaped, but he'd shown up on their doorstep, and there he'd found a home. Their pack had adopted him to keep him safe.

The gray wolf had become her savior during her "homebound captivity" while she'd healed. He'd kept her company, playing with her no matter what form she used, human or wolf.

Finally, the time came to move on. Convincing her parents hadn't been easy, but they had to admit she couldn't stay housebound for the rest of her life. She'd started back to school at North Carolina State University where only one more semester remained to complete her degree in forestry. A degree she hoped to use to help her own kind. A degree Ryland's pack didn't seem to need.

Nora circled the room again, her mind coming back to her predicament. Her body longed for fresh air, for the bright sunshine or soft rainfall.

"I can't do this," she said, speaking into dead air.

In the kitchen, Nora opened the same door Ryland had used when he left and glanced about. She stepped into a long hallway. Cinder block walls checkered

from the baseboard to the ceiling. The scent of pine-sol slapped her in the face. *Damned offensive cleaner.* She'd learned to hate that too during her captivity.

Keeping her steps light, she moved down the hall. Doors decorated with numbers lined the walls, reminding her of the school dormitory. How many wolverines were in this pack? Were these all dens like Ryland's? Her soft shoes squeaked on the clean, hard tiled floor. The farther she walked down the long hallway, the stronger the smell of the pine cleaner.

A sound of footsteps echoed somewhere in front of her. She slid back into the depression of one of the doors and listened.

The steps weren't coming toward her. She must be nearing the main part of the compound. Closing her eyes, she focused on the sound. The person moved without care, his steps reverberating through the halls. The steps were too heavy to be a female, thank heaven. She-wolves were more aggressive than their male counterparts when another wolverine wandered into their territory.

That territorialism was the reason Nora's mother had left the Uwharrie pack. As a borderline alpha female, she'd been mate to the pack leader for years. But when Nora's father had stepped down, moving her Uncle Kieran into alpha position, Laura, her mother, was no longer the alpha female. Centuries of instinct won over common sense, and she'd returned to her birth pack, fearing for her life.

Nora continued down the long hallway. The sounds of footsteps grew louder.

Voices echoed in the hallway. Male. All males. She inched forward until she came to a juncture. Like a courtyard, minus the yard. Hallways spiraled off in all directions, like the spokes of a wagon wheel.

A peek showed an empty room, with only voices echoing off the hard cement walls indicating life. Voices she couldn't identify.

"Damn," she whispered. She had sensed the compound was big, but nothing like this.

"Who the hell are you?"

Nora spun around to face the male behind her. He was short for a wolverine, but wide. A six foot linebacker, easy. Neatly combed, dark hair contrasted painfully to the rough ragged clothes he wore.

"I said, who the hell are you?" he repeated.

"I'm... I'm Nora."

"Nora," he taunted, his fangs flashing in the artificial light. "What are you doing here?"

Contempt poured off him in waves. Back home she held a position of power, just under the alpha female, but this wasn't her house. This wasn't even her pack. Making the effort to avert her eyes despite her natural instincts, she replied, "I'm a friend of Ryland's."

"Oh really?" he said, his lip curling. "I didn't know he had any friends. Especially the female sort." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "And I suppose Ryland gave you permission to wander around our compound?"

The sudden surge of anger rushed through her, heating her blood. His disrespect for Ryland's name rubbed her fur the wrong way, and the wolf inside wanted to rip out his throat. She took another step back and collided with the wall. "No, I just...."

Dark Succession

He stepped forward, and from the corner of her eye, she saw him inhale, his nostrils flaring. “Ahh, the smell of a shewolf,” he murmured.

“I’m sorry for interfering.” With one foot, she stepped back, and then another, her gaze glued to the male before her. Like a snake, he struck. One powerful hand snatched her wrist, and he yanked her up against him. He grabbed the other arm with equal force and pushed both behind her, hard against the concrete wall, holding them in his one-handed grip.

Fear clogged her throat, wild images flooded her brain of another time, another place.

“You may be a friend of Ryland’s, but you ain’t a friend of mine until I say so. So you’d best be accommodating.” He kicked her feet out wide, spreading her legs. Her voice returned, and she screamed with everything she had.

* * * *

The sound of Nora’s scream echoed through the compound, shattering Ryland’s control. Fingers morphed into long hairy claws, his fangs shot from his gums and he snarled. Control. He needed control. With intense effort he reeled in the sudden change and tore from the room, Brogan fast on his heels.

His heart pumped hard in his chest, afraid he’d find her dead or being raped by one of the many vile males within his pack. He rounded the corner to the hallway that housed his den and found her. Devlin held her wrists, pinning her against the wall and his body pressed against hers. Fierce possessive anger rolled through Ryland. His skin itched with the hunger to shift, to sink his teeth into the male’s throat, to feel the flesh rip, to taste his blood.

He yanked the man from her and threw him across the hall, the wolver’s body hitting with a satisfying crunch. “Don’t touch her again.”

The male bared his fangs, unfazed, eyes gleaming red. “What’s the matter, Ryland? Did I hurt your pretty toy?”

Ryland’s fangs dropped through his gums, his mouth throbbing. He ached to finish it, to kill the bastard where he stood. His lips curled into a snarl. “Touch her again, and I’ll kill you.”

The smell of Nora’s fear burned rancid in the close quarters of the hallway. The odor sickened him, yet awoke an urge to protect her with his life.

Mine. The word brought to life instincts he barely understood. Instinct to protect the one he would call mate fought against the responsibility to care for his pack. Breath eased through his lungs, controlled and even. He would not show his weakness to his foe.

Devlin chuckled. “Sure, Ryland. Whatever you say. You can have the little rabbit. You deserve her.” The male turned and moved a few steps away, but watched, his eyes glittering with malicious mischief.

* * * *

Nora straightened and moved toward Ryland, her eyes averted. She was nothing more than a coward. She sickened even herself. The instant they got back to the den she’d ask Ryland to call her a cab.

He sniffed her and grimaced. "Get back to the den. Now."

An order, given by the alpha. She nodded, not looking at the gathering crowd. She took a deep cleansing breath and turned. Her chin rose, and she moved with purposeful strides past the assemblage of males.

Devlin blocked her path, his eyes glinting in the artificial light. She desperately wanted to make him pay for his behavior, but the twinge of fear still stuck like a rock in her gut. She didn't hide her curled lip as she walked past.

For an instant, he glared back, a growl echoing from his throat.

With a toss of her head, she turned with deliberation and strode down the hall, her shoulders square and her head held high. Never in her life had she yearned more for the fresh air of the forest. To run, to let the scent of the trees chase away the fears hiding in the shadows of her memories. This place, this closed up concrete compound, awoke her buried fears, overwhelming her mind and reminding her what it was like to be held prisoner. Everyone around her felt like an enemy.

The farther down the hall she walked, the faster her pace grew. The sensation of Devlin's fingers on her wrists still burned her flesh. Nora ignored the urge to rub away the phantom pain. Once inside Ryland's den, she slammed the door behind her and leaned against it, forcing air into her lungs.

Crossing the living room at a trot, she opened the door to Joshua's bedroom. The acidic smell within turned her stomach. Spinning on her heel, she charged down the short hallway until she came to another doorway. Once inside, she inhaled.

Ryland's room.

His scent washed over her, calming her wildly beating heart, soothing the desire to run and hide. Her body folded onto the bed, and she lost herself in his remnants of his essence on the pillow.

What was wrong with her? When the man Ryland had called Devlin grabbed her wrists, the tunnel had opened up, releasing every horrifying minute of the nightmare she'd lived. She'd lost all control, and that was unacceptable. Ryland had looked at her with such disgust in his eyes. He hated her. *God, he hated her.*

"Nora!" His voice bellowed from the kitchen, and the door slammed. Her body tensed, waiting for the explosion.

"Nora, where are you?"

* * * *

Ryland sniffed the air. Her trail went to Joshua's, but she didn't stay there. Instead, he found her in his bed, curled up, moisture trailing down her cheeks.

What the hell did he need to do now? While her cowardice sickened the alpha inside him, his instincts screamed at him to protect her. He'd failed her. "Nora," he said softly. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, sniffing and hiding her face in his pillow.

This wasn't how he wanted to bring her to his bed. She smelled of a wide variety of emotions. Humiliation, anger, and a touch of fear. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

She bolted upright. "I'm not afraid of you!" she cried.

Ryland's arms ached to wrap around her, while at the same time he wanted to give her a good thrashing. He moved to the side of the bed, his steps slow and deliberate. Nora was his mate, whether she knew it or not, and she'd made herself look bad in front of the entire pack, and himself in the process. She'd shown not just fear, but abject terror of Devlin. The male may be an idiot, but he wouldn't really hurt her.

"Then what are you so afraid of?" He sat beside her on the bed.

She shook her head and refused to answer. With his thumb, Ryland brushed away the moisture from her face. The tears burned his heart the way silver burned his blood.

She jerked away from him and climbed off the bed, turning her back to him.

"Nora, talk to me. We need to get past this."

She whirled to face him. "Get past this? Ryland, you barely know me. Why would you care what I do, or don't do?"

Her sudden anger surprised him. And pleased him. He curled his lip in a snarl. "Maybe I want you to stay. I need a mate—"

"A mate?" she scoffed. "You need a mate? That's almost funny, Ryland. You don't need me." She waved her arm in the direction of the compound. "You saw what happened. You're the alpha, for God's sake. You don't need a mate who can't stand on her own two feet."

Curiosity joined the mishmash of emotions clouding his mind. "What happened, Nora? What scared you?"

She stared at him, and her bravado folded. He saw it, in the way her shoulders relaxed, hunching. In the way her eyes lost their sparkle. "I can't," she whispered.

"Why? Tell me, Nora."

She shook her head. "Take me to my car, or call me a cab or something. I need to go."

He had seen her inner shewolf. That spark of ferocity and tenacity that held the power to attract any wolven within miles of her. Yet fear held her back. He threw up his hands with a sigh of exasperation.

"If you want. First, I have to take care of some business. Can I trust you to stay inside this time?"

She nodded, her eyes averted.

"I'll be back in an hour."

* * * *

Nora stared at the door for long minutes after he left the den. He'd said he wanted her for his mate. Why? Why would an alpha of his stature even be interested in her? Sexual charge only led a male so far. Wolven mated for position, not love. There was only one exception she knew of. Anna and her uncle, Kieran. They were *True Mates*.

True Matings were rare and driven entirely by instinct. Instinct. Pah. She hadn't shown a bit of shewolf instinct today. Rubbing her wrist, she went over everything in her mind. The only way to heal was to confront the enemy, though confrontation was difficult when the enemy was inside herself.

The instant Devlin's fingers had wrapped around her wrist her entire mind had shut down. The same way it had last night when Ryland had touched her.

An odd sensation burned in her chest. A true alpha, he'd emanated dangerous power. Ryland could easily have killed Devlin. Though he'd given the man a good toss across the hallway, he hadn't hurt him. He was controlled. Too controlled. A shiver ran up her spine.

Then again, maybe his anger was directed at her more than Devlin.

She opened the door and sniffed. He was gone. Only his scent remained. Masculine and filled with power. The kind of smell that made a woman's muscles melt and her blood heat.

He was an alpha, and she was damaged goods. She should leave before Ryland tried to convince her to become his mate again. Before either of them got ideas in their heads about the future.

In the living room, she searched until she found what she was looking for. Picking up the phone receiver, she punched numbers by rote.

Her father answered on the first ring.

"Where are you?" he asked, even before she spoke. How he knew who was on the other end was beyond her.

"My car broke down, and an alpha named Ryland brought me to his pack."

She heard the sharp intake of breath.

"Ryland?" he shouted into the phone. "What did I tell you? Stay away from rogues, and what do you do? You find the biggest one of all!"

"What are you talking about?"

"He's the same wolverine who tried to kidnap Anna before your uncle Kieran stopped him."

"You've got to be mistaken, Dad. He wouldn't do that. He's honorable. He brought me here to protect me, not hold me prisoner." Even as she said the words, she realized why Ryland's name was familiar. She'd heard it before, from Anna.

"You get your butt home right now. While you still can." Her father resorted to his alpha voice, even though he was no longer pack leader. "Nora, he's got women there. Prisoners. He and his brother kidnapped them, hoping to have babies."

"We can't be talking about the same male, Dad. Really. He told me this is a pack of all males."

"All the more reason he'd kidnap females. *Human* females."

Find them mates. Those were Ryland's words, weren't they? She hadn't seen a single female when she'd been out in the courtyard, though she hadn't expected any. Either Joshua hadn't been very successful, or Ryland was hiding something.

"I don't believe it. I've learned a lot about him, and there's no way he would try to kidnap anyone."

"Tell that to Kieran and Anna. It's how they met, Nora. Ryland held her captive while Joshua fought Kieran to the death."

Her blood turned to ice. Not possible. Not the Ryland she knew. "Dad, there's got to be more to it." *There has to be.*

"You're right, there is. Ryland challenged Kieran for Anna. He was determined to make her his mate."

Oh, God. Her hand clutched her churning stomach, struggling to stave off the building nausea. Maybe all Ryland wanted was a female in his bed.

But to kidnap them? That didn't sound like the Ryland she'd met. He'd protected her last night. And even though he was attracted to her, he hadn't forced himself on her, like he could so easily have done.

Her father had to be wrong. Maybe Anna had mistaken Ryland's protection for advances. He was rather...dominant. Maybe there was a reason for what had happened. That was an awful lot of maybes, but her mind refused to accept her father's words.

Nora took a deep breath. "I'll find out, no matter what," she said, determined.

"You get your butt out of there now."

Nora groaned inwardly. Beating heads with her father wouldn't get her anywhere.

"No, Dad. If women are here, I'll find them." Her voice strengthened with conviction. "I'll help them escape. If not, I'll tell you that too, so you can quit worrying."

"Don't do this. Don't you have enough problems?"

She sighed. The concern in his voice bothered her. She understood, more than she let on. Could she really step up and take this on? "Yes, Dad, I do. I won't let fear drive my life. I refuse to be such a coward I'll let humans suffer if I can do something about it. I'll call you again tomorrow."

"Nora, where are you? Where is his pack hiding?"

"I don't know. I've never seen any place like this. Once I get my bearings, I'll call. I'll be fine, don't worry so much."

She heard his sigh of frustration on the other end of the line. "Nora, if I have to come and get you, I will. Tell me where you are."

Nora smiled, glad to have a way out. "I don't know where I am, Dad, so you can't come. I'll be careful. You know I will."

"I don't know any such thing." She punched the disconnect on the receiver, but not before she heard his frustrated growl on the other end.

She stared at the dead receiver. He had to be wrong. She could picture Ryland with Anna, trying to take her to mate. Anna was strong and an alpha female. He'd want someone like her at his side.

If so, why would Ryland be so quick to want her? Her emotions were all over the place, and she was afraid of everything. Since the attack, she wasn't the alpha female she'd once been.

A few months ago, the other wolveren attending NCSU tried to get Nora to notice them, as if she was the ticket to their own advancement. That was all over now. The scars on her back were a vivid reminder of just how much life had changed. Every time she thought she had control, memories of her torture popped into her mind, flashing her back to her most horrific nightmares. Only they had been real. No one should have to go through such pain. Nobody.

The kitchen door opened, and Ryland walked in. It wasn't his heavy step she recognized, but his scent. It filled the room and her senses, and it took everything she had not to run to him and bathe herself in his scent. She set the phone down, her hand trembling. *Damn.*

In the face of her father's words, Ryland was more imposing than ever before. She swallowed, burying her fears, and turned to face him.

"What were you doing?" he asked.

Nora struggled to control her nerves. "I called my pack to tell them not to worry."

He sneered. "Your boyfriend? And what did he have to say?"

She arched her brows at him. "My what?"

"Your boyfriend."

His body was tense, ready to spring, his face dark and angry. All because he thought she had a male in her life? He glowered at her, waiting for her response.

"I don't have a boyfriend."

His muscles visibly relaxed. He watched her from hooded eyes. "Are you ready to leave?"

Butterflies fluttered deep in her stomach. His jealousy tweaked on some subconscious level, calming her fears. She nodded and sighed. "I need to see about my car, but if we can't get the thing started, I have nowhere to go." Well, she did. She could have him take her home, but then she couldn't check out her father's accusations.

He studied her for long seconds. "Are you saying you want to stay?"

She shrugged, using deep breaths to keep her heart rate even. If he didn't believe her now, and wanted her gone, she'd have no options left. "If you don't mind. I'll understand if you do, after what happened. I don't want to leave this area without my car, and unless I'm mistaken, we'll need to call a repair shop to come and get it."

His eyes narrowed. "An hour ago, you couldn't wait to get out of here."

She met his eyes and tipped her chin. "An hour ago, my fear was talking. I'm under control now. Besides, your pack needs a feminine touch, Ryland, and since you don't have anyone else, I thought perhaps I could provide it for you." She wasn't lying. His entire facility was cold and drab. For their mental health, if nothing else. Perhaps she could offer a touch of natural design to the hard, icy interior.

He stared long and hard. The muscle in his jaw tightened and released, and she thought for just a moment he would tell her no. She wouldn't blame him if he did. Not after the altercation.

* * * *

Nora's scent didn't bespeak a lie, but Ryland could tell she wasn't being completely open with him. The traces of fear still remained, hidden beneath her alluring feminine scent, and he'd seen her hand tremble before she turned. Yet she wanted to stay. What was she saying? He needed her here? Or his pack did?

He wanted to believe she'd changed her mind for him, that after seeing how much he was willing to risk in order to keep her safe, she understood she could trust him. Yet something about the way she was looking at him flashed warning lights through his head. Something was on her mind, and it wasn't flirting with the pack alpha. Torn between wanting her to stay and not trusting her, he searched her eyes. But the answer wasn't there.

Dark Succession

At long last, he gave a brisk nod. "All right, let's go." He grabbed the helmets from their shelf.

"Don't you have a car?"

Ryland bit back a curse. He stopped, tipping his head back in frustration, his eyes closed. "Why do you ask? Don't you like the bike?"

"Sure, I do, but my hair, that's another story."

He pivoted, examining her long shiny black tresses draping to her waist. Beautiful hair. She was right, though, it probably didn't do very well on the bike.

"Besides," she continued, "if my car doesn't work, you'll need to take me to the store so I can buy a few things." She motioned to her clothes. "I can't wear the same things over and over again until the car's fixed."

"All I have is the bike. You can put your hair up, or I can give you a jacket to tuck your hair in."

She shook her head. "No, I was only trying to be practical. I'm not a wimp." She closed her eyes, and he saw the disgusted grimace cross her face. "Well, not in this case anyway."

Chapter Eight

They mounted the bike, and Ryland took off, the engine roaring its fury through the tunnel. When they reached the doors, they swung wide just seconds before they reached them, offering a cool forest breeze and dirt path instead of a collision. He heard Nora's gasp of relief and felt her hands ease on his waist.

Ryland inhaled. The acidic scent of pine and the earthy scent of sand infused his lungs, clearing his head of his worries. Soon, he'd have to release the women under his care. Then all hell would break loose. But not today.

The shewolf behind him sighed, and he knew she was taking in the same scents. She cleared her sinuses with a sneeze. Would she ever adjust to the idea of living beneath the earth?

Ryland thought about her words, and the look on her face when she'd said she wasn't a wimp. She recognized her fear for what it was, and that fear humiliated her. She could learn. He needed only to teach her to change her reactions, to fear less and to step out of her self-imposed box. Her reaction also meant the fear was new. He tightened his hands about the throttle at the thought of anyone hurting his mate.

The expression in her eyes when he'd rushed to her side in the courtyard would haunt him for a long time. They were blank, and for a moment, he wasn't sure she was with them. And last night, when he'd stopped her from touching him, she'd had that same look, her eyes glazed over in her terror.

Something had happened to her. The fear wasn't natural. He snarled, his fangs poking through, his gums itching. When he found out the root cause of her fear, he'd kill the one responsible. Already his instincts were out of control when it came to Nora. What would he be like after he marked her?

He accelerated the motorcycle. The great beast lurched between his thighs. Like an extension of his own body, the power from the machine seeped into his soul. The vibration fed and soothed his emotions.

They rode together in silence, until they reached the bar where he'd first seen her. He pulled over.

"Where to?"

She nodded toward the main road. "Just another couple miles down there. It should be sitting alongside the road."

He nodded and pulled the bike onto the street again. The softness of her body against his was pure nirvana. He hadn't ridden with a female behind him since his teenage years, back when he was looking for nothing but a female to fuck. Back when he thought only of himself and not what his brother was up to. Now, he wore responsibility like a second skin, the burden a weight hanging around his shoulders.

Joshua hadn't cared about the human world or the affect his actions would have on their race. Breeding with human females was one thing. Kidnapping them and raping them was another. Ryland had spent the last few years fighting Joshua at every turn. And losing. It had required the actions of another pack stepping in to take Joshua down. Nora's pack.

Ryland had never thought he'd be relieved to see his brother's death, but that was exactly the emotion he'd felt, while he'd held Anna in his arms that fateful night. Relief. Now he just had to undo his brother's legacy.

A light tap on his shoulder brought him back to reality. Nora pointed to a small Ford Focus ahead on the side of the road. He pulled the bike behind her car, and they dismounted.

"Give me the key," he said, holding out his hand.

Nora dug through her pockets, handed him her car key, and took off her helmet. She stood beside him while he turned the ignition, but the engine wouldn't start. He laid his helmet on the roof of the car before popping the hood. Nora peered over his shoulder while he examined each cable in turn.

"When was the last time you had the spark plugs changed in this hunk of junk?"

Nora bristled. "Don't call my car a hunk of junk. It's served me well up until this point."

He grunted.

"I guess we'll have to call someone," she offered.

He nodded and pulled a phone from his jeans. He dialed a number and waited. While he made the call to the repair shop arranging a tow truck, Nora checked the inside of her car, searching for her cell phone. She'd hoped she'd been mistaken about the phone being back at her dorm room.

"What are you looking for?"

Nora jerked and slammed her head into the roof of the car. "Ow, shit." She drew back, her hand rubbing her head.

"Let me see." He moved so swiftly she barely had time to blink. He stood before her, his eyes filled concern, and his fingers gently massaged her scalp.

His scent circled her, wrapping her in a protective blanket. The pain soothed, the scent spiking endorphins in her brain that warmed her both inside and out. Such powerful masculine testosterone, worn like a man might wear cologne. Nora bit her lip.

"Nothing's broken." He bent forward and kissed her forehead. Her skin burned at his touch, and she closed her eyes.

What the hell is going on? Everything inside her craved more of his touch. She swallowed hard. She couldn't hide her response from him.

His breath whispered across her flesh. Ryland stood inches away, his heat radiating from his body to hers. She opened her lids to stare directly into his icy blue eyes, golden flecks burning in their depths. His gaze lowered to her lips, which suddenly felt dry. Nora longed to lick them, knowing that doing so would be an open invitation.

The gentle massage seemed to short circuit her brain. With every ounce of strength within, she wrenched from his grasp. "Thanks. I'm fine."

"What were you doing?"

"I was looking for my cell phone. I had hoped maybe it fell between the seats. I must've left it at the dorm instead."

"The dorm?"

Dark Succession

She nodded, rubbing her scalp, still feeling the sensation of Ryland's fingers in her hair. "I'm a student at NCSU, and I keep a dorm room there when I'm in class. Keeps me from having to drive back and forth so often."

He peered at her through veiled eyes. "What's your major?"

"Forestry," she said, giving him a bland look, dropping her hand. "I want to maintain the forests so we wolverines have a place to live for generations to come."

* * * *

The world seemed to drop from beneath Ryland's feet. It wasn't bad enough his mate was a coward, but her goal was to maintain the very place he could never live. In the pit of his stomach, he knew this was bad. Very bad.

He motioned to the bike and mounted, hearing her stomach rumble.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She grimaced. "Yeah, I guess so."

He nodded. "Hop on. We'll eat at that little diner down the road before heading to the store."

She nodded, the helmet already tightened under her chin. She swung her long leg over and slid onto the seat.

The ride to the diner was short. Eighteen-wheelers lined up in the parking lot, along with a few beat up cars. Motorcycles dotted the black top surface in front of the establishment.

Ryland opened the door and stepped inside, protecting her body with his. It irked him the way humans let their females enter a strange place first. Danger wasn't evident until you were inside, and if the female entered first, she was the one most likely to get injured. That would not happen with his mate.

Ryland guided Nora to the counter and sat beside her. Men's gazes followed her, watching her every step across the floor. Jealousy seethed beneath the surface.

She was his, but she didn't bear his mark. The knowledge left him feeling hollow. He couldn't wait to slide his teeth into her flesh, his saliva blending with her DNA, marking her with his scent for the rest of her life. Once she was marked, no wolverines would touch her, and humans, though they wouldn't understand why, would steer clear of her. Nature always found a way to enable the weaker race of humans to survive. But if they kept looking at her like they were, this batch wouldn't survive the day.

Nora looked around, and he knew she noticed the intense attention she'd garnered. She slid her eyes away, not meeting any of the males' gazes. *Good*. She sat on the stool, and a blush stole over her face. They were making her uncomfortable.

The urge to growl a challenge to the men who undressed his *True Mate* with their eyes was almost overwhelming. Primitive emotions reared inside him, and he stared at the truckers through a haze of red fury.

* * * *

Nora rubbed the goose bumps from her arms. Her skin crawled with the force of the trucker's stares. They watched her, their eyes hungry for more than food. Ryland stood next to her, his body rigid. His scent had changed. Dark, aggressive, and downright furious. Maybe eating wasn't such a good idea after all.

Before Nora could guess his intentions, Ryland wrapped an arm about her waist and dragged her against his hard, steel body. He lowered his head to hers, his breath whispering like butterfly wings across her lips.

"Mine," he said, gruffly.

His lips captured hers, soft and teasing. She stiffened, her hands pressed against his magnificent chest. How dare he be so possessive?

Large hands spread across her back, massaging gently despite the strength in his fingers. His heat called to her, the taunting of his lips begged her to open. She did. The shewolf inside her took over, for the first time Nora could remember. His touch and taste burned away her resistance, and before she could stop it, her body responded, forgetting their audience. She melted into the hard planes of his muscles, and a soft rumble escaped her throat.

With masterful strokes, he tasted and devoured, overwhelming her with his intensity, awakening sensations she didn't understand.

He felt right.

He felt comfortable.

Dizzingly sexy.

Her fingers clawed at the shirt on his chest, despising the cloth between them, hungry for his skin, aching to touch and taste.

He lifted his head, his gaze hot and hungry, spearing into her. Nora's legs trembled, and she grabbed for the stool behind her, finally pulling from his grasp and sitting. Her own breath came in short gasps, and the room spun around her. She wondered if tucking her head between her legs would help. Somehow, she knew it wouldn't.

She stole a glance at Ryland, who glared meaningfully at the truckers. One by one, they turned their gazes back to their food.

He sat beside her, his hand resting possessively on her thigh. Heat radiated from his palm, burning with incomprehensible heat. She should move his hand. Really she should, but after that kiss, she wasn't sure she could even speak without making a fool of herself.

The waitress came up, her apron stained with spilled coffee, and her blond hair spilling from beneath her cap. "What'll it be?"

"A burger and fries. Give me a Coke." He turned to Nora. "She'll have the same, only she wants a Sprite."

"Make it a Coke, too," she interrupted, her voice low and rough, passing a quick sneer in Ryland's direction.

The waitress walked off. "You don't need the caffeine."

"I'll drink what I want, Ryland." His hand tightened on her thigh, but he didn't say another word. Once their food arrived, they ate in silence. When the waitress came to clean up their plates, she offered coffee. Ryland declined.

"Yes, I'll have a cup. Black, please."

"I told you—"

“And I said I’ll drink what I want.” He was probably right. She didn’t need more caffeine. Irritability rolled through her like a freight train, which usually meant she’d had too much already. It wasn’t uncommon for wolverines to have difficulty with the drugging substance.

He sighed, and shook his head. His cell phone rang, and he snatched the device from his belt. “Ryland.”

Normally, Nora’s ears would pick up a cell phone conversation with ease, but the voice on the other end kept cutting out.

“I’m going to take this outside,” he murmured and leaned forward, his lips finding hers. He tasted of hamburger meat and hot forest wildness. She bit her lip when he pulled away, afraid she’d let out a moan of disappointment.

When he spoke, he did so loud enough for anyone to hear. “I’ll be back, little rabbit. You wait here. And if any of these men give you any trouble,” he turned his head to encompass the room with his gaze, “if you don’t kick his ass, I will.” He stepped away and turned back to her. “And I won’t be as gentle as you.” After a quick kiss on her forehead, he turned abruptly, and left, the door swinging in his wake.

Nora stared at the closed door for long seconds, before turning to gaze around the room. The men in the truck stop all stared at their meals, refusing to look at her. She hid her grin and turned back to her coffee. She stirred, her spoon clinking on the sides of the cup.

Her lips still throbbed with the intensity of his kiss. The heat from the coffee only served to remind her of his touch. In one instant, his mouth had destroyed every ounce of inhibition. She knew kissing him would be hot, but never expected to be this rattled.

Her father’s suspicions be damned. Ryland wouldn’t play any part in kidnapping. If he’d been there that night with Anna when she’d been attacked, there had to be a good reason. She’d heard the story, how he’d come up behind her and threatened to rape her.

Unexplained jealousy ripped through her. The idea of Ryland’s hands touching anyone, even her closest friend, Anna, sent a surge of fury through her blood.

She took a huge swallow of the coffee, closed her eyes, and forced herself to calm down. The caffeine burst through her blood stream, waking every cell. She shifted on her stool.

The waitress topped off her coffee, and she took another sip. How long would he be? She glanced toward the window and saw him still talking into the phone.

When he came back, would he kiss her again, or would he wait till they were alone? He’d almost done so last night right up until that damned terror of hers had kicked in.

He should be disgusted with her. If he was, he’d sure hidden his feelings well during that kiss.

The door opened, and a man stepped inside. He smelled of Right Guard deodorant and Irish Spring soap. *Human*. She didn’t turn her head. The man moved beside her, taking the stool to her left. Nora shifted, turning her body away.

“What’ll it be?” asked the waitress.

"I'll have what the lady's having."

Nora ignored him. *Great*. Just what she needed. Another guy on the make. No matter where she was, she drew them like flies. At the pack. At college, and now at this stupid back woods diner. Disgust boiled in her blood. The only male she wanted to go on the make stood outside on his cell phone. She swallowed the growl that threatened.

"So what's a sweet thing like you doing here all by your lonesome?"

"Minding my own damned business." In the shadows of her mind, she knew she was being overly irritated, but right this second, she didn't care.

"Aww, now don't be like that. I just want to be friends."

"Go be friends with someone else."

"Touchy, aren't we?" The human laid his hand on her arm. Nora turned her head, stared at the dark, fat fingers, and lifted her gaze to his.

"No, *we* are not touchy. You, however, may have one less hand to get touchy with if you don't remove it from my arm."

The restaurant went silent. Ryland's lesson had not gone unnoticed. She could sense them holding their breath to see what she would do.

"Now, don't be like that. You're such a sweet, little thing, and I'd hate for you to be lonely."

Nora stood, and his eyes widened. She towered over him while he sat, all six feet one inch of her. "I said: Move. Your. Hand." She snatched the hand from her arm and twisted it behind his back, wrenching the fingers up to his shoulders.

"Arrggh", he cried in pain. "Stop! I didn't mean anything, really."

With a light shove, she pushed him hard against the counter, his chest bouncing off. "Keep your hands off."

* * * *

Ryland turned at the flurry of motion inside and saw Nora twisting a man's arm behind his back. Possessive rage roared through his blood, but he fisted his fingers and held himself in check. He'd half expected this, some idiot making the move on her. She was too beautiful and too young be left alone in a diner with truckers and bikers. His nails bit into his palms, and his gums itched as his fangs threatened to descend.

He took several slow breaths. She was handling him. His little shewolf had the bastard's hand twisted behind his back, his chest shoved against the counter. A small seed of pride sprouted inside. Maybe his rabbit wasn't such a rabbit after all.

Even so, he couldn't let this challenge go unanswered. With the slap of one hand against the door, he stormed inside.

"And if her lesson wasn't enough," he thundered, grabbing the man by his collar, "let this one take its place." He shoved the man hard, slamming him into one of the tables. The man tipped over and fell onto the floor. "Never touch my woman."

Blood trickled from the man's nose. "I didn't mean anything, honest."

Ryland ignored him and turned to Nora. His blood literally sang in his veins, pumping hard and fast, building the hunger he felt for his mate. It burned, searing and hot.

He looped his arm about her waist and snapped her against him. His lips crashed down on hers, staking his claim for all the humans to see one more time. Instinct warred with good sense. The urge to mark her beat upon his brain. Her body was soft and pliant beneath his hands, and she whimpered, burrowing deeper into his grasp. It took every ounce of his control to end the kiss and pull away. She stared up at him, her eyes glazed with her own hunger.

"You're ok?" he whispered, loud enough for only her to hear.

She nodded, and gulped. "I'm fine. He just touched my arm, that's all."

Ryland nodded and released her. "Let's get out of here."

He tossed a few bills onto the counter and grabbed her hand, dragging her out of the diner. They stepped into the bright afternoon sun and donned their helmets. Without a word, he mounted and pressed the starter. The bike roared to life. Nora surprised him. She didn't seem bothered at all by the incident with the trucker. Not like when he'd touched her last night.

Yet his kiss had definitely left a mark of sorts. He could smell her feminine need. He hadn't meant to react like a wild beast, but he'd been unable to control his need to stake his claim.

He shouted above the roar of the engine, "Ready to shop for clothes?"

Nora nodded. "Yes."

* * * *

The bike roared off, jerking Nora off balance. She grabbed Ryland's waist in surprise. The instant she touched him, she didn't care about the clothes any more. She slid forward, her thighs resting against his. He leaned back. She could swear she heard an appreciative male growl softened by the wind. She smiled.

The first kiss, she mused, had been for everyone else. The second was because he wanted her. It had been powerful enough for the floor to drop from beneath her feet, weakening her resolve to keep her feelings out of things. She'd melted, despite her father's words of warning. Ryland's concern had been real. She'd felt the pounding of his heart, his anger, and even his possessiveness in the way he'd held her.

She was so busy remembering his kiss she barely noticed when they turned into the shopping center's parking lot, and he parked the bike. She dismounted, ignoring the pang of disappointment at losing his heat. He took off his helmet, still astride the bike. The instant she removed her headgear, he looped an arm about her waist and pulled her to him, kissing her hard. His tongue teased hers, tasting and delving deep inside.

Her own hunger sparked. She moaned beneath the onslaught. He lifted his head, but tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her head back, baring her throat to his teeth.

He caressed her neck with his lips, kissing and scraping his canines along the sensitive skin. A rolling growl vibrated against the delicate flesh.

"Ryland," she whispered.

He rumbled in response.

“Ryland, stop.”

His fangs pricked lightly at her skin, so sharp amid such soft lips. Her emotions swam inside her. Hunger for the male who’d called her *his woman*, and anger at his audacity. This was not the place. “Ryland, I said stop.”

He had no right. This was her choice, and there was no way she’d let him take it away. “Let go of me. Now.” She shoved hard, but his chest was strong, and he didn’t budge. Her fingers gripped his hair hard, and she growled menacingly, fangs flared. “You will let go of me now, or you will be on your back, with your bike on top of you.”

He stiffened and eased back, a grin on his rakish face.

“What’s wrong?” His voice was silky and sensual.

“What’s wrong?” she repeated. “What’s wrong is you molesting me in a public parking lot.”

* * * *

Ryland stared at his *True Mate*. The grin faded, but returned with a slow curve, reflecting the pleasure her words gave him. She wasn’t rejecting him. She was rejecting the place. *Perfect*. Her eyes flashed with anger, yet he could smell her arousal, rich and sensuous. It called to him, and he’d answered. She’d melted right into the kiss, like she had at the bar.

He pulled her close again, careful to keep his movements slow. She felt so good in his arms, like she was made just for him. He nuzzled her cheek. “I can smell your desire, little shewolf. You want me as much as I want you.”

“Not in a public place, I don’t.” Her words told him one thing, but her body told him another. He liked her body’s message much better.

He chuckled softly. “Never fear,” he whispered in her ear. “When I take you, it will be in private, where only I will hear your screams when you come.”

Her eyes darkened, and her breath caught. “Ryland, please, enough.”

“Don’t worry, sweet, little rabbit. I got a little carried away is all.” He ran his fangs down her throat one last time, and released her.

“I’m not little and my name isn’t ‘Rabbit.’”

He laughed. “But you are little to me. And rabbits are sweet.”

“Oh bother,” she grumbled. “Just what I need. A man who’s blind as a bat.”

A laugh exploded from his chest. God, it felt good to laugh. He wondered if she noticed the possessiveness in her words. “Come on, let’s get you some clothes.”

The department store wasn’t busy for the middle of the day. *Thank you*. He hated shopping in crowds. He escorted Nora straight to the ladies clothes. The frown on her face didn’t make any sense. That’s what she wanted, wasn’t it?

She gave him a quick glare and walked to the racks, flicking through clothes efficiently. He strolled through the store, gazing at the displays and pretending to be preoccupied.

Every time Ryland turned his attention to her, she was looking at him from the corner of her eye. She’d flash him a beguiling smile and return to her shopping. At last, she’d picked out a few pairs of jeans and some tops.

"You should try them on," he said.

She looked critically at the clothes and glanced to the changing rooms. "You might be right. Wait here."

Without a backward glance, she turned and sauntered away. He watched with admiration at the soft sway to her sweet hips. She leaned toward the changing room monitor, and he groaned when her tight jeans accented the soft, delicate muscles beneath. The woman at the counter gave her a key, and Nora turned and winked at him before ducking inside.

Waiting, he scanned the store. The woman at the desk gave him a seductive smile. He nodded, but didn't return it. He glanced back toward Nora's little cubicle where her jeans dropped to the floor beneath the small door. One smooth, tanned leg slipped into a new pant leg. Ryland's breath hitched, and he watched, torturing himself, when the next one followed suit.

He ripped his gaze away, searching for something, anything to distract him. If he didn't, he'd join her in that tiny little cubicle, and the lady at the front counter would not be pleased. But the racks behind him did nothing to dissuade the building hunger throbbing in his body. Lingerie. He really shouldn't. But he did.

He flicked through the tiny pieces of cloth. One after the other, covered in lace, satin or silk. A single piece caught his attention. He ran a finger down the royal blue satin of a teddy and smiled. It was the perfect color for her dark flesh. Dark red flowers dotted the lace along its delicate edges.

What would Nora look like enveloped in such tiny scraps of material, with her soft breasts hidden behind lacy cups, her sleek curves covered in rich blue satin? He could almost see her moving toward him, her black hair draped over one shoulder, the lingerie's high side seam enhancing the sensuous sway of her naked hips, with each step.

"What do you think?"

Ryland jolted and turned to face Nora. Her back to him, she modeled the clothes she wore. The pair of jeans clung to her every curve, cupping her butt, encasing her long legs from waist to ankle. He hummed appreciatively.

She cleared her throat. "Well?"

"Nice," he choked out. It was better than nice.

She spun to face him, and the blouse came into full view. Before now she'd worn a thick, bulky sweater, but this top barely covered her breasts. The twin mounds molded to the material, pressing hard against the unnatural restraint.

His gaze rose to her lips, which she licked seductively, and stepped forward, trailing a finger down his chest. "Do you like the top too?" The sound of her voice was husky and low, and the scent of arousal tantalized, mocking his inability to carry through what his body desperately wanted. What he hoped she wanted.

"It's perfect. But not for public view."

She chuckled. "Very well. I'll get something else." Her gaze narrowed, and he realized he still stroked the satin teddy on the rack.

His hand dropped to his side. *Caught.*

She reached for the scrap of cloth. "Hmm. Should I model this as well?" She turned her back and swished her hips enticingly on her way back to the changing room. The woman at the desk gave them a disapproving glance, gathered an armful of clothes, and headed to the racks to restock.

Nora was like night and day, all rolled into one. *What have I done?* His little rabbit had come out of her hole and was teasing him with every sound, every sway of her body. If she came out in the teddy, he'd be lost for sure.

"Ryland?" Her voice was soft, and the sound rolled down his spine. "Can you come help with this?"

Lord, help me. But he couldn't stop himself. He answered her summons, moving with care, avoiding the pinch of his jeans in the crotch. His skin tingled with the desire to feel her body against his, and now she wanted him to help her dress?

He peeked over the door, an easy feat for a man of his height.

"What?" he asked and almost swallowed his tongue. She wore the small teddy, but she'd draped the blouse over it, maybe in attempt at modesty. It didn't help. The piece was a size too small, and her breasts pushed against the material, her nipples hard and erect.

She looked at him in all innocence. "I think this is too tight. What do you think."

"I think you need to get dressed and get out of here." His voice caught in his throat, and he barely got the words out.

She stepped toward him, her finger trailing down his cheek, outlining the scar on his face. He yanked his head back, but then relented. Fire trailed beneath her caress, and all he could think of was tearing off that little scrap of fabric and ravishing her body.

Her eyes met his and widened with amusement. She took a step back and gave a soft laugh, a sound so sensual and feminine he groaned.

"Maybe you're right. I'll be right out."

Ryland whirled away, gasping for fresh air, yet only her scent filled his lungs. It wrapped around him, destroying his control. His mind clicked, the pieces of today's events finally falling into place.

She was in heat.

Chapter Nine

Nora stood in the tiny cubicle, staring at herself in the mirror. It was the caffeine. It had to be. She'd come on to Ryland like a two bit hussy, begging him to look at her in a teddy of all things. She barely recognized the woman who stared back at her with cheeks flushed and sparkling, hungry eyes.

It was as though some long forgotten instinct had taken over, urging her to tease and taunt Ryland. She hated it. If she didn't know better, she'd think she was in heat. The coffee today had been pretty strong, and with the stress of recent events, she'd pushed herself too hard.

She stripped off the shirt, followed by the teddy, and dressed in her own clothes again. Her cheeks burned with humiliation. Not once in her entire life had she ever been turned on in a public place. Not even when in heat.

Her once a year cycle had just ended three months before. She should be fine for a long time. Like most wolvern females, her heat cycles typically lasted a couple of weeks, but once it had gone on for two months. It had been miserable. Her mother insisted it was possible for them to last three months, and she was forever thanking her lucky stars that hadn't happened. Yet, even while in heat, she hadn't felt the need to torture herself along with any male around her.

She slid her shoes on, tied them, and stood, forcing her emotions back under control. She was not about to go back out there acting like a bitch in heat again.

She opened the accordion door and stepped out. Ryland stood with his back to her looking at men's shirts. His shoulders were bunched. She could see his discomfort from across the store.

He probably wasn't surprised by her behavior. Shewolves were known to be highly sexual. But she wasn't a normal shewolf. She'd learned to cap her desires at a young age, when the males vied for her favors in order to capture her father's attention.

Still, she would apologize. What she'd done wasn't fair. Knowing he wanted her, she'd taunted him. She tiptoed to him and touched his arm. He stiffened even more.

"Don't," he bit out.

She yanked her hand back.

"If you touch me right now, I'll forget where we are."

"I'm... I'm sorry, Ryland. I shouldn't have acted the way I did." He turned and glared at her. "I didn't think. I'm really sorry."

He didn't speak, but nodded stiffly toward the registers. Nora got the hint and headed over, grabbing a few extra scraps of cloth from the sales bins on her way past them.

Ryland wouldn't let her pay for her purchases. Instead, he used his own credit card. The muscles in his face had clenched when he saw the blue teddy included with several pairs of the sexy panties and bras she'd snatched from the bins.

When they got to the bike, he tucked her purchases into the saddlebags and mounted without a word. This time, she didn't wrap her arms around him, and he didn't lean back. Instead, they both sat stiffly as the bike roared down the road.

* * * *

Ryland thought he knew how to protect his pack. He was wrong. He didn't deserve his position. He'd stolen it. A quick glance around the den said everything there was to say. Perceived order, yet when one looked just under the surface, chaos. Boxes of belongings lined the walls. He hadn't even moved in. Maybe the bastard knew he wouldn't be here long. The figure sent a mist of liquid from a spray bottle. It wasn't time yet. Not here. Not now. Soon.

* * * *

The instant Ryland opened the door to his den at the compound, he froze. All thoughts of throwing her on the bed and having his way with her dissipated. A foreign scent slapped him in the face. Pine-Sol. He growled low in his throat.

"What's wrong?"

"Wait here."

"I will not," she shot back, irritation in her voice.

He turned and snarled, his fangs flashing. He didn't have time to cater to a shewolf's fickle hormones. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she stepped back.

He opened the door and crouched low, listening, sniffing. Other than the Pine-Sol, he smelled nothing. He peered around the room, searching, smelling. The boxes had been rifled through, their contents mussed, but he couldn't catch the scent of the perpetrator.

"What's wrong, Ryland?" Her voice was soft.

"Someone's been here," he said. "But they've covered their tracks well." He moved slowly, the wolf stalking his prey. His skin prickled, and he considered shifting. He checked the entire den. Whoever had been there was gone. He straightened, but even though the danger was passed, he refused to relax.

He strode to the door.

"Come in."

Nora peeked around the corner of the door before moving in.

"Who would possibly break into your quarters, Ryland?"

His only response was a low, deep growl.

"What would they want?"

Ryland looked straight at her, but it wasn't Nora he saw. He was thinking, hard. The notebook. He spun and charged to his bedroom.

He charged straight to the hidden safe. With quick turns of the dial he unlocked the metal door. Inside lay the small notebook he'd found the night before, still safe.

"What is it?"

"I wish I knew," he said, removing the book and closing the now empty safe. "I found this last night when I cleaned out some of my brother's things. It's Joshua's, but I can't read it."

"Can I see?"

How much did he trust her? While they were *True Mates*, she still didn't know. To her, they were acquaintances who were attracted to one another.

He flipped through the book. "I doubt you can read it either. It's in a foreign language."

"I'm a big girl, Ryland. I did go to college, so if I can't read it, maybe I can find a way to get it translated."

He studied her. She waited on the other side of the room, her scent open and clean, with the hint of her residual arousal. Maybe she could help. He stepped toward her, but stopped. If he got near her, he'd want her again, and, right now, he needed to keep his head clear. He tossed her the book.

Her hand snatched the small worn college-style book from mid air and opened it. He watched her eyes scan the first page. A frown wrinkled her brows. She turned page after page, examining the handwritten letters.

"You know, Ryland, I don't think this is another language. I think this is a code."

"I thought that was a possibility. The question is, what kind of code?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but if you like, if you have a computer, I could see what I could find."

He narrowed his gaze on her. There was no change in her scent, only honest curiosity. "All right. If you think you can help, come."

He moved past her, still avoiding her touch. The exasperated sigh she let out told him she'd noticed, but it couldn't be helped. She had no idea how much he wanted her. Just being in the same room kept his blood heated, his body rock hard. A single touch could destroy the last shred of his control.

He needed to check on his office. If the notebook wasn't what the burglar was searching for, then something, or someone else could be in danger. And with Kyle's death, he needed to be careful and get back to see if anything was missing from the rifling in his work office this morning.

He escorted Nora into the den, a room he'd converted into a small, private office. He'd not done much with the room. Just a desk with a computer, a file cabinet for printed files, and a desk lamp leaning forward, like an old tree trunk whose branches were too heavy.

"The computer's over there. It's hooked to cable internet, but be careful. I don't want anyone tracking your research to the pack. Be cautious of what sites you visit and don't talk to anyone in chat. Don't email it to anyone to ask for help. If you can't do this on your own, let me know. I have resources."

"I can handle it."

He nodded, "Good. I have to go. Stay here."

The sharp scent of her anger filled the room. "Contrary to how I acted earlier, I can take care of myself."

He sighed and stopped, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. "Things are rather volatile. Devlin is still considering fighting for control of the pack, and he'll use you against me. I need you to be safe. He's walking a tight rope of control, and I don't want you stepping in the middle." He moved toward the door and stopped. "Stay."

"Yes, Master," she said sardonically.

He snarled.

"What? You think I'm one of your lackeys who bows to your every whim?"

"I think you're to do what I say."

“And I think you need a reality check. I’m my own person, not a dog. I’m not someone to be ordered to stay.” She propped her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Here I am offering to do you a favor and all you can say is ‘*Stay?*’”

Amusement and respect shoved away his anger, and he pursed his lips to keep from smiling. She glared at him, red sparks flashing in her eyes. Every nuance was so feminine, yet so aggressive. He’d used the word “stay” to test her. A word most often used with dogs and captive wolves, most wolverines found it offensive. A true shewolf, despite her reaction to Devlin’s attack this morning, Nora was no exception. His body warmed to her anger. He shouldn’t keep throwing the tests at her, but he was pack alpha, and he needed to know how she’d react.

“And if you can’t handle it,” she continued, “then you can just find someone else to help you out.”

He didn’t hear much about the rest of her rant. His gaze froze on her mouth. He couldn’t wait anymore. One long stride and he was cupping her face in his hands, his mouth covering those delectable lips. She stiffened for an instant, before melting against him.

He fisted his hands in the soft curtain of her hair and tipped her head. There was the tiniest sound, so soft, so feminine. A sound of complete submission to his touch. *Yes*. That’s what he wanted from her. His fingers shook with the desire to take more than a simple kiss, and he struggled for control over his own desires. He let her go.

“Now, for once, listen to your alpha. I’m going back to my office. A few things happened this morning beside your run in with Devlin that need my attention. Stay here and work on the notebook. I don’t need Devlin getting under my skin any more than he already does.”

He strode down the hall and was almost to the door when he heard her running feet behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see her poke her head into the hall.

“You aren’t my alpha!” she shouted.

Yet. He turned to her and smiled, and then strode toward the door.

Chapter Ten

Nora smiled on her way to the kitchen, thoughts whirling in her brain. This was her chance to get a good look around the compound. All she needed to do was bring Ryland his lunch. Sure, he'd asked her to stay here, but he couldn't possibly expect her to obey. Her own near alpha status poked and prodded at her, forcing her to tease and taunt this male, though she wasn't sure what she was expecting to get out of it.

Challenging his authority was just another way of provoking him. Though it did give her the best opportunity to prove her father wrong about Ryland's past.

She opened the fridge and frowned. Not much to choose from. She was going to have to talk to him about his stock, or lack thereof. Nothing but eggs, and the half a loaf of bread. Not quite the dinner she'd had in mind.

In a few minutes, she had three fried egg sandwiches wrapped and ready to go, hoping it was enough to fill up a man of his stature. Her uncle Kieran ate quite a lot, and three sandwiches were just enough to keep his stomach from growling. Since they'd had such a large breakfast, and also eaten a little at the restaurant, maybe this would do.

Her thoughts returned to this morning as she'd prepared the food. Something was going squirrely in her body. The coffee at breakfast and at lunch must have been a bit too much. Her hormones were running overtime, and she'd already behaved too sassily for her own good. There was nothing worse than a shewolf controlling all those around her just because she was female. It was rude. Maybe she had hung around too many humans, but it was flat out embarrassing. And she'd done it in a public place. Her face heated at the memory, yet her embarrassment didn't wipe away the lingering arousal still humming through her body.

Opening a cabinet, Nora found a few sandwich bags and also a few brown lunch sacks. Perfect. Nora packed the sandwiches and headed out the door. After taking Ryland his lunch she would take the opportunity to search through the compound. When she returned, she'd sit down and work on translating Ryland's little book.

Nerves crawled through Nora's belly the closer she moved toward the center of the compound. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.* Ryland had told her to stay for a reason.

The memory of Devlin's hands burned on her wrists, as though he still held her. She'd made a fool of herself, and Ryland. And now she would be meeting up with those who'd witnessed her humiliation. She hesitated at the juncture and took a deep breath, letting it hiss between her teeth. She would not show fear. They'd eat her alive.

She bit her lip, squared her shoulders, and stepped into the courtyard.

The courtyard was teeming with life, with wolven wandering in groups and pairs. Their quiet rumbles echoed off the cinder block walls making it impossible to discern any one conversation. A young man sat on a bench in the center, a knife in his hand. Nora watched him cut with delicate precision, carving a shape from the wood.

A quick glance revealed a door off the courtyard. Ryland. She could almost feel his presence through the closed door. She tried, but couldn't picture him inside, sitting behind a desk. He was too vital, too alive to be stuffed behind a closed door.

Odd. He'd never said he disliked being shoved inside a cramped office. Somehow deep inside she knew, and the image of his frustrated eyes flashed through her mind. The instant she pictured his face, her loins burned with a dull, empty ache. The memory of his scent blended with the smell of a pack of males, filled with testosterone. Nora's lips softened, curving into a smile, her fears dissolving beneath the hungry emptiness in her body.

Nora inhaled. Her eyes fluttered closed in appreciation of the masculine scents sizzling through her, electrifying instincts she struggled to bury. Primitive energies sparked in her brain, comparing the room full of males with her memory of Ryland. None came close to his power.

Against her will, a switch clicked inside her. Instinct overruled humanity, where only the wolf remained. Her mind screamed "no" while her body stepped forward, striding toward a large group of males, her hips swaying with each step. *God, no!* Yet no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop herself.

The males lifted their heads, sniffing the air. As though synchronized, they turned in her direction, their eyes widening. Uncertain, she stopped, drying her palms on her jeans.

The males moved toward her, stalking. They circled her, their faces filled with lust. Though her mind revolted in horror, her body swayed, teasing them.

"Hello," said one male. She focused her gaze on him. He moved with confidence, hunger burning in his eyes. He was big and handsome, like Ryland, but there the similarities ended. He was dark. Ryland was blonde. His scent didn't spike inside her, yet she was unable to stop the seductive smile at his greeting.

"I didn't catch your name this morning," he said, his teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

He'd been with Ryland this morning, witnessing her shame. Inwardly, Nora winced at the reminder, yet still the wolf inside her pushed forward. "Nora, and yours?" She barely recognized her own voice. It was low and sensual, with a come hither feel to it. So not good. Yet still she didn't withdraw.

"I'm Gerard," said the male. "And this here," he said, grabbing another, shorter male by the arm, "Is Dolan."

"Hello, Gerard and Dolan."

Both males grinned.

The circle of wolverines closed inward, the males jostling, each trying to step in front of the other.

Dolan grinned. "And what can we do for you, little lady?"

"Just out for a walk," she said, a sly smile falling to her lips. She turned to move past them, down one of the long, narrow halls.

"Not that way, little lady," said Gerard, stepping before her. "Not without Ryland's permission."

Nora arched a brow. Maybe she'd have to find other ways to search for human females. Something more... delicate.

She moved closer to Gerard, her finger poised over his chest. She stopped, staring for a moment. If getting the men to trust her helped her search and pretty up the compound at the same time, why not try it? Ryland would thank her for this, she knew. Nesting. She may not stay here, but damn, this place was ugly.

This time she didn't fight the instinct taking over her body. "I think," she said, her finger making contact on Gerard's buttons, trailing down the shirt, "Maybe we could make this place more a home. It's so ugly." Her eyes scanned each of the males in turn.

Lupine faces all nodded, fangs piercing their lower lips. Instinct. The word bounced around her brain. Her higher brain functions weren't dormant, but they were no longer in control. This time, her ideas made no sense. Only a shewolf in heat, with a mate, thought about nesting, about making her home comfortable. Yet she couldn't get the cold ugliness out of her mind.

Nora glanced about the foyer and suppressed a shiver of distaste, before returning her gaze to the males all vying for her attention. Right now, she could ask for anything, and it would be hers.

"Maybe some plants? Or some paintings?"

"John can paint," said one, elbowing the male next to him, who blushed profusely.

"John, can you?" Nora turned her attention to one with flaming red hair. The blush on his face only accented the fire on his head. She was sure if she touched him, he'd melt into a puddle at her feet.

He managed a nod.

"What do you paint, John? Landscapes?"

He smiled, but it looked more like a grimace in his befuddled state. "Yes, ma'am, I can paint anything you like. If you want landscapes, I'll paint you some landscapes."

Nora dropped her hand from Gerard's shirt and moved toward John. The dull fog of instinct blurred, and at last her brain was finally firing and in synch with her instincts again. *Thank God.* "You know what I want, John? I want a mural. I want to see a forest painted on that wall," she said, motioning to one blank wall. "Do you think you could do that?"

He nodded vehemently. "Oh, yes, ma'am. I'd like to do that for you."

She grinned. "Great."

A door slammed behind her, and she whirled about. Ryland stood, his face dark and angry. *Oh, so delectable.* He growled, a long, rolling sound from his chest. Lethal and dangerous. He reeked of masculine power. Animalistic. Deadly. Nora's body trembled with hunger.

He barreled through the males, shoving them aside one at a time until he came to Gerard, whom he picked up by his shirt collars and tossed him aside like a toy soldier.

"Boss, really, we weren't doing an—"

Gerard stopped when he saw the dark snarl on Ryland's face.

Nora trembled, weakening with hunger as Ryland moved toward her. Her mind struggled to keep up with her body, but all she could think of was the aggression, the power, and how masculine he was. Alpha. She moved toward him, her steps smooth and silky.

His eyes never left hers from the instant she stepped forward. The power of her own control over him struck her like an aphrodisiac. He wanted her. He would fight for her.

She tipped her head, absorbing his scent. A soft growl rumbled from her own throat. Pure feminine appreciation for the male who stood before her. Inside, she struggled to regain control, but, once again, the wolf ruled. Her legs moved forward, and her heart pounded in her chest.

Ryland froze, with only his eyes alive, burning through her clothes to her flesh. Her lids fluttered, but she forced her eyes to open wide, to admire the beauty of the hungry wolverine before her. The rest of the males fell back. The decision was made.

Wavering was not in the plan. However, she didn't really have a plan, did she? But the wolf inside her did. She strode straight to him and laid one hand on his chest. Heat burned through his shirt into her palm.

"I brought your lunch," she said, her voice low and silky. How did he make her feel like this? Shewolves were naturally drawn to the alpha's power, but she'd never experienced anything like this. Her body burned with need, and her senses relished every drop of testosterone rippling through his body. This time, when her hand raised to caress his shirt, the urge to rip the cloth apart sent a tingle through her fingers.

He lowered his face to hers, his voice hard. "Get in my office."

Dropping her hand to her side, Nora bit her lip, her eyes fluttered for just an instant. Just long enough to take in his essence. His scent was a conglomeration of anger, frustration, and arousal. She understood every one of them. For all three roiled inside her gut with equal tenacity. A shiver ran down her spine and she yearned for his touch. She strode past him, ignoring the eyes of the males who watched, her hips swaying as she moved.

Chapter Eleven

Ryland slammed the door behind him the second he entered his office. Nora stood, her back to him, stock still. His nostrils widened. Her arousal and the smell of confusion washed over him. The urge to reassure her, to tell her she was normal was buried beneath layers of furious jealousy. When he'd walked outside and saw all the males surrounding her like a pack of tail sniffers, he'd felt the harsh emotion cutting, twisting in his belly. The sight of her leaning forward, whispering to John drove the sensation through his chest like a knife.

Then she'd smiled at the wolven.

Predatory instinct had ripped through him, burying the last of his hard trained humanity.

Mine.

The thought, so possessive, so animalistic, refused to leave his brain.

With one hand, he spun her to face him and kissed her hard. When he released her, she stared at him, her eyes wide.

"Don't *ever* do that again."

"Do what? I was only bringing you your dinner."

He tossed his head. "And what about those males? And John?"

"All I did was ask John if he could paint a mural on the wall to make the compound more welcoming. I wasn't planning to sleep with him or anything. I can't help it if the rest hung around."

He glared at her. Her scent told him she was telling the truth. At least, as she saw it. But he knew what he'd seen. He'd seen a shewolf in heat, teasing and taunting every male in scenting distance.

Was it possible she didn't realize what was happening? He held her face in one hand, and tipped her eyes to meet his. "Nora, when you are out there amid my pack, you will remember, you're mine."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"I will not share you with anyone else in the pack."

Her face flushed with heat. She pulled from his grasp. "I don't recall ever saying I chose you for *my* mate, Ryland. This isn't your choice." Her voice was sharp, full of denial.

He didn't care.

He wanted to tell her the decision was made, but until she admitted she was in heat, she wouldn't believe him. If he mentioned her condition, he knew she'd fly into a rage. He'd seen it, in years past, when the woman who had raised him went through her annual cycle. He still wasn't sure who ended up on edge more in a female's heat. The female, or her mate.

"Think about it," he said softly. He glanced at the brown paper bag she gripped in her white knuckled fingers. He could smell the eggs within. "Is that for me?"

She looked down, her eyes confused, and then the expression cleared. She smiled "Yes. I made you some sandwiches." She sat the bag on his desk and glanced around the room. "So this is where you work?" Her question seemed so natural, but the rumble in her voice told him there was more than met the eye here.

Dark Succession

He was in trouble. All shewolf, her body arched seductively, her head cocked to one side, and she watched him from beneath lowered lids. He watched her run a finger along his desk, her expression seductive and hungry. The urge to clear the desk of paperwork and throw her on her back right atop the desk nearly had him crossing the room. He moved around a chair in the middle of the room, and she raised a brow.

"And what do you do in this office of yours, Ryland?" Low and husky, her voice rippled through his body, settling in his groin. He groaned. It wasn't possible he could get any harder, yet her murmur wrapped around his body like a hot, velvet glove. He strode forward, wrapped an arm about her waist and yanked her to him. Her soft body slammed into his hard, aching need. He hid his wince.

"I do whatever I want, Nora." He ran a finger down her cheek, and she shuddered. "And what would you do if you had the chance?" he asked. Her eyes grew heavy and darkened. Her breathing grew labored. He lowered his mouth to her ear. "Would you lie back on the desk and touch yourself if you were alone?"

* * * *

Nora's breath caught in her throat. Explicit images flashed through her mind. But not images of pleasuring herself. Pictures of Ryland, his head buried between her thighs, feeding off her. Her gaze met his dark, whiskey eyes.

"No," she choked out, licking her dry lips.

"No?"

"I wouldn't want to be alone," she rumbled. The growl he responded with drew a shudder from her body. So hot. So delicious. Damn. But she needed...something else. Something more tangible than teasing one another to distraction in his office. The ache in her belly turned into a cramp, and she bit her lip. *Not now*. She was not going into heat. It wasn't time!

She had business to attend to, a diary to translate, and a search to complete before she could begin to think of committing her heart to a man who was suspect. She'd made a promise, and she had to keep that first, before she let something more happen. She pushed at his chest. "Later."

He chuckled softly. "I'll take that as a promise." He released her. She moved to sit on his desk, sliding back until she was comfortable. He arched a brow, the curve of his lips stole her thoughts of behaving. She crossed her ankles and ran a finger down the edge of her blouse. The room was suddenly stifling.

A knock sounded at the door. "Enter," said Ryland, his voice sharp.

Brogan walked inside. "Boss, about the water...." His eyes widened when he saw Nora.

"Brogan, meet Nora. Nora, this is Brogan, my right hand man."

"Nice to meet you, Brogan."

The male stared at her long and hard. "I think we've met."

She cocked her head and examined Brogan. "Have we?"

"At the university."

The memory hit hard. He was one of the males who'd propositioned her in her first year of college. "Oh, yes, I remember you now. Brogan Connell, isn't it?" She grinned wide, and took his hand.

"Yes, it is."

"Good to see you again. It's been a few years." Brogan pumped her hand but refused to meet her eyes.

A rumble sounded beside her. The dark look of fury was back on Ryland's face, and Brogan yanked his hand from hers, ducking his head to avoid both their eyes. *Shit*. Ryland was acting like a true wolverine mate now, overprotective to a fault. She'd have to watch herself.

"It has been. Anyway, sorry to interrupt, but, boss, we have to settle the water problem."

Nora slid off the desk and adjusted her clothes. "Well, I'll let you boys get to work. Ryland, I'll see you back at the den. I'm going to do a little...reading."

"Wait," said Ryland. He punched the phone intercom.

"*Yeah, Ryland?*"

"Gerard, I need you to escort Nora back to my den."

"*On my way.*"

"Ryland, I don't need a babysitter."

"You need more than a babysitter, Nora. You had half of my pack out there drooling after you. Gerard will see you home, and if he lays a finger on you...."

Nora stared at him in surprise. He was jealous. Okay, she'd known he was jealous before, but maybe she hadn't realized how jealous. "You can't keep an escort with me at all times, Ryland."

"I can, and I will."

A knock sounded at the door, and Gerard peeked his head in. "Ready, Nora?"

She snarled at Ryland. *It's a damn good thing I have other things to do*. She spun and followed Gerard out of the door.

Chapter Twelve

Ryland stormed across his office, his hand fisted in his best friend's shirt before Brogan could step back.

"Keep your hands off her." Ryland growled, his brain fogged with jealousy and lust. He was losing his mind. Seeing Nora circled by half his pack had twisted the last of his control to the breaking point, and now he had his best friend up against the wall.

"I didn't mean anything," he said, his eyes wide in shock.

"You heard what I said."

"Do you know who she is?"

"She's my mate," he said, through clenched teeth.

Brogan paled. "Ryland, that's Sean Hunt's daughter. Kieran's niece."

He stared at his friend for a few seconds, ignoring the warning bells going off in his head. A distant memory shivered in the back of his mind. One from his childhood. Could it be her? The girl he'd found crying under the tree? He released Brogan's shirt front. "So?"

"So! Sean has been after this pack for longer than we've existed. "

"And Sean is no longer the Uwharrie pack leader." Ryland backed away, his eyes still on Brogan. He couldn't shake the image of the crying child, the young girl teased by the pack bullies. He'd been so drawn to her then. Though not nearly the way he was now. Then he'd gotten ill. Very ill. "His brother is."

"Yes, the very same brother who killed Joshua."

Ryland rubbed his face and sighed. Brogan was right, but knowing who Nora's father was didn't change anything. "It doesn't matter, Brogan. There's no choice to be made. I can't undo nature."

"You haven't marked her yet. So she hasn't accepted your suit. Get out while you can."

Ryland collapsed into his chair. Sean Hunt's daughter. When he'd caught her scent at the Uwharrie pack last month, he knew they were like all other wolver packs, with very few females. And he also knew the pack leader had two daughters. He should have guessed she was one of Sean's.

"It's not that simple, Brogan."

"Why? If you don't step away, you'll always be at odds over her father and uncle."

One hand rubbed over Ryland's face before he met Brogan's green eyes. "She's my *True Mate*. I couldn't stop my suit if I tried."

Brogan whistled. "Damn, boss. "

Ryland stood and paced the room, rubbing the back of his neck. "I wanted to kill John over her today, and she barely touched him. I'm too far gone. I can't give her up now."

"Then be prepared for war."

Ryland raised a brow.

"The instant Kieran gets word she's with you, he's going to try to take her back. You saw how he was over Anna."

"Yes, but he later mated Anna."

Dark Succession

“Don’t be stupid, you know what I mean. There’s been bad blood ever since your brother split with them.”

“And Joshua’s gone now,” Ryland roared. He was tired of cleaning up after his dead brother.

“And there are five women sitting in that room over there that says it’s not over yet.”

Ryland slammed both fists into his desk, his gums itching, and his fangs pushed through. “Don’t you think I know that? Brogan, I dream of the day that mess is over, and those women are freed.”

“Then free them.”

“I can’t.” He snarled. “Think of what it would do to us if they went to the police.”

“Nobody will believe them.”

“You’re being naïve. Someone will, and then there’ll be an all out search. I can’t chance it.”

“So what’s your plan? Keep them till they die of old age?”

“I haven’t got the foggiest idea.” He collapsed back into the soft leather chair. The chair his brother had bought. “Not the foggiest idea.”

Chapter Thirteen

Nora typed search words into an Internet search engine using Ryland's computer in his den. The list popped onto the screen. She frowned. Thousands of results. Everything from the simple to the complicated. One by one she clicked on links until she found what she was looking for. Letter Replacement Encryption. She should have known. Joshua probably hadn't done much research on this himself. From what she'd learned of the male, he didn't seem the type to while away his hours on the computer.

Only one problem. There was no decryption key.

She picked up the diary and studied it. There were several one and three letter words. She compared the short words and phrases, searching for what might be an A or I, and once she identified those, it would make everything a whole lot easier.

Once she got the idea, she experimented until she came up with her own key. She stretched and looked at her work. So far, so good. She had a full alphabet, now all she had to do was apply this to every single letter in the small notebook.

She grimaced. That would take days.

She stood and paced around the small room. She'd spent four years in college absorbing all the knowledge the professors were willing to share, including two years of computer science. The courses had helped her with her other work, including chemistry, where she'd used small computer programs she created, or macros, to help her with chemistry formulas. Maybe she could apply the same technique here.

Turning back to the computer, she stretched her fingers and set to work. The macro was easy once she got started. Using the key she'd created, she programmed the computer to replace the corresponding letters on the keyboard. When she typed a Z, for example, it meant A, and so forth. Until the keyboard would at last decrypt whatever she typed.

She turned to the first page.

nrtzya, ek rqq znp npzaeyo ubei, eu cpzyi e zc oqyp. e bzip pyjnrdupa eu iq zi uq czlp eu aekkejgtu kqn zyrqyp vbq keyai ubei xqql.

Nora typed the letters into the computer.

Ryland, if you are reading this, it means I am gone. I have encrypted this so as to make it difficult for anyone who finds this book.

It worked! She'd found the key and made the computer decipher it for her. Flushed with excitement, she started typing. She typed paragraph after paragraph and after completing a few pages she went back to read what she'd typed. Her heart fluttered. Ryland was not going to like this.

The door to the kitchen opened, and footsteps moved toward her. Seconds later, Ryland stood in the doorway, his scent filling the room. She hit print on what she had so far and turned, hoping the weight of her discovery didn't show in her eyes.

A frown marred his handsome face. He rubbed his scar, and she wondered if it offered him comfort. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

Her heart raced. She'd feared this was coming the instant Brogan recognized her. After her conversation with her father, she'd known Ryland would have

problems with her family, though she'd expected a little more anger at the discovery. "So Brogan told you my last name?"

"He did."

Nora couldn't make out his mood. His scent was too heavily disturbed. She shrugged. "I didn't think it was a big deal. I didn't know who you were till after I was already here." She laid the pages on the small desk and sighed with resignation. "I'll just go get my things and you can let me out of here." She moved to walk past him, but he grabbed her arm.

"Not so fast. Who told you more about me?" She met his eyes. There was uncertainty hidden in their depths.

Nora yanked her arm from his grasp. "My father."

"You told your father where you were?"

She shook her head. "No. When I talked to him, I didn't know where I was."

"I see. And it didn't bother you to stay with me?"

She pursed her lips.

"Ryland, I don't even know how to say this, but...." She hesitated. "I don't know if I honestly could have left by then. There's something about you...."

"Something about me." He didn't ask; he only repeated her statement. His gaze searched hers. At last, satisfied, he let her go. "Did you decide what it is that's so *different* about me?"

She took a deep breath. "No. I can't say I have. I can tell you that no male, ever, has made me feel like you do."

"Is that so?" She'd expected a snide comment in return, a heated argument, but, instead, he pressed forward. His eyes were dark and hungry.

"Did Brogan tell you how we met?"

He shook his head. "Just that he knew you in college."

"Right," she said dryly. "He wouldn't give you more than that. Ryland, I went to school to get away from the pack. Every day, males tried to convince me to be their mate."

He growled. She ignored him.

"And every day I turned them down. I thought I was broken inside. None of them caused a twinge of attraction. I got tired of fending them off, so I went to college to spend time among humans. Brogan was there. He was just like all the others, making unwanted passes, not knowing when to stop."

"Are you saying I'm no different than Brogan?"

She shook her head. "No, Ryland. Let me finish."

He nodded and leaned back against the doorframe, his bulk blocking her in the room.

"Brogan, in my eyes, was like all the rest. He pushed until I told him if he didn't get the hell away from me, I'd strangle him. After that, I decided something about me wasn't right. I didn't feel attraction toward any males, wolver or human." She couldn't believe she was sharing her embarrassing life. But once she'd started, she couldn't stop. "I met this human. His name was Adam." The disgusted sound from Ryland wasn't all that encouraging, but she continued. "We hit it off, and it was obvious he was interested in more than just my body. Knowing we wouldn't stay together, but curious, I slept with him."

"And?"

Nora wasn't sure continuing was such a good idea. Ryland's body stiffened, his voice dangerous. But it was too late to stop now. "And I felt nothing. I mean... I felt his touch, but it did nothing for me. So after that, I steered clear of all male companionship."

"And now?" His fangs flashed, reflecting bright white in the light of the muted desk lamp. His scent was mixed with anger, confusion, and desire. But there was more, buried deep inside him that she wished she understood.

"And then I met you."

He raised a brow.

"You woke up something that was missing, Ryland. My staying here was to investigate those feelings. It had nothing to do with my father, or your past, just what I was feeling when I was around you."

"So you're saying you stayed here because you wanted to see if I could make you hot?" He stalked forward, his eyes hard, yet in their depths, she thought she saw a flash of...pain?

"You don't have to put it in such a vulgar way."

"But that's what it is, isn't it? You want sex?"

She shook her head, exasperated. "See, I knew you wouldn't understand. No, Ryland. I didn't stay for sex. I stayed for you, damn it."

He stopped, his hand already reaching out to touch her hair. Anger faded from his gaze, his expression softening. He moved his fingers forward and caressed the ends of her hair. His other hand pulled her toward him.

When he kissed her, it was nothing like the possessive wildness she'd sensed from him at the diner. Instead, it was soft, gentle. His tenderness was even more destructive than his aggressiveness. Now he teased her until she responded. She opened to him, and long before she was sated, he pulled back, his eyes shuttered and unreadable.

"We could always have that sex now."

She laughed. "Later."

She pushed him away. She wouldn't sleep with him until she understood what was happening in his pack, and the words in the pages she had to give him only muddled the waters.

* * * *

Ryland forced a smile when she moved away. He wanted to drag her against him, to force her to accept him as her mate, but he couldn't. Not yet. She still didn't understand what was happening between them, but at least now he knew why. She was confused by her lack of intensity with other men just like she was befuddled by her fierce desire with him.

"I figured out the code in the diary."

"Already?"

The look in her eyes saddened, devoid of the arousal he'd seen moments before. Her scent softened, her mood overcoming the sharp scent of feminine hunger.

"I printed the first few pages. By the way, you can't use your computer till I disable the macro I have running. Your keyboard won't work right."

She pulled a few sheets of paper from the printer. "The encryption wasn't that tough. It was a simple letter replacement scheme. Once I figured out the alphabet, I just had to apply it. So I programmed your computer to change the keyboard to match my specifications. Then I just typed it in."

Ryland chuckled in appreciation. "I didn't know you could program a computer."

"Well, I went to school for forestry, but you can't do anything these days without programming classes."

He nodded. She held out the pages to him. The sheets trembled in her fingers. This couldn't possibly be good.

"Maybe you should read them alone." She moved to leave the room.

"Stay."

His brother had ruined so much of his life, and now he was about to see what other damage he'd wrought before his death. Ryland wasn't sure he could handle that alone. Her presence had a calming influence on him. At least when they were alone. Besides, if Joshua had mentioned the women in these pages, Nora would have confronted him by now. There would have been no tender confession.

She nodded, but moved to the old, beat up couch and sat down. She picked at the edges of the arm, but didn't look at him. He took a deep breath, and began to read.

Ryland, if you are reading this, it means I am gone. I have encrypted this so as to make it difficult for anyone who finds this book.

At the end of this diary, you will find an encrypted list of all the assets for our pack. Use them well. You will find everything in order, ready for you to take control. There are several accounts, set up within human law, and the money acquired legally. I know how important that is to you. Do with it as you see fit.

However, there is something on a more personal note that I must discuss with you. There's no easy way to say it, so I'll just be brief.

The people you thought were your parents, Jackson and Madison Keegan were not. They were mine, making them your grandparents.

You are my son, Ryland. Your mother, Joanna Taylor, was human. She was weak-willed, unable to fathom the power her child would hold. She was terrified and wanted nothing to do with you. I was young, so my parents raised you as theirs.

When they died, you were devastated. I was afraid if I told you the truth then, you would not accept it.

And Ryland, no matter what you think of me, I was your father, and I cared about you, and I cared about our race.

~Joshua.

Ryland stared at the words on the pages long after he finished reading them. His brother was his father. His vision blurred, and his fist closed on the pages. How could he do this to him? Joshua had ruined so much of his life, and now this? Ryland absentmindedly rubbed the ridged scar on his cheek, remembering the feel of the blade slicing through flesh.

Joshua charged Ryland, moving with startling speed for a male of his size. His fists raised, he swung. Ryland ducked, the blow glancing off the side of his head. Ryland's heart skipped a beat. His brother hadn't pulled his punch like he'd expected. Instead, he'd attempted to incapacitate in one strike.

Ryland hadn't expected a full blown battle when he'd challenged his brother's attempt to kidnap a human. He'd hoped their shared blood would keep things in check, help Joshua to see reason. He'd been wrong.

Ryland snarled in return, readying himself for full battle. He was young and wiry. Speed was his friend, but he had none of the powerful bulk his brother possessed. He would have to use his swift feet to his benefit, before his brother could use his weight.

Lowering his head, he charged, shoving his shoulder into Joshua's belly. The male countered with an elbow to the upper shoulders, slamming Ryland to the ground. Ryland flipped back to his feet, ready to take on the next blow, but already he was too late.

Joshua flew through the air, feet first, smashing into Ryland's chest. The impact shoved Ryland against the brick wall of the library behind him. His breath shot from his lungs, followed by the crack of shattered bones. White hot pain pierced through his lungs as bone met organ.

Wheezing with a punctured lung, Ryland struggled to stand. Joshua would have none of it. Blow after blow fell, pummeling Ryland in his already injured chest, slamming into his stomach, damaging the rest of his internal organs. Pain exploded through his body. Yet still Joshua continued.

"I'll teach you respect," snarled his brother, pounding his fists into Ryland's body, one after the other. His nose cracked, and his cheeks crumbled beneath the onslaught. The coppery taste of blood seeped into his mouth. One of his own fangs punctured his lower lip.

Ryland needed to shift, or he would die. Life giving fluids seeped from his body onto the hard paved surface, while his breath wheezed through his lungs. Pain twisted inside his body, his heart pounding in his chest. Yet Joshua continued, fist after fist. Ryland curled into a ball, protecting his insides.

At last, the beating stopped. Joshua grabbed him by his hair, yanking his head upward.

Ryland couldn't feel his legs as he dangled between the earth's hot surface and his brother's flaming fury.

"This will teach you to interfere with your alpha," Joshua snarled.

A sharp, rancid scent pierced Ryland's broken nostrils even before the glittering edge of the silver dagger flashed in his brother's hands. Every wolverine, young or old, was trained to avoid the poisonous metal.

He gave one last ineffective struggle seconds before the blade seared his cheek, his blood burning at the touch of the white-hot blade.

Joshua shoved him away, and Ryland crumbled to the ground. "Shift, son, before you die." And he turned and stalked off.

Something dark and painful snapped within Ryland's mind. Ferocious anger burned in his body while the silver worked in his blood stream. And as his body slowly shifted and his mind screamed in pain, he made a vow. He would stop his brother, even if he had to kill him.

The memory played over and over in his mind. Joshua's words echoing through the emptiness of the pain in his heart.

"Shift, son, before you die."

Ryland had always thought Joshua's words were intended to humiliate, to belittle. Now he knew he'd been trying to tell him something.

It didn't matter. The wolven had ripped the last vestiges of trust straight from Ryland's heart with the slice of a silver dagger.

He glanced up to see Nora watching him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm so sorry, Ryland. I didn't expect that when I offered to translate them. I thought maybe it would be a list of financial holdings, or maybe even why he built this place beneath the ground. But not this."

"Everything. Everything he could, he destroyed," he rasped.

Ryland was numb from head to toe.

His brother was his father, and his father was his grandfather.

Ryland stared at the crumpled pages. He had a mother he'd never met. Nothing made sense. He tried to grasp hold of one emotion. Anger, sadness, pain. Anything. But he couldn't. They all spun out of his mind's reach.

Nora's hand touched his arm. She stared up at him, her eyes filled with pain for him. Like the eyes of a little girl he once knew.

"You know, this explains so much. The memories that didn't make sense."

"What memories?"

"The ones of how I couldn't shift like the others." He took a deep breath before expelling it, his head tipped back, afraid to meet her eyes. "And the ones of you."

"Me?"

Ryland ran a hand through his scraggly hair. The motion did little to calm his mood. He stood and paced twice across the floor. "You probably don't even remember." He dropped into the couch, staring at the wrinkled sheets of paper in his hand. "You were no more than five. I found you in the woods, alone. You said all the boys were picking on you and to go away."

* * * *

Nora stared for an instant at the wolven, lost in his memories. Memories he claimed she was a part of. She shook her head, confused. "I don't know what...." Images floated through her mind, slowly sharpening. Memories of her childhood, crying after the boys of the pack had teased her unmercifully, just like boys were wont to do. Another boy, a bit older, had come and chased them away, before sitting beside her on the ground. "I remember!"

He nodded. "I sat with you and talked. But when I met you again, I couldn't figure out something."

"What?"

He lifted his ice blue eyes to meet hers. "I told you I couldn't shift. Nora, I was 8 years old at the time. I should have been able to shift at least at the full moon. About a week later, I was very ill. My brother," he grimaced and looked at the pages before continuing, "I mean, my father told me all would be well, that I would be able to shift by the next full moon, that I was a late bloomer."

"I've heard stories of boys not shifting until they were ten."

"You don't understand. My parents had just died, or the people I thought were my parents." He fisted the crumpled pages. "I was in a strange pack, and Joshua had just shown up. From what this letter says, I wouldn't have been able to shift till I was turned. I was half human. The only way I could ever shift would be if I received a bite. I remember, right before I got sick, I found a mark on my shoulder, but it was healed the next day. I didn't pay much attention to it, and I didn't know what it was."

"So you think he bit you? Changed you?"

He sighed. "He must have."

* * * *

Nora smiled and sat in the desk chair, swiveling to face him. "You were so quiet. Nothing like you are now."

His laugh was weak.

"Actually, it was that summer that everything changed for me too."

Ryland cocked his head at her. "How?"

"That's the summer I developed this sudden dislike for every male I met. I hated being around them. Most of them made my skin crawl, and others... Well, let's just say others were barely tolerable." She shrugged. "Maybe it's because of them teasing me so much."

He didn't reply, but simply watched her. He didn't seem surprised by her words at all. Could he know why? But that would mean....

Oh, God. It couldn't be. Was he her *True Mate*? Had her body, that long ago, bonded with him, knowing him to be her mate, and forced her to refuse the attention of any male?

"Nora?" He stood, closing the distance between them.

"Ryland, that summer, did you feel anything unusual for me?"

"No. But I was more human than wolverines then."

"What are you trying to tell me, Ryland?"

"You know what it is. You feel it." The piercing icy blue eyes studied her, waiting.

She shook her head. "It can't be. That would mean... Oh, God!" Nora stood, brushing past him. "This can't be!"

Only one thing could cause such intense dislike. But she'd been a child. No older than five. This couldn't be.

She couldn't get her head wrapped around the implications of the idea. All the suffering and pain, believing something was wrong with her, when all that time she'd had a mate waiting for her. A *True Mate*, the mate chosen by nature. The mate designed to complete her. She whirled to see his face set hard as stone, eyes glittering in anger. "Oh, God," she repeated.

"You don't have to be so happy about it," he clipped and stormed out the door.

"Well, excuse me for breathing," she said aloud to the otherwise empty room.

She lowered herself to the couch.

True Mates. That would mean this discomfort, this arousal... She was in heat. "Oh, God." She couldn't quit repeating herself. No wonder she was acting the slut.

Her stomach growled. She growled right along with it, stood, and stomped into the kitchen. She opened and closed the refrigerator, searching. Nothing looked good. She did it again. There had to be something to ease this hunger. The carton of eggs, a small container of milk. Nothing. She turned to the cabinets and searched through them. Still nothing. *Damn it. Why couldn't he stock his fridge?* At last she opened the freezer and found a tub of chocolate ice cream. She grabbed it and a spoon and headed for her room, running into Ryland on the way.

"Nora," he began.

"Leave me alone. I need to think. And why don't you have any real food down here anyway?"

He stared at her open-mouthed as she trudged past him. In the bedroom, she threw on the t-shirt. The same one bathed in his scent. Arousal shot through her, and she cursed. Damn him for not telling her they were *True Mates* the first night. And damn him for needing her at his side. It wasn't fair.

She popped open the ice cream and dug in. The first bite was rich and sweet. Nora rolled it over her tongue, forcing herself to enjoy the flavor. She'd thought the cool, rich chocolate would sooth the aching beast inside.

She was wrong.

Her inner wolf roared, furious with her circumstances. How could she possibly be the mate to a male who had kidnapped women?

Maybe her father was wrong, and there were no females here, except herself. Tomorrow, she would find the truth. One way or another.

Once the ice cream was gone, she stood and took the spoon back to the kitchen and tossed the carton in the trash. Ryland sat in the chair in front of the TV, watching who knew what. Well, maybe he wasn't watching anything because the channel kept changing. He didn't even turn in her direction when she passed him. His scent was closed and angry.

What did he have to be so angry about? She's the one who suffered. She sighed. Chances were he hadn't known what had happened. He'd been no more than a child the last time they'd seen one another.

She'd been a bitch. Plain and simple.

"Ryland?" she called.

"What?"

He didn't look at her. Just kept clicking away on the remote control.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be such a bitch. You don't understand."

"What's to not understand? My *True Mate* is disgusted to find out I'm her mate."

"Or maybe, she's disgusted at herself for not figuring it out all those years ago."

He turned to look at her, his eyes shining and fathomless.

Nora folded her arms and looked at her feet before meeting his eyes again. "Ryland, all those years I thought something was wrong with me. When the real problem was I already had a mate, and while my mind didn't know, my body did."

He didn't speak for so long she thought he was ignoring her.

"So what upset you is knowing something wasn't wrong with you?"

She smiled. “No, I’m saying what upset me is not having been smart enough to know all along that something *wasn’t* wrong with me. It’s bad enough that I’m in heat worse than ever before, but, Ryland, having you for a *True Mate* is not what upset me.”

Still he didn’t get up from that damned chair. “So you are accepting me?”

She held her breath. She couldn’t. Not yet. Not until she knew about the women. “I haven’t gotten that far. Give me a little more time. This is a lot to take in.”

He nodded, his face hard. She wished she knew what he was thinking.

“Come here.”

“I can’t sleep with you, Ryland. Not now. It hurts.” And it did. Her body had cramped in her anger, and she couldn’t get it to ease. That happened during heat cycles. The pain. The hunger, the desire. It all made sense now. But she wasn’t ready for him.

“I know, rabbit. Come here. We’ve both had a rough day. I need....”

When he didn’t finish, she understood. *True Mates* needed more than just sex. They needed touch. Just like their cousins the wolves, wolven craved caresses more than anything except food. Especially after an upset like he’d received tonight.

She couldn’t argue because she wanted to be held just as much. The problem was keeping it non-sexual. She stepped toward him, fighting to hide the sway of her hips. He pulled her into the chair with him.

“Just let me hold you for a while, mate.”

Nora relaxed into his arms. She wouldn’t correct his choice of words. Not tonight. For a while, maybe peace could reign. She relaxed, absorbing the heat of stone-hard muscles beneath her. Pain tightened and twisted her insides. She fidgeted, though no position seemed to help.

His hand moved to her abdomen.

“Ryland, I can’t....”

“I know, baby. I’m just going to hold you.” His hand rested on her lower abdomen. The heat of his palm melted through her skin, settling deep in her womb. The pain eased, and Nora sighed.

His lips touched her forehead. Her skin burned beneath them. “Sleep,” he whispered. “We’ll deal with everything tomorrow.”

She nodded. Before long, the low voices on the television became murmurs, and she fell asleep.

* * * *

Ryland stared down at the shewolf in his arms. She was so much more than he’d ever thought. If only he could figure out what caused her to be fearful, they could be happy—if he could get rid of those damned women in the compound.

Chapter Fourteen

Ryland's muscles screamed with the need to stretch. He lay in his oversized easy chair with Nora in his arms, so he didn't move an inch. Every muscle ached with forbidden desire. He'd promised her no sex, wanting only to ease her discomfort and obvious cramps, but when she'd climbed into his lap, his need had intensified to the point of pain.

She moaned. He rested his palm on her belly again, smiling when her face cleared, and she relaxed in her sleep. Her suffering was the only thing keeping his desires at bay. Shewolves were very sensual creatures. However, during early heat, hormones skyrocketed one moment and crashed the next, torturing both sexes. It was nature's way of forcing the female to be careful in her choices, he assumed; otherwise she'd probably accept anything male.

Ryland bit back the sudden growl erupting at the thought of her bedding another male. *Never. Mine.*

Nora snuggled deeper into his arms, a soft smile on her face. He tried to ignore how sweet her body felt, how good her heat felt. Somehow, by giving her what she craved, she'd given him what he needed. He gazed at the delicate face resting on his chest. The feel of her in his arms warmed his insides, though after what Joshua had done, he couldn't imagine trusting another person. Not even this one.

Though he couldn't trust her with his heart, he would keep her, even if it meant war with the Uwharrie pack. He would find a way to bind her to him. Nora would be his match at every turn once she overcame whatever scared her. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close to his chest. *And she will get over her fears.* Her heart pounded a steady beat against his ribs, and her soft breath whispered across his chest, stoking his already heated flesh.

But can I get over my mistrust?

Nora stirred, her lashes fluttering open. "What's wrong?" Her voice was low and sexy, filled with sleep.

He squeezed her tight. "Nothing."

She turned to look at him and sniffed. "Liar."

He grimaced. "Just thinking is all."

"About what?"

He kissed her softly. He didn't want to think anymore. He wanted to feel. He brushed his lips against her forehead, but she tipped her face to meet him. Deliciously red, swollen-from-sleep lips called to him. She opened without hesitation, her mouth moving beneath his. He groaned into her mouth. Her feminine spice both soothed his thoughts and aroused his body. Lifting his head, he murmured, "Nothing important." For long moments, he tasted her, softly sweeping his tongue into her mouth, relishing every drop of her sweetness.

Her fingers teased the tiny hairs on the back of his neck, tracing downward.

Her delicate touch chased the painful memories straight from his mind. All that remained was Nora. She was his, even if she wasn't ready to admit it. The rumble of pleasure rose in his throat. He would do anything to stay with her today, but he couldn't. He pulled back. As much as he hated it, he had work to do today.

"I only have one command for today."

She arched a brow, a frown on her face.

"You will not let another male touch you. If you do, I'll kill him." Her lips opened, ready to argue, and he touched a finger against them to quiet her, struggling to ignore the moist heat left from their kiss. "I mean it, Nora. Do me that one favor while we figure out what's happening."

He tried to ignore the pleased smile that curved her lips.

"All right. No male will touch me."

He nodded. "Good. Now stand up, I have to go check on the pack."

"You want breakfast?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. There are some water issues I have to check on, plus a few other things. It's already after eight." He wasn't ready to share the horror of the murder with her. Maybe he'd be lucky and solve the crime before she heard.

"I can bring it by the office again."

"All right. Do that. But remember—"

"I know, stay away from Devlin."

Ryland nodded, satisfied she had understood her marching orders. She climbed from the chair and stretched. His breath caught, but he couldn't stay and play. He had work to do. He stood, hiding the screaming muscles he'd held still for so long. He headed to the shower in his bedroom.

Today, he would call a council meeting in the pack and determine what to do about the women. The very idea of their captivity had always eaten at him, even before he knew he was part human. Now, he felt more a fraud than pack leader.

He didn't see Nora when he came out of his room, but heard the shower running in the bathroom she used. The flow was barely a trickle, he knew, and wondered how she would manage to wash her long hair. Images flashed into his mind the instant he had the thought. Water cascading over her naked flesh, her head tipped back to rinse her hair, exposing the softness of her throat.

Ryland's fingers tightened and he jerked his gaze downward in surprise. His fingers were closed around her bathroom doorknob. With a quick yank, he released the knob, turned on his heel, and headed to the pack office.

Once inside, he surveyed the room. Piles of paperwork sat on his desk. At first glance, all looked well, but it wasn't. Each stack stood neat, edges even and sharp. Nothing unusual there. But his pen, it wasn't on the right side where he'd left it, close to his hand when he needed it. Instead, it rested atop the pile of pages. Just like yesterday.

He never did that. True, with Nora nearby, he was a little distracted. He could barely comb his hair into any semblance of order when he thought of her. And he always thought of her.

But this was different. He would never lay his pen there. It would be in the way. No, someone must have been here, rifling through his office. The hidden safe he'd installed turned out to be useful after all. If the thief was after pack financial records, he wouldn't find them without breaking into the safe.

He sniffed. There was no scent of Pine-Sol this time. In fact, there was no scent out of place at all. Whoever broke in was a regular in this office.

A knock at the door jolted him.

“Boss?”

“Brogan. Come.”

His second-in-command stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“I wasn’t sure you were still speaking to me after yesterday.”

Ryland gave him a wry smile and glanced back at the desk. “Trust me, I have a lot bigger things on my mind than the fact you knew my mate in college.”

Brogan let out a sigh of relief. Ryland decided a warning was still in order.

“However, if you touch her, I’ll kill you.”

“I didn’t know she was your mate.”

“Which is why you’re still alive. Sit. Tell me what you’ve learned.”

His friend sat, still watching Ryland with wary eyes. *Good*. He should worry. One step out of line, and there would be no more Brogan.

“I haven’t learned much. Just that the scent of Pine-Sol was out of place. There was no bottle indicating Kyle had been doing any cleaning before his death. There were no sponges or cleaning cloths with it either. The Pine-Sol was put there by the killer.”

A sharp rap sounded on the door.

“Enter.”

Nora walked in. “Breakfast.” She waved a brown paper bag in front of her. She nodded in Brogan’s direction.

She strode in, light and carefree for a woman who’d slept cramped in an easy chair, curled around his body. The memory of her body on his heated his already warm blood.

“Thanks.” He had trouble keeping his voice natural. Her eyes narrowed on him. Her eyes were deep pools, wide with arousal. He wondered how big those dark orbs would get when he was sliding deep inside her.

Her lips curved, and he sensed she was laughing at a secret thought. Some shewolves could read their mates’ minds, and he hoped to all that was holy that she hadn’t figured out what he was thinking. Shewolves weren’t known for their sensitivity during the mating frenzy when they were in heat.

She smirked, and he knew he was in trouble, but, instead, she turned her attention to the male seated at the conference table.

“Morning, Brogan.”

The seductive smile on her face was like an arrow to Ryland’s heart. Ryland watched Nora sashay across the floor straight to his right hand man. Every muscle inside him tensed, and when her hand brushed lint from Brogan’s shoulder, Ryland’s lip curved. The muted growl meant only for her ears.

Nora cocked her head toward him, a sly smile on her face. She dropped her hand and walked past the male.

Anger exploded deep inside Ryland. Her message was clear. She was eyeing another. He fought hard for his common sense, but it was a losing battle. All he could think of was ripping Brogan’s head off his shoulders.

He fisted his hands to keep from doing just that.

Brogan blushed furiously and refused to meet either of their eyes. *Good. Maybe he’d live after all.*

“Morning, Nora. Good to see you again,” the male muttered.

She looked at Ryland, and he could almost feel her smirking beneath her calm exterior. Anger and jealousy boiled inside him, burning his stomach and throat.

"I brought enough food for several, just in case others were running late too."

She strode toward him, tossing the bag onto the conference table. It landed with a heavy thud. The hell with the food. Fierce possessiveness built inside him, stretching what was left of his control.

The instant she was within reach, Ryland snatched her to him, folding her into his arms. Her body curved to meet his, so sweet and soft.

Ryland curled his lips into a snarl, his eyes spearing Brogan. His lips found his mate's, and he kissed her hard. His fangs grew in his mouth with the desire to mark her as his own. *Mine*. The word echoed through his entire being. She moaned into his mouth, and he shook with the effort to control the instincts raging in his body.

For the first time in his life, he was truly conflicted. Humanity struggled with wolf. The primitive response sent waves of dismay through him. The wolf inside him howled in frustration, howled to kill Brogan and mark Nora as his own, regardless of her wishes.

Thank heaven his friend stared at the floor, because if he looked at Nora right now, Ryland didn't know if he could stop himself.

He ended the kiss and looked at his *True Mate*. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were glazed with desire.

It was then he realized she hadn't struggled, hadn't stiffened in the least.

She'd played him.

She'd provoked his jealousy with the ease of baiting a pup with a bone. Like the female wolf in the wild, she'd teased and taunted her mate, pushing him to the aggression that so naturally lay beneath the surface. He snarled and nipped her ear. Her lips curved into a soft smile, and she nuzzled his chin.

He released her and cursed softly. "Bitch," he whispered. "Don't push me."

The rumble of laughter from low in her throat stabbed him like the edge of a sharp blade. Lust burned inside him with a mind all its own. He ached to strip her and throw her on his desk, Brogan be damned.

She was shewolf to her core. Totally in control, torturing the males around her. How had he missed this part of her nature?

"I wouldn't dream of pushing you, Ryland," she whispered.

Ryland turned from her. He would have his revenge when he had her back in his den. The single thought conjured images of her stripped, her body writhing while she begged for his touch. Oh yes, revenge would be sweet.

"I'll leave you to your work. Oh, and, Brogan?"

"Yeah?" The male's head jerked up in surprise before he yanked his gaze back down to the conference table.

"Don't worry so much."

She walked out and closed the door.

The only sound in her wake was the heavy breathing of two very disconcerted males. Ryland stormed back to his desk, slammed the chair against the wall, and dropped into the leather seat.

He turned his gaze toward the only man he could call friend. Brogan. He'd wanted to kill him just seconds ago. How does one apologize for that?

"Does she know about Kyle?" asked Brogan.

Straight to business. Maybe that was the perfect answer. That was the good thing about Brogan. He didn't hold grudges.

Ryland shook his head. "No. She knows about the water, but I think she was talking about you and her, not the pack."

"Oh. Right. She's in heat."

"No shit," growled Ryland. He didn't like talking about such private business, but this was Brogan. If anyone could help him keep his focus at a time like this, it was his second. "I hadn't expected it this soon. Most of the time, you have a week before that happens. And it's driving me insane."

"So I see," smirked Brogan. "You haven't marked her. I thought for sure you'd have done so after yesterday, or maybe sent her packing."

"I refuse to mark her against her will."

"And since when can you, the pack alpha, not convince a little shewolf who obviously wants you, to let you mark her?"

"Will you quit harping on that? You're worse than an old woman."

"I'm just saying...." Brogan flashed a grin.

* * * *

Alone at last.

Nora walked through the halls of the compound. She smiled at the memory of Ryland's kiss. She shouldn't have provoked him. Though it was unlike her, it had felt so right. Like a mating dance. Seeing the power build in his body, the aggressiveness, the pure alpha-like strength he exhibited, was well worth it. She'd always heard that females in heat were attracted to strength. She'd never believed it.

Now she understood.

And everything Ryland did stoked her arousal, sending a liquid heat to her core, nourishing the small seed of self-confidence that seemed to grow just being in his presence. She bit back the rumble of feminine hunger that threatened. Oh yes. She believed. *True Mates*.

But he had yet to prove himself to her. And she wouldn't permanently mate with any male who didn't love her, *True Mate* or not.

She glanced around the halls. Everything was quiet. Maybe the pack liked to sleep late. That wouldn't be unusual, since most wolveren enjoyed the night sky. The protection of the dark from prying human eyes was a powerful motivator. This was an excellent time for her search.

Nora moved furtively down the hall everyone had avoided when she was in the courtyard earlier. The scent of feminine hormones filtered through the canned air and reached her lungs. She widened her nostrils. Human. All human. Nora's heart sank.

A sniff at the doors she passed told her each of the dens was empty. All except the last one. The farthest from the courtyard. Here the scent was strongest, hidden behind the door. One quick perusal behind her told her she was still alone.

How she'd hoped her father was wrong. Yet if he was, why would Ryland tell her his pack was all male if there were females inside this room?

She closed her fingers over the doorknob, ignoring the slight tremor along their lengths. She turned it to the right. A metallic snick and a frozen doorknob answered one question. Locked. Of course it was. Using the fine blade of the knife she'd brought from the kitchen, she jiggled the lock. Her dad used to try to hide things from her behind lock doors when she was a child, but she learned early to get around any obstacle.

The click of the lock release echoed off the cinder block walls. She winced at the sound and tucked the knife back in her waistband. With a deep breath, she opened the door and slipped inside, pulling it closed behind her.

The clank of metal pipes sounded above her. She turned her gaze upward. Pipes ripped apart, pulled by a long nylon cord attached to the inside door knob. Icy cold water crashed over her head, cascading onto her clothes and drenching her from head to toe. She gasped and whirled to face the five women glaring at her from within the den.

For several seconds, only sound of dripping of water from Nora's clothes filled the room. A distraction?

Five pairs of eyes stared, each filled with emotions Nora could only guess at. Human females. One was pregnant, ready to pop any day.

Horror twisted inside her gut, freezing her in place. Her father was right. These women were prisoners.

"Arrggghh." One of the women charged, her blond hair wild, her face mottled with rage. Hands grabbed at Nora's throat.

With a quick drop and roll, Nora twisted her body. Her leg swept the attacker's feet from beneath her. The woman crashed to the floor, knocking a table over with her. The sound echoed through the den.

"Stop, I'm here to help!" Nora cried.

The woman didn't stop, but instead rolled to her feet, preparing to launch again.

Instinct kicked in, and Nora crouched. She needed to stop this, now, before things got out of control. Before she could control it, her body reacted to the surge of adrenaline. Energy rolled like electrical charges over her skin, tiny hairs prickled in a desire to shift. Her fingers itched, claws sprouted from her fingernails, and fangs lowered from her gums.

"I don't want to fight you," she snarled. Yet a part of her did. For two days, she'd wanted to vent the odd frustration building inside of her. Nora shook her head even as she growled low in her chest.

The human charged again.

With a quick spin, Nora dodged the onslaught. Her hand snapped forward, claws grasping the petite woman's throat. With a hard shove, the woman's back crashed against the wall.

Strength poured into Nora's limbs, feeding on the sudden taste of fear in the human's scent. She had to stop this, before her own anger exploded out of control. With one thrust of her weight, she lifted the woman, her feet clamoring for the floor. Ineffective fingers tugged at Nora's claws, and the woman gasped for air, her face paling and eyes bulging.

Dark Succession

"I can't help you if you fight me," she growled in the human's ear.

The door to the den slammed open. Pack members poured inside. Males moved to put their bodies between the remaining women and the two fighting. One grabbed the pregnant human by the arm, dragging her from the room.

Nora stared until the woman turned her eyes away. Satisfied, Nora lowered her to the floor again.

"What the hell's going on here?" Ryland bellowed.

Nora eased her head around, one eye still on the woman, though she loosened her hold on the human's throat.

Ryland's own fangs were lowered. His eyes shone honey gold. His scent punched through her like a sledgehammer, racing straight to her loins. Even through her anger, her body reacted. She snarled in response. The sudden surge of arousal mixed with anger boiled in her blood. The wolf inside her howled for release.

"I think that's my question," she said, cutting him a look.

"Let her go."

Nora sniffed the woman, inhaling her scent deep into her lungs. The smell of a male clung to her pores. "Who are you?" she asked.

The woman glanced furtively at Ryland and at the rest of the pack. Upper lip curled, Nora examined the human female. Strawberry blond hair draped to tiny delicate shoulders. She had wide hips and a large rack of breasts. Damn, the woman was all petite and beautiful. Everything Nora wasn't.

"I said, who are you?" she asked again. Nora bit back the rumble rolling upward from her gut. No matter the instincts burning inside her, this human was not at fault.

"Go back to my den, and we'll talk." Ryland's voice penetrated the fog of arousal and anger.

She turned her head in his direction. "Why should I?"

A voice sounded behind her. "This she-devil is a crazy, Ryland. You have to get rid of her."

Devlin. Fury rolled through her at mach speed. Nora whipped her head toward the voice. This weasel thought it was okay to rape women in the hall, and he thought *she* was a danger?

Nora's body vibrated with the need to throw herself at him, to rip his throat with her very teeth. She wasn't the scared female they'd met in the hallway. Instinct had ripped away the timid rabbit, replacing her with a furious beast.

Ryland had kidnapped these women. She'd almost fallen in love with him, and he was no better than the bastards who'd held her hostage. She released the woman, who straightened her clothes, but didn't step away. Yet all the while, Nora's stare never left Devlin. If the male stepped toward her, she was taking him down. And then she'd go after Ryland. She may not be able to kill them all, but this had to end. Now.

"Do you want to be next?" she growled at the male across the room.

* * * *

Ryland stared in surprise at his *True Mate*. Power rolled off her in waves as she fought the partial change. Her clothes dripped with what must be icy cold water. Yet she glared Devlin down ready to kill him. Somehow, he figured he'd be next on her list.

She swung her head around to glare at him. "Why are these women here?"

"They've kidnapped us," said the woman who'd attacked her, apparently deciding she was the lesser of two evils. "We've been here for months. Some of us for years. You have to help us."

"Let me explain, Nora," he said softly. His worst fears had come to life.

"And if you're his hostage," Nora spoke to the woman without turning her gaze, "why did you attack me?"

"We're trying to escape."

Soft, muffled sobs sounded from across the room.

Ryland watched Nora scan the den, her head lowered, her eyes still glowing with fury. Almost a third of the pack had squeezed into the door to watch the outcome.

Ryland groaned in frustration. Everything was spinning out of control, and he needed to grasp hold with both hands when what he wanted to do was throw his mate up against the wall and have his way with her.

The pack was waiting.

Watching.

The longer he hesitated, the more furious Nora became.

"Someone had better explain what's happening here."

"And why should we?" snarled Devlin. "You have no business here. Get out. Go back to your own pack."

She stalked toward him, her piercing gaze now focused on one enemy. "How dare you." Her voice rumbled, full of menace. "I don't give a damn what pack I'm from. You have humans here."

Ryland couldn't believe his eyes. His little rabbit had become a fierce shewolf, fearless against one of the most powerful of his pack. The problem was, it was him and his pack she'd turned on.

"At least one pregnant human," she glowered at the lot of them. "And you hold them prisoner. I have every right to ask questions."

"You're nothing," gloated Devlin. "You aren't even a pack leader's daughter anymore."

Ryland's head jerked up. He growled and moved forward. It was time to end this. He didn't care what the rest of the pack wanted or needed. He would do it alone. "Everyone out," he roared. "Now."

"So you're going to take care of her? Just like you handled the water problems?" Devlin took a step forward, his lip curled in challenge. "If I'm not mistaken, we've found the source of the leak," he said, nodding at the pipes over the door. "And you've been blaming me."

"I haven't blamed anyone," Ryland shot back. "Get out."

Slowly, the pack exited the room, but not before Devlin gave one last baring of his teeth.

All that remained were the five women, three pack members plus Nora and himself. He glared at Brogan and the others. "I thought I told you to leave." Two males turned and left.

"I just wanted to—"

"OUT!"

Brogan hurried the others out, then followed, closing the door behind him. At last only Nora and the five humans were present.

Nora took in several breaths. He watched her muscles slowly ease, and she returned to the Nora he knew.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, wishing he could scrub the entire situation away so easily. "Sit down. All of you." He glanced at the one who was pregnant. Sarah. Delicate Sarah, the pack called her.

A woman as dark as Sarah was light helped her sit, her stomach so rounded she couldn't do it alone. Her sister. Kirsten. Rumor had it they were fraternal twins, yet at a glance, he couldn't even tell they were sisters.

These were the two women his brother had targeted the most, taking them, willingly or unwillingly into his bed.

And Mary. He turned his gaze to Mary. Dear sweet Mary. She was the first woman taken. She'd been here at least four years, subject to multiple rapes and cruelty. Ryland found it difficult to meet her eyes. He knew Joshua, and there was no way the man had been gentle when he took her. Nevertheless, she'd kept her sanity and strength.

"Jackie, sit," he said to the brunette who kept her arm around Diane. Dark, ugly bruises the shape of Nora's fingers already marred the white flesh on Diane's throat.

Cousins, or so he'd heard. Two more women from the same family. What had Joshua been thinking? Tugging Diane's arm, Jackie pulled her cousin to a chair and pushed her down. She herself sat on the arm of the chair. Ryland was surprised when Diane pushed the other woman's fussing hands away and rested her fingers against her throat.

For months, he'd struggled to find a way to release the women without hurting the wolveren race. So far, he'd been unsuccessful. This was his responsibility, his pack, left to him to fix the disaster before it struck. He could leave. He could take Nora and head out to start their own pack. But then the fate of these women would haunt him for the rest of his life. His father had started this mess. Ryland would finish it.

He glanced toward Nora, who stood, her back to the wall, her arms poised at the ready, her hands balled into fists. She glared alternately between him and Diane.

A twinge of respect shot through him. Not too many women could take what Devlin had to dish out. The wolveren was pure menace, determined to steal power whenever possible, to cause disruption in the pack until he was the one in control.

And she'd found the women. How, he didn't know. Or how she'd even known they were here. Even in his disgrace, relief washed over him to know this was finally out in the open.

"Look, ladies," he said, avoiding Nora's eyes. "I'm trying to work something out. I'll get you home. Be patient."

“Let us go,” said Diane, her voice raspy. “Now.”

He sighed. “If I could do that, I would have done it a month ago. Nora and I will come up with a plan. Joshua was wrong to bring you here, I know that. I’ll set this right.” Though he had no idea how. “Trust me.”

If he let these women go without a plan, they could wreak havoc on the entire pack. If they went to the police....

Ryland hid a shudder at the thought.

And one of them was already pregnant, the child half wolverine. He would see it was cared for by someone who had at least an inkling of how wolverine life fared. He’d seen what happened to wolverine children when raised by someone who didn’t understand them. They were torn between two worlds, never comfortable in either. He couldn’t let that happen, no matter how the child had been conceived.

Ryland turned to Nora, who stood frozen in place, and met her accusing stare. There was no way of telling what she was thinking. But whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

Ryland’s stomach twisted. He didn’t know if he could take it if she left him now, not since he knew who she was to him. He needed a strong woman at his side, and Nora had proven to be that and more. If she left, he’d be alone.

He moved toward her, slowly. “Let’s go, Nora. We’ll come back here later.” He reached to take her arm, but she yanked it away and stepped back.

“Why don’t we talk here?” Her voice was sharp, edged with the blade of fury.

“These women have been through enough. You and I need to talk.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that,” Nora sneered, “but it never happens. Why are you holding these women hostage?”

“To protect our race,” he bit out.

Her face darkened. “You have got to be kidding me.” She stepped forward. “You hold five women captive and expect me to believe it’s for the good of all?”

“Nora, we need to talk about this, but not here.”

“Why are they here?” she demanded.

“Joshua brought them,” he finally admitted. “He thought he could save our race by forcing them to have children.”

Her eyes narrowed and he could see the fury raging inside her.

“For children,” she scoffed. She glanced at each of the women. “Is this why you brought me here? To try to impregnate me? Like Anna?”

He lifted his chin, but his eyes widened. “What do you know about Anna?”

“I know you tried to kidnap her, Ryland. Threatened to rape her. I didn’t believe my father when he told me what you’d done. But it’s true, isn’t it? If Kieran hadn’t stopped you, would she be here too? With these women?”

“Let’s go, Nora. We can talk about this in my den.” He tried to take her by the arm, but she evaded him, jerking back.

* * * *

Nora struggled with the sudden surge of jealousy mixing with the rage. It rose from the depths of her soul, surging to the forefront. It was the heat. She knew that, but she couldn’t seem to fight the words shoving their way out of her mouth.

"You wanted her," she whispered. "You're a rapist and a kidnapper. And you wanted Anna, my best friend. My father told me you wanted her for yourself." Fury burned inside her. Emotions boiled like acid inside her, ripping away any facade of control. Images of those masculine hands wrapped around Anna's body flashed in her mind. Images of these women held against their will. Betrayal ripped through, boiling into a rage she barely recognized.

"You bastard," she snarled. The tingling surged over her skin, rippling through her muscles while fur sprouted over her arms. Her fingers turned to claws again, and she flexed them, relishing the sharp edge of pain when they pierced her palms. It wasn't enough he held humans hostage. *How many had he slept with? How many had he touched?*

"Nora," he warned.

The faces of the audience were a blur. All she saw was Ryland, who stalked toward her. *Stop this! Stop acting stupid!* But she couldn't stop, no matter how hard she tried. She struggled to convince herself it was her heat cycle controlling her emotions; she visualized Ryland's fingers caressing Anna's arms. Holding her. Wanting her. Hell, for all she knew he'd raped one or more of these women.

"Back down," Ryland ordered.

She didn't care about his orders just now. The shewolf inside reared her head and howled her displeasure. "You touched her!" she snarled. A vicious growl rolled from her throat. The woman buried within her struggled for control, but the wolf shoved her back.

Ryland backed her up, placing his body between her and the women.

"Stop this, Nora."

She struggled to get away from him. His hands had touched the very woman who'd saved her life when she'd needed her most. When men had tortured her with silver, it was Anna who'd stopped the bleeding with her miracle cure. "You wanted her," she cried.

He lowered his mouth to her ear, one hand propped on the wall by her head. He leaned in, his body just inches from hers. "But never the way I have hungered for you."

Her breath came in gasps. Nora wanted desperately to believe him, to know he didn't want Anna in the same way he wanted her. She knew he'd been with other women before they met. What alpha wouldn't? But to know he had wanted her friend ripped away a piece of her heart. Common sense tried to seep through the cracks in her psyche, but the shewolf inside her twisted with jealousy.

His hot fingers trailed along her face, forcing her gaze to his.

"Nora, what happened before we met means nothing. It's you I need at my side. Not Anna. Not any other female."

His voice was soft and deep, the sound of it melting into her blood. He was controlling her with the ease of cajoling a child, and that sent another wave of anger through her. She growled, fighting the urge to nip or lick the delectable masculine flesh.

He lowered his face to hers and rubbed his cheek against hers. His whiskers rasped against her skin. Nora bit her lip, hiding the whimper of hunger. She arched toward him.

"I'll kill her, Ryland." Nora didn't recognize her own voice, nor the words she spoke. *No, not Anna!* Anna was her friend, the woman who'd saved her life.

Ryland's fingers trailed along the neckline of her wet blouse, teasing her with his touch.

Yet in her mind she saw him touching Anna the very same way. Her eyes glazed over.

He moved forward, forcing her to step back to the wall. She shook her head, fighting for a semblance of control.

"No, you won't," he whispered. "The one short instant she was in my arms disappeared the moment you stepped into my life." His breath brushed against her neck. "You are mine, rabbit. Mine."

His lips left a hot trail along her throat, and she gave up any illusion of maintaining control. When his mouth closed over hers, she moaned and leaned into him, her fingers tangling in his hair.

Mine.

The thought whispered in her mind. The echo of rational thought pulsed in the depths of her mind. Yet instinct pushed it back. She tasted his dark sensuality, feeling the proof of his hunger press between her thighs, hot and hard. She ground herself against him, moaning at the decadent heat exploding in response.

"Hello?"

The feminine voice buzzed in her ear, like an irritating mosquito. Nora ignored it. It didn't belong. All that mattered was this male. *Her* male.

"Are you just gonna fuck in front of us?"

The harsh words penetrated her fogged brain, and she pulled back. The memory of where they were seeped into her mind, and why they were here.

"Let me go," she whispered harshly.

With one last nip of her ear, he released her.

She turned, yanking her arm from Ryland when he tried to grab her. "Take me home," she demanded. She spun on her heel and stalked from the den.

He followed, close on her heels. Pain, anger, humiliation. All three burned inside her as she stormed through the halls. How could she melt in his arms so soon after discovering he was a kidnapper? *A kidnapper!*

She wasn't even sure how she made it back to the den, but she did. Without stopping. The pack had watched, warily from a distance. She'd passed them in the courtyard, but none interfered.

She stomped through the kitchen door and moved straight to the bedroom, slamming it in her wake, but it only bounced, swaying open again. Ignoring it, she yanked off her wet shirt. She had to admit, the water was a pretty damned good plan. A simple pipe rigged with a rope, tied to the knob. The instant she opened and shut the door, the rope tightened around the pipe, separating it at the joint. Ingenious, really.

The sharp intake of breath was her only warning she wasn't alone. She whirled and covered herself. Ryland stood at the door, his hand on the knob. His eyes were wide with horror.

"Get out," she roared.

Chapter Fifteen

Ryland couldn't move. His entire body was frozen in shock. It couldn't be true, but it was.

Scars.

Her back was covered with scars. He didn't utter a word, but stalked forward, grabbing her by the shoulders and spinning her around.

She twisted in his grasp. "Let go of me."

"No," he said. His hands were gentle, yet he held her firmly in place. "What happened?" He examined the sleek, soft skin of her back, marred by numerous scars. Small, almost surgical in nature. His fingers traced the soft ripples of freshly healed skin. They laddered up her back on each side of her spine, from her waist to her shoulders. Ten on each side.

"I asked you a question. Who did this to you?"

She wrenched from his hands. "Let's just say the men who held *me* prisoner weren't nice like you seem to be with your captives."

He fought the urge to argue the comparison and, instead, concentrated on her meaning. Anger roiled inside him. Cold, icy fury. "I'll kill whoever did this to you," he growled through clenched teeth.

"No need." She was so calm. Almost eerily so. "He's already dead."

He'd found her secret at last. The reason why she reacted with fear. How even the slightest touch could send her off in a tangent of terror.

Tortured.

The word echoed inside his mind, stabbing like sharp daggers.

"When...."

"About three months ago."

He did the math. That was the last time he'd seen Anna. *Oh, God!* That meant when he'd caught her scent for the first time, she'd been recovering from this... this... torture! Her pack hadn't protected her, and he'd left her alone with them, worried more about his own reputation.

"I'll kill them." He growled. "All of them. Kieran's responsible for this, isn't he?"

She gaped at him. "What gave you that idea?"

He looked into her stricken eyes. She was humiliated. He understood, and he would help her. He would wipe the disgrace from her heart when he wiped Kieran from the earth.

"Kieran failed you. He will die." His hands shook with the effort to remain gentle, caressing the damaged skin.

Her body stiffened. "Anna and Kieran saved my life. And my father's! What happened is over, and I won't have you threatening the very wolverine who is the reason I'm standing here."

The timing clicked inside his head. Changes had happened in the Uwharrie pack at that time. Big changes. "Why is your father no longer alpha?"

"He stepped down." She ducked her head just as he caught a glimpse of a red blush to her cheeks. .

"Why? Pack alpha's don't just step down."

“Because of this,” she said, motioning an angry hand behind her. “Because a fool decided he wanted control of the pack and used me to get it. Because the same fool tortured me in front of my father for weeks until Anna and Kieran saved us. Satisfied?”

She yanked away from his arms and stormed into the kitchen, grabbing a shopping bag from the trash. Her skin glowed in the artificial light, each slash mark brilliant against her flesh.

Ryland followed and blocked her path. She wore nothing but her bra above the waist though he forced himself to meet her eyes, ignoring the soft, barely covered curves.

“What are you doing?”

“Packing, what the hell do you think I’m doing? Ryland, I’m not staying here. You aren’t the man I thought you were.”

His fingers caressed her arms. Her skin was so soft. How could anyone mutilate such sweet tenderness with a silver blade? He thought of his own scar, how she’d touched it that first night and he’d stopped her. Her reaction had been extreme the instant his fingers had grabbed her wrist.

He tried to concentrate on what she’d said. It was important.

“And who did you think I was?” He leaned in and sniffed her skin. She smelled so good, especially angry. Her hormones weaved through his senses, binding him to her in a way he couldn’t understand, much less fight.

“I thought you were an alpha with principles, but what I found is a bastard who keeps women prisoner.”

He snapped out of his reverie. He pulled back, meeting her blazing gaze. “Sit down.”

“I won’t.”

“Then stand. But we *will* talk.” Their gazes met, each hard and unforgiving, but Ryland refused to back down. Their relationship was rife with secrets and lies and it was time to tell the truth. No matter the cost.

At last, her gaze flickered, and she sighed. “Let me get dressed.”

He nodded, and she stormed to her room. He stared toward the darkened television. If only he could turn back time, to be there for her when she had needed him. Though if he had, the succession of power from his father to himself could have been worse.

In less than three minutes, she returned, wearing one of the sexy blouses she’d bought the day before. He groaned, fighting the desire to move to her side, to feel her skin beneath his palm. The need to heal her with his own touch churned inside him.

She sat in the smallest chair. Probably to ensure he didn’t sit with her. He sighed. “You’re right about the women.”

* * * *

Nora opened her mouth to speak.

He interrupted.

“Wait, let me finish,” he demanded.

Staring into his eyes, Nora closed her mouth and nodded, fighting the urge to give in, to offer her help. But there were no excuses. He was a kidnapper. Pain and anger twisted inside her. She fisted her hands in her lap.

"I told you I inherited this den. When Kieran killed my father, I also inherited his pack, and all the problems therein. I was with Joshua that night, and I did hold Anna against her will, but not for the reasons you think. I went with him in hopes of thwarting his plan to kidnap another woman."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you will." He shrugged. "My father built this place with the hopes of reviving the wolverine population. The problem was he couldn't get any females, human or wolverine, to join his crusade, most hating the idea of living in this compound. So, he decided to take them. To make his own half breeds that he could turn later."

"And you?"

"I wasn't here. I was away at college when he kidnapped the first one. Mary. By the time I knew what he'd done, it was too late. She already knew what he was, and he'd raped her. I tried to stop everything. This is what I got in return." He rubbed the scar on his face.

"A scar? One scar?" She tried to feel sympathy, but the scars along her back made it difficult.

His eyes lit amber, his fingers tensing into fists. "Yes, one single scar." His jaw muscles flexed. "And a beating from Joshua like never before. I was younger then. He was more powerful, able to kill me if he chose. He was my alpha."

"Yeah, so? Give him a cookie and pat him on the head and say, 'Good Boy, Fido.' Get over it."

"Enough!"

Anger flared in his eyes, but he continued. "I worked to thwart his plans. I had others in the pack working with me, hindering his attempts to grab human females. Those women you saw in there were four years of his work. Four years! He tried hundreds of times, but Brogan and I, we found ways to stop him. Sometimes, we were unsuccessful, but we tried. Always we tried."

The anger faded, replaced by hopelessness in his eyes. "I bided my time, until it was right to make my bid to take over. He was quicker, faster. The night he died, I never expected..."

He rubbed the scar on his face with an index finger, deep in thought.

"You never expected what?" she prompted.

"That night he went for Anna, I was planning to distract him, and let her get away. But she was so strong. I could sense it, the steel in her spine. Even when I tried to draw out her fear, she continued to challenge me. You're right, I wanted her."

Jealousy ripped through her. She wrinkled her nose in a snarl.

"I wanted a woman who could stand beside me, who would help me defeat my father. I admit, I thought Anna was that woman. I was wrong."

"Because she was Kieran's *True Mate*?"

She couldn't help feeling satisfaction at the widening of his eyes.

"I didn't know, but..."

"But what?"

"That explains everything. His reaction, why he killed Joshua. How he was *able* to kill Joshua. Just like I would kill anyone who touched you."

Instincts awoke, stretching and hungry. Instincts she'd shoved away the instant he'd noticed her scars. She tried to push it down, to concentrate on the here and now, but primitive emotions would not be denied. A rumbling admission washed through her, building a hunger she tried to hide.

"Would you?" God, what was wrong with her? One minute she's baiting his anger, the next she was fighting the desire to sidle up against him, relishing his touch.

He turned, his nostrils widening. *Damn*. She was caught.

He stalked toward her, his shoulders taut. *Why was that so arousing?* He held her gaze for long seconds before he released her, moving across the room. When he spoke, his voice was a low, rolling whisper.

"Finding one's *True Mate* makes a male stronger. It gives him courage and strength beyond his natural abilities." Nora didn't care what he felt right now. She jumped from the chair and turned away. "That's enough. You can't just—"

Powerful fingers closed around her arm and spun her around.

"You feel it." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against his body. He was hard. And huge. God, he was so big. Heat surged beneath his touch. And his scent... She inhaled. So intoxicating. Her knees turned to water. All she could think about was his touch. Even now, she could feel the heat of his fingers, tracing the scars on her back.

The scars. She shook her head. *Kidnapping*.

"Stop it, Ryland, you're trying to distract me."

He chuckled, so masculine, so sure of himself. "Not distract. Touch. Tease." His breath whispered along her neck and nuzzled her cheek. "So soft," he murmured.

"I can't...." The words slipped from her mind. She didn't want a mate who held women captive. She wanted a mate who cared for her. Maybe even loved her. Yet her body ignored her mind.

His lips closed over her ear, and she bit back a whimper. She didn't want this. Yet heat seared her insides, and her knees wobbled. Sliding her hands to his chest, she planned to push him away, but his powerful muscles caught her attention. Strong sinew, tempered like steel. The urge to shred the cloth separating their skin nearly overrode common sense. Her gums tingled with the hunger to sink her fangs into the warm, hot flesh of his breast. To taste his blood, to mark him as hers.

Mark him? God, what was she thinking? With one quick shove, she pushed him away. "I said, 'I can't.'"

Her body trembled with need when she moved away from his heat. His energy called to her, and she wanted to submit. *Needed to submit*. No, strike that. She was in charge; she was in control. There was no need here. Desire, yes. Need, no.

* * * *

Ryland contemplated the woman he knew to be his *True Mate*, his body aching with hunger. The wolf wanted her, screamed at him to take her. For the first time, the human side of him was worried.

She would leave him, and he would forever be alone. No other woman would do after having caught her scent. Her anger aroused him more than was natural.

Her temper was obvious in the sharp glances, the rumble from her throat, and the aggressive stance of her body.

"You're confusing desire with mating, Ryland."

"No, rabbit. I'm not confused at all. You feel it. You hunger for it. Your jealousy is eating you alive."

She stared at him, her eyes round in shock. "I'm not jealous. If you want those women...." She whirled away from him. "Who's child is it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" She spun on her heel to stare at him in shock. "Meaning too many of you touched her?"

Comprehension dawned on him. "It's not mine."

Her lips drew back, the forced grin so reminiscent of a shewolf's snarl. "How can you be so sure?"

Ryland sighed. "Because I never touched her."

She raised a disbelieving brow. "Really?" Sarcasm dripped like acid from her throat.

"There's no way for me to force you to believe me. All I can tell you is I haven't touched a single one of those women. I don't believe in rape."

"But you do believe in kidnapping."

"No."

"Let them go."

"I can't. They'll destroy everything wolveren." Why couldn't she understand? "My dear father," he said, a sarcastic twinge to his tone, "didn't think about the consequences of his actions. He kidnapped women who knew nothing of our kind, and the instant they're free, they'll run to the authorities."

"You can't keep humans hostage, Ryland," she shouted.

"I know," he bellowed, pacing the room. He dragged his hands through his hair. "I don't know what to do, Nora. I can't find the answer."

She glared at him. "Well, I'll tell you what," she said, her scent seething with rage. "You let me know when you figure it out." She spun on her heel and stormed out the kitchen door, slamming it behind her. The sound echoed through his den.

Anger roiled in his gut. *How dare she walk away from me?*

He collapsed into the easy chair, his hands rubbing his face. She was right. He needed to find answers.

Chapter Sixteen

Nora stormed down the hall. The few who did meet her gaze received a snarl and sometimes a snap in return. Like a caged animal, she paced, unable to find an escape. Even now, she could picture those women, held hostage in a world they couldn't understand.

Just like what had happened to her.

Nora's mind raced, desperate to understand everything from the last few days. She couldn't shake the hunger that burned in her blood for Ryland, but disgust at his actions twisted inside her. Holding women prisoner, letting them be raped. It didn't matter the crimes were initiated by his father. He was still guilty, he'd still let it happen, and he still hadn't freed those poor women.

Why hadn't the pack revolted against Joshua? He was a bully. Bullies rarely kept control of a pack for long. Always the group rose, fighting to destroy anyone who held control for his own pleasure. Yet Joshua had ruled until Kieran had stepped in.

Nora turned at the end of the hall, heading back the way she'd come. She'd finally picked up on what Joshua had created with his underground compound, and, while on one side she found it ingenious, the wolverine side of her cried out, desperate to run. Worse, now, was the feeling of entrapment. With every dodged look from the wolverine about her, she felt more and more like a zoo animal.

She entered the courtyard, ignoring the stolen glances from the men who skirted about her. One of the women, now free to move about the compound, ducked into a hallway, and she had a feeling she was avoiding meeting the wolverine who'd taken on Diane. Good, because right now, there was no telling what would happen if they met up again.

A young male sat in the middle of the courtyard, a chunk of wood and a small, fine blade in his hand. Nora slowed her pace, cocking her head to one side to get a clear look at him. He looked familiar.

And then she remembered. He'd been in the courtyard the morning she'd met so many of the pack. The time Ryland had been so aggressively furious with her. A shiver of feminine appreciation at her memories trickled down her spine. She shoved the thought away. That was before she found the women.

The boy cut into the wood, and she watched a small sliver fall to his feet, blending in with the pile of shavings on the floor. Curious, she moved closer. With deft hands, he maneuvered the small knife through the wood with the precision of a surgeon.

"What are you making?"

The male's eyes lifted to hers, and she caught her breath. He wasn't a boy at all, but an adult male, probably in his twenties. Yet his body looked very small, more like a human young man than wolverine. He flashed her a bright smile, his teeth glittering in the light. Small fangs protruded. Maybe he was a half breed who never fully changed. Whatever he was, she could tell by the innocence in his smile he was someone she could talk to, even if for a moment.

"I'm making me a wolf. Wanna see?"

She smiled and sat beside him on the bench. "Yes, I'd like that, if you don't mind sharing."

Without hesitation, he handed her the piece of wood. Most of the surface was rough, with the wolf's body barely discernable. But the head and face of the animal were complete. The carving was exquisite, the detail more complete than the masters she'd studied in school. Tiny fangs were visible beneath the curled snarl of the beast, the eyes slanted, glaring at its unknown enemy.

"This is amazing. Who taught you to carve like this?"

Harry beamed at her. "I taught myself," he said, thumping his chest. He frowned. "It's the only thing Harry can do."

The sadness in his face tugged at her heart, wiping away her own concerns.

"Are you Harry?"

He nodded, his face screwed up, avoiding her gaze. His face flushed red.

"Harry," she smiled. *How did a wolven like Harry end up in a pack of rogues?* "I like that name, Harry. And I bet you can do lots of things."

"No," he shook his head. "Banan says I can do other stuff, too, but everyone else just makes fun of me." His lower lip trembled. "Say I'm a retard."

"Oh, Harry," she wrapped her arms around the childlike man, "anyone who says that doesn't see what I see."

He lifted large dark brown eyes in her direction. "Like what?"

"Well, you sure made my day better. I was upset when I came over here, and you made me smile." And he had. She'd set aside her own troubles when faced with his pure innocence.

"Didn't. That was the wolf," he huffed, looking at the carving in her hands.

"No, Harry. It was your smile. Some people can't appreciate a nice smile, but I can."

"Really?" Large, hopeful blue eyes met hers.

How anyone could be cruel to this sweet child-man was beyond her. Nora smiled. "Really. Of course, the wolf helped, too, but only because you made him."

He beamed, the pain of the cruel nicknames forgotten. "I like you, Miss Nora."

She grinned. "And I like you, Harry." She frowned. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you know my name?"

"Everybody knows your name. Banan told me you're Ryland's mate."

She arched a brow in surprise. "He did, did he?"

"Leave him alone," said a gruff voice behind her. She whipped her head around, dropping her hand from Harry's back.

A lone wolven stormed toward her. He was average height and build for a wolven, around six feet tall. His hair was dark and close cropped. And it was obvious he wasn't happy. He frowned.

"I'm just talking to him."

"Yes, I know your kind. You talk to him, right up until you realize what he is, then you pick on him, or laugh at him behind his back."

Nora stood, glaring at the newcomer. "I take it you're Banan?"

The man nodded, his eyes flashing in anger.

"Well, Banan, I find Harry to be a very intelligent and talented young man."

"Until he turns his back."

"Always. Harry, tell me something," she said, softening her voice. "Does Banan always take up for you like this?"

The boy nodded, mutely.

"That's good," she said, her attention still on Banan. "It means he's a good friend. One day he'll understand sometimes other people can be your friend too."

Banan's mouth opened, but didn't speak.

"She's right," said Harry, a soft, child-like smile on his face. "She's a good lady. I like her."

Nora smiled. "And I like you, too, Harry."

"She's special", said Harry, addressing his friend. "You should be nice to her."

"I'll remember that. Harry, excuse us for a second. I want to talk to Miss Nora alone."

He nodded his head to the side, and, taking the hint, Nora joined him.

Before he could speak, she charged ahead with her own questions. "How did Harry get into this pack?"

"He came with me. We were in a pack in another state. I got into some trouble, but Harry... Harry was the brunt of every joke. I was his only friend. His parents had died, and when I left, I knew there would be nobody to care for him." He shrugged. "I figured he'd be safer with me than being left behind. But people here treat him just as bad."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Banan. He doesn't deserve to be punished for something outside of his control. He's a sweet and talented young man."

Banan studied her, and she knew he was looking for ulterior motives, but when it came to Harry, she had none. Though there were other things she wanted to know which were eating at her mind right now. "You were here when those women were brought, weren't you?" She was pushing, she knew, but maybe she wanted to be angry at someone besides Ryland for this mess.

Banan looked at the floor, his hands tucked in his back jeans pockets. "Yeah. It was different back then."

"What was?"

He shrugged, his eyes not meeting hers. "The pack. Joshua. Everything was different."

Stopping now wasn't an option. "You slept with them?"

He nodded, and if ever a man could look miserable, it was Banan. His gaze darted about the room, and she had the impression he wished he was anywhere but with her. His scent turned raw, filled with humiliation.

"We had to. Joshua saw to it. It was terrible." He shoved his fists into his pockets and stared at the floor.

"He couldn't force you to rape a woman."

He lifted his eyes in surprise and dropped them to the floor. "Yes, he could. Joshua had a way about him. He knew everyone's weakness. He said he would kick Harry out if I didn't, said I needed to build our race." Now the words were flowing, he couldn't seem to stop. "I told him I couldn't because forcing a woman and fighting with her just didn't do it for me. He just made me tie her to the bed." A tear trickled down the corner of one eye, and he angrily wiped it away. "It's good Joshua is gone. Those women didn't deserve to be treated that way."

Uncomfortable, Nora's own eyes darted away. "You're right, Banan. They need to go home." It seemed everyone had feared Joshua, for their own reasons. Maybe she'd misjudged Ryland. She didn't ask him how long he'd lived here. It

was rare a bully of an alpha could maintain control for so long, yet Joshua had not only maintained control, he'd ruled with an iron fist.

He nodded adamantly. "And Ryland'll send them home. He's been trying to find a way to convince the women to not tell about us, but so far," he shrugged, "he's not come up with anything."

"You really think that's the reason they're still here?"

He nodded. "Absolutely. We had a meeting about it just last week, and nobody had any answers."

She pursed her lips. "Did anyone think to ask the the women?"

Banan looked at her as if she'd grown an extra head, backing a step away. "What for? Do you really think they'd be honest?"

She shrugged. "It's their lives we're talking about. Who knows?"

"Maybe. It's beyond me and is in yours and Ryland's hands. Look, I have something else I wanted to ask you."

In her hands? Now this was her fault? "Okay," she said warily. The edginess returned, and she shifted her weight.

"Promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me you'll see he's always well taken care of." He nodded toward Harry.

Nora's lips parted, and she studied Banan. He refused to meet her eyes, but it wasn't submission she read on his face. Whatever was going on, he didn't want to share. "Why ask me, Banan? Who takes care of him now?"

"I do. And I'd like to make sure if anything happens to me, he's always well taken care of."

Nora stepped back to pace around in a small patch. The re-circulated air was hot and rancid, and she struggled to hide the sudden need to gasp for breath. Banan's request put her on the spot. She'd have to stay here, and, if things didn't work out with Ryland, there was no way she could stay in this compound. And what did he think would happen to him?

"Why me? You just met me."

"You're the new alpha female. What you say goes, and if you promise to care for him...."

She stared in shock. "Banan, I'm not—"

"Promise."

She glanced at Harry, who watched expectantly. She just couldn't let him down. Something about the boy in a man's body tugged at her heart. "All right. For however long I'm here, I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask." He turned to walk away when Harry spoke.

"She needs to run."

Nora glanced at Harry in surprise. She hadn't said a word about her desire to run. Maybe he was good at reading body language.

"Harry's a bit special," grinned Banan.

"That he is," she smiled in return.

"Banan is special, too, but he's worried."

She looked closer at the boy. He was a lot more perceptive than she'd given him credit.

"Why is he worried?"

"I don't know," the boy said, his brow furrowed. "He just is."

She nodded. Reminded of her stress, her body refused to stay still and now there was no hiding her pacing.

"Banan," she began, "what do you think is going to happen to you?"

He shrugged, again avoiding her glance. "You never know. I just want to be safe."

She now panted, searching to fill her lungs with air. The walls closed inward, and the courtyard felt so small. The urge for freedom shot through her, pulsing in her blood. Perhaps she should end this.

"Look, I—"

"Need to run," said Harry again.

"Right," she said, and Banan smiled.

"Why don't you head over to the gym? If Harry says you need to run, it sounds like you're getting a case of cabin fever."

"You have a gym?" Shifters didn't have gyms, they had forests, with plenty of running space. They didn't go to gyms and use exercise machines.

However, she was so claustrophobic, anything would help. "Which way," she said at his grin.

* * * *

Eyes watched the wench turn away. She would have to go. Later. Others were more important. Guilt floated through the halls of the compound like the canned air pumping through the vents along the ceiling. It had to be purged. The classic tune of Peter and the Wolf floated back in the breeze as the figure strode away.

* * * *

Ryland stared at the door, waiting. Wondering. She'd been gone almost an hour, and still nothing. At least she'd left from the side door and not the main entrance. And she hadn't ordered him to take her home like she had before. Yet knowing all those little details, his nerves still twinged with every noise. When the air conditioner kicked on, he'd almost thrown a boot at it.

He wanted to track her down, drag her back, and finish their argument. But what the hell would he say to her? He still didn't have any answers.

Ryland paced the living room. He couldn't simply release the women, sending them back into the world. Not without some assurance they wouldn't report their kidnapping. And who in their right mind would give such an assurance?

If he could pummel his father right now, he would. *Damn*. Joshua wasn't even his brother; he was his father. Even that was destroyed. Throwing himself into the easy chair, he picked up the remote. Waiting, watching TV. Wasting time. He flicked through channels, his mind oblivious to the scenes skimming past.

Nora herself had been held prisoner. Tortured. Pushing his thoughts past the flash of anger, remembering her back, Ryland imagined himself from her viewpoint. A kidnapper. No different from the beasts who'd left their scars like a

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calling card, laddered in her flesh. Beasts he himself would kill if they still lived. She would never forgive him. She shouldn't forgive him.

After a few minutes, he tossed the remote aside and shoved up from the chair, pacing around the room.

He snatched the small hand radio he kept to contact Brogan when they were out of their offices. Cell phones didn't work down under ground.

He double keyed the mic and released it, their signal.

"Yeah?"

He couldn't believe he was about to ask this favor. It hurt, but it was the only thing he could do. If there was one last person in the world he could trust, it was Brogan. "Keep an eye out for Nora."

"Got her, boss. She just entered the gym. I was here working out. She's ok."

"Good. Let me know if..." He couldn't say it. He couldn't ask his second to spy on his mate, no matter how much he wanted to. "Never mind."

"It's okay, boss. If I see anything important happening during my workout, I'll let you know."

Ryland double keyed the mic in acknowledgement and tossed the radio on the couch.

Waiting was a bitch.

Chapter Seventeen

Nora stared at the gym in awe. It was huge. The room stretched from one central hallway to the next, like the outer ring surrounding the rungs of the wagon wheel. This entire compound was an engineer's dream job. From what she could tell, at least six hallways spread out from the center, and if this room was any indication, they were joined along the outside by large, rectangular rooms. This one had to be at least 30 feet deep and at least 50 yards long. Wrestling mats covered one end, a basketball court at the other, and, in between, were exercise machines. She inhaled. It smelled of sweat, wet fur, and recycled air. *Damn.* She'd never get used to that.

A crowd of males hung out at the wrestling mats, perhaps preparing for a small bout. She didn't care. She needed her feet to move. She strode across the floor to the machines and a row of treadmills. She mounted the first one she reached and examined the controls. It was state of the art and included a small television screen hanging from a ceiling rack above. She clicked through the video options and found a recording of a forest. She selected start and moved her feet on the surface. The motion initiated the view screen above her head, playing images of the wild. When she increased her speed, so did the motion in the video. The only thing missing was the blowing of the wind and smells.

Hmm. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

She worked her way to a trot. Across the room, the males laughed, ignoring her for the most part, though the occasional side-glance shot her way. Two shifted and moved onto the mats. If it weren't for the laughter, she'd think it was a challenge.

She watched the wolves stalk one another, their toothy grins wide and mocking. Their game made her heart ache. They should be outside, practicing the kill, preparing for hunter's moon, not hanging out in a gym, having mock battles.

Needing more, Nora pressed a button, speeding up the treadmill, her feet pounding a full run on the rubber matting. Her body burned, but she ignored it. The image on the screen whizzed by, matching her pace. If only the picture brought with it the sounds and smells of nature. What she wouldn't do for a breath of fresh air or the sound of a bird chirping. With a click of another switch the machine raised, she ran uphill at top speed. Sweat dripped from her brow, but she continued on. The timer expired, and she reset it, struggling to push away the torrent of emotions running through her mind.

Ryland. He held five women hostage. Why couldn't he just let them go? Her muscles twitched. Ignoring the twinges, she struggled to continue. Her body hungered with the desire to shift, urging her to run her fastest. Anything to escape the burning pain in her chest.

Images of their tortured faces floated before her mind. The tears on their faces after she'd fought the one named Diane. The very idea of being confined for five years in this God forsaken place ripped another hole in her already damaged heart.

The timer counted down to zero, and she reset it again. Why couldn't these damn things keep up with her? She kept her pace steady. It was the only escape,

yet her thoughts followed her, stalking her. Time passed, and her legs wobbled. How long had she been here? She reset the timer again. It didn't matter.

Cabin fever, Banan had called it. Ha. This was much worse than cabin fever. More like severe claustrophobia. Caged as effectively as she had been three months ago. The last time, her captor had tortured her, slicing her flesh with a silver scalpel. This time, her jailer tortured her in a different way. He made her body ache with hunger. His scent ripped away any choice. If she left now, she'd hate herself. But if she stayed... She might end up hating him.

She stumbled and heard laughter from the men at the other end. Were they laughing at her? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, just the need to run. She remounted and continued on.

The muscles in her legs grew unsteady, their strength worn to the last fiber. They wobbled again, and she shut down the contraption, happy she didn't fall. But once the rubber pad beneath her feet slowed to a stop, her knees weakened, and she bent over resting her forehead on one handle. Tears stung her eyes. She'd run herself to exhaustion, yet still her mind refused to slow.

"What do we have here?"

She yanked up her head, angrily wiping her eyes. Devlin's dark and ugly face appeared before her. "Devlin."

"What's the matter, sweet thing? Having a bad day?"

Nora had the sudden urge to wipe the smirk from his lips. "Go away."

"Awww... Poor baby. You look nothing like an alpha's mate. More like a scared, tired rabbit if you ask me."

She stepped off the treadmill, praying her knees would hold her upright. The muscles wobbled, but held. "Nobody asked you." She tried to push past him, but he grabbed her forearm. Anger stirred low in her gut. "Let. Go."

"Or what? Ryland's got himself a chicken shit of a mate." His eyes glinted, and he smirked. "Just goes to show what kind of pack leader he is. I can't wait till I take his sorry ass down."

Fury rose like bile, burning through her belly, rippling into her throat. She wrenched from his grasp, spinning, her leg swinging outward and around. Her foot connected with surgical precision. All the self-defense her father insisted she learn paid off. He gasped and dropped to his knees, his hands clutching between his legs.

"You can't even take down this sorry, little rabbit. How do you expect to take down Ryland?"

"Bitch," he bit through clenched teeth. "You'll pay for that."

"Oooh," she said, her hand flying to her mouth in mock fear. "I'm so scared. Remember this, Devlin. Rabbits have a hell of a kick."

The friendly bout of wrestling ended, and the onlookers now gathered around her and Devlin. Some grinned; others glowered. What was it about this pack? It felt like there were multiple personalities. Usually, a pack was in sync, everyone wanting the same thing. Safety in numbers. But there was no safety here.

She caught a glimpse of Brogan coming toward her. No, she wouldn't let Ryland's watch dog confront her now.

She twisted away, shoving through the onlookers, and stormed out the door. She kept her head high, despite the trembling of her muscles. There would be no

tears. Not now. She heard them, males following close behind. The shuffles of their feet, the whispers and laughter.

She rounded one last corner. She was almost there. Almost to Ryland's den. The walls shrunk in on themselves. Her mind played tricks on her. The hall looked longer and narrower than before. She stared at her goal through tunnel vision. Odd how his den was now her idea of freedom, when just hours before all she could think was escape from it.

Nora sped up. Her muscles screamed and trembled with every step. Tears trailed down her cheeks. *What the hell was happening?* She'd never lost control like this. Her body had turned against her, vibrating in anger and fear. Claustrophobia ate a hole in her control, driving her forward faster and faster. She bit her lip, fighting back the sobs, pushing for command over her emotions and body. With one last charge, she yanked the door open, slamming it behind her. She collapsed to the floor. One hand still on the knob, her sobs wrenched from her body.

Chapter Eighteen

"She's on her way, boss. I think she's upset."

Ryland keyed the little radio handset. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. She ran on the treadmill the entire time she was here. When I looked up, Devlin was on the floor, and she was tearing out of the gym. I tried to stop her, but...."

Ryland growled. He'd told her to steer clear of the male. Perhaps he'd given the order to the wrong member of the pack. Maybe Devlin needed a lesson in pack leadership.

The kitchen door opened and slammed shut, the sound reverberating through his home. *Nora*. He charged from the room, shocked to see her collapse, her hand gripping the doorknob like a lifeline. Tears trailed down her face, and her body violently shook with silent sobs. He ran forward, gathering her into his arms. "What happened?"

She shook her head, unable to speak, the sobs now audible only to his ears. He lifted her, carrying her toward her bedroom. He nuzzled her hair. It was wet and smelled of sweat. Tremors ran through her body, not only from her crying. Something was wrong. Her scent was stronger than before, the heat cycle suffusing her blood with its aphrodisiac properties. It normally took weeks for a female to reach this level of heat.

She buried her face in his shirt, her cries ragged as though each one ripped a piece of her soul out her throat.

"Shh, baby, tell me, what's wrong?"

She shook her head and swallowed "Please. Outside."

Her words seared his mind, boiling his blood with fear. The compound was at fault. The closed air circulation must have wreaked havoc on her system, her hormones surging through her body like a silver arrow, burning her blood, destroying her emotional control. He should have known the instant he realized she was in heat so early. Guilt reared its ugly head, and he stormed across the den to the main door and into the outer hall. If he'd taken her home like she'd asked that first night, she wouldn't be in this condition. Close proximity to him in a closed environment had made her heat cycle literally unbearable.

The added stress of the women as another catalyst. He'd driven her to collapse.

"Shhh, baby. We're almost there."

Ryland slapped his palm over the computerized lock. It read his print, and the door slid open. He waited, her body limp in his arms. Brogan had said she was in the gym. She must have worked herself near to death. Her body was covered in sweat, and her face was pale as death.

He carried her through the outer door, the cool night brushing through her hair. He glanced about before noticing a small bed of leaves and pine needles, wishing he'd thought ahead and grabbed a blanket. He laid her beneath the tree, cocooned in nature's bed.

Kneeling at her side, Ryland ran his hands along her arms, working her blood, pushing the fresh air through her system. His heart pounded in his chest, while hers beat slowly and her breathing was shallow. *Please. Please wake up.* Ryland

brushed her wet hair away from her eyes. He searched her face for some sign of consciousness. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head, his hands cupping her face, and bent to kiss her forehead.

He was about to do the hardest thing he'd done in his life. Harder even than leaving Anna that night with the Uwharrie pack.

He had to send her home.

Sitting back on his knees, he stared into the sky, the moon shining bright. He fought the urge to release his pent up emotion, swallowing the howl aching to escape. Emotions he couldn't explain.

A cool breeze fluttered through her hair, and her nostrils widened. Sensing impending motion, Ryland watched.

She stirred. Color slowly returned to her cheeks, and her eyes fluttered open.

"Ryland?"

His breath stilled. "Nora."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice weak.

The permanent pain in his heart twisted. Her first words upon waking were an apology to him. He'd taken this beautiful, powerful shewolf and ripped her world apart. "Sorry for what?"

"Devlin."

Jealousy reared deep inside. He tried to fight it, but instincts could not be denied. "Explain." Ryland couldn't hide the sharpness to his tone.

She moved then winced, grabbing her head with one hand and rolling to a sit. "I know you said not to go near him, but he was harassing me while I was working out."

Ryland stiffened. Anger burned inside his gut. Devlin's life was now forfeit. He'd stepped into Ryland's business one time too many. He moved to stand, but she grabbed his arm.

"Don't worry. I took care of him. I'm pretty sure he won't be bothering me again."

Ryland relaxed and cocked his head, quirking one brow. Red rimmed her eyes, her lids puffy. He remembered Brogan's words. "What did you do, Nora?"

"I got him in the balls. He's not going to be moving for an hour or two."

Relief stole the last intelligent thought in his mind. The laughter started low. It rolled up his spine. "Thank God." His arms dropped to his side, the laughter fading into the darkened night. He couldn't keep this up. The rollercoaster ride of his pack responsibilities, his need to protect Nora, and his hunger to be inside her was ripping him apart.

"What happened?"

He sighed, studying her. It scared him how small and worn she looked, her face pale, her eyes sunk deep into her face. "Your body shut down. You were covered in sweat. Your workout, combined with your heat and everything else, trashed your system."

"How did you—"

"Brogan. He was there when you arrived. He was supposed to call me if anything went wrong. He waited until it was too late." Already he felt the anger burn against his second.

Nora studied him. His jaw worked, and the sharp spice of his anger hung between them. "Don't blame Brogan. He probably didn't have a chance to call you. It all happened so fast."

Offering her hand to him, the heat of his palm radiated through her fingers as he grasped and pulled her to her feet. Her knees wobbled for an instant, and he held on, waiting for her to pull away. Nora brushed the leaves and pine needles from her jeans. "I must look a mess." Her hair hung in strings along her face. Bending at the waist, she ran her fingers through her hair, surprised to find just how much her sweat had soaked through her scalp and down her hair. She'd definitely overdone it.

"I'm taking you home tomorrow."

"What?" Nora jerked up, and her gaze met his. The icy blue in his eyes was gone, replaced with a hot, yellow glow. His face was hard, his expression unreadable. Her body chilled, and she shivered. He turned away, stepping toward the door.

"You don't belong here, Nora. You can't deal with the way I live. You need to go home."

She'd known it would come to this. The day her fear would be too much for him to handle. He'd been so gentle with her after finding the scars on her back, so protective of her with Devlin. Her weaknesses were too much for a male of his caliber. No alpha wanted a spineless shewolf for a mate.

But she wasn't spineless. Not normally. Whatever happened to her today wasn't her usual self. She lifted her chin. "Isn't that for me to say, if I can 'deal' with your world?"

Anger stirred inside her. His world? The world in a concrete cave, harboring five women against their will. No one in his or her right mind could handle his world without reacting.

"I don't want you here."

Nora studied him. His scent was mixed. Anger, sadness, pain, disgust. All emotions she'd expect from an alpha male who believed his mate was weak. "You may not want me here, but you're stuck now. I'm not leaving until this problem is resolved."

He jerked his head around. "What problem?"

"The women. I'll leave only once they're free."

"You're leaving tomorrow," he snarled. He stalked forward, his shoulders square, his face filled with dark anger.

"You let me take those women with me, and I'll leave. When they go, I go. It's that simple. Now turn around."

His eyes widened at her sudden change in demeanor. "No. Why?"

Nora reached to unbutton her shirt, but stopped when he wouldn't turn his back. Her hands dropped to her side, and she let out a gust of air from her lungs. "I'm shifting. What the hell do you think I'm doing? I'm tired, but I still need to run. I need the fresh air."

"This conversation isn't over."

“Yes, it is. You’ve had your say, and I’ve had mine. You want me to go. That’s great. Just let those women go, then I’ll leave. And until then....” She reached for her shirt buttons again. “I intend to be one with nature.” Fluttering her hand at him, she waited. “Now, be a good boy and turn around.”

* * * *

Ryland growled, flustered. No female, human or shifter, had ever treated him with such disregard. He’d given her a command, and she’d blatantly refused it, issuing her own in return.

He stepped toward her, ready to stop her, when she yanked off her blouse. He froze. “Nora, stop this, now. Put it back on.” *Please.*

She stared him straight in the eye, the challenge obvious. “I’m going to enjoy myself, Ryland. I’ve been stuck inside that building long enough. I need to feel the sand between my toes.” With that she yanked off her shoes.

“Damn it, Nora. Don’t make me come over there.” Anger and arousal roiled inside him like a hurricane, mixing the two powerful forces to dangerous levels.

She stripped off her jeans, and he lunged to grab her, but light flashed before his eyes, and the wolf snarled, snapping at his hand.

“I won’t have this,” trembled on his lips, but before he had the words out, she was gone. Lightning fast she tore through the trees, her tail high, teasing the wolf he was, her grinning teeth flaunting the challenge she’d left him.

She’d have to pay for this, he thought and stripped off his clothes. Without another sound, he shifted. She’d know. She’d see the light and know he was on her trail. When he caught her, there would be hell to pay. And pay she would.

No mate of his would flaunt his authority, tossing his commands back in his face. He shifted, already stretched into a full run. He used all his senses, his keen eyesight, his crystal clear hearing, and his powerful sense of smell to track her. Only one thing mattered. He would tan her hide when he got her back. He’d never hit a female, but if ever there was a female who deserved punishment, it was Nora.

He broke through the trees and stopped in a clearing, shaking his head. Her scent permeated everything around him, and he knew she’d run circles around the grass, rolling in its softness. But he couldn’t find her.

His body, even in wolf form, burned to taste her, to rip his fangs into her throat and mark her as his. She would know the power she toyed with then.

A snarl tore from his throat, and he shook his head. He couldn’t. He had to wait. Until the women were free, and the murders were solved. He couldn’t risk her life by keeping her here.

A body slammed into him, and he fell to the ground stunned, flipped to his belly, and stood, snarling. She was there, laughing at him. Ryland wanted to talk to her, to try to reason with her before he lost his temper. Before her body made him lose his mind.

I need to run. The words echoed clearly in his mind.

He yanked his head up.

She sneezed, obviously surprised he’d heard her. *Ryland, don’t spoil this. Let me run.*

Dark Succession

He studied the dark wolf before him. He'd heard *True Mates* could sometimes talk in the other's head, but that wasn't supposed to happen until the marking, the moment he took her as his, and only his. Her brown eyes challenged him.

He snarled. No shewolf would flaunt his authority. Not even Nora.

I'm sorry, Ryland. I just... I needed to feel the earth. Doesn't it feel wonderful?

Could she hear him in return? He tried to push thoughts in her direction. He wanted to say "apology not accepted." But she didn't blink. Instead, her eyes studied him, waiting for his response. Ryland snarled in disgust. If ever there was a time he wanted her submission, it was now.

* * * *

Nora ducked her head, her gaze on Ryland. He wasn't happy with her. She bit back the natural growl building in her throat. The instant the sound became audible, he reacted, his own fangs long and sharp in his snarl. *God, he's gorgeous. Even as a wolf.* His golden coat burned incandescent in the darkened night. His ice blue eyes pierced through her soul. He was huge compared to her father's pack, his body mass equal to his human form.

Long buried instincts stretched to the surface, the shewolf inside pushing through, ready for control. His needs were her needs. His demands were hers to honor. With a quick bob of her head, she approached him. Each step stretched her toes forward, digging into the soft sandy soil. She drew even, matching his body with hers, standing side by side. The top of her head barely came to his chin, her tail even with his haunches.

The wolf's power was unmistakable. His scent burned deeper into her soul. A shiver of longing passed through her. This wasn't natural. She'd never heard of mates wanting each other in wolf form.

Her body took over, and she dropped her head beneath his, her ears flat to her skull. Cocking her head, she licked his lips. He jerked his head higher, refusing to make things easy for her. He wanted her apology. She grinned. If that's what he wanted, she'd be happy to oblige. She sidled closer, relishing his heat, leaning her body against his. Her teeth nipped, and she licked his lower lip.

He snarled, jerking his head from her reach. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. When she moved to try again, he lunged, his teeth bearing down on her throat. Nora's body collapsed to the dirt, belly down. Her neck turned, baring the side of her throat. She refused to offer him her soft underbelly. His rejection had stung more than she thought it would. He didn't deserve her full submission.

Powerful jaws held her in place. The tension heightened in the deep rumble rolling from his chest. The woman inside the wolf's body was torn. The human within was furious at his rejection, something the wolf inside had yet to understand. With every roll of his growl, her soul screamed at her to submit, but she refused.

The instant aggressive thoughts passed through her mind, Ryland's fangs tightened on her throat. He must be able to hear her thoughts, or at least her emotions, without her trying. *This so wasn't fair.*

Blanking her mind, she waited.

Dark Succession

At long last, his jaws eased. Nora bit back the sigh of relief when she felt his warm tongue bath her face and ears. Each hot, wet lick burned through her blood. She wished there was some way to see inside his mind. But the wolf inside her was satisfied, pleased with his acceptance.

* * * *

Ryland sat back on his haunches, his eyes steady on hers. Even flat on the ground she was graceful, her muscles flexing with power. Her submission had assuaged his anger, and, for the first time, he felt like the alpha he was said to be. An alpha with a powerful mate.

Her refusal to submit in full, compounded with her reason burned in his brain. Hearing her thoughts in his mind was both a blessing and a curse. She wanted him, but she also wanted autonomy, as any alpha shewolf would. He rumbled in appreciation and watched her stand and shake, the dirt and leaves flying from her shining black coat.

He grinned when she spun, flicking her tail upward, teasing him with her scent, and bounded into the forest.

Ryland followed, enjoying for the moment, the one thing he'd dreamed of since laying eyes on her. They ran, side by side for the next hour, leaping over fallen trees, occasionally pouncing and playing with one another.

If only this could last.

Chapter Nineteen

"Where are we going?" Nora asked as he swung his leg over the bike. Ryland had woken her, pounding hard on her door. At first, she'd thought he was taking her home. It wasn't until he'd refused to let her pack that her hopes rose.

"For a ride. To get some fresh air."

Nora nodded and joined him.

The bike thundered through the tunnel to the main entrance, which swung slowly open at their approach. She still had yet to figure out how he opened the door when his hand wasn't on the electronic reader beside the exit.

They rode through the forest, and then onto the back highways. Foliage lined the roads, bright and colorful, heralding the coming winter. She leaned back in the seat, enjoying the sights and the fresh air. The scent of pines and oaks rippled through the breeze. Nora smiled. This was the same forest they'd run through last night, only they hadn't come this far.

After several miles, the purpose of the ride dawned on her. He was showing her his territory. And it was gorgeous. Nora bit back the satisfied smile. Last night, he'd wanted to send her home, but, apparently, she'd managed to change his mind. He pulled into a small picnic area, near a man-made lake and shut off the bike. Cars passed by, but a storm was approaching, so none stopped. He took off his helmet and stared at the water without speaking.

She dismounted, leaving her helmet on the sissy bar, and stepped beside him.

"It's beautiful. Does the pack own all this?"

Startled he turned to her and shook his head, gazing back over the water. "No. We don't own anything but the compound, Nora. This is just where we consider the lines to be drawn between your pack and ours."

She nodded and realized he didn't see her. "I understand."

He still didn't turn to look at her. Unease settled over her the way dust settled on furniture. A light dusting of concern.

"What's wrong, Ryland."

"Nothing...." He turned to face her, his eyes searching. What was he looking for? Did he find it in her face? "Everything."

"I don't understand."

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "I need you to leave."

Anger lit deep and hot in her chest, a match struck against flint. "We had this conversation."

He dropped his head and slapped his gloves on his helmet. He dismounted with a swing of his leg, moving toward the picnic table overlooking the lake. "No. We didn't."

After last night, she knew there was no way to hide her thoughts from him, so she delved in. "Yes. We did. I told you I'm not leaving until those women are freed."

"It's not safe, Nora. There's more going on than you know." His jaw tightened. With a face like granite, he stared out over the water, his eyes unwavering.

"This silence is killing me. Spit it out, Ryland." Nora's stomach knotted.

He took a deep breath and sighed. His icy blue eyes met her gaze. "There's been a murder, Nora. I can't let you stay."

Icy and cold, fear rushed over Nora. "Who died?" she whispered.

"One of Joshua's biggest supporters."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know." He turned to stare at the water again. "But when I find him, I'll kill him myself."

This time it was Nora who stared over the glassy surface of the lake. Last night, she'd been too overwhelmed with her own emotions and physical issues to see through the hard exterior he'd shown her when he ordered her home. Pieces of the puzzle slipped into place, and the ice in the pit of her stomach melted. He didn't hate her after all.

Warmth flooded through her. A smile teased the corners of her lips. That meant there was still hope for them. Danger was no reason to go home. She was shewolf, and she would stay with him when he needed her most, even if he didn't like it. If ever she'd wondered about her emotions for him, now she knew they were clear.

Before she could win his love, however, she had to win his respect. She took a deep breath. "I'm not leaving, Ryland." He moved to speak, but she silenced him, her fingers on his lips. They were cool, drawn in a hard line across his face. "Hear me out."

Nora watched him struggle with his instincts. The ice blue eyes slowly gave way to the burning yellow wolf within. A shudder of hunger ran down her spine.

"Let me help." When he moved to disagree, she pleaded with her eyes, skimming the softening flesh beneath her fingers. "Let me help find a solution that works for everyone."

He took her hand in his and laid a kiss on her palm. Heat seared her flesh.

"I can't put you in danger."

"You aren't," she vowed. "I'll still be with you, but working as a go between. I can take care of mys—"

Ryland released her hand, shoving it away, his lip curled in disgust. "You think my own pack can't take care of themselves?" He spun away, pacing in front of her, one finger rubbing the scar on his face. "Nora, Kyle was one of the most powerful in my pack, yet he's dead. There's no sign of a struggle. He knew his killer."

"But we're aware, and he wasn't. We already know your pack doesn't trust me, so I'll be wary with them all."

He turned his back, dragging one hand through his hair. "I can't ask you to live like that. Besides, I need to focus on what's happening."

She sucked in a breath. "And you can't focus with me here?"

He whirled to face her, his eyes searching hers. "If you go home," he said, his voice gruff, "you'll be safe. I'll come for you when this is over."

Nora felt the growl rolling through her throat. She refused to fight it. Not now. Her lips curled. "I'm not leaving, Ryland. You said we're *True Mates*. *True Mates* don't run when things get tough. I'm asking you to trust me to help you."

"Trust," he snarled. He paced before her, his energy roiling, his emotions hidden beneath the facade of anger. "I can't even trust my own father to tell me the truth. How can I trust you?"

“Try it,” she snapped. “You know damned well I’m nothing like your father.” Her fingers curled into fists. “For once in your life, embrace what you are. You’re a wolverine. Act like it, damn it. Quit acting so civilized. You can’t lead your people while you’re trying to be something you’re not. Remember what it is to be wild and take a chance.”

Ryland swung toward her, his fangs bared. “Too civilized?”

“Think about it,” she snarled in return, her body tight, her hands fisted at her sides. “You lock those women in a small den. You keep your pack so tightly controlled they have to play on mats in the gym to let off some steam. It’s no wonder someone snapped.”

He stalked her, his face filled with fury. “Are you blaming this murder on me?”

Nora blanched but stood her ground. “You’re a wolverine, Ryland, yet your pack lives in a facility more reminiscent of a human bomb shelter. I’m saying the environment isn’t good for our kind. Something has to give. Look at yesterday!”

“What happened yesterday was more than just the compound, and you know it.” Ryland was more impressive than ever before.

The scent of his anger burned through her nostrils, swirling in her lungs, melting into her bloodstream. Nora struggled to ignore the heat building low in her body. “I know no such thing. I know what it’s like to be held prisoner. The claustrophobia to the point of insanity. If two days has done that to me, what can your pack be feeling?”

“My pack is not in heat.”

Nora swung her arm in frustration. “But your pack has been in that place for months on end. There’s not even a single green plant to make them feel more at home. Damn it, Ryland, don’t you see? You’re forcing them to be human, and now you have human crimes!”

Ryland snarled and stormed the last few feet between them. “And you think you can stop this, rabbit? How? By opening the doors and letting them run wild? Letting them be seen running through the woods? Captured to be studied and put in zoos?”

Nora glowered at him. “No,” she said softly. “By letting them be who and what they are, a little at a time. By working on the compound to give them what they need. By letting them express their instincts. Okay so the gym might be a good place for that, but you have tons of unused space down there.”

* * * *

Everything she said struck like a silver dagger in his chest. She was right. And that pissed him off.

Lightning rocketed across the stormy sky, a sizzle of heat echoing the sensation in his gut.

His pack needed something, but he had yet to figure out how to give it to them. But he had to be responsible. He had to ignore the instincts constantly beating at his brain if he was to keep them safe.

“Go home, Nora. Let me find the killer, and then you can come back and help me with ideas.”

Thunder rolled across the darkening sky.

"No, Ryland. I won't be frightened away."

Blind fury rolled in his gut. Frustration at Nora for seeing him so clearly, anger at his father for leaving him with the mess he called a pack, and rage at an unidentified killer. She thought he was civilized? She couldn't be more wrong. Inside Ryland, the beast roared, snarling to escape.

And then there was what she made him feel. Starved. Explosive hunger for a female he needed to protect. The wolf inside demanded release, determined to use his pent up desire and take her as his. She was too close, too powerful, too feminine. Every nuance of her body and soul screamed aggression and femininity, a sweet, impossible union of traits few shewolves possessed.

"What do you want out of this, Nora?"

She frowned. "I want you to accept who and what you are. To be what you are."

"How the hell do I know who and what I am?" he ground out, fighting the tingling of the fangs pushing through his gums. "Until yesterday, I didn't even know who my parents were. I'm still not sure. And what about you, Nora? What about your fears? You think you know more of who and what you are than I do? You're afraid of a mere touch."

She snarled, the curl of her lips drawing his attention to the soft, reddened flesh he ached to taste. Lust ran hard through his body. Large droplets of rain fell, running like tears down her cheeks.

"At least I have an excuse, Ryland. I'm not hiding in the guise of a civilized human while trying to lead my pack."

"You want uncivilized?" He stepped closer. She swallowed, and her eyes widened, but the look on her face wasn't fear. Her eyes darkened with hunger, her scent wafting his direction, twisting the bands of control on his emotions.

Fuck civilized.

He hooked an arm about her waist, jerking her against him. Her lips were mere millimeters from his. Her breath whispered against his flesh, hot and inviting.

* * * *

Nora gasped, relishing the dark, sensual hunger sizzling through her blood. Yes, her wolf whispered. His hard mouth covered hers, delving, taking what he needed. He dipped inside her. The power of his masculine taste exploded across her tongue. The growl rumbling beneath his breath only served to build her desire even higher. The world spun, everything fading into nothingness until all that remained was the two of them, and the soft fall of rain which did nothing to cool her ardor. She moaned beneath the onslaught, her body arching against his.

Fingers twisted in her hair, grasping and yanking her head back, baring her throat to his fangs. He teased her with them. Their sharp points trailed from the soft, sensitive flesh of her neck down to her shoulder. Tiny nips along her throat, soothed by the softness of his tongue. A tremor ran through her body, and heat burned deep and low in her body. Her fingers fought the buttons on his shirt, her body yearning for the feel of flesh against flesh.

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Lightning exploded, splitting a tree along the water's edge. Ryland lifted his head, his eyes crinkling in amusement. "I think we should move this somewhere more private, before we get electrocuted."

Nora closed her eyes and struggled for control, her breath rushing through her lungs in short, shallow gasps. He took his time releasing her, for which she was grateful, since her legs shook with the same wild hunger as her hands. She smoothed her clothes and brushed the dripping locks of hair from her face.

She was ready. At last, he would be hers.

Chapter Twenty

It had to be here. Somewhere. Gloved hands searched the office, with quick and efficient motions. Pages lay on the printer.

Damn it all to hell. Ryland had already found the diary and was translating it. Ryland wasn't that smart. Yet there was no doubt the pages belonged to Joshua's private diary. A quick perusal of the pages listed Joshua's philosophy of leadership. There had to be more. The alpha had promised the keys to the future were in that diary.

The visitor searched the desk, but nothing more remained. Frustration boiled from inside, before the pages crinkled in a fisted hand. Time was running out. Ryland was never gone long. The visitor yanked the bottle of Pine-Sol from a pocket and sprayed the surfaces and carpet. It wouldn't do for Ryland to know who'd been here.

When the door opened, a male stood on the other side. Harry, the resident dimwit.

"Whatcha doing?" asked Harry.

The visitor forced a smile. "Just taking care of something for Ryland."

Harry peered into the den, and the visitor could see the little bastard's brain working. The boy's nostrils widened. There was no telling if the boy was smart enough to smell a lie.

"He's not gonna like you being here, ya know," said Harry.

The visitor pulled on the rubber gloves. They snapped, drawing Harry's eyes to them. "But he's not going to know, is he, Harry?"

The young male's eyes grew wide, and he shook his head. "Nuh-huh."

Chapter Twenty-One

Ryland watched Nora dismount, her body dripping from the rain, but she grinned as he cut the engine on the bike. At last, she would be his. She hadn't mentioned accepting his mark, but once he got his mouth on her body, he doubted she'd have any complaints. Already, the heat and hunger she emitted burned like an inferno low in his body.

He yanked off his helmet, his hair tangled, and he was sure he looked a mess. He was drenched from top to toe, and her dark brown eyes sparkled with laughter.

"You look like something a cat dragged in."

He gave her a crooked grin. "Are you applying for the job?" He swung his right leg off the bike. He took her helmet from her and leaned low to whisper in her ear. "I can't wait to get you out of those wet clothes."

Ryland swallowed his laughter when a shiver ran down Nora's spine. He could tell by her scent it had nothing to do with the rain trickling down her neck from her wet hair.

"It's about time," she murmured.

Ryland chuckled. He gripped her hair in his fist and pulled her head back. His mouth watered at the sweet sight of her delicate throat. Her pulse beat wildly, calling to him. Mine. He dropped a kiss on the pale, tender flesh, released her, and unlocked the door.

The instant the knob clicked open the scent assaulted his senses. Pine-Sol. It overwhelmed everything else, even that of his own body. *Damn*. An intruder had broken in again.

"Wait here," he ordered.

"Again?"

He shot her a hard glance. "Do it." He skulked through the door, his heavy boots quiet on the soft carpet. The liquid cleaner was present again, sprayed directly onto the carpet.

The killer had used Pine-Sol.

Ryland followed the burning smell of the cleanser until he ended in his home office.

"Nora," he called.

She peeked around the corner, her nose wrinkled. "Who is it?"

"I can't tell. I can't get past the Pine-Sol scent. How about you?"

She shook her head, her lower lip trembling. "I... I'm not so good around the stuff."

"What's wrong, Nora?" Her face was pale, and moisture pooled in her eyes. He hurried to her side.

"The men who... They used Pine-Sol to help hide us."

Ryland swore and gathered her into his arms, stroking the wet strands of her hair. Was it possible to hate someone who was already dead? Every time she talked about her kidnapping, every time she showed fear, he felt the urge to rip someone apart, and it frustrated him that someone was already dead.

"I'm sorry, Nora. I should have guessed."

Nora twisted from his grasp. "I'm not a baby, Ryland." Her voice was sharp. "I can deal with it."

Ryland bit back his growl of frustration. He couldn't make her fear go away, and he couldn't find the killer in his own pack. He spun on his heel and stared at the desk, desperate to find something, anything to set him on the right track. Nora had worked in the office recently, and everything was different from what he remembered. He didn't know what she'd moved and what the invader had moved.

"Whoever was here raided the office. Notice anything missing?"

Ryland watched Nora take a steadying breath. A light shudder passed through her body, and he knew the scent of the cleanser was bothering her. He hated putting her through this. But if they were going to ever catch this bastard, maybe she could help.

When she opened her eyes, she looked stronger, her eyes clear and her hands steady. More like the shewolf he was coming to know. Her eyes scanned the desk, examining, remembering. There was little hint to any emotion in her expression.

Admiration warmed Ryland's heart. Few wolveren, male or female, could ignore a scent. Smells invoked as much emotion as the memories themselves, and their bodies were designed to never miss a single odor. Yet Nora did what he thought would be impossible. She pushed past not only basic fear, but obvious terror from her past.

"The pages are gone."

"What pages?" His gaze scanned the desk.

"The diary pages I'd left on the printer. I'd typed in a few more pages."

"What about the diary?"

She motioned for him to follow her. They stepped into Joshua's bedroom, and she slipped her hand beneath the mattress, and pulled out the diary, waving it toward him. "Everyone thinks it's such a bad hiding place, but you'd be surprised how few people check the bed when looking for something."

"Or in the T-shirt drawer," he muttered under his breath, relief a tangible breath of oxygen.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, taking the little book from her hand and flipping through. Touching the diary reinforced his confidence. Why, he was unsure. All the pages were present. He snuck a glance at Nora. Her hands rubbed her arms, and her lips held a tinge of blue.

"Go take a hot shower," he said, turning, diary in hand.

"But, Ryland—"

"Your body is having trouble regulating your temperature, and you're soaked. Go take a shower before you get sick."

Her eyes widened in surprise before a sensual smile crossed her face. A pretty blush stole over her features, and she moved toward him. One finger traced the buttons on his shirt. "Aren't we going to take up where we left off?"

Ryland pulled her close. His lips pressed against her cool forehead. "Not until you're dry. Go take a shower and warm up. I'll wait in the living room."

Her eyes fluttered closed, her lips in a seductive curve, but she turned. "Suit yourself." She moved to the bathroom, one foot in front of the other, enhancing

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the seductive sway of her hips. Ryland watched, unable to turn from the hypnotic sight before him.

Her blouse hit the floor, baring the delicate curve of her back. Ryland's mouth watered to seize her and run his tongue over each scar laddering her back. Ryland groaned. "I'll be in the living room," he repeated and spun on his heel.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sharp rap echoed through the silent hall. A quick perusal toward the empty passageway confirmed no one noticed. Banan opened the door, and The Seeker of Vengeance slid inside, closing the door behind.

The Seeker smiled coldly. Death whispered its macabre message. Vengeance would be served. Banan would die. Today. Cold eyes traveled through the small den. Perfect. Order. Surprising considering the nutcase lived with him. The den was small, positioned half way down the hall, placing Banan's pack status very low. The larger dens were at the end of each hallway, the smaller ones in the center.

"What do you want?" Banan demanded.

A smile fluttered across The Seeker's lips. This was going to be so easy. "I had to talk to you. With the changes going on around here, it's been hard to meet you."

"I thought you were finished with me. Didn't you get what you wanted when Joshua died?"

"Some. But I want more."

"You're a pervert, you know that? Besides, Ryland is in charge, and his word is law. I refuse to break his law as long as he's willing to keep Harry here."

Banan turned away, sauntering toward the kitchen. A cold, hard smile slid over cool lips. Was it possible to make this any easier? Yes, this death would be *sweet*.

"Want a beer?"

"Not yet. Maybe after."

Banan threw a quizzical look toward his guest. "After what?"

The visitor shrugged. "After I take care of my business. I left something in your bathroom the last time I was here. I want it back. Now."

Banan glanced at the cleaning bucket in the unexpected visitor's hand. "What the hell could you leave there?"

"I left my Pine-Sol."

His brows raised in surprise. "Why the hell did you bring Pine-Sol here?"

The visitor shrugged. Banan motioned toward the room in question. "I don't know what it is about that cleaner. Why can't we use something better, like that new orange cleaner or something? That pine shit is nasty. Take it."

"It's your den. You get it." Let the fool think he was in control.

He grumped and spun, heading for the bathroom. "Damn, stupid...."

The instant he turned his back, the killer donned a pair of surgical gloves. With a twist of a latex covered hand, the stereo suddenly blasted, cutting off the male's tirade. The heavy bass beat of rock music filled the room. His neighbors would hate it, but it was nothing unusual. Banan always played music too loud.

Following the male to the latrine, the killer watched him bend over to pull the amber bottle of Pine-Sol from the cabinet.

"I don't know why you like this stuff. What could possibly be so important that you need it now?"

He straightened, and his eyes widened when the gloved hand shot in front of his face.

“This.”

Silver glinted in the mirror, slicing the male’s throat. The bottle of cleaner fell to the floor with a satisfying crash, splattering the entryway with the sharp scent of pine. A tiny crimson necklace of blood formed, and his eyes went wide in the mirror.

The killer smirked. This was the most satisfying part of all. Watching the instant they realized it was over, knowing life was about to end. The male gurgled, his face paling. Fingers clawed at the destroyed throat, and the skin separated, triggering a gush of the dark red liquid.

The killer laughed. The warm, coppery scent flooded the room, and the killer smiled into the mirror. The victim struggled, and the flash of an attempted shift powered through the room.

“Go ahead, Banan. Shift. It won’t help. Consider your account paid in full.”

With a sharp shove of a gloved hand, Banan crumpled forward into the bathtub, the life giving liquid spilling toward the drain. His fingers, wet with his own blood, grabbed at the side of the tub in a futile attempt to reach help.

Excellent. The killer chuckled, inhaling. The satisfying scent of the male’s fear filled the room, combined with the coppery-scented blood, and the spilled Pine-Sol. It was revolting. It was delicious.

Banan’s life emptied into the tub, easing like a thick, syrupy river toward the drain, voiding like the sewage he was. Power flooded through the slayer’s veins.

The weakening hands lost their grip on the side of the tub and slid within. The Seeker watched and waited. For that one moment when life would end, and that last breath escaped those destructive lips.

After death, the body changed. Slowly. Like the setting of the sun. Merging from man to animal. Canine fur sprouted on his body, and his legs drew into his stomach, paws where once there were fingers. More beast than man.

The change wasn’t like when it was commanded, when the mind controlled it with speed and accuracy. Instead, this was the last bodily function of a dead wolverine, slow and foul. At long last, he was wolf. Brown fur coated in the coppery, syrupy blood.

The message was simple. Just a quick dip into the blood, the gloved fingers swirling on the shining mirror. Now, it was time to clean.

No time to enjoy the thrill of success. That would come later. Once they were all dead.

Gloved hands went to work. In the space of a few minutes, the room was cleansed. The Pine-Sol in a spray bottle spritzed the oily cleanser into the air, over the furniture and even over the drapes. The scent clung to the surfaces, hiding any stray smells. The sound of rock music pounded hard through the room. Perfect.

Latex-covered hands opened the fridge and took out a beer, popping it on the way out.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Nora stepped into the doorway to the living room, her nerves working overtime. Ryland seemed interested, but had been quick to push her into a shower instead of into a bed with him. What if the only reason he wanted to sleep with her was the *True Mate* bond? What if deep down, he was disappointed in her?

She bit her lip and glanced down at the small scrap of satin she wore. The teddy he'd found at the store. The fabric pulled against her breasts, exhibiting more cleavage than she even knew she possessed. The tight waist cinched, drawing her body inward, presenting a feminine figure for the first time. Nora leaned back against the doorjamb, enjoying the scene before her while she searched for the threads of confidence she'd enjoyed at the lake.

Ryland sat in his chair, dressed only in jeans. Powerful, muscular shoulders, with a dusting of hair that trailed down his chest, drew her attention. God, she wanted him. But he looked immersed in the diary pages in his hand, the thick blond hair falling forward in his face. If not for his masculine scent mixed with the dark sensual hunger, she'd think he wanted nothing more to do with her.

Ice blue eyes lifted to hers. The red of his wolveren power sparked in their depths as he examined her. He stood and before she could react, he was there, the heat from his hands already caressing her arms, his palms rough against her flesh.

He bent to kiss her, but she turned her head, unable to silence the sudden fears in her mind.

With gentle fingers beneath her chin, he forced her to face him. "What is it, rabbit?"

Nora refused to meet his eyes, looking at his lips instead. *Bad move*. Especially when they curved into a smile.

"Tell me," he demanded, his voice soft. "What's wrong?"

Nora's eyes teared, and she moved to turn away. "It's not me you want," she whispered.

"Then who is it I want?" he asked, surprise evident in his voice.

"No, I mean... You only want me because of the *True Mate* connection. Not for me."

Ryland tipped her head so her eyes met his. The light blue no longer looked cold, but instead warmed her to her soul. "I can't deny," he began, "the *True Mate* bond is strong. I feel you, deep inside. But, Nora, it wouldn't be that strong if I didn't want you for you."

Nora again averted her eyes. She wanted to believe him, but how could she? Years past, she'd learned she wasn't very pretty. The day she'd overheard the boys in the pack talk how they would tolerate sleeping with her only to be the son-in-law of the alpha. "I know better, Ryland. I know what I look like."

The scent of frustration and confusion drifted between them.

"Nora...." His hands cupped her face. His lips meet hers, gently probing, teasing her mouth. He pulled away and gazed into her eyes. "The first thing I noticed about you was your eyes, Nora. So dark and sensual. When you were in

wolf form, they called to me even as you threatened me for behaving like an ass.” He leaned in, his lips touching briefly her lids, first one, and then the other.

She bit her lip. She didn’t want him to feel guilty, forcing him to say things he wasn’t ready for. She shook her head, unable to speak, the heat from his mouth still heavy on her eyelids.

Ryland dropped to his knees, and he slid his hands downward, his palms caressing her legs until they reached her ankles, and then they moved back up toward her calves. Nora gasped, his palms easing up the inside of her legs, gliding toward her thighs.

“My next thought was of your legs,” he said. His fingers traced the muscles of her thighs and the sensitive skin on her legs. He leaned forward, leaving a soft, gentle kiss on each leg. “Such powerful, strong legs for a shewolf. Yet so feminine. I couldn’t wait to feel them wrapped around my body, drawing me inside you.”

His hands seared her flesh as they moved upward, skimming the softness of the blue satin. He licked her belly through the fabric and reached upward. He cupped her breasts with a delicate touch, holding them like the finest treasures. “And the next thing I noticed were these.”

“They’re small,” she whimpered, trying to get back to why this started, but already she was forgetting her fears. “Too small.”

“Wrong,” he corrected. “Perfect. I don’t like large breasts,” he said. He blew over the tip of one soft globe and smiled when it hardened. “Absolutely perfect, and so soft.” He nuzzled her body, and she groaned in frustration.

He grabbed her hips, and before she understood his intention, he whirled her around until she faced the wall. Large hands grasped each cheek, delicately kneading the globes, his hot breath whispering his own need. “And this, surely you remember my reaction to this sweet butt.”

Nora nodded, remembering how he’d stepped behind her when she’d bent over. How she probably would have let him take her that moment if he hadn’t sparked her fears. She pressed her face into the cold stone, struggling for control, her fingers clenching and unclenching while his hands massaged her flesh.

“And here,” he said, his hot, wet tongue tracing the scars on her back. “When I see these, I see how strong you are, and how much you have suffered.”

A sharp pounding on the kitchen door erupted through the quiet space, and he yanked himself away from her, his fangs dropping, his eyes flashing yellow. “This had better be good,” he growled. “Enter,” he shouted, coming to his feet, and turned Nora to face him, his body pressed against hers to hide her.

Brogan entered. Nora tried to duck into the hallway, but Ryland held her pinned to the wall. Brogan averted his eyes from Nora, staring instead at the television in the living room. His hands propped on his hips.

“What is it?” asked Ryland, his eyes holding Nora’s gaze, the ice blue hard and glittering.

“Boss, you gotta come. It’s happened again.”

“B, slow down,” Ryland said. “What’s wrong?”

“Banan’s dead.”

Icy fear swept over her, draining the heat from her face. Banan. The man who’d befriended her the day before, when she’d so needed a friend. Tears stung her eyes. She glanced at Ryland. She felt the explosion building inside of him, like

an insidious bomb ticking down. She understood his fury. She felt it herself. She moved to pull away, but he held on to her.

“Shit. I’ll be right there,” said Ryland. Anger burned hot and sharp from his body. He dropped his forehead to hers, his eyes scrunched tightly, and she sensed him fighting for control.

“Let go,” she whispered. She needed to go change.

As though reminded of their discussion, his blue eyes snapped open, staring straight into hers, the yellow glare easing, the hard ice blue returning. She could almost see the swirl of emotions inside him. His grip on her arms remained steady.

“Brogan, before you go,” he said, interrupting his friend’s departure, “I have a question for you.”

“Sure, boss, what’s up?”

Nora spotted the tick in Ryland’s jaw. *What’s he thinking?*

“I know this is a bad time, but when you met Nora, at college, what did you think of her?”

Nora’s mouth dropped open. “Ryland, I don’t think this is the time—”

“Don’t,” he snapped. “I’m going to settle something with you right now.”

“But—”

“Brogan, tell the truth. I won’t get angry. Tell me.”

Nora knew why he assured Brogan of his safety. Nora’s fingers curled into fists and waited. If Ryland lived through today, it would only be because Nora might not have the opportunity to carry through with the anger churning in her gut. What the hell was he doing? It was bad enough he didn’t care if Brogan saw her wearing nothing but a teddy. Now he was keeping the male here just to ask him about his past history with Nora while one of his pack members lay dead.

“Well, I, uh....”

“Spit it out, man. Tell me the truth.” Fangs flashed when he spoke, but still he didn’t move, his hands pinning Nora in place.

“I thought she was uhm... Beautiful.”

Nora felt her eyes go wide in surprise. Humiliation burned hot in her face. “Ryland—”

“Quiet,” he ordered. He threw a quick glance at Brogan. “Specifics.”

“Boss, I don’t think this is—”

“Do it.” Ryland’s anger was building.

Could anything be more frustrating and confusing? Or even humiliating? He’d asked for this. Why would he be so angry? *Did he only want her when he was jealous?*

“Well, she was different than the other shewolves. She’s taller, and if I’m not mistaken, stronger. She’s gorgeous.”

“And what is so gorgeous about her, Brogan.” This time the words came through clenched teeth.

Nora shook her head in confusion, but didn’t dare speak. Mortified, she wanted to sink into the floor and she wouldn’t compound things by making more of a scene.

“Well, boss, she’s got beautiful long legs, and her breasts are the perfect size, and—”

"Enough," Ryland bit out. "Thank you for your candor. You may go. We'll be right with you."

Nora waited until the door closed, her eyes still on Ryland. Anger boiled inside her. "What the hell was that about?"

"Don't make me *ever* have to do that again." His words were harsh and ragged.

"I didn't make you do that!" Fury spiked hard. He hadn't cared that Brogan saw her almost naked. He had even asked the male to describe what he'd thought was so attractive about her.

Ryland crushed her to him.

"I'm sorry," he murmured in her ear. "It was necessary. You have to see what you are before you can see what you are to me."

Realization dawned. He'd wanted her to understand she was attractive to men, even without the *True Mate* connection. But of all the high handed, idiotic... She couldn't even think of words to scream at him. Her palms shoved at his chest, struggling to get away, but Ryland didn't give.

He teased and taunted her lips until she finally relented, opening for him. His taste exploded through her mouth. Anger poured into her mouth. Hot sizzling hunger burst through her. She moaned, leaning into his kiss, her tongue dueling with his, taking as much as she gave.

* * * *

Ryland plundered his mate's mouth, wishing he had time to plunder her body. He hated asking Brogan to describe his attraction to his mate, but she needed to know how attractive she was, even without the bond they shared. Timing was horrible, but he knew if he didn't do it then, he wouldn't have the strength later.

He broke from the kiss, pleased to see her eyes glazed over with lust. This was what he wanted, a mate ready for him, when he returned.

"I'll be back soon," he whispered.

"I'm going with you. Harry...."

Damn. She was right. He closed his eyes and nodded. Harry would need someone if Banan was dead.

"I'll hurry. Let me dress."

"Wear that little sundress you bought."

Nora turned and grinned, nodding. "Yes, I think I will."

She closed the door between them, and Ryland took her place against the wall. Traces of her body heat still radiated from the hard concrete. The urge to trace her heat with his palms, to lean in and grab the remnants of her scent from the surface was nearly overwhelming. Instead, he leaned his forehead against the wall and took deep, even breaths, searching for the civilized demeanor she accused him of possessing.

This *True Mate* business was exhausting. Half the time he didn't know if he was coming or going. For a moment, he feared he was falling in love with her. But that couldn't be. Wouldn't be. Because if ever she had control of his heart, she'd have control of his pack.

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Nora yanked the bedroom door open, already dressed in the clothes he'd suggested. Ryland groaned. "Let's go," he said, grabbing her hand.

* * * *

"How did he die?" Ryland demanded. He stormed through the compound, anger twisting inside him. This was what he'd worried about, his inability to protect his wolveren. The fragile control he held over his own pack crumbled with every emergency.

"His throat is slit, just like the others."

Ryland had been surprised to see Brogan just outside the den when he and Nora had left. Ever the consummate professional, Brogan led the way, straight to Banan's quarters, never once asking why Ryland had asked such strange questions.

Brogan's den wasn't that far down. He held one of the smaller, center dens. Of all those killed, he was the lowest ranked in the pack, demonstrated by his cramped living conditions "Who found him?"

"I did. We were supposed to go for supplies. When he didn't show up, I came to get him. I knew he was in trouble the instant I got here. I could smell the blood from outside the door."

Brogan was right. The den reeked with the metallic scent of blood, mixed with Pine-Sol. The combination turned Ryland's stomach, and he could only guess what it would do to Nora who walked behind him. He had to hope she'd be able to control her reaction, because taking time to coddle her now would be detrimental to his leadership, and to her station as alpha female.

The dead wolveren lay in the bathtub. It was almost identical to the last killing. He was in wolf form, fur wet from the blood and water.

Ryland sniffed. Nothing. Nothing but blood and death. No scent of anyone but those in the room now. No scent of the killer. Just the reek of pine cleanser.

Ryland examined the wound on the wolveren's neck. The killer had used a silver blade, just like all the others. By the angle, it appeared the killing slice came at him from behind. The mirror had a message, just like before. *Paid in Full*.

He turned to his *True Mate*. She stood in the doorway of the bathroom, her face pale and her hand clutching her throat. She lifted her wide eyes to his.

He nodded once and turned back to Brogan. "Dispose of the body. Clean this mess up."

"But—"

"You heard me. There's nothing here. No scent, no traces of another person. I don't like it any better than you do, but there's no reason to make the rest of the pack nervous."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"The truth," Ryland said. But what was the truth? Anger ripped through him. How could he protect his pack if he didn't know where the danger lay? "I want this killer found, Brogan. I don't care what you and Gerard have to do, but find him. Search every den for Pine-Sol. Confiscate every bottle of the damned cleaner and get rid of it."

He moved back into the den. Still no scent. Just Pine-Sol. He hadn't realized Banan was such a clean wolver. The den reeked of the cleaner, burning his nose and lungs.

He grabbed Nora by the arm, careful to avoid her wrist, ignoring the stiffening of her body. He moved to escort her from the den when the kitchen counter caught his eye. Despite the otherwise clean home, trash lay on the counter. "Wait here."

Ryland moved into the kitchen. The scent of Pine-Sol was stronger in this room. The killer had been here most recently. The plastic he'd seen were rings used to hold cans together. Beer cans. Ryland opened the fridge. Empty. Had Banan shared a beer with his killer? He glanced around. Only one partially filled can sat on the counter. Ryland picked it up and sniffed. No other scent but Banan's. The can was still cold. Not ice cold, yet the aluminum still held the chill of the liquid inside. The trash held beer cans. He counted. Five. One was missing.

"Brogan!" He shouted, pleased when the man ran into the kitchen, ready for his next orders.

"Yeah, boss?"

"When you search for the Pine-Sol, check the trash cans in every room." He held up the rings with the tips of his fingers. "Someone had a beer recently. I want to know who."

Brogan nodded, peering into the trash can.

Ryland returned to Nora. "Let's go." He stopped again at the doorway. A small message board showed two notes. *Brogan, supply run, 1 pm*. That was no surprise, everyone knew that. Then the other. *Harry, meet Paul at noon to learn to mop the halls*. At least now they knew where Harry was. He would have to be told.

Nora nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. "This is going to break Harry's heart."

Ryland nodded, wrapping his arm around her waist, guiding Nora from the foul smelling den. They both sneezed when they entered the hallway, clearing their lungs of the acidic burn of the cleaner and the copper tang of blood.

He escorted her to his office, just outside the courtyard. He needed to think. There had to be something they were missing. Once inside, he closed the door. She didn't utter a sound when he moved behind his desk and collapsed into his soft leather chair. He rubbed his face with his hands.

"I just talked to him yesterday," she whispered.

Ryland nodded.

"He was so worried about his friend, Harry. He seemed almost...." She frowned. "Fatalistic."

Ryland examined her. Her face was pale, and her eyes looked too large for her face, but she was steady. Strong. "What do you mean?"

"He kept pushing for me to promise to take care of Harry if anything happened."

Could it be Banan had known he was next? If so, why wouldn't he tell someone who he thought the killer was?

She sank into a chair at the conference table. "Who could be doing this?"

He shook his head. "I wish I knew. In both cases, the only scent was Pine-Sol. No other wolveren or human scent. The dens are either scrubbed, or the killer bathes in the stuff."

She nodded. "I already told you. I've seen Pine-Sol used before."

"You said that. Can I ask, how they used it?"

She nodded, her lip trembling, but the moisture in her eyes didn't spill over her cheeks. He hated himself for asking, he needed information.

"They sprayed the soil with Pine-Sol, following everywhere we walked. Kieran only managed to find Anna's scent because she's his *True Mate*. He said it was buried beneath the Pine-Sol, and if he hadn't known she'd been in the area, he wouldn't have been persistent enough to find her scent."

Ryland nodded. Her story made sense. Wolveren could distinguish multiple scents at any given time, just as wolves or dogs could. But sometimes, if another scent was unexpected, it could overpower everything else. Their human sides tended to ignore everything in favor of the strong, oily cleanser.

"I'll have Gerard take another sniff in the dens. He's got a good nose. See if he can find anything beneath the Pine-Sol."

Nora nodded, and he wondered again what she'd been through. He wanted to know the details, but knew if he did, it would tear them both apart. Her, with her fears, him with his anger.

His fist hit the desk. "Damn. I just wish I knew who was doing this and why."

His mate, and yes, he considered her his mate, cocked her head to one side. "You said the women were normally not locked up. Could one of them be the killer?"

He sighed. "I doubt it. I doubt any of them are strong enough to be able to take on a wolveren male. No, whoever it is must be male. The killer was able to pick them up and put them in the bathtub before the blood could reach the floor. That takes strength."

"Unless they were already in the bathtub to start."

She was right. There was no way to eliminate anyone but himself. Everyone else was suspect. He narrowed his eyes on his mate.

No, she wouldn't. She may have had opportunity, but she had no motive. Just because she was a rival pack leader's daughter didn't mean she had reason to kill. Besides, the first killing had occurred while she was sleeping, and he'd been with her most of the day today.

Convinced, and more than a little relieved, he rubbed his neck. He was so tired. His hormones were on overdrive with Nora constantly in his mind and in his blood. Something had to give, and he knew what.

He looked toward her. She stared at the portrait above his desk. Two wolves howling, trees behind them, snow beneath their feet, their breath frozen in the cold air.

"Yours?" she asked.

"Yes, you are."

She spun her chair to face him, her eyes wide. "What did you say?"

"I said," he stalked toward her. "Yes, you are." He snatched up her hand and pulled her to her feet. The simple touch shot through him, searing his blood. He

shouldn't be doing this, not when his pack was in such uproar, but he couldn't wait any longer. He had to solve at least one of his problems.

She stepped back against the wall, and he continued to approach, her hand out to stop him.

"It's my choice, Ryland, and I haven't made it. I'll sleep with you, but—"

"But you have. Your body has. All that's left is for your mind to catch up."

Her palm rested against his chest. "No, I'm pretty sure my mind is still in control of my body," she said, her voice filled with sarcasm.

He laughed. He let his fingers stroke the shining, dark hair, so like ebony. The strands were still damp from her shower.

* * * *

He crowded her backward, and Nora groaned in frustration. Hot, sizzling lips trailed her tender skin, and she arched to give him better access. She never doubted her need for his body. Only an hour ago, she'd been ready to throw herself at him, dressed in a dark blue teddy. No, it was the possessive nature of his words she'd disagreed with.

There was no way she could fight him. Such a useless endeavor would only cause them both more frustration. She needed him too much to try to pretend otherwise. His masculine scent rolled over her tongue and through her nostrils, filtering through her body, searing everything in its path. Every ounce of her life giving blood boiled inside her. Pooling low, it filled her body with a dull, empty ache between her thighs.

He murmured his approval. "You want this as much as I do. We've waited long enough." Firm hands grasped her hips, and he yanked her to him, his body hard and unforgiving. "I'm going to make you scream for more," he murmured against her flesh.

Every muscle within her threatened to melt against him, and she fought it.

His teeth scraped her carotid artery. Anger mixed with desire, and she stiffened. No, he would not. He'd better not. If he marked her without her permission she'd never forgive him. "Stop."

"I see," he murmured, his lips curving against her flesh. "You aren't rejecting me. I didn't think you could. You only reject my mark. You're afraid." His teeth nibbled her ear lobe. "That's ok, rabbit. When I mark you, you will be in the middle of an orgasm and won't feel a thing."

He didn't understand. Hell, she didn't understand. All she knew was her heart wasn't ready to become his, even though her own fangs itched to be buried in his chest, to leave her own feminine mark of ownership. Something was missing. Her hands pushed at his chest, but he refused to give.

"It's not the pain, you animal."

He chuckled. "Yes, we both are."

She shook her head. "No, Ryland. I won't accept your mark. Not yet."

He cocked his head to the side, and his eyes narrowed. The scent of his anger washed over her. Nora inhaled, relishing every iota. Like a drug, she wanted more. So masculine and powerful. And so damned erotic.

She shook her head, searching for control. She had to be clear, explain to him her wants and needs. The words stuck in her throat, and she only moaned. His strong hands held her in place, urging her soft belly to cradle the hard edge of his arousal.

"You are mine, Nora, and I won't wait another day." He ground his hips against hers, and she gasped. "If you won't take that mark, so be it, but you will have me inside you."

Her eyes widened, and her heart pounded in her chest. Relief accompanied his promise. Those few simple words released her to act as she needed. The way she desired. Anything she wanted. And she wanted him. Desperately.

He must have sensed the change in her, for he growled low in his throat, and her pulse spiked. He slipped his hands to her arms, linking his fingers in hers, and whipped them above her head.

The motion sent a shot of lust through her body so strong her knees buckled. God, was it possible to spontaneously combust?

"Yes," he said.

His lips burned along her throat again. She felt vulnerable. Hungry. And when his lips trailed her artery again, she moaned.

"You are mine, Nora. You want me to take control. You need it," he murmured against her flesh. "Just like you need me. And I will. Today, this instant. I will wait for your mark, but for nothing else."

Nora struggled to keep from moaning again at his show of dominance and strength. He was right. She craved his ability to control her the way no other ever had. The more aggression he showed, the hungrier she became. It was a scary admission.

"Come." He took her hand and pulled her to the door.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the den. I refuse to take you in my office."

He yanked open the door and dragged her through. Once in the courtyard, he stopped. It was filled with wolverines, and the looks on their faces were not welcoming.

"It's her. She did it." The low growl belonged to Devlin.

* * * *

A surge of pure aggression surged through Ryland, and he dropped Nora's hand, his own fisting, fighting off the sudden urge to shift. It was past time he dealt with the male. The wolverine was really beginning to get on his nerves.

Ryland curled his lips and shoved Nora behind him. He could feel her fight to remain at his side, her sensual hunger buried beneath the rush of fury at the accusation.

"Enough of this, Devlin. Go back to your quarters."

"Why? So you can protect her? She's a killer! You know it. Nobody died until she arrived." The venom in his words rolled over the audience, and others nodded and whispered.

"I didn't kill anyone," Nora said. She pushed away and stepped in front of Ryland, her back stiff and proud. If he hadn't known she was just whimpering in his arms, he would never have believed it.

"Why would I kill these wolven? I don't even know them. You do. I have no reason to kill any of your pack."

The urge to step forward and protect her pounded against his instincts, but instead Ryland stepped beside her. Where he belonged. She was his mate, but she also needed to find her own way within his pack. His skin tingled, and his fangs dropped. Ryland waited, every muscle tense, ready to spring if needed.

"You don't need a motive," said the darker man. His brown hair hung in his face; his eyes flashed red in anger. Lips curled over his teeth, and moved forward, breathing into her face. "You're just a slut who came looking for control of a pack. We all know you're part of the Uwharrie pack, and they have hunted us for years. Well, you ain't gonna get it."

Fury unlike anything he'd felt before ripped through Ryland at the slight to his mate. He moved forward, only to have a soft, gentle hand stop him.

"If I wanted your pack, wolven, I would take you on now. Right here, in front of everyone. I'm no coward who goes behind your back." Her teeth were drawn, and her fangs flashed in the artificial light. Her eyes burned red. Just like before, she exerted powerful control over her change, and Ryland's heart beat harder. Unable to stop himself, he growled at her side. She was powerful and beautiful, standing up to his entire pack.

"You aren't a coward, eh?" Devlin's hand snaked out with the speed of a snake, grabbing her wrist. She shrieked, and Ryland felt her terror.

Instinct won out, and Ryland's body exploded, energy crackled and ripped through his cells. His clothes dropped to the floor, and he landed on all fours. Wolf. He snarled and stepped toward Devlin, who spun, holding Nora, his arm wrapped around her neck.

"Stop, Ryland, or I'll kill her."

Ryland howled in fury, his body shaking with anger. But he stopped. He glared at the wolven, waiting.

Thank heaven, Nora wasn't cowering in fear, despite the hold on her wrist. She spun in his hands, her face close to his neck, and she leaned in, whispering. "If he doesn't kill you now, I just might." Her teeth flashed, and she bit down on his ear. Blood spurted, and he howled long and loud. He released her, his hand clutching his bloody ear. She darted to the side.

Ryland charged headlong into Devlin, who slammed hard against the wall. Leaping to the side, Ryland shook his head, teeth snarling. This would end, now.

"I've been waiting for this," the male said. Another flash and a second wolf stood in Devlin's stead, clothes pooled about his hind legs. He was smaller than Ryland, his coat was dark brown and slightly ragged.

Ryland growled, his head ducked, his body crouched low. Lips curled, he exposed his canines, a promise of pain yet to come. He stalked to the side, his eyes never leaving his foe. The image of Devlin's hands on Nora flashed through his mind. Pictures of the wolven's fingers wrapped around his mate's wrist, bruising her soft skin.

Ears flat against his skull, he charged.

Dark Succession

The two exploded in a rush of fangs and claws. He caught Devlin on the side, and foul copper blood rushed over his lips. He snarled, releasing him, spitting fur from his mouth. Devlin charged. The male was smaller, but he was quick and powerful. With a leap, he slammed into Ryland, and the two bodies rolled across the hard floor.

Ryland felt claws scratch against the soft skin of his underbelly. He leapt to the side, his jaws clamping on the throat of his enemy. Blood seeped over his tongue, hot and vile. Ryland shook his head, burying his fangs deeper.

The smaller wolf froze, his body stiff in submission, his eyes averted. Instincts warred inside Ryland's heart. The instinct of a fair pack leader, who should accept the submission from any in his pack, struggled against the desire to protect his mate. The wolf in his mouth whimpered and licked his lips nervously.

Ryland snarled, hungry to destroy the beast beneath him, tortured by responsibility. At last, he eased his grip. The smaller wolf pulled away and moved to the other side of the room, flashing into human form, his hand rubbing his neck.

Ryland glared at the observers, who'd all backed away to watch the fight. Each averted their eyes.

Nora stood alone, tall and proud, waiting. Her eyes were wide, yet dark with hunger. The smell of her feminine need, more intense than ever before, swirled around him. Her breasts heaved, and her breath came in short gasps.

Now was the time. He would brook no argument. There was no more time for thought. Ryland shifted, the flash so quick he barely felt it.

* * * *

Nora stared at the two males standing breathless, panting and naked. Devlin's gaze dropped to the floor, and he stepped back, swallowed by the murmuring pack.

But it wasn't Devlin who held her attention. Ryland stood proudly, sweat glistening on his body, his chest heaving. Her nostrils flared. The masculine wildness of his sweat sent her senses into overload. His essence rushed through her lungs, pouring heat into her bloodstream, reigniting the desires she so long been unable to feel. She'd thought she'd wanted him before, but there was no denying the power of the hunger in her body. Starved for his touch, she waited.

He was a handsome wolf, his coat glistening gold, just like his hair. But in his human form, naked, he was even more impressive. His eyes were wild, and she could see the bloodlust from the fight still clung to him. A soft moan escaped her throat.

He tipped his head back and howled, the sound echoing through the compound, reverberating against hard, cement walls. Powerful, rich, and masculine.

Like a living creature, the sound wrapped around her, owning her, body and soul. It ripped through the last of her reserves, and heat seared through her blood. This was her *True Mate*. Her heart pumped wildly.

Her gums itched, and her fangs lowered, her lip curling in a seductive snarl, answering her mate's call.

He stalked closer, oblivious to his nakedness. He was ready to claim, and she was ready to be claimed. Almost.

With each step he took, her heart beat harder. She should be afraid. For years, she'd avoided the more aggressive males. And Ryland was beyond aggressive. How could she give herself to him knowing he held women hostage? But she couldn't fight it anymore.

Soft murmurs reached her ears, but she ignored them. They came from the rest of the pack. They watched, waiting to see what happened next. Instead, Nora concentrated on the male moving toward her. Everything about him radiated powerful masculinity. Even his arousal, hard and ready for her, stood straight and proud. It was obvious he didn't care about the prying eyes of his pack.

He stopped before her, so close she could reach out with her tongue to catch the bead of sweat upon his chest. Her mouth watered.

"You are mine." Yet still he didn't touch her. He sniffed, taking in her scent. It was a game. One he played for his pack, staking his claim publicly, explicitly. None would doubt his intentions at the end of this day.

"Not here," she whispered.

His response was to lean forward, placing his palms on the wall on either side of her head, caging her in place. "They'll leave. But not until I do this."

His lips descended, slowly. Like the brush of a feather, they caressed her mouth, soft, inviting. She moaned and opened to him. The rough texture of his tongue swept inside like a conquering hero, demanding what was rightfully won.

She wanted to touch, wanted to caress his hot flesh. But not here. Not where only canned air brushed against their skin. She wanted to be outside. Where sweet, clean fresh air waited. What better way to get him there, than to play his game.

She growled, and the males around her perked. Several had begun to move away, yet the instant they heard her challenge, they returned.

"You think this is all you have to do to take a pack leader's daughter? Fight a fellow suitor?" she taunted.

Ryland's eyes crinkled, and, for an instant, she thought he would laugh. She heard the murmurs of approval from the crowd. This was what they wanted. What all wolverines craved. Conflict. An alpha bitch with strength and conviction. Fine. If that's what they wanted, that's what she'd give them.

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "I want outside. I want air. I want you."

He gave a soft rumble of approval and nuzzled her cheek. His body tensed, and she knew he understood. She let her eyes flutter close for that one instant and reached inside for the shewolf. Instinct rumbled through her like silent thunder, the vibrations rolling up her spine and into her heart. She reveled in the hunger, the desire, and the power of control. The surface of her skin rippled as soft hairs prickled on her arms.

She controlled the change. For the last several days, they'd seen her at her worst. It was time they, and Ryland, saw her strength. Dark hair grew, millimeter by millimeter on her skin, and she heard the males behind Ryland gasp.

Placing her palms on that magnificent chest, she shoved hard, and, for the first time, Ryland gave with ease. She glanced around the room, and there she

spotted her. Diane. Why wasn't she locked away in her room? The bitch watched from across the courtyard, jealousy carved on her face.

"It is the shewolf's choice," she said, loud enough for the crowd to hear, her gaze meeting Diane's. "And I choose a male who is capable of proving his worth." She turned back to Ryland. "If you want me, you will have to catch me." She tipped her chin high, the challenge placed.

His eyes widened, and he smiled, dark, sensual hunger sparking beneath the flash of yellow in his gaze.

"Show me your worth as a wolf, show me your worth as my mate."

* * * *

Ryland bit back a smile. She wanted to meet outside, and he couldn't have chosen a better way himself. If this didn't bring his pack over to her side, nothing would. Like him, they respected strength. Nora had shown fear in front of them in the past, but she'd also shown bravery. Now, she showed her strength over her wolf, something every wolvern strove for.

She turned, walking a few steps away. Ryland couldn't take his eyes off the provocative sway of her hips, or the flash of teasing in her eyes. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew the other males watched, but this time, he didn't care. This show was for him. An appreciative rumble escaped unbidden.

With a flick of her long black hair, she turned and made eye contact with the pack.

He cursed inwardly. She wouldn't. Couldn't! Her eye contact did just what he feared. She included them in her challenge. When he got his claws on that little bitch, she was going to pay for this.

She'd initiated a test of his control over those he ruled. A test he could easily fail. While in a well-balanced pack no male dared challenge the alpha for his mate, his group wasn't balanced. Hell, they weren't even a true pack. Every muscle in his body tensed, ready for the coming fight. He would kill the first one who stepped forward.

With one last glance around, she turned her gaze to his. Their gazes met. Hers were filled with lust, yet her body teased and taunted. Everyone held their collective breath. His instincts were sparking on all cylinders, and all he could think about was being inside her.

He saw the gleam of expectation from the males in the room. They inched forward, each male jockeying for position. He stepped between her and the pack, determined to make his claim clear. With a glare of deadly intent, he stared down each wolvern and snarled.

He heard a giggle from Nora, who shifted. The flash of her change crackled through the room, blinding in intensity. For an instant, he forgot about the challengers to his pack leader position.

Her solid black coat shone even in the artificial light, accenting the length of her beautiful, thick fur. Her gaze met his, filled with mystery and longing, and then she spun about, charging down the long hall.

The males in the room murmured, and he whirled back to them.

Dark Succession

"I'll kill the first one of you who goes near her." He barely recognized his own voice.

To his surprise, none moved. Several pairs of eyes met his straight on, but most turned away. The challenge was laid, and none seemed ready to take up the fight. A strange warmth flooded through Ryland's heart. She had known. Somehow, she knew more about his pack's thoughts than he did.

"You better go catch her, boss. We'll hold down the fort," said Brogan.

Ryland nodded, but not before making contact with every male of the pack one last time. Just to be sure. Respect shone in almost all before they dropped their gaze. Devlin refused to meet his gaze at all.

The rush of bloodlust from the battle, from the knowledge his pack was finally secure in his leadership, and from thoughts of the shewolf waiting for him rushed through his body. He tipped back his head and howled. In a flash he changed and charged after his bitch in heat.

* * * *

The figure stood in the shadows of the hallway. What had just happened was sickening. The blatant display of possession was enough to turn the stomach. That bastard, Brogan, stood there with a grin, watching Ryland chase after his bitch.

And then he turned, his gaze finding Mary across the crowd. The next thing would be he'd walk across to her. Yep. Totally predictable. The poor girl didn't know what hit her. She cowered when Brogan reached out to touch her.

"Don't hide," he said. Such sweet words. Bastard.

Mary's lashes fluttered to her cheeks. Hiding. She looked so innocent, in comparison to the evil beside her.

Brogan leaned forward, pressing his lips to Mary's.

Anger burned inside the darkness. He had no right to touch her.

"Come to my place?" he asked her.

Mary didn't argue, but walked beside him. She flashed him a smile.

From across the courtyard, long fingers curled into a fist, fury threatening to rip away much needed control. Soon. Soon he would die.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nora ran through the trees, relishing the freedom. Ryland pursued her. And she wanted him to catch her, but not just yet. To earn her touch, he had to work at it. She'd laid down some pretty severe tests already, but this one was the most fun. She charged through the undergrowth of the tall pine and oak trees.

She heard a sound in the distance. Ryland. She yipped and ran faster. His scent grew stronger. Her blood sang in her veins, pumping faster and faster with the thrill of the chase.

He howled, calling her. So pure and beautiful. For the first time in months, Nora stopped, tipped her head back, and let loose the sound building in her chest. The celebratory howl surged through her throat, and was swallowed by the dark night, the trees absorbing her answering call.

Her mouth closed, and, in an instant, he was on her, tackling her to the hard sand beneath them. She grunted, but knew he hadn't used all his weight. She rolled to escape, but he growled low, his lips curled, his fangs at her throat.

His strength was made manifest in every muscle, his masculinity proven in his control of her every move. She squirmed, determined to make this a good fight. With effort, she squirmed herself onto her belly. Her paws reached for the sand, crawling from beneath the one she knew would have her tonight.

His fangs clamped on her shoulder, and she froze. She didn't want a mark. Not yet. Not until she had every part of him, even his heart. The sharp feel of his mouth felt like pleasure at its purest.

His grip eased when she didn't move, and she flashed to human form and rolled to her back. He didn't follow suit, but instead snarled, determined to remind her of her place. She met his eyes and waited. She would not bow to him like the others. She was his equal, or nothing at all.

His lips curled, and she snarled in return. He snorted. He was laughing at her! Her fingers curled in the fur at the scruff of his neck, and she glared at him. *Do not laugh at me!* But it didn't stop him, his eyes filled with humor at her show of dominance.

When he flashed to human form, his energy poured over her. Like rain, it trickled over her body. Nora moaned at the sensation. Heat poured through her blood, thickening, building the sensation of desire.

She gave a fleeting thought to Adam. Sympathy, really, for he would never feel this all encompassing burning hunger. The anticipation alone was enough to howl at the moon in celebration.

"You are a tease," he snarled.

"Am I?" she asked, hiding her sudden need to grin. "And how have I teased you?"

His caught her palms in his hand and lifted her arms above her head, her back arching. She couldn't let him get away with that. Not yet. She struggled, but he held firm.

"You are mine."

"You know, you keep saying...." His mouth closed on her throat, and her breath caught. "That," she finished, her voice husky, "but I have yet to agree."

He laughed, a dark, masculine chuckle deep in his throat. "I distinctly heard you say you want me."

With his free hand, he caressed her side, sliding it down to her hip and over her thigh, and then back up. He still had yet to touch even her breasts, and already she was breathless, mewling like a child. She hated it. She loved it.

"What I said," she gasped, "was that I wanted you, not that I would have you as my mate."

Large knuckles scraped along the top of her nipples, hard and hungry for his touch.

"I will make you eat your words." He cupped her breast and squeezed ever so lightly. Her traitorous body curved into his touch. He nuzzled her neck, his unshaven whiskers rough and erotic. He spoke against her skin. "You will cry out for me, begging me to mark you before I'm through."

She tried to think, but the shewolf retained control of her mind. "I don't see me begging," she said.

He gave her a seductive laugh and nipped the soft skin at her shoulder. "You cannot deny what is between us, Nora. We are *True Mates*. You want me, and nothing can change that." To convince her, he swept his hand down the length of her thigh to her knee, and her muscles trembled.

"No, I can't," she choked out.

Ryland nuzzled her throat one last time, then moved on to her ear, whispering, "I'll show you what it's like to be with your *True Mate*. You won't be able to deny what we share."

* * * *

Everything about her was driving Ryland insane. His hand shook with the effort to control his need. He wanted to slam into her, bury himself inside her, and feel her moist heat wrap around him. Yet he wanted her to pay for her taunting. He wanted her insane with lust. Insane for him.

His hand inched up the inside of her thighs. So soft. Yet beneath, he felt the steel of her wolveren power, the muscles he couldn't wait to have bound around his waist.

"I don't deny anything." She moaned as his hand brushed across the most tender regions of her body. She arched toward his hand, and he knew, no matter what her heart wanted, her body was his.

"In time," he murmured softly, "you will be mine, and mine alone."

I'm already yours. She hadn't known what she wanted until the words popped in her head. She hoped he could only hear her words when she wanted him to, because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't hold back the thoughts in her mind. She loved him, and she wanted his love in return. His lips came down on hers, and even as she relished his taste, tears stung her eyes. Love was what was missing.

He kissed her, long and hard.

The sudden realization did little to cool the ardor she felt, and she groaned, desperate for his masterful touch, for the masculine, hard body to press into her. His tongue tormented her mouth, teasing her. He ended the kiss and pulled back.

“You will bear no other male after I am through with you.”

She shivered at the stark possessiveness of his words, at the dark, sensual promise. A promise already fulfilled and he'd barely touched her. In all her life, there had always been only him, though she'd been too blind to understand.

His lips touched her breast, and her mind melted beneath the liquid heat of his tongue. His lips poured over her like lava, burning out of control. She bit back a low growl and shoved upward into his mouth, offering herself.

His hand trailed down her side and to her thigh. Each touch scorched, as though he were the match and she the flint, leaving a trail of flame in its wake.

The steely burn of his hunger pressed hard against her thigh, but he didn't move to take her. Instead, he teased and taunted her body with his touch.

With a soft whimper of frustration, she buried her hands in his hair and yanked his head to hers. She needed the taste of him in her mouth, and she devoured him with her kiss.

He chuckled beneath his breath, and, if she'd been able, she probably would have hit him, but her body was no longer hers to control. Instinct had won out, ignited by his touch, empty and ravenous for what only he could provide.

Her fangs grew, aching and hungry. The tanned chest before her inflamed her senses. The scent of his body, combined with the sweat that slipped silently down his flesh, drove her to distraction. She raised her head from the forest floor far enough to lick the salty liquid from his skin. Like ambrosia, it travelled down her throat, one single drop at a time.

The heady taste and scent of his pheromones went straight to her bloodstream. She growled, nipping at his chest. The sharp points of her fangs scraped across his pectoral muscle, and she smiled when he gasped, his chest spasming in response. The rumble that followed only served to build her hunger to the point of pain.

The huge, masculine body above hers shook with pent up desire. The erotic sounds were constant as he nipped, caressed, and teased.

When at last she felt him spread her thighs, she growled in approval.

“Now, Ryland. Now.”

He groaned in response, his body shuddering. She felt the blunt tip taunt her, brushing against her center. He entered slowly, teasing her, inch by seductive inch. Her body shook with hunger, and she tried to lift to meet him, but his hands pressed her thighs hard against the earth.

The act of dominance sent an even stronger shot of pure hunger through her body. Her body writhed beneath his, starved for his thrust. “Please,” she murmured.

Why was he so slow?

“Please what, rabbit?”

His voice was tight, edged with the same desire as was running through her veins. His fangs glinted in the moonlight. He pressed inside her, slowly. Controlled. His goal may have been to drive her insane with desire, but she knew he'd nearly managed to do the same to himself. His muscles trembled above her, vibrating with his power. Her legs wrapped around him, hungry for more. When at long last he was buried to the hilt, he stopped and stared down at her. She lay beneath him, her breath coming in hard pants.

“Move.”

Her hips struggled to move and force him to her will. But he held steady.

“Look at me, Nora.”

But she was looking at him. At his body. A shudder ran through her body, and her gaze slid upward, meeting his. His yellow eyes, darkened to honey gold.

“No matter how long you make me wait, you are mine.” And with those words, he eased back, still teasing her.

She cried out, her body trembling with need. “Ryland, I’m begging.”

His lips curved, ever so slowly in triumph. She didn’t care. All she knew was she needed more. At last, he thrust, hard.

Nora cried out at the power and strength of the stroke. He’d done what he promised, forced her to beg, made her scream. Each stroke sent an explosion of heat through her body. Each hot lick of his tongue over her nipples served to draw her higher into a world she didn’t understand.

Her brain had long since quit working. Instead, her body wound tighter and tighter, reaching for something she’d never experienced. Her entire existence centered on him driving inside her, the sensations climbing with each stroke.

He slowed, and then stopped. She whimpered. She was so close.

He lowered his head and scraped her throat with his fangs. “Here, rabbit. Here is where I will mark you.”

She could only whimper in response, struggling not to offer her throat for his mark. Instinct and common sense warred until she focused elsewhere. The longer he was still, the higher her need built, and she pleaded with him. “Either move or kill me, Ryland. I can’t take this.”

He laughed, that low, masculine laugh he reserved only for her.

“Don’t make me beg again, Ryland.”

“No, Nora. Not again. Not tonight.”

And then he thrust. She screamed again. His hands released her hips, allowing her ease of movement, and she met him, stroke for stroke.

One hand fisted in her hair and tipped her head back, exposing her neck. But instead of leaning toward her, he lifted her with one hand beneath her back, drawing her upward. She was at his mercy, joined in the most intimate of ways, her body no longer touching the earth. He held her weight with ease, their bodies moving as one. A demonstration of his power, of his strength that of an alpha, and it shattered the last of her control.

Nora trembled, spasming in his arms. Sensation rippled through her body, exploding in the form of a scream ripped from her throat. Her eyes pinched tight, and sparks burst like fireworks beneath her closed lids. Nora heard his breath shudder in his chest, and as her own body shattered in its release, he tossed his head back and howled, joining her.

Time stopped, holding them both suspended in that moment for what felt like hours. Nothing else mattered.

Slowly, the clock moved forward, and her body softened. Ryland lowered her to the soft grass and settled in with her. They remained joined, her body cradling his.

She had so much she wanted to say, but her body didn’t work, nor did her mouth. All she could do was lie beneath him, and stroke his shoulders softly. A

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shudder ran through his body, and hers responded with an aftershock. They moaned in unison.

“Mine,” he whispered at long last. “Only mine.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Nora snuggled deep into the covers. A heavy, masculine arm rested over her waist, holding her in place. She inhaled, surrounded in the scent of Ryland. A smile curved her lips, her body heavily sated from their lovemaking.

A fist pounded on the kitchen door, banging in time with her pulse. She turned just in time to see Ryland's eyes pop open, and then he was up, charging through the den, not even taking the time to put on a pair of jeans.

In seconds, she heard voices in the kitchen. Nora grabbed her clothes and dressed quickly, finger combing her hair. The murmured voices were urgent. Something was wrong.

She stepped into the kitchen and saw Brogan, the male who seemed to be everywhere.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Sarah's in labor." The way Brogan said the words reminded her of a proclamation of death. "Where's your doctor? Why don't you call him?"

Both men looked at one another, and then back to her. "We don't have a doctor," said Ryland, his voice grim.

"You what? What did you have planned?"

Brogan shook his head. "She's a month early. We hadn't made plans yet. Joshua...he...."

Nora's eyes narrowed. "Joshua what?"

The men's gazes met, and, for the first time, Nora saw the discomfort in Brogan's face. *Later*. "You can go, Brogan. We'll be there in a minute." Taking over had never been her style, but now, she knew it was either she took over as alpha bitch of the pack, or the human would die. Shoving her fears aside, she grasped hold of what remained. Anger.

"Joshua what, Ryland? What was the plan? To let the mothers die?"

Guilt flashed in his eyes a second before his lashes dropped to feather his cheeks.

"That's it, isn't it? He planned to let the mothers die." Horror washed over her. "God, Ryland, what have you done?"

"I didn't do anything, damn it!" he shouted. "It was Joshua. He planned everything." His threw his arms out in frustration. "He left me with this mess!"

"Well that's a nice pat answer, isn't it? A really nice excuse." Sarcasm dripped from her words. "What was he going to do?"

Ryland stiffened and turned his back and muttered unintelligibly.

"I can't hear you."

He turned and faced her, his eyes filled with remorse, guilt and pain. "He was going to cut the babies from their wombs."

Shock rolled over her, the blood draining to her feet. She shook her head. "Tell me this isn't true."

"It's not me, Nora. It's not my plan. But it's why there was no doctor. I've only had control of the pack for a few months, and it's been tenuous at best. I hadn't even thought about a doctor yet."

Nora couldn't believe her ears. They had planned to mutilate and murder these women.

No, not they, she reminded herself. *Joshua*. The man's name had become a dreaded nightmare.

Ryland took hold of her arms and met her eyes. She'd never seen him like this. He was angry, yes, but there was more. She took in his scent and knew her eyes widened in surprise. Fear.

"None of our pack has even seen a baby born."

"You think I have?" She pulled from his grip and paced about the room. She turned to face him. There was only one person Nora knew who could help. "Call Anna."

"What?"

"Call Anna. Give her directions. I would, but it appears I'm needed at the other end of the compound. Call her, Ryland. Tell her I said we need her, now."

"I can't. If the Uwharrie pack finds where we are—"

"They'll do what? Try to take control? For God's sake, Ryland, call her. You can worry about pack dynamics later." She whirled to glare at him. "Unless that's more important to you than this woman's life?"

His lip curled, and she knew she'd hit a sore spot. He didn't want Joshua's dark legacy to succeed any more than she did.

For the first time since she'd met him, he looked almost defeated. He nodded to her. "I'll make the call. Go. I'll make sure Anna gets here."

Nora nodded. She turned to leave, but Ryland dragged her into his arms, pressing his lips hard on her forehead. "Thank you," he said roughly.

"For what?"

"For understanding."

"I didn't say I understood, Ryland." But she did. Joshua had left him with a horrendous mess. She hugged him tightly and gave him a quick peck on the lips. "Now make that call."

She pulled from his arms and ran down the hall before he could respond. Most of the pack stood in the hall outside the women's door. They moved to the side. The parting of the Red Sea, like she was the miracle to save everything. God, how she wished she was.

Diane and Jackie paced the living room inside the den. They wore pajamas, and their hair was mussed. Venomous looks darted her way the instant Nora walked inside.

"Did you come to watch her bleed to death?" The acid in Diane's voice took Nora by surprise. She took in the scents of the room. It was true. The room reeked with the smell of blood.

Nora shook her head. "The doctor's on her way."

She spun and poked her head back out into the corridor until she spotted Brogan. "Run. Tell Ryland she'll need blood. Hurry." When she turned back to the room, the two women glared at her. She brushed past them and walked to the bedroom.

Inside, Sarah lay on the bed, her body soaked in sweat. Her sister held her hand while Mary had one palm pressed against her belly, feeling the baby. A male Nora didn't know held her other hand, concern in his eyes.

The combination of animosity and hope was like a thick haze in the room. And it centered right on Nora.

"The doctor's on her way. What can I do to help?"

Mary shook her head. "There's nothing to do, unless you know how to turn the baby."

"Breech?"

Mary nodded. "She's not due for at least another month, but things have been so hectic. She's been showing early labor for weeks. It's why Diane was determined to get us out of here."

The reference to the attempted escape the day before hit hard. "Why didn't anyone say anything? For God's sake, I could have gotten the doctor here earlier, had her examined."

A look passed through the women. Nora clenched her fists. Searching for control, she took a deep breath and let it hiss through her teeth.

"Ryland isn't Joshua. He's not cruel, surely you know that?"

The women were quiet. They looked at Mary and also at Diane, and unspoken permission was asked. Approval came in so subtle a look Nora would have missed it had she not been watching. For the first time, Nora could see the pecking order. Diane made the decisions. Mary did the talking. Odd. Only humans could be so convoluted.

At last, Mary spoke.

"But he hasn't asked us if she needs a doctor. He hasn't offered any assistance, and he hasn't let us go."

Nora was exasperated. But not with the women. "You're right. But it was an oversight, not on purpose."

She moved toward Sarah, slowly, hoping to not frighten anyone. She whispered, knowing the woman didn't need to feel her frustration, "Anna will help. She's not a doctor, but she knows a thing or two about babies. She's a good woman. She's saved my life before, and she'll do whatever she can." She looked over her shoulder to the others. "Someone at least get a cloth and some warm water. And a towel. Let's see if we can at least get her dry for now."

Mary nodded and disappeared through the bathroom door.

"Can you do anything for her pain?" The male sitting beside Sarah spoke. One hand stroked Sarah's forehead, the other grasping tightly to her fingers.

"What is your name?" Nora kept her voice soft. As a child, she'd learned speaking with a calm demeanor kept otherwise high emotions in check.

"Ian. Ian Connory."

"Ian, she'll survive the pain," she said gently. "Women have been giving birth for thousands of years. Our only concern for her is that she's hemorrhaging. Hopefully, Anna can get some blood. That's what she'll need."

She moved closer to Sarah and placed a hand on her belly. There was no movement from the child.

"Don't touch her," cried her sister, her voice an acidic reminder of the anger surrounding her.

"Shhh," she said, ignoring the woman.

Taking deep, even breaths, Nora focused inward and listened. Every breath in the room whispered in her ears, and every heartbeat beat like drums. She closed her eyes and blocked out each adult sound. There it was, powerful, yet so fast. She smiled. "I can hear the baby's heartbeat. She's doing fine, despite everything."

"Are you sure?" asked Sarah.

She nodded. "I'm sure. Her heartbeat is strong."

Sarah visibly relaxed and grimaced. Another contraction ripped through her body, tightening every muscle. Nora watched the woman's body prepare to give birth, her own body tightening in sympathy. It was frightening. Terrifying, even.

Nora sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. There was nothing more she could do. The other women passed the time by cleansing and drying the mother-to-be. Mostly, no one spoke. The only sounds breaking the silence were Sarah's cries of pain.

Nora glanced at the clock on the dresser. It had already been forty minutes since she'd been roused from her bed. *Please, Anna, get here, fast.* She uttered the words like a prayer in her mind.

Sensing the sudden desperation in Nora's mood, Sarah spoke. "You have to save my baby. No matter what. Promise me?" The woman's gaze bored into hers. Nora saw strength there. And the love of a mother who cared for her child.

"We're going to save both of you," said a voice from behind them.

Everyone whirled to face the door. Relief gushed over Nora at the bright smile on the veterinarian's face.

"Anna, thank God you made it."

* * * *

Ryland surveyed his pack members milling in the hall outside the makeshift birthing room. The number of his pack in attendance surprised him, as did the worry in the edges of their eyes. He hadn't expected them to care. Perhaps there was hope for their pack after all.

Like the rest of the males, he felt useless and impotent. He couldn't control birth, and, more than anything, he couldn't stop death.

The worst part was he knew Nora felt the same. When he'd escorted Anna to the den, he'd felt his mate's relief.

It was hard to believe this beautiful female was the same woman who'd trembled in his arms, terrified when he'd grabbed her wrist. Pride burned inside him. She'd stepped right into the job of alpha bitch, building respect from his pack. That first morning, the entire pack had seen her fear, but they'd also seen her stand up to one of the most powerful males.

And now she'd taken over the room with the women, not letting the anger the humans had for their species get in her way. He'd heard her whispering comforting words to both Ian and Sarah.

"You know, boss, it's gonna work out."

Ryland turned to see Brogan standing beside him.

"God, I hope so, Brogan."

From where he stood he could see the women moving about the room. Nora moved to console Kirstin, wrapping her arm around the human woman. He watched Kirsten stiffen, and then relax, accepting the offered reassurance.

"Boss, I need to talk to you about something. It's about the women."

Ryland dragged himself from his musings and turned to Brogan. But before he could respond, the sound of an infant's cry broke through the night, and

Ryland grinned. He patted Brogan on the back. "Later, my friend." He left the males in the hallway and strode into the den.

He was a wild fire of emotion: pride, for his pack's first child, fear for that child's future, concern for the future of his pack.

Nora stood just inside the bedroom, a smile on her face, her hands busy creating a make shift crib from a dresser drawer. His heart warmed at the age old feminine motions. In his mind, he could see his mate caring for their own child, swaddling him and nursing him.

As though she sensed his presence, Nora turned to face him, offering him a tired smile. The hard shell of ice about his heart melted, and, for the first time, he wondered what she would mean to him in years to come. He moved to her side, resting his hand on her hip while she worked.

Anna was finishing up with her patient, with blood dripping into Sarah's vein from a bag.

"Is she going to be ok?" he asked. All heads swung in his direction.

"She'll be fine," said Anna. "Weak for a while, but fine. We'll need to make sure she gets a lot of rest, and some good food in her, and some help with the baby."

"I can help with the baby," said Mary.

"As will I," said Ian.

Ryland met the gaze of the man holding Sarah's hand. A huge grin decorated his otherwise bland face. Ian had been mostly quiet when Ryland arrived within the pack, but since Joshua's death, he'd been a constant companion to the pregnant woman.

Ryland stepped closer to the child held in her mother's arms. Leaning over, he brushed away tiny wisps of dark hair, hiding the widening of his nostrils, taking in the child's scent. It rolled through his lungs. To be sure, he opened his mouth just enough and inhaled again. The taste of birthing fluids mixed with the child's natural scent. One which mimicked that of Ian.

A grin broke out on his face, and he clapped the man's shoulder. "Congratulations, Ian. I'm happy for you." And he was. He'd been worried the child was Joshua's. Surprise and relief shot through him. Thank heaven she wasn't.

Ryland turned to look at Nora. His *True Mate*. He took her by the hand. They had issues to discuss.

Anna, the woman he'd once wanted for his own, was finishing up her tasks. He looked at her through new eyes tonight. He'd once thought this woman was his mate. Tonight, the only emotion he felt for her was gratitude.

He pulled his and his *True Mate's* clasped hands to his lips, pressed a kiss to her knuckles, and turned back to the doctor.

"Anna, is there anything else we need to do tonight?"

The woman he'd once wanted for his own shook her head. "No, I'll stay for the next few hours, make sure all is well. The baby was early, but she's perfectly formed. Then again, I'm not sure anyone knows what the gestation would be for human/wolven births. It could be she's right on time."

Ryland furrowed his brow. "I don't understand?"

“Well, the average shewolf carries for six months, while humans carry for nine. My guess is Sarah carried for seven and a half, half way between both norms.”

“But wasn’t it a breach birth?” asked Nora.

“Yes, but that could also be the combination of DNA. The mother’s body prepared the same way she would if the child were human. This baby is entirely formed, without any of the typical problems of a preemie.”

Ryland nodded. It was good information, but he shouldn’t have to worry about that anymore. None of these women would suffer at their hands any more.

He turned to Diane, who stood in the doorway. “Come by my office at nine in the morning. It’s time to send you ladies home.”

Nora squeezed his hand. The simple action sent a wave of warmth through his heart. He coughed into his fist to hide his reaction. Nora turned to look at him, her eyes puzzled.

Ryland turned his gaze to his mate. “Let’s leave these women in peace for now.” Wrapping one arm about her waist, they turned and headed out the door.

“Anna, if you need anything, let us know,” Nora said as they left.

The other woman nodded, preoccupied with examining her patients.

The pack was still gathered in the outside hallway. Ryland smiled, and lifted a hand. “Nothing more to see, gentlemen. All is well. It’s a healthy baby girl.”

There were sighs of relief, laughter, and even some cheers as they moved through the crowd.

“Boss?”

Ryland stopped and turned toward Brogan, his second, one arm still about Nora. “Yes?”

“I still need to talk to you. It’s... It’s about Mary.”

“What about her?”

Brogan looked like he’d swallowed something nasty, though smelled nervous. “I want permission to move her to my quarters. Permanently.”

Ryland stared at the man, trying to gage the reason, but Brogan refused to meet his leader’s eyes. “I don’t think that’s going to be necessary, Brogan. See me tomorrow afternoon about this.” The man nodded and moved to leave.

“And, Brogan.” The man turned. “You will do nothing without her permission. You will not touch her, or any of the others.”

Hurt flashed through Brogan’s eyes, but Ryland ignored it. He hadn’t made the pronouncement just for Brogan’s benefit. He’d said it for the entire pack. “I will not tolerate any further disrespect heaped on these women. Do I make myself clear?”

Surprised murmurs met his declaration, but no one voiced disagreement. Ryland knew he was repeating himself, but the women had had enough. They were not animals to be used as the pack saw fit.

Each male nodded in turn before averting his gaze, acknowledging the order. Except one. Ryland met Devlin’s gaze from across the hall. The wolven narrowed his eyes and glared at Ryland. Yes, this man would be trouble. After a tense moment, Devlin lowered his gaze.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ryland appreciated Nora's silence while he walked her back to the den. He was so tired. Tired of cleaning up after a dead brother who'd turned out to be his father. They stepped inside the kitchen, and Ryland turned and closed the door, pressing his forehead against it, his eyes closed.

"You ok?" she asked.

He nodded. His body ached with stress. Between the break ins, the women, and the murders, it felt like someone was trying to destroy everything he worked for.

The only light in the dark shadows was Nora. Nora. Her strength oozed over his skin like a comforting salve. *Thank God for Nora.*

"Maybe you should get some rest," she murmured, her hand resting between his shoulders.

He let out the air he held pent up in his chest and met her eyes.

"Not yet, Nora. I have to make a decision. We can't keep these women any longer than necessary. Brogan and my council are clueless, and I'm fresh out of ideas, but I have to come up with something."

She pursed her lips. "I think talking to Diane is a good idea, no matter how much I dislike her. The women have an odd sort of a pecking order. Not much different than a pack structure." Nora moved across the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, taking out two bottles of water. It seemed someone had added some supplies during the day. "She and Mary seem to share the load. Diane seems to make the decisions while Mary does the talking. I like Mary better, but since this will need full cooperation, I think Diane is the best bet."

He nodded, cracking open the bottle and taking a long drink.

"I'm thinking Sarah may actually want to stay. She and Ian look pretty close."

Ryland spun to meet her eyes. *Of course!* This was what Ian had wanted to talk to him about the night Ryland had met Nora. He'd never followed up with the male on the missed conversation. Perhaps Ian had always suspected the child was his.

"Don't worry. I've got a suspicion he hid it well. Joshua had staked a claim on Sarah, from what I can tell, and he was afraid to tell anyone that they were together." She hesitated, folding her arms to put distance between them. "I think they're *True Mates*."

Ryland couldn't move. His heart thudded hard in his chest. The implications of her words nearly ripped him apart. "You're telling me Joshua raped another male's mate?"

She bit her lip and nodded. "You couldn't have known, Ryland."

Ryland roared in fury and slammed his fist against the wall.

"God, what has he done?" Ryland whispered. His chest hurt, and his eyes burned. Joshua. The one and only male he'd looked up to as a child. The same man who'd struggled to protect and raise Ryland after what turned out to be his grandparents' death. How had it come to this? How had one good man turned so evil?

Rape. He'd tried so hard to pretend it hadn't happened. Yet, inside, he knew. It was why he'd tried to protect Anna that night by claiming her himself. It was why he'd been so determined to rip the pack from his brother's hands.

A soft hand touched his arm, and he looked down. Nora. A leader was supposed to be strong, and that's what she deserved. A mate who was powerful and able to protect those in his pack. Instead, she had him. Nature had chosen the two of them to be together. He almost wished he could step back in time, to the night at the bar. She'd have found a way to get away from those kids that night. Without him.

"It's not your fault, Ryland. You didn't do this."

"You're right. I didn't. But I still haven't found a way to release them."

"So do something about it."

He looked at her, shocked by the venom in her voice. "What do you expect of me, Nora?"

"I expect you to be what you are. The alpha of your pack. I expect you to work to find a way to release those women, to make up for the pain they've suffered."

"And how do I do that? How do I make up for years of rape? Mary has been here for almost three years, Nora. *Three years.* I can't make up for that."

"Have you talked to her? Have you asked her what she wants? You didn't even know Sarah had found her mate among your pack. Maybe some of the others have too." She took a ragged breath and blinked hard. "Maybe you can get them through this. All they need is for you to do what you do best. Lead."

Her words echoed through his mind and heart. Lead. How could he lead when he didn't know where to go?

She frowned at his silence. "Just ask them, Ryland. Ask them what they want. Ask them what they will do to get it. *Talk to them.*"

He nodded and sighed. "All right. I'll talk to them."

She smiled. "And, in the meantime, there's something I need."

He rubbed his face. "What?"

"I think, after all that's happened tonight, I need a hug."

Surprise jolted through him. *She* needed a hug? After all this, she wanted his touch? She wasn't repulsed?

She waited. Her gaze met his, and he saw something deep inside he hadn't expected. An emotion stronger than lust. And it wasn't pity. Thank God, it wasn't pity. He could swear he saw respect.

He held out his arms, and she came into them. Warm and soft. He held her tightly and kissed the top of her head.

"I never wanted to bring you into this," he whispered. "Since the first time I caught your scent, all I've wanted is to end this mess, to bring my pack together in preparation for your arrival. But then there you were, in that bar. I couldn't walk away. Not even after you were safe."

She sighed. The sound of contentment. He pulled back in surprise.

"I'm glad you didn't leave me there alone. But why? Why would you want to be here with me now? Why would you want to deal with the likes of Diane, and the birth of a premature baby?"

She stared in his eyes. "You really don't know?"

"No."

“Ryland, I want to be here with you now, so you don’t have to go through this alone. No one should have to be alone at a time like this. It’s true that the alpha needs to be strong and in control, but he doesn’t have to do it alone. I can’t pretend to know much about *True Mates* and the stories that go along with it, but I do know one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Even without your mark, I would never want you to be alone when things are at their darkest. I’ve been there when the pain feels like it won’t end. Nobody should have to feel that. I am your *True Mate*, and no matter whether you love me or not, I am here for you.”

Emotions swelled in his chest. Warm, churning emotions he couldn’t deny yet couldn’t identify. Could it be that simple? Could she really just want to be there for him?

His gaze rested on her lips. So soft and red, so tempting. He wanted to lose himself in her arms, and in her taste. Lowering his head, he brushed his mouth to hers. The soft sound of acceptance slipped from her throat, and he deepened his kiss, but not too far. He wanted to cherish her, to thank her for everything she was. Everything she’d already done for him.

He kissed her gently. Not because he didn’t want her, but because he did. She’d become so much more to him than the scared, little rabbit he’d met that first night. The sweet taste of her swept inside him, pushing away the worries of the night. He could so easily lose himself in her.

Heat built slowly between them. Gentle waves of arousal rolled through his body.

Ryland pulled back. “Come.” He took her hand and guided her to his bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The next morning came much too quickly. Ryland woke, his arm wrapped around the beauty that was his mate. *True Mate*, he corrected himself. Her scent was like an aphrodisiac, and he wanted to take her again. But he had business to take care of. He glanced at the clock, a stark reminder of the way his pack lived. Underground, unable to see and feel the sun. It was already after seven.

He got up and, with one last look at Nora, padded to the bathroom to shower. He had to meet Brogan, and then Diane.

More than anything, he hoped Brogan had come across information to help solve the murders. Something about the killings nagged at his memory. Could there be a connection between the murders and the women? If so, what could it be?

The water poured over his head as he went over the list of those killed. The first was an aggressive supporter of Joshua. Banan was not. From what he could tell, Joshua had tolerated the man because he was easy to control, and Banan had only stayed because Harry was here. Later today, he'd try talking to Harry to see if the boy knew anything.

The soap slipped from his grasp, hitting the tub with a thud. He still hadn't seen Harry since Banan's murder. He cursed. He reached for the water faucet. Foreboding trickled up Ryland's spine, and he growled. Something was very wrong about Harry.

* * * *

Nora woke with a start, surrounded by the strong masculine scent she so adored. She relaxed and smiled. She rolled over to find herself in bed alone. A pang of disappointment ran through her, but she ignored it. Ryland was a busy man and couldn't hang out all day in bed with her, no matter how much she'd enjoy that. The sound of the shower reached her ears. She smiled.

She glanced about the room, instinctively searching for a non-existent window. *This is not working. I need to find a way to bring the natural world inside this place.*

She glanced at the clock and tossed her covers aside. The bathroom door swung open, and Ryland walked out, a towel covering his head and his hands vigorously drying his hair, oblivious to his nakedness.

God, he's gorgeous. Powerful muscles rippled with every step, with every move of his arms. His skin was so golden one would think he spent hours beneath the sun's rays, instead of hidden beneath the surface of the earth. Maybe he had, before he'd become pack leader.

A soft rumble sounded in her chest. Pure feminine approval. He jerked the towel from his head at the sound, his eyes meeting hers, his gaze intense. Hungry.

"Good morning." His voice was gruff.

"Morning. Any chance for some breakfast before you start work?"

"No." He shook his head. "I have to meet Brogan soon. I'm hoping he has information about the murders. I have to stop these killings. I won't allow another on my watch."

She bit back the smile at his naval terminology. "And then?"

"I intend to have Diane brought to me. I want to talk and see where the women stand." He slipped his shirt over his head.

"I want to be there when she is."

He stopped midway, one arm in a sleeve, the other poised for dressing. "Why?"

She arched a brow. "I told you, there's something strange about that woman. I won't let her meet with you with her alone."

His eyes crinkled, and he slipped the arm through the sleeve and pulled the shirt down over his chiseled abs.

"You're jealous."

She saw his smug grin and wanted to smack him. Of course, she was jealous. "Maybe. Or maybe I'm just a shewolf who wants to protect the pack."

He moved toward her. "Who's pack?"

Why did he have to keep doing this? Every time he looked at her with those whiskey-colored eyes and used that low, luscious voice, her body did strange things. Things she couldn't begin to understand.

"Your pack."

He now stood just inches from her. His heat radiated into her body. She bit her lip. It took every bit of control she had to not drag his mouth to hers.

"Who's pack?"

She groaned. "Now isn't the time, Ryland."

He gave her a knowing grin. "I'm not letting you in to see Diane, not until you answer the question."

He was asking for commitment. Even without the mark, he was asking her to accept his suit. *But I've already made that decision. What's the problem?* But she knew. She didn't want to share her thoughts. Not yet. She wanted his love, not just his body.

"You're going to be late."

He glanced toward the clock. "Oh shit," he said. "I've got to go."

"I'll see you in a few minutes."

He stopped and turned. "The question, Nora. You can be in that meeting when you answer the question."

He turned and left the room, the door closing firmly behind him.

Damn. So much for getting out of that conversation. There was no way in hell that woman was talking to Ryland without her present.

It took no time at all to shower, dress and get some food prepared for Ryland. He'd said he didn't have time to eat, not that he didn't want to.

She headed out of the den and down the hall. She moved through the courtyard, hesitating when she caught an unexpected scent. Her nostrils flared, and she inhaled. Perfume. And one so strong it made it hard to scent the woman beneath it. None of the women wore such heavy perfume that she'd noticed. At least, not on a regular basis.

She followed the scent down one of the wheel spokes of the compound. The long hallway looped and wrapped the scent so effectively it was impossible to determine the source. Coming to a stop, she opened her mouth and inhaled again. The scent rolled over her tongue, bitter and strong. The perfume wasn't

naturally strong. It was heavy because it was poured on. She closed her eyes and concentrated, letting the taste and smell come together. She sorted through the unusual chemicals.

It wasn't just perfume. The subtle scent of Pine-Sol intermingled, along with the scent of a woman. A scent so soft and elusive she couldn't identify it.

Ryland did say the women weren't kept locked up any longer, so maybe one had been in one of the male's dens. Last night had shown her that several wolverines were interested in caring for the ladies. She shrugged and retreated, heading to Ryland's office.

Wolverines milled about, and one was painting. John, she remembered. He was painting in large colorfully blue strokes. She smiled, happy to see he'd taken her advice. He looked at her and grinned. She nodded and hurried to Ryland's office, determined not to miss the next meeting. Diane would *not* be alone with her mate.

* * * *

Ryland glared at Brogan, wishing he could pull information out of the man's head. "There has to be something. Two men can't die without any hint of who did it."

"I'm telling you there's nothing, boss. I can't find a single clue."

Ryland grimaced. "Maybe the lack of clues is a clue itself. Who do we have that's so detailed and able to clean up like that?"

"There's always Devlin."

Ryland snorted. "Devlin may not like me, but he wants the pack for himself. He's not going to kill his biggest supporters."

"Are you so sure about that? You've already beaten him once. Maybe he knows he can't win and is trying to undermine you."

"I wouldn't put it past him, but no. Not murder."

"If you say so. What about Harry? That boy's not right."

"And he's not violent either. I'd suspect you or I before I'd suspect Harry. Did you question the boy yet?"

Brogan's eyes widened. "No, I haven't seen him to talk to him."

"I was afraid of that. I've got a bad feeling about him. Nobody's seen him since before Brogan's death. Did you ask Paul? There was a note with an appointment that he was to meet Paul yesterday."

Brogan cursed. "I haven't seen Paul either."

"Damn it." Ryland tossed his pen onto the desk. His office had been ransacked ever so carefully again.

Brogan frowned. "I still say Devlin's our man. He would do just about anything to take control of this pack."

"The key words are *just about*. He wouldn't kill. No, we're missing something. Something important."

"Maybe it's not one of the pack?"

"So you are accusing Nora too?"

Brogan shook his head. “No, boss. I’m saying maybe someone has snuck in when we weren’t paying attention. It’s a big compound. We still have rooms not even used.”

Ryland studied his second. He was right. “How’s the den by den search going? Any luck?”

Brogan grimaced. “We’ve managed to confiscate about 15 bottles of the stuff, but no matching beer cans were in any of the pack members dens. Of course, they could have already dumped it in the trash compactor.”

Grasping at straws was never a comfortable feeling, and Ryland knew that’s what he was doing. He nodded. “Keep it up. I want this killer found. Check every place, even the unused spaces. If someone is hiding, find them.”

Brogan nodded. “Got it. Boss—”

“And find Harry. I want to know where he’s been for the last day or so. The boy could be in trouble. Get on it.”

The wolveren looked about to say something else and must have thought better of it. Ryland let him go. He didn’t need more fires to put out. Diane would be here any moment, and a piece of him hoped he’d finish their conversation before Nora arrived. He’d thrown out a challenge to her hoping to keep her out, but he knew she’d show up anyway.

Her jealous possessiveness was exciting, yet dangerous. If she saw him and Diane together, there was no doubt his mate would spy his respect and affection for the human. If he wasn’t careful, she’d kill the woman.

When the door opened, Ryland was struck with Nora’s scent first. The delicate, yet spicy feminine fragrance he couldn’t ignore. Thoughts of Diane dissolved in an instant. He’d taken her in every way he could imagine in the last twenty-four hours, and still he wanted her again.

“Did I miss anything?”

He shook his head, struggling to clear his head. He had important things to handle. “Diane will be here soon.” If his voice got any gruffer, she’d probably not be able to understand him.

“I brought you some food.” She set the bag on his desk, and he peeked inside. Another egg sandwich. Not a nice rare steak, by any means, but at least it was food. Soon he’d have to talk to Gerard and have supply give him a stock for his refrigerator. These eggs were starting to get old.

“Thanks.” Since the first killing, he’d spent all his time away from Nora right here in his office, not taking care of himself.

He pulled the food from the bag. “Do you have an answer for me? Or do I send you back to the den?”

Nora stared in disgust. Anger burned low in her gut, mixing with the continuous ache of desire. “You don’t have the power to *send me back* to the den.

He raised a brow. “You heard my condition. You stay only if you tell me whose pack this is.”

“It’s yours. You’re the alpha. It’s a stupid question,” she snapped. It wasn’t what he wanted to hear, she knew, but she couldn’t commit to his pack. Not yet.

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“And you heard what I said. I will not be rushed,” she snarled. “If and when I’m ready to make a commitment, you’ll know.”

“Is that so?” He stood and stalked toward her. His head was lowered, and he watched her from beneath shuddered eyes. “And when will you be ready? When I pledge my undying love?”

The sight of his fangs peeking through those masculine lips sent lust rolling like a freight train through her blood, pushing and pulsing through her body. “I’ll let you know.”

“Or is it,” he murmured, as he moved in on her, pressing her back against the wall, “when I refuse to take no for an answer, and I mark you here.” His hand trailed down her neck to her shoulder. “When I make you mine forever. Then will you say it?”

Sizzling heat followed his every touch, and Nora wanted to give in. The words were there, on the tip of her tongue. She bit her lip, struggling for control. Her heart wanted to speak, to profess her love for her *True Mate*, but her brain knew if she did, she’d never win his heart. He would hide it, deep within his soul, protecting it from perceived danger.

The knock on the door startled them both, and Nora pulled away, averting her eyes.

Diane entered, her blond head held straight and proud. Nora fought unsuccessfully to hide the growl at the inopportune interruption. It was bad enough to be interrupted, but Diane grated on her nerves. The human wanted Ryland. Nora didn’t care what Ryland thought. She’d seen the human’s eyes dilate, noticed the change in her scent, and in her behavior when he was around. She behaved like a rival shewolf.

“You wanted to see me?” Diane directed her question at Ryland, completely ignoring Nora. Ryland walked back to behind his desk, motioning for Diane to sit. She did not.

“Sit,” he commanded.

“I think I’ll stand.”

Nora bit back the curse on her lips. She was in heat, she was not a bitch. Well, not that much of one. “Please sit,” she said.

Diane green eyes flashed with anger, and she cut Nora a fierce look before dropping into the chair closest to the front of the desk, her jaw set hard.

Nora took several deep breaths, struggling for control. Okay, she was in heat. That didn’t mean she had to act like a jealous bitch. She closed her eyes and breathed, wrapping her mind around the last vestiges of her control. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been testy enough to bitch at a female, no matter how many times she’d been in heat.

Ryland leaned back in his chair, his expression unreadable. “We need to find a way to resolve the issue.”

“What’s to resolve. Let us go.”

He sighed. Nora could see the frustration in his eyes. “You know we can’t do that. At least....”

“At least what?” Diane prompted when he hesitated.

“At least not without some kind of assurance from all five of you that you won’t go to the police.”

She studied him for a long time before her lips curved into a sensual smile. She tipped her head. "Perhaps you can find something to offer us in return for our silence."

She was flirting! Or was she?

Nora widened her nostrils, inhaling, as jealousy twisted inside her. There was no arousal, yet something tantalizingly familiar filtered in the air between them.

"What did you have in mind?" Ryland asked. Nora growled, and Ryland threw Nora a warning look. Well, hell, where was this going?

The blond glanced at Nora and returned her gaze to Ryland. "I guess the question is: what do you have in mind? Do you intend to keep us here our entire lives if we don't agree to keep quiet?"

"Your group needs to go home, Diane," Nora said. "Staying here will only make things harder for everyone. You're the pack leader of the group. Talk to them. Convince them."

Diane swiveled to face Nora. The human's icy gaze trailed from top to bottom, her lips drawn into a disgusting smirk. Nora fisted her fingers, reminding herself that the female had been held captive, even raped.

"And tell them what? How if they keep their mouths shut, they can go home? That the creatures who abducted them don't have to suffer? That the ones who raped them will live free and happy lives?"

"They will be punished," interjected Ryland before Nora could respond. "The man who instigated this mess is already dead. You tell me who raped you, and I'll see he's punished."

Diane laughed, the sound a sharp echo in the small office. "Mess? Is that what we are to you? A mess?"

Ryland's brows rose, and he steepled his fingers, examining both women before him. Nora wished she could hear his thoughts. *Ryland, if don't get this under control, I will.* Ryland's eyes widened, and he looked at Nora, giving a subtle shake of his head.

Damn. She finally uses her ability to whisper in his head when it counted, and he was ignoring her.

"Tell me who raped you," he repeated.

"Then just like that, we can all go home and live happy lives?"

"If the ladies all give me their word."

She shook her head. "You just don't get it. You really think these women are going to just go home and forget what happened? What are they going to tell their families and friends? What's Sarah going to say, coming home with a baby?" She looked at the two of them.

Nora waited. Ryland had yet to present an idea for how to handle the child.

"Oh my, God," said Diane, her eyes widening. "You don't plan to let the baby out of here, do you?"

Ryland grimaced. "I'm trying to resolve this to the best of my ability, to make everyone happy."

He glanced toward Nora, and she raised a brow. What did he think she would do? Step in with some unexpected divination to help? He'd dug himself this hole by ignoring her, so he could damn well get himself out of it.

When she didn't reply, he continued. "I need you to go back to them and find out what will convince them to keep quiet. We're willing to work with them, to do the best we can, but we have limitations. We can't let the police find out who and what we are. It would destroy our entire race."

Diane settled back in her chair, her finger tapping the top of the conference table to her side.

Something about this woman wasn't right. She didn't act quite like the scared victim. Beneath the veneer of fear lay something else. Something Nora could appreciate. A spine. Yet there was something more. Nora caught the unusual scent again. She rolled it over her tongue, tasting it. Shit! This woman smelled like Anna had when she'd first met her. She was part wolverine.

Holding Diane's gaze, Nora fisted her hand in the woman's long blond hair, and, with deliberate aggression, she jerked the bitch's head back, baring the woman's soft throat. Nora leaned in and sniffed, taking in the woman's scent, detecting the rancid lie and searching for terror. The woman's eyes widened, yet there was no fear buried in the sweat on her flesh.

At long last, Diane lowered her eyes. Nora released her with a shove. "She's shewolf," announced Nora.

"What?" asked Ryland.

"She's at least half shewolf."

"Is that true?"

Diane glared at Nora, and then slowly nodded. "Yes."

Ryland slammed his hand on his desk then stood, resting his palms on the desk leaning forward. "Why haven't you told us?"

Diane's eyes flashed in anger. "What difference does it make, Ryland? I'm still a prisoner. I've still been raped. Joshua didn't exactly ask about family history when he snatched me."

"And you didn't think it was important when you attacked me in your den, did you," demanded Nora.

Diane whipped her head around. "It's none of your business," she hissed. "None of this is your business. You aren't the one who's been held against her will."

"Aren't I? You don't know me either, Diane."

"Enough."

Ryland's command was filled with pure authoritative power. Nora didn't even try to hide the shudder of appreciation running through her body.

"Diane, go back to the women and find out what it would take to make things right."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ryland fought to subdue the rush of emotion still washing over him. *Mine*. The word echoed, reverberating in his mind. He didn't care about Diane. The little shewolf minx could spend the rest of her life cursing him if she wanted. The half-breed had brought out attributes of his mate he couldn't, and, for that, maybe one day he would thank her.

He stood and hurried the women toward the door. More than anything, he wanted to get Nora alone, in his bed, open and ready for him.

With one quick, embarrassed glance in his direction, Diane left the room. Nora didn't say a word, her eyes shielded behind lowered lids, as she slammed the door behind the half-human.

The click of the lock on the door sent Ryland's heart racing in overdrive. His nostrils widened. The hot scent of her fury burned beneath the sensual feminine hunger filling the room. His eyes closed, and he couldn't help opening his lips, sucking in the tasty spice of her scent. He rolled it around his tongue, relishing her flavor.

Nora whirled to face him, and, before he realized what she had in mind, she shoved him. Hard. Jerked from his musings, he stumbled back crashing into the conference table.

"Easy," he teased. There was nothing amusing about what she planned. At least, not to Nora. That didn't mean he couldn't enjoy every minute of her nature. A shewolf in heat, burning in possessive rage, was the most arousing moment of a male wolven's life. If he wanted her possessiveness. In this case, he definitely did.

Ryland smirked and stepped backward, this time dodging the table.

She strutted toward him, her body a sensual swaying delight for his eyes. Her eyes flashed red, and he knew her wolf struggled for control. Yet, for all her anger, he only wanted her more.

"There's nothing easy about you, Ryland."

Her husky voice sent a rumble of pleasure through his body. Like heavy bass, it rolled like thunder down his spine. For an instant, he saw a flash of them together, hard rock music playing in the background, their bodies moving in time to the beat of the drums.

He fisted his hands to fend off the urge to grab her, and drag her soft, sensuous body against his. First, he had a question that needed to be answered.

"Who's pack is it, Nora?"

"Yours, Ryland. That hasn't changed." Her scent perfumed the room, and he could smell every emotion, every nuance. Hunger, confusion, anger.

Her hands caressed his chest, and the heat from her palms scorched his flesh, even through the fabric. "You can't have it both ways, Nora." He growled. "I'm either yours, or I'm not. The pack is ours, or it's not."

She shoved hard, and he fell back against the desk. She matched his stumbling step, her body hot, just inches from his. "I won't be pushed. I don't care what you say, Ryland."

God, the minx was driving him insane. Why wouldn't she just give in? Fighting their desires was no longer an option, so why did she still hold back?

Ryland yanked her body against his and hissed at the softness of her belly cradling the hardness of his body. "What do you want from me?" he ground out.

"I want you," she murmured. Her fingers grasped his collar and yanked him down, her lips meeting his half way. Her soft, demanding lips burned on his, and, for an instant, her tongue shoved hard against his. "All of you," she murmured into his mouth.

Her taste flowed across his tongue like a drug. He met her, stroke for stroke, relishing the fervor behind her desire. Despite taking her last night, heat built to an almost painful level. A hunger, more than physical, burned in his body, though he was loath to examine it. Not when her body was pressed against his, grinding against the hard ache in his groin.

Ryland could smell her desire and aggression, but underneath was something else. That same, elusive emotion he'd caught on her before. The scent filtered through his lungs, and the more he tried to identify it, the more it confused him. Before he could decide if something was wrong, her fingers trailed down his chest. In a quick move, she yanked the shirt open, shattering his thoughts as buttons pinged to the floor.

Energy trickled from her body, showering him with the magick of her wolf. Her nails lengthened to claws, their sharp points scraping down his flesh. Ryland's muscles trembled beneath her touch.

His hands clasped her hips, and he pivoted, pushing her back against his desk. "Careful, rabbit. If you keep this up, I'll take you right here on the desk."

"Promises, promises," she murmured. Her hands slid down his now bare belly, moving toward his belt.

* * * *

Nora could barely make her fingers work. Lust burned through her body, overriding her normal good sense. Instincts sparked high, pushing her, as she burned with hunger for Ryland. He'd once teased her about what she would do on this desk. It was time to show him. Thoughts of Diane flashed in her mind, remembering how the little half breed had teased and taunted Ryland right in front of her. If the bitch had been full wolverine, Nora would have ripped her throat out. No female was going to look at Ryland like that and live.

She would mark him with her scent if nothing more. Her emotions swirled inside her, mixing a dangerous cocktail of jealousy and arousal. With a hard yank, she opened his belt and undid his jeans. His erection sprang out, ready for her when the dark material parted. Her mouth watered with the hunger to taste him. All of him. Her fangs dropped.

"I want my answer." Ryland's deep voice rolled through her body, and it took all her control to not shout out what he wanted to hear. And what she wanted from him. She wanted all of him. His body, heart, and soul. He wanted her, body and soul. The conflict pierced her heart, and she refused to meet his gaze. Instead, she wrapped her fingers around the proof of his arousal.

He tipped his head back and hissed. She smiled.

"You said I'm yours," he ground out through clenched teeth.

"You know you are," she murmured, her voice low and husky.

"I know nothing of the kind."

"Since the moment of your birth you were mine."

The soft sound of a chuckle beneath his breath only stirred her senses higher. "Then I get my answer? Whose pack is this?"

Nora growled. She would not let him push her. "Take them off," she murmured.

He cocked his head. "Take what off?"

"The jeans. Take them off." When they'd made love the last two times, Ryland had taken complete control, denying her the opportunity to touch him and caress him. Now was the perfect time to remedy the situation.

He grinned. That male, sensual grin that reminded her of dark, hot promises whispered in the night. With sure, long fingers, he yanked the remnants of his wide-open shirt off and let it drop to the floor.

Nora swallowed. Hard. He was all sinew and tanned flesh. Flesh that stretched taut across wide shoulders and a powerful chest. Her eyes trailed down to the tight stomach, every muscle defined across strong ribs, down to narrow hips. A light dusting of hair led from his navel down into his jeans.

"Well?" he asked.

Nora licked her lips, hungry to trail her tongue along the sharp angles and tender flesh.

"The rest," she managed to get out, her voice rough.

"Does this mean I'll get my answer?" he asked, humor in his voice.

Nora met his stare. Despite his light tone he wasn't unaffected. His eyes were dark with hunger. "You'll get what you deserve." Though it might not be what he wanted. "Finish it," she murmured.

Ryland leaned back against the desk, resting his hands beside him. "You do it."

Nora bit her lip. Her body burned with the hunger to take him, at her pace, at her desire. To control their time together just this once. Yet if he touched her, she knew she'd melt into his arms. But, if she didn't get her hands on his body soon, she would melt into a puddle at his feet. She nodded. "Don't touch me."

Ryland smirked. "Scared?"

"No," she said.

"Then why can't I touch?"

"If you touch me, I'll stop."

His nostrils flared at the challenge, his eyes flashing yellow. At long last, he nodded. He opened his arms, waiting.

Nora studied him, absorbing the hot intensity of his gaze and dropped in front of him. Trembling hands gripped his thighs, caressing upward, her gaze steady on his.

She let her palms slide over the hard muscles, relishing the power hidden beneath his smooth flesh. She reached upwards, stroking his body, feeling the tiny hairs tickling her arms. Her eyes absorbed every one of his sharp, masculine edges. For the first time, she felt powerful in their relationship. He was an alpha, one of the strongest males she'd ever met, yet he trembled beneath her touch, the muscles in his thighs quivering with every caress.

* * * *

Ryland stared down into the darkened orbs of his desired mate's eyes. In all his life, no female had ever touched him this way, had ever controlled him with the simple caress of her hand. Her palms skimmed his thighs and cupped his manhood. Air hissed through his teeth, the urge to lewdly thrust into her soft hands almost overwhelming.

His mind struggled to maintain control. This had to stop. Her touch was too soft and addicting. Her fingers rolled around his erection. An edge of sharp emotion jabbed at his heart. He groaned and tried to jerk away, but she closed her fist about him, holding him in place. He couldn't do this. If she kept this up, she could destroy him. The simple touch of her hand would drive him down a path of no return. He couldn't trust, so he couldn't love. Ryland wrenched from his thoughts, searching for a distraction.

His hands gripped her shoulders, and she growled.

"I said don't touch." Her fangs were there, at his thighs, so close. So deadly.

"Enough," he ground out, yanking her to her feet. His lips closed on hers, capturing her denial in his mouth. Moving forward, he pushed her until she collided with the desk. With firm hands, he gripped her hips, lifting her until she was seated. "*Mine*," he muttered. His fangs scraped along her neck, and she whimpered. One hand slid between her thighs, parting them, leaving her open to his touch. He grasped her thighs and yanked her forward until she slid to the edge, pleased at the look of surprise in her widened eyes. He stepped into the sweetness of her body, her heat cradling him. *Yes*. This was where he belonged.

Holding her in place with one hand, the other strayed to her blouse, shoving it high, baring her breasts to his eyes and to his touch. His fingers traced the edges of her body, from her throat to her waist. One soft curve after the other. Her eyes fluttered closed, and he resisted the urge to bare his fangs, knowing if he did, he would mark her. Her skin was so soft, so delicate.

Secure she wasn't fighting his sudden surge for control, he moved to fist her hair in his hand, and he tipped her head back, exposing the soft, tender flesh of her throat. His mouth closed on her hot flesh.

His fangs pierced through his gums. The *True Mate* bond hungered for fulfillment. A struggle between instinct and control raged inside him, and a groan escaped his throat. One sharp canine pricked her flesh, and she whimpered. An answering tremor ran from his head downward, heat sparking in its wake.

If I don't move, she'll have no choices left to her. He could take her, right now, mark her. Her body was already too caught up in the hunger smoldering between them. There was no way she would fight him.

If I do, I'll be no better than Joshua. Hiding the conflict inside him, he let his mouth slide down her body until he found the sweet, perked tip of a hungry nipple. The instant his lips closed over the nub, she jerked, pressing her body against him.

"Ryland," she cried.

The sound of his name on her lips resonated inside his heated mind, though instinct continued to direct his every move. Determined to fight the building

hunger to pierce her flesh with his teeth, he fought through the lust, searching for a distraction.

His fingers closed over the tiny scrap of material hiding her sweet charms from him. With a quick jerk, he yanked the cloth. It ripped, shearing the last barrier between them. She gasped in surprise.

Hunger exploded, driving him to the edge. He needed to be inside her. Her hands caressed his chest, fluttering, so soft and feminine. Each stroke built the fire in his heart. A fire which sent a surge of panic through his mind.

To distract her, he slipped a hand between her thighs. The instant he touched her soft center, she arched, her body trembling. Her soft cry was nearly his undoing. He clenched his fingers and tried again. Her body shuddered, and his heart did the same.

* * * *

Nora raised her eyes to meet Ryland's. The ice blue was gone, replaced with the fire of amber. When he linked their hands, Nora's heart nearly exploded. Before she could react, he leaned into her, forcing her backward on his desk. He stretched her arms until her hands were even with the opposite side of the desk.

"Hold on," he ordered.

She shook her head. She wanted to touch him. Needed to touch him.

"I said, 'Hold on.'" His hot gaze scorched her already sizzling flesh.

Nora nibbled the inside of her lip and nodded. Her body demanded she obey his commands, but her heart worried. She reached back, grasping the edge of the desk. For an instant, old fears rushed in, her body laid out more like a sacrifice than a mate. But then he touched her. His hands encircled her waist, and just like that, her confidence returned.

He shoved forward, entering her. She arched and screamed. He felt so good. So right. He slid back and thrust again, hard, filling every part of her. And then he stopped.

His body shook with emotion and need. His scent was a mixture of hot, needy masculinity and pure wolverine hunger. Yet underneath was a softness, an emotion she'd not sensed in him before. Her heart skipped a beat.

His fangs pricked against her breast, teasing. He thrust inside her again, and again. Each motion drove her own needs higher. His mouth moved upward, taunting her body. When he latched onto her shoulder, she trembled.

"Nora." His voice was gruff, animalistic. "I need...."

She shook her head, her eyes wide in panic. She knew what he was saying. He wanted to mark her, needed to. She felt the same urge, shooting through her veins, driving her instincts to the very edge. "Ryland, no."

"Stay still." He leaned into her, his breath coming in huge gasps.

He held her, his hands caressing her flesh, ratcheting her need even higher. He buried his face in her neck. The softer emotion flooded around him. Unable to resist, Nora opened her lips, tasting every bit of the essence. It rolled in her lungs, exploding inside her. Her body arched, and she screamed. The orgasm was unexpected, shattering the last of her control. Spasms ripped through her body,

vibrating from her very core. Her pelvic muscles contracted, milking the hardness within her.

He moved inside her, the explosion of pure lust intensifying, rolling through her body, driving her onward. At long last, the spasms eased, her climax having run its course.

Ryland remained above her, his face hard, his eyes glittering more yellow than amber as he held himself in check. Nora released the desk and touched his face. He jolted, surprise filling his eyes

“Ryland,” she whispered. Their bodies continued to move together, joined as though one, his hunger still not sated.

* * * *

Ryland stared down at the woman beneath him. His *True Mate*. Yet he felt like an animal for the first time in his life. There was no finesse as he stroked inside her, no ability to push her to her own pleasure. All he felt was the need to taste her, for his fangs to pierce her flesh. The hunger to mark her shook him to his core.

He wanted to allow her the time to come to him, but he wasn't sure he could do this again. Each stroke sent him higher and higher, but still his mouth watered. He gritted his teeth, burying his fangs in his own lips, determined to hold back.

Soft hands caressed his face. His heart thundered in his chest, and Ryland's mind whirled. Pressure built, pushing lower in his body, searing his blood with his own hunger. Such sweet torture. He wanted it to last forever. He wanted it to end.

But when she grabbed his head and yanked his lips to hers, he exploded. He roared into the depths of her mouth. His body shuddered, and he slammed one last time against her. Her answering scream sent them both over the last precipice. Her body trembled and shook beneath him.

It felt like he emptied his very soul into her waiting body, shooting his seed deep inside her. And when his body collapsed onto hers, the terror in his heart intensified. *Oh, God, I love her!*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ryland's heart pounded so hard he couldn't believe she didn't notice. He rested his weight on his elbows. He struggled to contain the whirling emotions, desperate to keep Nora from sensing them, glad she was still in the throws of her own climax. He breathed in and held his breath, focusing his mind on a countdown, like the seconds of a clock in reverse. Anything to get back his focus. She couldn't know about his feelings. Not until he was sure of her motives. Part of him scoffed at his sudden suspicions, but he'd learned the hard way that trust was a two-edged sword. Joshua had shown him just how useless the bonds of family and love could be, especially when slicing through another's heart with lies.

Pounding on the office door brought him from his musings and Nora from her after glow.

"Boss, boss, we got a problem."

Ryland was almost relieved at the interruption, and he swallowed the sudden surge of guilt. He was alpha. He had every right to question the motives of an outsider. It was the only way to be prepared for trouble.

He smiled at Nora, ruefully. "Back to the real world."

She chuckled. "Guess you'd better open the door."

Ryland dressed and turned to be sure Nora had finished. She was already adjusting her blouse, so he opened the door. Brogan stood on the other side, distraught.

"Boss, it's Devlin."

A growl came unbidden to his lips. "What's he done this time?"

"He's dead, boss."

The blood drained from his face, rushing to his pounding heart. "Where is he?"

"In his place."

Ryland stormed past Brogan, with Nora close on his heels. He rushed down the hall, taking in the pack. Some averted their gazes; others glared at him accusingly. And then he stopped. The scent washed over him like an ocean breeze. He turned and stared at his mate. It couldn't be. Yet there it was, her scent, outside Devlin's door.

That tiny seed of mistrust germinated. She couldn't have done it, could she? It was true. Nora belonged to a rival pack. She'd spoken to her father, admitting that she knew he was a part of a rogue pack. Nora was smart and an alpha female: the only female who could get under his skin. And she had complete access to his pack. Had she already known they were *True Mates*?

She'd been stringing him along, not allowing him to touch her until she herself was caught in the web of her own making.

And none of the murders happened until after she'd arrived.

God, he'd been a fool. A furious growl rose. "Why," he demanded.

Nora's eyes widened in surprise. "You can't think I did this!"

"Why were you in this hallway?" *Please, have a good excuse.*

"I caught an odd odor," she said, flinging a hand toward the end of the hall. "Perfume. And yes, I smelled some Pine-Sol too."

"Who's perfume?"

Nora folded her arms, her brown eyes flashing in anger. "I don't know. I thought perhaps I was imagining it."

Ryland sniffed the air. There was a perfume. Light and flowery, it floated through the air, almost hidden beneath the scent of his mate.

"If you still think I did it, go in there, you tell me. You know my scent better than anyone."

"The killer uses Pine-Sol, Nora, you know that."

"Kieran did it. He found his mate's scent even through the Pine-Sol." The sound of his warning growl did nothing to slow her tirade. "The day he rescued me and my father. Are you telling me you can't find my scent even when it's hidden? Is Kieran that much more powerful than you?"

Ryland snarled, his fangs cutting his lips. He fisted his hands in an effort to remind himself not to reach for her, to teach her who was most powerful.

"Watch her," he ordered Brogan, not taking his eyes off his *True Mate*. He prayed she was right, that he wouldn't find her scent inside Devlin's den.

Nora met his gaze, unblinking. Challenging him to believe her. He wished he could. He had an entire pack relying on him. If he played it safe and was wrong, she would never forgive him. If he believed her, and she was the killer, he would never forgive himself if someone else died.

With a sharp nod, he spun on his heel and entered the den. The powerful stench of Pine-Sol turned his stomach, and he grimaced. When this was over, he would ban the use of that cleaner anywhere in this compound. He moved to the bathroom, where he knew he would find the body.

Like all the rest, Devlin lay in his bathtub. The wolf's throat was cut from ear to ear, the bottom of the tub filled with blood. Ryland ground his teeth and leaned forward. Something glittered beneath the male's heavy paw. Ryland straightened and glanced around, searching the bathroom. He spied a toothbrush. That would have to do. Using the handle of the brush, he moved Devlin's foot. Beneath was a medallion. Ryland peered closely. A St. Christopher's medal. The Patron Saint of Travelers. It could belong to anyone. Except Nora. She didn't bring one with her.

Straightening, Ryland laid the toothbrush on the bathroom counter. Careful to touch nothing else, he glanced at the mirror. *Paid in Full*. Again. The blood red letters stood out in relief against the silvery glass. The same message on each mirror. But paid for what? A dark, knowing sensation twisted in his gut, and Ryland was pretty sure he knew if not who the killer was, why the person killed. Joshua. His insanity had at long last caught up to the pack.

There was one more test. He still hadn't sorted through the scents. The medal could belong to Devlin, though he'd never noticed the man with one. The close proximity to his front paw, however, indicated he had probably ripped the medallion from the neck of his killer.

It was time to see if Nora was telling the truth. Ryland sneezed, clearing his body of extraneous scents and closed his eyes. One at a time Ryland identified and discarded each odor. The coppery blood, the acidic Pine-Sol. Even the food Devlin had cooked this morning.

All that remained was the perfume. He rolled it through his senses, struggling to identify it. The fragrance was familiar, but not so familiar he could say who

wore it. With one last long inhale, he rolled the scents over his tongue searching for the telltale taste that belonged to his female. Nothing. Not one iota of her taste or scent washed through his senses.

Ryland's eyes popped open, and he tried to hide his grin. He swallowed the jubilation building in his chest. She was innocent. *Thank God*. She was innocent. Of course, chances were she was also furious. In a momentary lapse, he hadn't trusted her. Ok, maybe he'd really known deep inside, but he had a pack to protect and had to be careful.

Ryland spun, ready to race out the door, only to slam into Gerard as he entered the bathroom. "The killer left something behind this time."

Gerard raised his brows.

"Under his front paw. I used that toothbrush to move his foot to look, but left the item in the tub for you," said Ryland, motioning behind him.

"Good," said the security manager.

"Are you going to keep a tight leash on that mate of yours?"

Ryland let a low rumble up his throat. "She's innocent."

"Really? Then why is Brogan guarding her outside the door?" Gerard stared at him through ice-hard grey eyes. Eyes that, in that instant, reminded him of Joshua's.

"Find what you can here." Ryland pushed past Gerard and stalked from the room.

* * * *

In the hallway, Nora leaned against the wall, her arms folded, and one knee bent, allowing her foot to prop behind her. She glanced at Brogan. He pretended to be interested in the pattern of the wall while he watched her from the corner of his eye.

Nora swallowed the growl forming in her throat. It wasn't Brogan's fault. This was Ryland's doing. The male who had claimed to be her *True Mate*. Some mate. The instant he'd caught her scent in the hall, he'd blamed her for the murders. She'd seen it in his eyes, in the sudden wounded expression. Only he wasn't the one hurt. What motive would she have? She didn't even know those men. Hell, if she were going to kill anyone, it would be that bitch, Diane.

Nora blinked back angry tears. *I will not cry over this male*. Maybe if she thought it enough times, she would believe it. Even now, her eyes stung with moisture. He'd done the unforgivable: Tricked her into loving him when it was obvious he didn't care a lick for her. With a sharp jerk of her hand, she brushed away the lone salty drop trickling down her cheek.

The door to Devlin's den swung open, and Ryland stormed out. Nora didn't move, glaring at him. He moved across the hall and grasped her arms. She straightened, curling her lip and letting loose a soft, threatening snarl.

"I was wrong. I shouldn't have leapt to such conclusions."

Nora shrugged and dragged herself away from him. "So, I take it you decided you were wrong *after* you realized my scent wasn't there."

Ryland shook his head and reached for her, but she yanked her arm away. An exasperated sigh filled the air between them. La-di-dah. He had no business getting frustrated with her.

"I knew before. We should talk about this, later. I need you to go to our den." His voice was soft, coaxing.

She arched a brow at him, shocked. "*Our* den? Don't you mean yours?"

"Please, Nora." He glanced toward Devlin's door, and then back to her. "I have to take care of some things. I've left too much for others of late."

"Fine. I'll go. I have things to do before I pack."

His expression was unreadable as his gaze roved over her. He merely nodded and turned to his second. "Brogan, go with her. Stay with her and keep her safe. I don't want anyone in that den but the two of you."

Brogan nodded. "No problem, boss. I'll see she's kept safe."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Nora, I need to know you are safe. People are dying."

She pursed her lips. Now wasn't the time to argue. Males, who were stronger than she would ever be, were dead. There was no way she would be a target, though. She wasn't a pack member. The only good thing to come from Brogan babysitting was Ryland's peace of mind, and, right this second, she didn't give a damn about his peace of mind.

"Nora, we'll talk about this mess in a few minutes. I have to deal with this, while everything is fresh. Go with Brogan. Allow me that."

There was pain in his eyes. But she wasn't sure if he hurt because his pack was hurting, or because she was leaving. Too bad. He'd have to deal with it. She spun on her heel without speaking, leaving her watchdog to catch up.

Chapter Thirty

Two hours later, Ryland opened the door to his den. He was bone-weary and desperately needed a shower, but he had to take care of Nora first.

Brogan sat in his easy chair, watching TV.

"Hey, boss."

"Where is she?"

Brogan motioned toward the den. "She's in your den on the computer. I hope you don't mind. You didn't say to limit her movements beyond keeping her here."

Ryland dropped onto the couch. "No, that's fine."

"Find anything?" Brogan clicked off the TV and laid down the remote.

"The perfume is no help. It turns out to be the same perfume Devlin kept in his den. Gerard says he was known to give bottles of it to the women after he raped them. An apology of sorts, I guess," he said with disgust. "Our past is coming back to haunt us, Brogan. I don't know who this killer is, but there's a pattern, and only one victim doesn't fit."

"What pattern?"

"They were the rapists. Every wolverine killed was among the ones who were the most supportive of Joshua's treatment of the women. The only one I don't get is Banan. He never treated anyone with disrespect. I can't see him raping any female."

Brogan sighed. "Yes, he did."

"What?" Ryland jerked his gaze to meet his friend's.

"Banan did, once. You were out of the building that day. Joshua forced Banan, said if he didn't, Harry would be sent packing."

"So, he raped a woman because Joshua forced him to?" Ryland asked in disbelief. Was Joshua that frightening that he could force someone to do something so out of character?

Brogan nodded.

This just got worse and worse. His best friend struggled to hide the disgust from his eyes. "Joshua even had Mary tied to his bed, said he wouldn't let her go until Banan did the deed. It was just after you and I first showed up."

Ryland bolted from the couch and paced the room, one finger rubbing the scar on his cheek. "How do we recover from this, Brogan? Joshua's legacy has nearly destroyed this pack, and some bastard is determined to make things worse by killing."

"I don't know, boss. Maybe...."

Ryland stopped and turned. "Maybe what?"

"Maybe we should have a trial of some kind. Establish who are guilty of rape and deal with them that way."

"An interesting idea." And it just might work. If the women cooperated, they could find who the rapists were, bring them to trial, and judge them according to pack law. It would assure the women the males would be punished, and help to convince them to be more willing to keep the pack a secret.

"Has anyone seen Harry yet?" He couldn't believe Harry was still missing. The search teams had so far turned up nothing. The boy couldn't be far. No, male, he corrected himself. A boy's mind in adult's body.

“Not yet, boss. I’m sure he’ll turn up. I just hate that he’s so terrified that he has to hide like this.”

Ryland’s nod was sharp. “My biggest fear isn’t that he’s terrified, but that he’s in danger.” There was no telling what had happened to Harry. Not with everything going on. Was everything related? Harry’s disappearance? The killings? The person rifling through Ryland’s own office and den? No matter how hard he tried to piece the puzzle together, it didn’t work. There were too many pieces on the board.

It made sense. The killings were carried out by either one of the women, or one of the males who supported the women. Retribution. *Paid in Full*. Had the killer take out Harry too? And then hidden his body because he didn’t match the profile?

The biggest puzzle was the searching of Ryland’s space. He had nothing to hide. For the last few weeks, he’d done nothing but try to undo the havoc Joshua had wreaked. Could there be some underlying secret he hadn’t found yet? Something dangerous, like the kidnappings and rapes of five innocent women?

Speaking of women, he had one angry female to deal with. “So, was Nora much trouble?” he said, returning the conversation to Nora. “Is she very angry?”

“She hasn’t spoken. She stormed in here and went straight to the computer.”

Ryland nodded. She was probably transcribing more of Joshua’s notes. To him, they were no longer important. A curiosity. One which kept Nora’s mind occupied. She had to be going stir crazy. “Sorry to have to leave you with her while she’s in heat. I know it couldn’t have been comfortable.”

Brogan shrugged and stood. “Oh, it was nothing. Nothing at all. I have my own mate to worry about.”

“Mate?” asked Ryland, stunned.

“Yes, my mate. I’ve been trying to tell you since Joshua died, but you’ve not given me a chance.”

“Who?”

“Mary.”

“Mary’s your mate? Since when?”

“Damn, Ryland, are you blind? Since the moment I laid eyes on her. You used to yell at me for bringing her to my den but never once asked me why I did it.”

Ryland paled. Joshua’d had Brogan’s mate tied up and raped by another male. Had he known what he was doing at the time?

“I’m sorry,” he choked.

“I said before none of this is your fault. We were both fools in the beginning.”

Ryland nodded, but his friend’s absolution did nothing to ease his guilt. “And what does Mary think about you being her mate?”

A grin broke out over the male’s face. “I think she’s ready to accept me now. For the first time, last night, she actually cuddled with me.” The grin faded from his face. “She’s broken, Ryland. Joshua raped her so often she’s terrified of anything male. I brought her to my den to protect her. I had her sleep on my bed while I slept on the couch. I couldn’t stand the sight of her fear.”

Ryland closed his eyes. He wanted this all to just go away. Even his best friend, the man who’d come to this pack because of him, was hurt. “I’m sorry, Brogan. I don’t even know what to say.”

"Nothing you can say. You didn't do anything to hurt her. I can't blame you."

"But it's possible I could have stopped this, if only—"

"If only what? You'd killed your own brother yourself? Even I couldn't expect that of you."

"I wish I had. Nora's had a tough time too. She was held captive three months before we met. How can I offer to be her mate when she must see me as no better than the man who held her prisoner? Just because I don't torture them doesn't make me better."

Brogan's eyes widened. "She was tortured?"

"Yes. And bears the scars to prove it. Narrow, almost surgical slices along her back. Made with silver."

"Damn, Ryland. No wonder she's so jumpy. But I'm sure she knows you wouldn't do that. You're doing your best to release these women."

"Yes. I am. Thanks."

Ryland escorted Brogan to the door. "Do me a favor."

"What?"

"Don't move Mary in with you just yet. We need to find out who the killer is. He or she is close to the women, and we need to watch them closely to see who it might be."

Pain flashed in his friend's eyes. "I don't want—"

"I know, Brogan. I don't want her separated from you either. Please, just for a few more days. If we can't figure out who this killer is soon, I'll let you take her to your place. But for now, I'd like to keep the women together during the night."

Brogan nodded, but Ryland knew he didn't agree. "Soon. I promise."

Brogan closed the door behind him, and Ryland expelled the air from his lungs. He moved to put the remote control back on the TV when Nora walked in the room. Her head was down, reading the printed pages in her hands. Her brow was furrowed with worry. Worry he was pretty sure he put there. Maybe he should start his groveling by kissing those worry lines away.

Her eyes lifted to his and dropped back to read more of the pages. That tiny flicker of her gaze warmed his heart in places he'd not realized had gone cold. Sweet, rich, and sensual. Seconds in her presence and already he wanted to reach out and pull her against him.

Was it possible he was going insane? Like his father? He had enough on his mind, important things. Bedding a female shouldn't be at the top of his list, yet within seconds, all he could think of was her touch, and being touched.

"Hi," he said, feeling like an awkward teenager.

Without a word, she handed him the pages, turned around, and stepped toward the hallway.

"Nora," he began. She stopped, waiting, but didn't turn to face him. "About earlier—"

She spun on her heel and came at him, her face filled with anger and pain. She pounded one finger into his chest. "About earlier? Ryland, there's nothing to talk about. You showed me exactly how you feel."

"No, I didn't."

“Didn’t you?” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. “Aren’t you the one who took one good sniff in that hallway and *knew* I was the killer? I guess I’m supposed to just ignore that glaring little error.”

“I have a pack to protect, Nora.”

“You *had* a mate to care for, or did you forget that little fact.”

“I did not,” he said, through clenched teeth. He’d known she was angry, but he hadn’t expected this ferocity.

“You made it perfectly clear where your priorities are, Ryland. I know now you can’t give me what I need most.”

“And that is?”

She stood, feet planted shoulder width apart, her eyes blazing red in her fury. She tossed her head, and the dark curtain of hair floated behind her shoulders, like the wings of a dark fairy in a picture book. The movement did something to his insides. Damn, she was beautiful.

“Trust, Ryland. Love. You can’t trust me, and you can’t love me. I will not tolerate a loveless and trustless relationship.”

He glared at her, anger roiling in his belly. He swallowed his own guilt. There was a reason she’d stayed after her talk with her father. Until he knew what it was, there could be no trust. “I never promised you love, Nora. Hell, I can’t love anyone.”

“No, you didn’t promise me. And now I see why.” She spun on her heel and stormed toward the hall.

“What are you doing?”

“Packing. Call about my car, I want out of here by tomorrow. In the meantime, I’ll be where I should have been since the beginning. With the rest of the females of this pack.”

Ryland stormed across the den and grabbed her arm, pulling her hand off the doorknob to Joshua’s bedroom door. “You’ll do no such thing.”

Nora looked down at the hand on her arm, her fangs glittering in the light. A low, viscous growl rolled from her throat. “Take your hand off me.”

Ryland raised a brow. This was going all wrong. He needed her, now, more than ever before. He eased his grip on her arm, but didn’t let go. “Nora, we can work through this.”

“Can we?” Her laugh was brittle. “Do you trust me, Ryland? Or do you love me?”

His heart sank. He had to lie to her. The last time he’d trusted anyone, it had been Joshua. “I couldn’t even trust my own father, Nora. How can I trust anyone else? How can I love?”

* * * *

Nora didn’t know if she wanted to bean him with something from one of his boxes lying around or comfort him. Wait, what if... “Ryland, read the damned pages in your hand. You’ll find who’s been breaking into your den. At least you can solve one problem today.” Nora whirled and headed for the bedroom. She’d kept the plastic bag she’d almost packed the day before and stuffed her few items inside. It didn’t take long because she didn’t have much.

Dark Succession

When she returned to the living room, Ryland was sitting on the chair, engrossed in his reading. Part of her wanted to stay, to help him through what he was reading, but if she did that, she'd give in and stay forever. Guilt twisted inside her, and her hands shook as she grabbed her shampoo. He was about to get the shock of his life, and she was leaving him.

She took a deep breath and remembered her resolve. Being close to him would be torture. Her body wanted him at every turn and her heart... Well, her heart was already lost. There was no chance of getting that back. Just like there was no chance to convince Ryland to trust her and love her. But if she stayed away from him, severing their ties early, she could maybe ease the transition back to her old life.

"Don't forget my car, Ryland."

He nodded, and she was sure he didn't hear her. She closed the door softly behind her.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ryland absorbed each word on the pages carefully. It wasn't possible. Yet Joshua insisted it was truth.

There is another secret I have kept from you, son. You have a brother. After I left you and your mother, I met up with a female from the pack down in Georgia. It didn't take long before she too was pregnant. Unlike your mother, she knew what she was getting herself into and kept the child. No matter how hard I tried, she wouldn't give him up to me. I thought about stealing him away in the dead of night, but decided against it. I had enough to worry about without a squalling infant on my hands. So I let her raise him.

I went back for him two years before you came to stay with me. His mother had already died, and I dragged him here. I had him trained in security, and he's been with the pack ever since.

Gerard! It had to be. Nora had typed this while he'd handled Devlin's body. He gazed around the empty room. "Nora?"

When she didn't answer, he stood and ran to her room, and then searched the rest of the house. Surely, she hadn't left while he was reading? She'd seen these pages, knew what they said. Would she leave him regardless? Had he injured their bond that deeply?

"Nora," he shouted. Nothing. Damn her.

He ran to Joshua's room. It was empty. He checked the closet. Bare. He charged back into the kitchen. His mind spinning, he slumped into the kitchen chair. What had he done? He'd let his own personal happenings get in the way of the one relationship that was meant to be. He'd pushed away the one female he would now want for the rest of his life.

* * * *

Nora stormed down the hallway carrying her single plastic bag filled with her clothing and toiletries. How dare he? Not only had he said he couldn't love or trust her, but he'd completely ignored her from the moment he'd scanned those damned pages. He hadn't even acknowledged her when she'd walked out the door.

Males scurried out of her way, most casting furtive looks in her direction. She didn't care. These males had no clue what true danger she'd already faced, before coming here, and they were nothing to her. A couple of them were in wolf form, searching, she assumed, for scents that could lead to Devlin's killer. She hoped they found him, and soon. Because she'd made a promise to Ryland. She wouldn't leave until the women were released.

She didn't knock, but stormed straight into the women's den. Tears burned in her eyes, but she brushed them angrily away. She would not show weakness.

She turned to four women eyeing her warily.

"What's going on?" asked Diane.

Nora cleared her throat. "I need a place to stay, just for the night."

Diane smirked. "What's the matter? Ryland get to be too much to handle?"

Nora snarled. "Don't push me, halfling. Ryland isn't here to protect you this time."

Diane stared at her for a long time and nodded. "Fine." She stepped forward, offering her hand. "Let's start over. I'm Diane Chadwick. You?"

Nora stared for several seconds at the offered hand and sniffed warily. She didn't smell duplicity in the woman's scent. With a nod, she reached out and grasped the woman's palm. "Nora Hunt, Ryland's mate."

Diane arched a brow. "Don't see any mating marks. And if you're his mate, what are you doing in here with us?"

She shrugged. "A misunderstanding."

"He thinks you killed those men, doesn't he?" Diane laughed. "Now that, I find interesting. Were you even here when the first one was killed?"

"Apparently. I guess he was killed within a few hours of my arrival."

Diane shook her head, and the other women joined in. "Weak evidence if I do say so myself. But then, this pack has a notorious habit of punishing first and discovering the truth afterward."

Nora frowned. "He may make mistakes, but that is still my mate you are talking about. Besides, he knows I was with him during at least one of the murders. He knows I didn't kill anyone. We have...other issues."

Diane laughed and turned her back on Nora. "I'm not talking about Ryland, but that's ok. It sounds to me like he's thinking about following in his brother's footsteps after all."

Nora swallowed the anger at the woman's words. Instead, she walked to the couch and dropped onto the middle cushion, staking her claim. Kirsten and Jackie stared at them openly, surprised at the obvious truce between the two powerful females.

"I prefer to think he's protecting his pack, and his status. A leader doesn't have the option of making mistakes. Not when murder is involved." Her words made perfect sense, now that they were said aloud. She swallowed the guilt that caught in her throat. Maybe she should... No. He'd said he could never give her love. That was the real reason she had to leave him.

"Murder," scoffed Kirsten. "They're animals; they don't deserve to live."

Diane whirled on her. "And who are you to judge," she shouted. "Does that make you better than them?"

Nora jerked her attention to the half breed, surprised to see her taking up for the pack.

"She's right." Mary's words were barely a whisper, coming from the baby's room. "Devlin was evil. Everything about him was horrid. I'm glad he's dead."

Nora peered at the young woman. She was pale, and her hands were busy wringing in front of her waist. Were they missing something about her? She'd overheard Brogan say she was his mate, but that didn't make her an innocent. "How did you know it was Devlin who died?"

Surprise crossed the plain face. "I... I just guessed."

"Oh, come on, it had to be Devlin."

Nora turned to Jackie. "And why is that?"

"It's easy. Every single one killed so far have been the ones who were the most violent. To us, to the pack, and the biggest threats to Ryland's control."

Nora arched a brow, hiding the anger building inside. She scooted to the edge of the couch, her muscles tense. "And so now you accuse my mate?"

"I didn't accuse anyone," the woman continued. "I'm just saying that every single male killed was an abusive bully. They were also the same ones who challenged Ryland from the get go. We aren't blind. We may be concubines here, but we aren't stupid."

"I have to admit she's right about that," said Diane. "Every one of those males killed, *if* this latest one was Devlin, were among the elite under Joshua. The ones most angered when Ryland took control."

Nora stared at them all for long seconds. They truly believed what they were saying. At first, when Mary blurted out Devlin's name, she thought she'd found the killer. Now she wasn't so sure. "That's not true. Banan wasn't one of the elite."

"The only exception," said Diane. "Maybe he knew who the killer was and so had to be taken out."

"But the message was the same," Nora said, exasperated. "Ryland told me they all had a message on the mirror, and it was the same for each of them."

Diane cut a look toward Kirsten and frowned. "What message?"

"Paid in Full."

"Paid in full?" echoed a chorus of female voices.

Nora nodded.

"That's not good," said Diane, dropping into a chair beside the couch, her eyes wide in apparent horror. "That makes it look like one of us."

"How can you be so sure it's not one of you? These men raped each and every one of you. That's a pretty strong motive."

"Not all," said Diane wryly.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." She shrugged. "I came across too abrasive for them, so most of the males ignored me. And Banan, he only...."

"He only took one of you," Nora finished. "I know, he told me. But he did it under duress. Joshua planned to kick Harry out of the pack if he didn't. But he didn't tell me who."

Sarah stepped to the door, but not before Nora noticed all pairs of eyes turn to Mary.

"Oh, God," said the woman, her face crumbling into a mass of tears. "I didn't do this. Please tell her it wasn't me." Her gaze jerked from female to female. They all stared at her in horror. Tears streaked down Mary's face, and her body collapsed to the floor where she leaned against the wall and sobbed. "It was horrible, but it wasn't his fault. I knew that."

Diane moved to comfort her. "We know," she said, putting an arm around the woman.

Mary. The first. How fitting in an absolutely horrific way. Nora wanted to stop this conversation, but if it meant getting to the bottom of things, she would continue. And then she could leave.

"It's the only time Brogan couldn't stop it," sobbed the stricken woman. "It ripped him apart. I tried to be brave, really I did. But...."

Oh, God. It couldn't be. Brogan? Would he kill these males to get back at Joshua for what happened to Mary?

Nora walked silently toward the woman and knelt beside her, ignoring the warning glance Diane gave her. "Mary," she began, her voice soft, "Do you think Brogan would...." She couldn't finish it. The very idea that Ryland's best friend could be the killer sent shivers down her spine.

Mary stared at her through horrified tear-filled eyes. "No! Never. He might... He might have gone after Banan, but not the rest."

"You're sure?"

Mary nodded. "He loves me, you know."

"I know," said Nora. "He does." Inside, she prayed it wasn't Brogan. Ryland couldn't take it if the one man he did trust was the killer. A pang of jealousy twisted in her heart, but she ignored it.

"It's no excuse." Jackie stormed over and pulled Nora away. "Just because he loves her is no excuse to rape her, night after night."

"No," shouted Mary. "He didn't rape me. He... He...."

All eyes turned to the wide-eyed woman grasping the wall. "I may be weak, and may have been attacked by several of the males here, but not Brogan. He's gentle. And sweet."

"And wouldn't rape anyone," said Nora with confidence. She knew that. From the time she'd spent with him at the college to the time she'd seen him here. Yes, he'd changed, but not enough to stoop to rape.

"They're all the same," said Kirsten, her tone viciously scathing. "It doesn't matter which of them did it; they're all guilty. Every last one of them. They're nothing but animals."

Nora took in every single one of the women. Sara, with her child held protectively in her arms. So strong in the face of so much pain that night. Bound to a male she obviously cared for.

Mary, who'd probably suffered more than any of them. Her spirit was strong, but her fear was great. It showed in her every movement. Yet the night the baby was born, it had been Mary whom Sarah had turned to in her hour of need. Not her own sister.

Diane, the strong one. She almost looked as if she hadn't suffered at all, her confidence swirling around her like iron armor. Nora knew that look well. One just like it stared back at her from her own mirror every day.

The two Nora knew the least: Jackie and Kirsten. One a cousin, the other a sister. Both protective and strong. The only time she'd seen them react was to protect another. But how much had they suffered?

The main door opened. Anna walked in. Relief showered Nora, and she leapt from her seat. "Oh, thank God. A friendly face!" Nora wrapped her arms around her friend.

Anna hugged her warmly. "I came to give Sarah and the baby an examination." She pulled back and looked Nora in the eye. "What the hell is going on here?"

"It's a long story." A weight lifted from Nora's shoulders. If anyone would understand her pain, it was Anna.

"First, I want to talk to you alone. I have a message from your father."

"Excuse us," Nora said to the others. The outburst had done nothing to ease the coolness between herself and most of the women. Mary, however, offered a tremulous smile when they passed her.

The two shewolves moved to the bathroom and closed the door. "Your father wants to know if you're well," Anna said. She handed Nora a folded piece of paper.

"As well as I can be I guess." Nora opened the note. Three words were printed in ink.

I'm sorry.

She turned to Anna who mouthed a name. "*Ryland.*"

What the hell? Anger surged inside. "Does he think this makes everything better?"

Anna's eyes were filled with compassion. "He loves you."

"Can't prove it by me. In fact, just an hour ago, he told me he doesn't."

Anna's eyes widened. "It's not possible. He's your *True Mate*."

"Really?" said Nora with sarcasm. "You would think that would make things easier, but, instead, it only makes them worse." She dropped onto side of the tub and rubbed her forehead, soothing the tension beneath. "I won't stay in a relationship with a male who has no respect for me, or refuses to trust me."

Anna shook her head. "I just think it's the situation. He'll come around. You have to give him time. Besides," she smiled indulgently, "males aren't known for their ability to explain their feelings. He knows you've been through a lot, but he can't put you above the rest. It would make him look bad."

Nora wadded the note into her fist. "I wish I could believe you, Anna. I'm so tired. Just so tired. First the attack, then Dad, then this. I can't take it."

Anna put her arms around the younger woman. "You can, and you will. You are shewolf, and you will do what you must."

"You don't understand," she said, jerking away from her friend. She saw the hurt in Anna's eyes, but she refused to let it sway her. "He wants me to stay with him, yet he refuses to trust me. And he refuses to love me. I can't do that. I won't live with him, Anna. I can't. I need what he can't give me." Even now, she could still feel the heat of their last passionate lovemaking.

Sex. It wasn't love making. It was sex. Because if it was true love, he'd have said so. He'd been so intense, so aggressive. And at the end, she'd thought she scented an emotion beneath his normal scent, one deeper than all the rest. And then Brogan had knocked on the door, and it was gone.

"Give him time. Relationships aren't made overnight."

Nora shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. "He said he will never love me. I'm going back to school. At least there I can put all this nervous energy to good use." She stood and paced the small room.

Anna pursed her lips, her eyes worried. "All right. Do you want to go home with me tonight?"

"No," she said and collapsed onto the side of the tub again. "I told Ryland I would leave when the women were safe. I overheard him talking to Brogan, so I think that's going to happen soon."

Anna bit her lip and nodded. "Okay, but if you change your mind, you call me. The entire family is worried about you. It took all I had to get here without Kieran in tow."

Nora nodded and wiped the tears from her face. She sighed. "I don't know about you, Anna, but I've had just about enough of this crap here. No more crying, and I'm going to get to the bottom of those murders. If it's one of those women, I'll find out."

Anna gave a sigh of her own. "Nora, I can't tell you not to. You're a big girl, but I can say be careful. I don't know everything that's been going on here, but I know enough to know there's danger."

Nora stared at their reflection in the mirror. Anna looked so feminine and short. She could see why Ryland had fallen for her on sight. She, on the other hand, looked nothing like Anna. Instead, she towered above her friend, with her long, gangly and masculine body. He'd tried to say he liked her the way she was. Heck, even forced Brogan to admit that he'd been attracted to her. But being attracted to someone and wanting them for their mate were two different things.

As if she read her friend's mind, Anna pulled Nora away from her musings. "All I have to add, Nora, is that I know he loves you. I've seen it. The night the baby was born."

Nora shook her head. "You saw pride in his pack, pride in the child, not love for me."

"I don't think so."

Nora only glared at her.

"Very well, you win. Just remember what I said. Now, give me a hug."

Nora folded herself into Anna's arms, pulling strength from the warmth of her friend's heart. "I'm so glad you came today," she whispered.

"Me too. Now, let's go see that baby."

They hurried from the bathroom to see the others scurrying across the room. Even if there was no one at Ryland's end listening, she was pretty damn sure four of the five women in this room were. Only Sarah sat, unperturbed, feeding her baby.

Anna crossed the room and held out her arms. "May I?"

Sarah smiled. "Of course, doctor." She handed the delicate bundle over to Anna. "I never got the chance to thank you for what you did."

Anna waved her away. "Nonsense. It isn't often I get the joy of bringing a bundle like this into the world." She examined the child, caressing and watching her with educated eyes.

"I'll be having one of these myself very soon."

"You're pregnant?" For the first time since the announcement of Devlin's death, Nora smiled when Anna nodded. "That's awesome! I know how much this means to you."

She knew Anna had lost her first child when she'd been changed from one quarter human to all wolverine. The miscarriage had been exceptionally painful and had driven a wedge between Anna and her mate. For weeks, she'd thought the two wouldn't come back together.

Anna smiled broadly. "Kieran's sure of it, though I'm not. We're both a little nervous, though. Since I'm mostly wolverine, we have no idea if the child will be

born at six months, which is normal for wolver, or nine months like humans. Then again, it could be somewhere in between.” She turned her eyes to the child in her arms. “But based off the birth of this sweet child, I’d say it’s going to be between six and seven months. So I only have a few months to prepare.”

The room full of women all oohed and ahed over the infant, and the fact that Anna would have her own soon. Nora watched from a distance. It was hard to believe these women were prisoners. They interacted like a large family. Sisters or cousins, each protecting the other, each hurting for the other.

Anna turned and handed the child to Kirsten. “Hold her. I’m going to take your sister in the other room and examine her.”

The two women stood and walked out while everyone else burst into conversation. Nora didn’t listen, but watched Kirsten.

The human stared down at the child with a mixture of awe and what could only be described as envy. When she looked up and saw Nora watching, her features softened, and she smiled.

“Isn’t she beautiful?”

Nora walked closer. Her scent was mixed with a variety of emotions. “Yes, she is. So Sarah’s your sister?” Nora prompted.

“Twins,” she said, her eyes still gazing at the child.

“I bet it’s hard having a sister with a child now. Especially when you’re twins.”

“Yeah. We’ve always shared everything.” A faraway look shone in the woman’s eyes. “Absolutely everything.”

Nora watched her carefully. Envy didn’t mean murder. “So tell me, Kirsten, if Ryland were to let you go, what would be the first thing you would do?”

Kirsten looked up at her in surprise. “Go? Where would I go? My sister is here. Everything I need is here. I don’t think I would go anywhere.”

“Really?” Nora’s brow rose in surprise. “You don’t want to leave after having been raped by so many males?”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t rape. Well, it hasn’t been for a while anyway.”

“Yeah, she likes it,” said Mary, with startling venom in her voice. “She doesn’t care who he is. All she cares is if he chooses her over the rest of us. Slut.”

Kirsten looked up, her eyes hard. “Who’s a slut? All you do is moon over Brogan. The instant he walks through the door you melt like chocolate ice cream, all sweet and syrupy. You, who’ve been raped more than any of us.”

Nora sat back down, observing the drama unfolding. The illusion of family disappeared, replaced by one of pain and hatred.

“I’m not the only one. Your own sister fell for one of them. Now she has a baby, too, so even if we are forced to leave, she’ll have something to remember them by. I’ll have nothing.”

“That is if she’s allowed to take the child.” Diane’s voice stilled the conversation. Everyone looked at one another.

“What are you saying?” asked Mary.

“Ask Miss Shewolf over there,” Diane motioned toward Nora. “She’ll tell you. I saw the look on Ryland’s face when I said that aloud. They have no intention of letting her take the baby with her.”

“He didn’t say that,” said Nora. She angled her body and rested her legs on the couch, ensuring no one else would share. Aggressiveness burned inside her.

Diane was the alpha female of this little group, though Nora's instincts demanded she challenge the half wolf. "In fact, he didn't answer you at all."

"My point."

Nora watched Diane's eyes take in her position on the couch. She wondered if the woman would challenge her again. She almost hoped so. She was itching for a fight. Anger, humiliation, and pride battled inside her. She was an alpha female who'd left her mate and was stuck with five humans, each filled with their own pain. The only one so far to keep silent was Jackie.

She turned to the dark haired woman.

"What about you? If you could leave, what would be the first thing you'd do?"

The woman glanced at Diane first. "I'd go home."

"Not to the police?"

She shook her head. "No, the police wouldn't believe me anyway."

"And what would you tell your family?"

The girl glanced at her cousin again. "Diane is my family. I will protect her."

Protect Diane? Nora's gaze sharpened on the woman. Ahh, because she's part wolverine. Nora wondered if the rest of the group understood.

Before she could question them further, Anna stepped into the living room. "That's that. Everything is fine." She turned to Nora. "Is there anything I can have brought to you?"

"Yes, my freedom," said Diane.

Anna gave her a pained smile. "I wish I could."

"How about some Quick Stop. You never know when we'll need it," said Nora. Planning ahead was a good thing. Silver had been used in the murders, and if anyone understood the pain from silver, it was she.

Anna's eyebrows shot almost to her hairline. "Absolutely. Tell you what, I'll have it for you by later tonight. I didn't think to add any extra in my bag. Until then," and she rummaged in her black bag and pulled out a container, "here's a little, but it'll help if needed."

"What's Quick Stop?" asked Diane.

Nora thought quickly. "It's a special treatment I use on the scars I have, to help them heal more quickly."

"Scars?"

"Yes. Scars." She didn't elaborate and took the bottle of the Styptic powder from Anna and dropped it into one of her plastic bags. Diane moved toward the couch, and Nora turned and growled, baring her fangs. The woman immediately backed off.

Nora gave one last snarl before hugging Anna, her eyes never leaving Diane.

Anna smirked and nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The door closed softly behind her.

Nora was stuck with these women at least until the morning. She glanced at the clock. Five more hours till nightfall. *Great. Just freakin' great.* She plopped on the couch and flipped through the channels available on the television, ignoring the remaining women.

She stared at the television, oblivious to the program she'd turned it to, struggling to ignore the pain in her heart. Time ticked by, just like when she'd sat in her mother's cabin for weeks.

Dark Succession

The sound of growls and snarls jerked Nora from her reverie. Voices shouted in the distance.

The howl of a wolf penetrated the cement walls of the compound, the sound a call edged with the hint of fury. Nora knew that voice.

Ryland.

With a yank, she jerked open the door and charged out, the women close on her heels.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The roar of the masculine voices echoed off the brick walls of the courtyard. Nora skidded to a halt the instant she turned the last corner. Testosterone crashed through her senses like waves of an ocean, washing away all anger and frustration. The scent expanded inside her, burning through her blood. A low growl formed in her throat, and her body tensed with excitement.

She shoved through bodies, oblivious to the aggressive sounds coming from them. It wasn't them she wanted. It wasn't their scent she craved. The human inside her struggled to remember that she was angry, insisting she pull back, but the shewolf was in control. Instinct surged to the surface, hungry for the masculine display which every cell of her body hungered to watch.

When she shoved through the last row of male bodies, she saw the cause of her unchecked desire. Her heart pounded, and her breath quickened. She took in the sight of Ryland in a fighting crouch by his office door. His lips were pulled back into a lethal snarl. Razor sharp fangs glinted beneath the unnatural, eerie light.

Gerard stood opposite her self-professed mate, his shoulders hunched, his head hung low, but his eyes gleamed in apparent anticipation.

"Oh, God," she murmured under her breath. She wasn't sure if it was fear or excitement ripping through her veins at the speed of a freight train. Maybe both.

"I ought to kill you," snarled Ryland. "You invaded my den, and you broke into my office." His voice rumbled low, filled with hostile intent.

"I broke into *my* office," barked Gerard. "This should be my pack, not yours."

Ryland advanced a step. "Come take it, then."

Gerard charged, lowering his head, fists pummeling Ryland's belly, one after the next. Sickening thuds echoed through the rooms with each blow.

Ryland growled, and his eyes flashed with fury. He drew his elbows in to ward off the punches, his opponents fists deflecting ineffectively from his forearms. With a shift to his right, Ryland dodged the next blow which whizzed past his ear. His left hand shot up and caught Gerard's forearm mid swing. Using Gerard's own weight against him, Ryland yanked hard and slammed Gerard's face into the wall with a satisfying crunch.

With a rapid twist of his body, he yanked him away from the wall and shoved his opponent back into the center of the room. The younger male's feet stumbled. Barely able to right himself, he flailed his arms for balance.

Gerard was not to be denied. He scrambled for his balance and lowered his head, charging into Ryland again. His shoulders caught Ryland in the solar plexus, knocking the larger wolverine off balance, shoving him to the floor. Fist pummeled one after the other into Ryland's face.

Nora wanted to shut her eyes, but couldn't. She was horrified, and yet her body sang with hunger, preparing for her mate. She bit back a moan when Ryland's eyes glanced in her direction. He knew she watched.

With a sharp upward kick, Ryland shoved his opponent off him, rolling to his feet, crouching for the launch. Gerard settled himself on the balls of his feet, waiting for Ryland's attack.

Nora watched, breathless, unable to turn away. Ryland leapt upward, spinning his body, his foot slamming into the male's chest, propelling him backward onto the floor. Gerard rolled to his feet, panting heavily and swinging his fists. The crunch of knuckles on flesh echoed through the common area.

Mixed horror and lustful appreciation rumbled inside her when Ryland accepted the blows stoically, his head jerking first to one side, and then the other. His eyes met hers, glowing with fury. And then she understood. He was letting Gerald hit him. For her. To show her his own prowess.

Stupid wolver.

He moved with unprecedented speed, blocking his opponent's blows with his forearms. Right, left, and right again. He spun in place, snapping one elbow back in the male's gut, and when Gerard doubled over, Ryland chopped hard, knocking the man to the floor.

Gripping the defiant Gerard's belt and shirt collar, he lifted him from the floor, and tossed him across the room. The large body crashed into the hard concrete wall, collapsing into a broken heap on the floor.

Rushing forward, he gripped the male by the throat, lifting him until his feet were off the floor.

"This pack is mine."

Gerard spat. "Not for long," he said, refusing to give in. "By right of blood, it's mine. I'm Joshua's son. You're his brother."

A murmur rippled through the crowd behind them. Ryland arched a brow and quirked a grin, ignoring the frantic hands trying to break his grip.

"You're wrong," his voice was deliberately quiet, stealthy. "I am Joshua's son, not his brother. And I am the oldest."

Gerard's eyes widened, and Nora held her breath, waiting.

"That can't be," he sputtered, gasping for breath. "He'd have told me."

"Yield," growled Ryland. He leaned in, whispering to the male. "Brother."

Their gazes held for what seemed an eternity. Nora watched, waiting. Her own lungs would scarcely work, her breath coming in choppy gasps. What could possibly be so sexy about seeing two men fight? Yet the adrenaline surging through her veins wasn't from fear. Heat burned through her blood, hormones sparked and begged her to be there for the victor. She shook her head. No. That wasn't going to happen.

She turned to leave.

"Nora," Ryland growled. "My office."

How dare he? She whirled, ready to tell him exactly where he could stick it, but she held her tongue. He stood, staring at Gerard. The onlookers dissolved, the fight now over.

"Come meet my brother," he said, softer.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ryland motioned for Gerard to sit at the table.

"I'd rather stand," the male said.

"Sit," ordered Ryland. He stood a few inches from Gerard. As Nora entered the office, Ryland grabbed her hand. She tried to yank it away, but he held on tight. He needed her touch, and he would have it.

The male dropped into a chair, propping his feet on the table, and Ryland relaxed and pulled Nora's stiff body along toward his desk.

"Let go of me, Ryland."

Ryland whirled and pushed her against the wall. His control hung precariously on the edge of disaster, and the only one who could keep him from falling was Nora. "You will stay with me."

She shook her head, anger flashing bright in her beautiful brown eyes. "I won't. I'm leaving, I already told you that."

He shook his head. "Now, Nora. Just for now." He could survive without her. But not yet. Not until he'd dealt with Gerard. Knowing someone was breaking into his home was one thing. Finding out he had a brother was frustrating. Finding out the one breaking into his den was his newly discovered brother was even worse. He'd been betrayed on every side. Joshua. His grandparents. Gerard. He couldn't handle this one without help.

Leaning against her sweet softness he widened his nostrils, bathing himself in her scent while he could. Her essence burned through his blood, spiking a deep seeded hunger which demanded a response. His body hardened painfully, and he bit back a groan.

"If you two want to be alone," began Gerard, dropping his feet and standing.

"Sit," ordered Ryland. He didn't look away from Nora's eyes while he waited. When the male returned to his seat, Ryland turned his attention back to the woman he wanted for his mate. Her body was stiff, but he wasn't fooled. Beneath the anger surging through her body was something else. A hunger strong enough to match his own.

He ran a finger down her cheek, hiding his smile at her shiver. "It doesn't go away because you demand it," he whispered to her. "You have no choice."

"A female always has choices," she shot back. *Shut up, Ryland, and let me go.*

Ryland narrowed his eyes. He'd hoped the next time he heard her voice in his head it would be something more positive. Like her telling him she wanted him. Not demanding he let her go.

Just hours before, he'd laid her out on his desk, relishing her every touch, her screaming as he drove her to orgasm. And now she could barely meet his eyes.

He'd lost her. The knowledge settled as a heavy lump in his heart. He could see it in the set of her shoulders, the fury in her eyes. The anger was stronger than her hunger for him. He hadn't believed it until this moment. Until now, when it was too late. Pain settled in his gut, sharp, like an edge of silver twisting inside him. His hands dropped from her shoulders, and with a sharp nod of his head, he stepped back.

She pushed past him and sat at the table.

Ryland dropped into the chair beside her. The urge to give in and turn everything over to Gerard pulsed in his mind. He wanted to hide from the sure knowledge that he'd fucked up the one relationship he cared about. He scrubbed his hands over his face. Now wasn't the time to feel sorry for himself.

Gerard stared at him with open distaste.

"What do you want, Ryland?"

Ryland sighed.

"We need to talk. How do you know Joshua was your father?"

Gerard's expression darkened, his lips curling into a snarl. "If you must know, he helped raise me."

Ryland's brow rose. "Not possible," he said. "He raised me, and you were nowhere around."

"Ouch!"

Ryland jerked his gaze from his brother to Nora, her fingers closing around his, prying his hand from her leg. When had he put his palm on her thigh? And why hadn't she made him move it? He must have hurt her squeezing in his anger. He yanked away in horror. "Nora, I—"

"I'm fine," she mumbled. Ignoring him, she turned to Gerard. His brother. "Are you saying Joshua visited you regularly? Or that he lived with you?"

Gerard sighed and sat back, his eyes staring at the ceiling. One fist bounced on his knee.

The urge to yank the wolven out of his seat and demand an answer sent a rolling rumble down his spine. Jealousy mixed with the pain in his gut. He was jealous of a male who knew more about Joshua than he did, and yet, at the same time, he wanted to welcome him as a brother. Ryland fisted his hand, determined not to reach for Nora again.

"My mother was from a pack in Georgia. Joshua was there a couple times a month."

"Your mother was his mate?" asked Ryland.

Gerard lurched from his chair, pacing the length of the office. Ryland could see Joshua in his every move now that he watched. The way he strode across the room. "No," he shook his head. "She chose him to be the father of her child, but never intended to mate. He hated that idea. He didn't like having a child he couldn't control," he spat out.

Ryland watched his brother's every move. Bitterness dripped like poison from his every word. Joshua wasn't any more loved by this son than he was by his first born. Ryland shook his head. "So, why were you breaking into my den? And my office? You could have challenged me for control of the pack any time you wanted."

They both knew he was right. In true wolven tradition, had the pack supported Gerard's challenge, Ryland would be dead. Most humans believed wolves fought for supremacy one on one. But that was wrong. When other wolves supported the challenger, most often there was a full blown pack brawl. Wolven were no different. By waiting, Gerard had only ensured Ryland's victory, enabling him to gain more and more control over the pack.

"You never wanted the pack, did you?"

Gerard stopped and swiveled to face Ryland. "What are you saying?"

Once again rubbing Nora's thigh, the one he'd squeezed too tightly earlier, he relaxed. For the first time in a long while, something made sense. Gerard felt exactly the same Ryland himself had moments before, wanting a pack out of obligation, not out of the desire to lead. "You thought it was your responsibility to take over the pack, but you didn't really want it. It's work. It's responsibility. Hell, half the time I don't want it." With a quick pat to her leg, he stood up facing his half brother. "Subconsciously, you sabotaged yourself. You moved so slow I had to catch you. You gave me time to take firm control of the pack."

He watched Gerard's eyes widen, and he swallowed hard. Ryland could see the battle going on within the male.

Gerard sighed. "You might be right." He dropped back into his seat.

"So, did you find anything of interest while raiding my home?" prompted Ryland. "Did you, by chance, see anything to tell us who the killer is?"

Gerard shook his head. "No, but I do know where Harry is."

"Where?" blurted Nora.

Both men turned to face her.

"I made a promise! I promised to take care of him if anything happened to his guardian. I want to know what happened to him."

Gerard let out a sigh, his head dropping back again. Ryland cringed. That was one of Joshua's favorite ways of avoiding a conversation.

"Harry's in my den. I told him to stay there for a while."

"What?"

"Why?"

Nora and Ryland both shouted at the same time.

"He caught me coming out of your den, and I didn't want him to let it slip, so I asked him to stay with me."

Ryland smelled Nora's fury, like burning sulphur.

"Does he know about Banan?" Her words were slow and deliberate.

"Nora," Ryland warned.

"No, Ryland. He's held that poor boy against his will."

"No. He's stayed with me of his own free will."

Both Ryland and Nora turned their attention to him.

"And did he understand we didn't know where he was?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. His eyes wandered the office. "And yes, he knows about Banan. I told him."

"Go get him," ordered Ryland. "Now."

Gerard nodded. He left the room, the door closing with a quiet click.

Nora moved behind the desk, her arms folded, her eyes on the portrait.

"Nora, I—"

"I don't want to hear it, Ryland. I've said all there is to say. I'm glad you found your brother, and I'm glad you found out who was rifling through the papers, but that doesn't change anything."

"I know." Everything was crumbling around his feet. He wanted more than anything to take her in his arms and make things return to the way they were.

A tap sounded on the door before it opened and in walked Harry, followed by Gerard.

“Harry!” Ryland watched his mate shoot across the room, her eyes bright and happy. The silver blade in his gut twisted again knowing she wouldn’t run to him in the same way. Yet, even so, he couldn’t find any jealousy inside himself for the child.

Nora wrapped her arms about the boy/man and hugged him. “I was so worried about you. Are you okay?”

The boy nodded, a blush on his face.

“Gerard has been nice to me. He let me play video games.”

Gerard shrugged, embarrassed. “I wanted to keep him busy, so I let him play with some of my Nintendo games.”

Nora pulled back from the boy. “So you’re okay? Really?”

“I’m fine,” said the boy with a blush.

Before Ryland knew what happened, he was alone. Nora had walked with Harry back to Gerard’s den.

He dropped into his chair behind the desk. His palm traced the hard wood, remembering how he’d felt with Nora beneath him, screaming in ecstasy. In that single moment, his entire life changed. And not for the better. After she was gone, he’d burn this desk. Until then, he would remember.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Nora slept fitfully on the couch. The beds were all taken, and there was no need to disrupt the daily routine for the women for one night. Ryland had sent word that her car had been delivered, and tomorrow she could go home. He insisted in the note that the women would be released within the week. She'd expected to feel relief. Instead, her body ached, and her chest felt like someone had laid a huge brick on her.

When she'd realized who Ryland was to her, once she gotten past the first bout of shock, she'd been pleased, opening up her heart to the one man she was destined to be with. She hadn't expected him to throw it back at her. *I can't love anyone*. His words echoed in her mind and ripped a hole in her heart. Blinking back the sting of tears, she rolled over, pounded the pillow, and lay back down. Brooding wasn't doing her any good.

She was glad Ryland had found his brother. At least one of the mysteries surrounding the pack was resolved, and the women were going home soon. But none of that eased the pain in her heart.

Soft sobs sounded from one of the bedrooms. Mary. Her heart tugged for the woman, and for Brogan. She'd heard him telling Ryland how Mary was his mate. God, she hoped things worked out better for the two of them than they had with Ryland and herself. But, by the sound of the soft sobs, that was doubtful.

She got up from the sofa, tiptoed to the woman's door, and tapped on it. "Mary, can I come in?"

"Go away," came the muffled response.

Nora was not to be dissuaded. She tried the knob to find the door unlocked and softly entered the bedroom.

"Mary, are you okay?" she whispered.

The woman rolled over, her short brown hair falling into her face, hiding her tears. "What do you want?"

She sat on the side of the bed beside her. "I was worried about you. I think Brogan would be very upset if I didn't do all I could to make your last few nights in here comfortable."

"What do you mean last few nights?" Jackie demanded from the bed across the room. Nora twisted her body to look at the other woman. Jackie sat in her bed, her sheets twisted about her lower body, her eyes red. Nora's heart went out to them.

"Ryland's working on a way to release you."

"Right. When hell freezes over," she said, scathingly.

Nora gave her a patient smile. "It's true. But first he wants to punish those who raped all of you."

"They're all dead," said Mary, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Except one," corrected Jackie.

Nora frowned. "Who's left?"

"Brogan."

"No," protested Mary, sitting up in the bed, her tears forgotten.

"Just because you say it isn't rape doesn't mean he's not guilty."

Nora watched the two women glare at one another.

"Brogan hasn't touched me." Mary tossed the covers to the side and swung her legs over the bed. She stood, towering over Jackie's bed, glaring at her friend. It was hard for Nora to believe this powerhouse of a female had been reduced to tears just moments before. "Brogan is a gentleman."

"And how many times has he dragged you to his apartment?"

"It's a den," growled Mary. Nora's eyes widened in surprise. "And he takes me there to protect me."

"Some protection," retorted Jackie. "He sure didn't protect you from Banan."

Color drained from Mary's face, and she gathered her pillow close, her arms holding it like a child's body. "He wasn't here when that happened," the woman choked.

"Oh, admit it. The bastard was like all the rest. He tied you up and watched you fight. He just didn't want to have to work to keep you there like most of the others did."

Nora stared at the two women. "Jackie," she began, keeping her voice soft and under control. "Are you saying that they encouraged you to fight?"

Sharp laughter sounded at the door and Nora spun around. Kirsten stood laughing. "They loved it. Every one of them loved the struggle."

Cold seeped into Nora's blood, pumping straight from her heart. "Oh, God," she murmured.

"God has nothing to do with their evil," said Jackie.

"But they're all dead," murmured Mary, her body rocking on the bed, her arms still cuddling her pillow. "Long dead."

Nora wrapped her arms around Mary. "And soon you can go home."

The woman shook her head adamantly, tears brimming in her eyes. "No place to go."

"And what are they going to do with Sarah's baby?" asked Jackie.

Nora shrugged. "I don't know the answer to that, Jackie."

"I know what they'll do."

Nora turned to the new voice to see Diane standing in the doorway. "Sarah's going to stay."

"The slut," said Jackie.

"Knock it off, cuz. The woman has made her decision, and she'll be fine."

"They're animals. Every one of them," Jackie bit out. "Just like you," she said her eyes spearing Nora. "And her," she continued, shooting daggers with her eyes at her cousin.

"Shut up," snarled Diane, who shot a furtive glance at Nora.

"No secrets here. You know I've already figured it out," said Nora. "Who's your wolverine parent?"

"My father," she murmured, her gaze never leaving her cousin.

Nora nodded. She needed to ease the tension in the room before Diane attacked her own cousin. Fighting wouldn't get anyone anywhere tonight. She wondered if Diane realized just how many wolverine instincts she'd picked up living among the pack.

"It doesn't matter," said Nora, standing. "What matters is you will all be free to choose your future very soon."

"I want to stay," whispered Mary, who dropped back onto the bed.

Nora smiled, her heart warming at the whispered confession. "I think Brogan would like that."

"You think so?" she asked, her eyes wide and hopeful.

Nora nodded. "I do. And I also think he'd like it a lot better if you got some sleep."

"Nora," said Diane.

"What?"

"Why are you really here with us? You think one of us is the killer, don't you?"

Nora shook her head. "I don't know. I'm only here with you because I had to get away from Ryland."

Diane narrowed her eyes. "I've never heard of a female leaving her mate."

Nora flushed. "It's actually common. My mother left my father just last month after more than twenty years together. Did your mother stay with your father?"

The instant the words were out of her mouth she knew she'd made a mistake.

Diane's eyes hardened and her jaw tightened. "My mother was raped."

Sympathy burned in Nora's gut. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"I've had enough of this," Diane said. "I'm going to bed."

Her words effectively ended the conversation. Kirsten followed Diane to the other room, while Jackie and Mary both snuggled beneath the covers.

"Goodnight," said Nora. She pulled the door closed, but not before she caught the glare from Jackie. There was no doubt the woman harbored a lot of anger. Nora lay on the couch, pulling the tattered comforter around her. *Those poor women*. They had all been through so much.

In some ways, each seemed stronger than she was. They weren't cowering when someone touched them. They weren't trembling in fear at the memories they held inside them. Okay, now and then, Mary shook, but she proudly stood up for Brogan.

Nora pounded her pillow one last time and wrapped her arms about her body. Maybe things would look better in the morning. She closed her eyes, searching for sleep.

An hour later, her mind still ran circles around her attempts to doze. Thoughts of Ryland and the words that drove her away. *I can't love anyone*. Anna had said she should give him a chance, but she couldn't live her life on chances. She'd done that long enough.

Yet when Ryland and Gerard, his missing brother, had fought, her body had refused to remember what her mind knew so clearly. Instinct had burned inside her while watching him allow Gerard take the upper hand, getting his punches in. And then Ryland had taken over. He'd shown his strength and his ability to control any situation. She remembered how he'd flaunted his strength and power, putting the male in his place, the scent of his testosterone filling the air. The aching, throbbing hunger returned to her body.

She'd almost given in, especially when he'd ordered her to his office and pressed her up against the wall. She'd used every ounce of moral fortitude to keep from grabbing him and kissing him until they both were so out of breath they were dizzy. If Gerard hadn't been there, she might have.

Dark Succession

A sound whispered from one of the women's bedrooms, yanking Nora from her musings. She let her lids drop, pretending to sleep. There had been enough conversation today.

The door to Kirsten's room creaked open.

Nora concentrated on keeping her breathing even as the woman crossed the floor and headed to Sarah's room.

The human woman's stealthy movements bothered Nora. *She's up to something.* Nora rolled off the couch and followed her, her bare feet quiet on the carpeted floor.

* * * *

Ryland shot up in bed, where he'd been tossing and turning instead of sleeping. Something was wrong. He could feel it deep in his bones. Nora needed him. Rather than take the time to think things through, he jumped from bed. He shoved a leg into his jeans and then another, almost falling over. He slipped on a pair of shoes, and in an instant was trotting down the hall. He popped open his radio and punched in a frequency.

"Security, meet me at the women's den. Now. Something's going down."

He sensed the urgency through whatever strange connection he felt with Nora. The *True Mate* link between him and Nora was stronger than most. Strong and true. He couldn't see her, but he could feel her.

* * * *

Inside the den, Nora could just make out Kirsten's back. She was at the makeshift crib. Sarah slept soundly in her bed, worn out from childbirth and caring for a newborn infant.

Maybe she'd misjudged the woman. Maybe she only wanted to check on the child. Though something about the way the human crept forward sent a shiver of dread running down her spine. Like wolves in the wild, often wolverines knew when something was wrong, and her gut told her this was one of those times. The human's scent was off. Like an illness mixed with a lie. Nora shook her head to clear it. Whatever the emotion was, it rippled, confusing Nora's perceptions.

The woman picked up a pillow from a chair and approached the sleeping child. Alarms went off in Nora's head. She crept from her bed and stood in the doorway.

"What are you doing?" She didn't whisper. There was no need.

Kirsten jerked around and Sarah jolted upright in bed. "What are you doing in here?"

"I'm asking the questions, bitch. What are you doing in here with that?" she motioned toward the pillow.

"The child has to die. Surely you see that?"

Nora's blood ran cold at the conversational tone to Kirsten's words. So different from the woman who'd stood in the doorway of Mary and Jackie's room talking about their past.

"She's a monster. And if she lives, Sarah will only stay here with her. I can't have that."

Sarah leapt off the bed, tangling herself in the sheets, running to her child. Kirsten spun and with the swing of one arm, cracked an open-handed slap across Sarah's face. The young mother crashed to the floor, her head slamming against the dresser. The woman moaned and collapsed.

Kirsten whirled back to Nora, and it was then Nora saw the glint of the knife.

"Kirsten, please, what are you doing?" Sarah struggled to a sitting position, blood dripping from a wound at the edge of her scalp. "That's my child, and your niece,"

Kirsten shook her head, her eyes wild and demented. "We promised to share everything all our lives. You promised!"

"What didn't she share, Kirsten? The baby?" Nora kept her voice calm and even. Yet inside, her heart thumped.

"She didn't share her mate. And my mate is dead. They killed him. They all have to pay."

"Who are you talking about? Who is your mate?"

Kirsten gave Nora an incredulous stare. "Joshua. Joshua was my mate."

One thing Nora knew for sure, Joshua didn't have a mate. "No, Kirsten. Joshua didn't have a mate."

"He did!" she screamed in fury. She pulled down the nightgown off one shoulder. The mark was heavy and inflamed.

She shook her head. "That's not Joshua's mark, Kirsten. If it were Joshua's mark, I could smell him on you. I can't."

"You never met the man," she screamed, her voice full of venom.

Nora heard the footsteps creeping down the hall. The cavalry was here, thank God.

"Put the knife down, Kirsten."

"She has to die. They all have to die."

Nora inched forward. There was no way she would let that bitch touch the baby's tender, newborn skin.

Kirsten poised the knife above the baby's throat. Nora leaped. She slammed her fist against Kirsten's arm, knocking it away from the child. Off balance, the human yanked her arm, and the blade sliced into Nora. She screamed in pain, but charged again, this time knocking Kirsten to the floor. She crashed a fist into her face, again and again.

Kirsten fought, her arms and legs floundering and striking. A foot slammed Nora in the gut, and she rolled over, avoiding the next blow. She lifted to a crouch. Kirsten charged, blade ready. In a flash, Nora shifted, her nightgown shredding as instinct rolled through her and magick charged her flesh.

The wolf charged, leaping onto Kirsten, her teeth ready, weapons in her counter attack. Nora clamped down on her opponent's shoulder, ripping backward, the metallic taste of blood heavy in her mouth. The wolf spat it out and snarled.

Kirsten's eyes widened, and one hand grabbed at her bleeding shoulder. "You'll die for that, bitch," she said.

Nora waited, her body crouched and ready. When Kirsten charged, Nora ducked the wide swipe of the knife blade and hit the woman in the chest. Kirsten cut upward with the sharp edge. The blade slashed deep, slicing into her belly. Nora screamed at the searing pain. There was only chance of survival: Go on the offensive. Nora turned, her teeth sinking into the soft flesh of the woman's throat. With a quick jerk of her head, she ripped through skin and tendons. She knew the instant she found the artery when blood spurted into her face.

Tight muscles grew weak, and bright spots flashed before Nora's eyes. She let go, stumbling back, licking the blood from her lips. The wooden door splintered, and she lifted her gaze to see the flashing eyes of her as he *True Mate* crashed into the room.

Her legs wobbled, and darkness seeped into her vision.

* * * *

Ryland charged across the room, gathering Nora in his arms. "Nora. Oh, God, Nora." The scents of blood mixed, the human's and Nora's, overpowering his senses. The life giving substance was everywhere, on his mate, on the woman who lay dead on the floor, and now on him. He searched her body till he found her wound. A slice down her belly, from chest to groin.

"Don't die, rabbit, please, I need you."

She was losing blood fast, and if she didn't shift now, he'd lose her. Forever.

"Nora," he said, caressing the blood soaked coat, "shift. Now."

She whimpered and licked his hands.

He leaned closer, his face by her ear. "I love you, baby. Please, don't leave me." And he did love her. And he trusted her. She had given her life to save another. He reached inside to find that illusive bond between them, shoving the two crucial emotions into her heart. "Please, Nora, shift. For me."

Her body stiffened, and she howled in pain, and then there was a flash of light. Her human form slowly returned, the howl changing to a more human screech. She lay naked in his arms, her wound healed, but blood still covered her flesh.

She opened her eyes, and he'd never been so relieved in all his life. He hugged her, rocking her in his lap.

"It's over, baby. It's over. You got her." Ryland crooned the words softly, and his large hand stroked her hair.

"She was insane, Ryland. She thought Joshua was her mate." Nora couldn't stop the sobs. "She was going to kill that innocent child." Her vision blurred, darkening, her body weak from the loss of blood.

"I know, sweetheart, but the baby's safe now. You're safe now."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ryland carried Nora to his den while Brogan handled cleanup in the women's rooms. Everything inside him demanded he get the blood off her before she woke. He laid her on his bed while he ran water in the large bathtub. For the first time in his life, he wished he had sweet smelling bath oils in his possession. Not that Nora needed something to make her smell better, but the scent of the oils might help chase away the scent of blood.

When the tub was full, he lowered her body inside. She gave a soft moan. He brushed her hair from her face.

"Shh... It's okay, baby." She relaxed, turning her face into his shoulder.

Relief swamped him, and he kissed the top of her head, his arms still wrapped around her body. She felt so good in his arms, so warm and alive. He'd thought he'd been scared when he realized she intended to leave him, but when he'd seen her blood pumping onto the floor, it seemed his heart had stopped beating all together.

He drew the wet cloth over the soft flesh of her belly, scrubbing away the remnants of her battle. The coppery crust washed away, revealing creamy feminine flesh. With gentle fingers, he washed the flaky dried remnants from her hair, and then rinsed the soap from her. He lifted her from the tub, water sluicing from her body. In his arms, she felt so small, and so feminine, despite her height. Protective instincts burned inside him, and he wanted to bundle her in a blanket and hide her away from any future dangers. Balancing her in his lap, he dried her, wrapping a towel about her for warmth. His little shewolf was no longer the rabbit he'd first met. As much as he wanted to protect her, he knew she wouldn't allow it.

For now, though, he could, and would, care for her. He strode across the floor, her body safely cradled in his arms, with his nose buried in her neck, swimming in her scent. He still didn't know how she'd done it. How she'd wormed her way deep into his soul. But she was there, a soft, delicate space hidden deep in his heart, protected by his own primitive instincts. Entrenched so deeply he'd been unwilling to accept her presence until it was almost too late.

God, he hoped she'd forgive him. Everything inside him trembled at the memory of how close she'd come to dying. Even if she didn't forgive him, at least she was alive.

Lowering her to the bed, he slipped the towel from her body and covered her with the comforter, blocking that sweet femininity from his eyes.

* * * *

Nora woke slowly, the darkness ebbing away like fog in a light wind. Memories flitted in and out, images of blood and a knife blade. Shaking her head, hoping it was a dream, Nora pushed them away and surrendered to the masculine scent clinging to the comforter and pillow. Her lips curved into a tender smile. The darkly sensual scent rolled through her body like a lit fire, and she burned inside.

Her eyes fluttered open and she arched, the sensual tug spiking in her blood. She lay in Ryland's bed, but, except for her, the room was empty. Beside her on the bed lay a tray with a nice juicy steak awaiting her. Her nostrils widened, the delicious scent of the meat running through her lungs. Her stomach growled in response. She dragged the tray across her lap.

The first bite hit her like dark ambrosia, the juices trickling down her throat. She closed her eyes, relishing every drop. The taste exploded across her tongue.

"Now, that's beauty at her best."

Nora's eyelids popped open, her eyes tracking to find the speaker. Ryland leaned against the bathroom door, a towel in his hands. Moisture glistened from the powerful muscles across his chest. The spicy wildness that was his scent rolled through the room between them, signaling his sensual hunger.

"Hi," she said, feeling suddenly shy. The look in his eye was hot and hungry, though a flash of an indiscernible emotion flitted in their depths.

"How do you feel?"

She took another bite of her steak before answering. She felt strange. Her stomach fluttered with every look at him. Something had happened between them. Something she should remember.

"Oh, God," she whispered. She'd killed Kirsten. Her gaze shot back to Ryland.

He straightened and crossed the room, his eyes filled with concern. "You did what you had to, Nora."

Glancing at the food, her stomach turned. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she cut a piece of the rare beef, ignoring the blood she so often found appetizing, and raised it to her lips. Her hand trembled violently.

Warm, masculine fingers closed about her hand. "Let me."

Ryland took the fork from her shaking fingers and lifted it to her lips.

Her stomach revolted, and she turned away. "I can't." The whispered admission only shook her even deeper. "I killed her. I really killed her," she sobbed.

Ryland laid the fork on her plate and moved the tray. "I know, rabbit, I know. But you saved Sarah's baby." Ryland pulled her into his arms.

She wanted to lose herself in his touch, but it didn't feel right. Nothing would ever feel right again. "And killed her sister."

His hands rubbed warm, comforting circles over her back. "Kirsten made her choices, Nora," he said softly. "Nothing you can do will change that. She was the one with the knife in her hand, not you. You only protected the child and yourself."

The tears wouldn't stop. No matter how hard she tried, Nora could only see the blood when she closed her eyes, and she sobbed even harder. She expected Ryland would get up and leave her to her tears, but he surprised her, holding her as she cried.

After a time, Nora looked up at him, giving him a watery smile. "I'm sorry, I got your chest all wet."

"Again," he said with a grin.

Cocking her head, she gave him a confused grin. *Again?* And then she realized her hair was wet. He must have bathed her. A wave of embarrassed heat burned her cheeks, and she looked away.

He chuckled softly. "It was nothing, rabbit. I just wanted to get your blood off of you."

Unable to contain her need to touch him, she wiped her tears from his chest. Quirking a smile, she pushed off the bed, wrapping the comforter around her body, ignoring the wave of dizziness. She crossed the room to his dresser.

"What are you doing?"

"I need to borrow a T-shirt."

Ryland furrowed his brow. "Why?"

"I need to go outside. I need to breathe."

That was all it took. In seconds, Ryland had snatched a T-shirt from his dresser and whisked it over her head. Before she could sputter to make him stop, he'd whipped the comforter from her and dropped the T-shirt down her thighs.

"I'm sorry, I should have realized."

"It's not your fault, Ryland. I just... I just need...."

"I know. Come on, I'll go with you."

Nora shook her head. "You don't understand, Ryland. I need time to think, to be alone."

"Wrong. You need time to breathe. After that we can talk more."

Nora pursed her lips but nodded. There was no need to argue with him right now. The time would come when she wouldn't see him anymore, and she would miss their little spats when he tried to control her. But tonight there wouldn't be an argument.

Ryland escorted her outside, and they moved to the clearing they'd played in just a few short days before. Her gut twisted, almost as though the blade of Kirsten's knife still remained. It hurt, knowing this would be their last night together. But she wouldn't—couldn't—live without his love.

She sat on the sandy soil, her back resting against a fallen tree, and stared up at the starlit night. She let her senses take her. She closed her eyes, taking in the scents and sounds of the forest. She opened her mouth and let the tastes roll around inside her. Like delicate caresses, the light breeze played with her hair and her body. She could almost believe she was alone. *Almost*.

"Nora—"

"Shhh...", she whispered. "This is my last night here. Let's not talk."

His body stilled beside her. "I thought perhaps...."

For long seconds, she listened to the crickets, ignoring his words. When at last they reached her brain she turned, puzzled. "You thought what?"

Ryland didn't look at her. Instead, he turned to face the forest, his golden eyes glittering in the moonlight. "I thought maybe you had forgiven me."

Nora sighed and picked at the few sprigs of grass poking through the sand. "There's nothing to forgive. I just can't live like you want me to."

Ryland bowed his head and sighed. Then he turned to face her. The urgency in those blue eyes sent a shiver of need through her body. "I'll give up the pack. We'll find a cabin in the woods if that's what you want."

The urgency in his voice caught her by surprise.

"Ryland, you know it's not where you live that's the problem."

"Then what, rabbit? I need you with me. It's selfish, I know, but I love you too much to let you go."

Nora's heart stilled, and her eyes opened wider, staring at Ryland. "What did you say?"

"I said I need you with me."

"No, after that."

Confusion rippled across Ryland's face, but just for an instant. He smiled, a slow confident smile she loved so much. That's when she realized she'd missed something very important.

"You don't remember."

"Remember what?"

"Before you shifted, when you were bleeding. What do you remember?"

Nora's heart fluttered, and then beat faster than before. She pushed through the fear and through the pain. She'd been laying on the floor when Ryland rushed to her. He'd begged her to shift. To not leave him because *he loved her*.

"You really love me?" she squeaked. Damned voice. Couldn't she speak like an adult when she needed to?

"I love you, rabbit. Everything about you."

Tears stung Nora's eyes. He did. She could see it in his expression, feel it through the link they shared. She inhaled, and her eyes fluttered closed. That illusive scent, the one he'd hidden after they'd made love on his desk, washed over her, cocooning her, loving her.

Nora leaned toward him, her hand trailing the scar on his cheek. Like she'd done the first night they met. This time, instead of pulling away, Ryland leaned into her touch. "I love you, Ryland."

A flash of hope glowed within his eyes and his lips softened to a curve. "Then stay. Stay with me, or we'll find a cabin in the woods. I don't have to stay here, Nora. Gerard and Brogan can have the pack."

* * * *

Ryland stared at her, waiting. Hope burned in that tiny place she'd built within his heart. Ryland's lungs stopped working, and his heart stuttered. For the first time in his life, a woman held his future in her hands. If she said no, he wasn't sure how his heart could take it. At the same time, he was terrified she'd say yes.

With a small sad smile, she shook her head and bit her lip.

"No," she said, her voice breaking.

Pain seared his chest in the vicinity of his heart. Ryland let his head drop into her lap.

"I can't make you give up your pack," she whispered. With a gentle hand, she lifted his head, tipping his face to meet his eyes. Tears trickled down her face, and her lips quivered. "If you'll have me, I'll stay here...with you."

Ryland's heart skipped a beat. It sounded as though she'd said she'd stay with him. He had to have heard wrong, because she hated the compound. Ryland's throat constricted. "What did you say?" he croaked.

She smiled, emotion glittering beneath the soft brown eyes he'd grown to love. "I said, if you'll have me, I'll stay here, but there's one condition."

"Anything."

Her soft laugh felt like tiny fingers caressing his spine. “You have *got* to let me do something to make that compound look more at home.”

Ryland grinned. “You’ve got it. Free reign to do whatever you want.” He wrapped his arms about her waist and pressed his head to her breast. Relief showered over him like a warm summer rain. Delicate fingers combed through locks of his hair. Her touch soothed him, calming the fears burning in his heart.

He nuzzled her breasts. They were so soft, so sweet. He lost himself in the honey of her feminine scent. Her scent rolled into his lungs, burning through his blood, hardening his already hungry body.

“Ryland,” she whispered. “Look at me.”

Ryland lifted his head and looked into the face of the female he knew he would love forever.

“Ryland, if you will have me, I accept you as my mate. For now, for the future, and forevermore.” The ritualistic words her pack used struck hard. Wolven were not matriarchal, but it was the shewolf who chose her mate. Each pack held its own ritual of acceptance, and he remembered this from years before when he’d lived among her pack in his childhood. Then, he hadn’t understood the importance. Now, he did. Blood rushed to his groin, hardening his body with need for his *True Mate*. She would be his. He would possess her heart, body, and soul, just as she already possessed him.

His fangs lengthened, and his mouth watered, hungering to claim the one woman who would be his forever. But she was too important. He couldn’t rush this last step into their relationship. With care, Ryland slowed the frantic beating of his heart and cupped her face in his trembling palms, forcing himself to take things slow. His fingers caressing the soft, delicate skin, and her heat burned his fingertips, despite the cool breeze filling the forest. A hint of pink peeked between her luscious lips.

Words tumbled through his mind, penetrating the fog of hunger that exploded at her words. Searching for the right answer, he found none. One word echoed through his brain, searing on his heart and soul. One word he could clearly speak in response.

“Mine,” he growled as his lips met hers.

* * * *

Nora trembled at the single syllable from his throat. Days ago, she’d found his declaration acquisitive, yet this time, every nerve sparked in response, igniting on the hot embers already burning within her.

Her lips ached with hunger until Ryland’s mouth touched hers. He teased her with his tongue, sweeping along the seam of her lips, waiting for her to open. The light nip of his fangs tantalized so sweetly, the light sting of pain combining with the pleasure of his taste.

“Yes,” she hissed beneath his touch. He didn’t devour her, but instead, teased her, exciting her passions higher than ever. Heat burned through her body, and a dull, empty ache ricocheted through her body. For the first time, she knew where she belonged. Here, with Ryland.

Leaning into him, she splayed her fingers across his muscular chest. The skin was supple to the touch, yet beneath were hard, powerful muscles. She shoved him, forcing him back to the sand. But she didn't leave him there alone. She followed him, climbing on him the way she had in his office, straddling his hips.

His chest rumbled, and she caught a glimpse of a grin before he tightened his lips.

"You are mine," she whispered, and then claimed his lips with hers. In a flash, he rolled her over until she was the one cradled in the soft warmth of the earth, his hard body pressed against hers.

She arched, unable to stop herself. He responded with a low, masculine laugh.

"I want this to last," he whispered, before scoring the sinew along her throat with his fangs.

She arched, offering him full access, begging him to take her. "Please," she whispered. "Make me yours."

His hips jerked hard against her in response, and he bit down just enough to cause the sting of sensual pain. "You were always mine," he murmured against her flesh. His hands reached for the neck of the T-shirt she wore. His T-shirt. The soft cotton held his scent, the same scent she wanted inside her forever more.

With one quick move, he ripped it in half, baring her body to his view.

He lowered his mouth, nipping lightly, trailing to the juncture of shoulder and neck. "Here," his fangs played with her body, "here, you will wear my mark."

"Yes," she sobbed. "There." Many shewolves today hid their marks so humans wouldn't see and ask questions. Their mates would place the marks on their shoulders, on their breasts, and even on their thighs. But she wanted everyone to know she was taken, and who had taken her.

* * * *

Ryland rumbled in approval at her capitulation. He couldn't believe this was happening. At long last, they would be joined, forever more. He wanted every male to see the mark and know she was his.

Her hands clawed at his waist, and he realized he still had on his jeans. Kneeling back, his fingers opened the waist, his gaze on his *True Mate*. She was so beautiful. Her pale flesh glowed beneath the moonlight, and her red, luscious lips beckoned to him for another taste. But he held off. Tonight would be about control.

His lips curled in his hunger, and he growled his appreciation when her eyes widened, and her beautiful body bowed in response. She lay open for him, waiting. Nora's breasts appeared to reach for him, begging him to touch them. He knew she believed them to be too small, but in his eyes, they were perfect. The only thing missing was his mouth. With a quick motion, he stripped himself of his jeans and leaned forward, more than ready to give her what her body craved.

Her nipples were hard, tiny buds in his mouth, both salty and sweet on his tongue. The taste of her flesh exploded across his taste buds, driving him on for more. He teased the other breast with his thumb and forefinger. Her moan of pleasure oscillated through his body, driving his pleasure even higher. "Mine," he whispered, his mind still struggling to accept her offer.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Make me yours forever.”

The need to feel her sweet muscles clamped round him sent a tremor through him. One hand trailed along her stomach and down her hips; the other continued to caress her breast.

Her body flexed upward, begging without words, for his touch. He released the pebbled nipple from his mouth, but not before he scored his teeth along the edge, just to hear her gasp of pleasure.

Like music to his ears, Nora’s body played her tune of sensuous arousal for his enjoyment. Her breath came in heavy gasps, her moans and sighs a melody that vibrated along his spine.

His hand trailed lower, his fingers reaching for the sweet, sensuous honey within her body. The curve to her back and her gasp of pleasure brought a smile to his face.

“Ryland,” she cried. “Please, I need you.”

“In time.” For an instant, he flashed on their lovemaking in his office. He’d been so uncontrolled, so aggressive. Tonight would be different. Her body was his to play with for the rest of his life, and he would see to it she understood how important she truly was.

With a slide backwards, he dropped his mouth to her belly, tracing her navel with his tongue. Leaving a wet trail on her flesh, he moved down until he reached his destination. The one part of her where he could show her what his heart wanted to signal to the world.

Ryland inhaled, letting the sweet honey of her arousal play through his body. Like a drug, she drew him in until he had to taste her. He buried his face in her body, his hands grasping her hips. Her body bucked, and he growled and held on. Lapping at her sweet body, he taunted her with his tongue.

She cried out, and her body trembled. He lifted his gaze to watch her reach that pinnacle of pure pleasure. Her body stiffened, her face tightening with pleasure. He’d never thought pleasuring a woman would be as arousing as being pleased.

When at last she settled, he released her, crawling upward. But Nora wasn’t the spent lamb he’d thought her to be. She flipped over on her belly and crawled toward a tree.

His little bitch was still testing him. He snarled, primitive instincts leaping to the surface. He palmed her hips, jerking her back toward him. Before he could stop himself, he thrust inside her, groaning when her soft, wet heat enveloped him. She cried out, arching her back, accepting his full length.

Damn. He froze. So much for thinking he could control this—her.

* * * *

Nora wanted him to move. He’d nearly destroyed her with pleasure just moments before, but this wasn’t about her. It was about them.

She’d realized just moments before he’d forced her over the edge that she would have to take matters in her own hands, or he would torture her through the night, refusing to give her his mark until he was ready.

She didn't want to wait. She wanted to know him in the most intimate way a shewolf could know her mate: with his teeth embedded in her body. When he'd touched her neck and shoulder, pointing out where he would mark her, she'd nearly howled with joy.

She shoved backward, encouraging Ryland to move. Powerful hands gripped her hips, forcing her still. Peering over her shoulder, she saw his face, frozen, a mask of pure lust, his jaw set, and she knew he was searching for control.

Control was not what Nora wanted. Not now. It was time to find all that was shewolf inside her.

With a lunge, she made an attempt to escape, knowing what his reaction would be. Fingers tightened on her hips, and Ryland's nails grew, pricking her flesh. She moaned, secretly satisfied with his response, hungry for more.

"Move, Ryland, please," she begged.

"Not. Yet." His voice was tight, evidence of his battle for control.

"Now. Or I swear, when this is over, I'll make you pay."

His laughter only sent her hunger skyrocketing.

"But I'm already paying, rabbit." He pulled back, withdrawing slowly, torturously. She could hear the hunger in his voice.

He felt so good, so right. The fit was absolutely perfect, and for the first time, she could feel every nuance and shape of his body as he moved inside her. Teasing her. Nora whimpered.

He slammed hard against her hips, and she screamed.

Buried deep inside her, he leaned forward, his chest against her back. "Tell me, Nora. Tell me what you want."

Nora struggled to find the words. He'd knocked every bit of concentration out of her mind. "You. I want you forever. Your mark."

With strong arms, he lifted her, until both of them were on their knees, pulling her back to his chest. A hand brushed away her hair from her face, and he thrust inside her again. Each move drove her closer and closer to that magical moment when her body took over. She didn't want to come yet. She wanted to wait, until his fangs were against her throat, until he was as close as she was.

Using her inner muscles, she tightened on him. They groaned in unison. Instead of arousing him further, she'd only managed to wind herself tighter. Her body trembled. "Please," she begged. "I need..." She couldn't finish. Her mind toppled into the space where time and words had no meaning. Only sensation. Ryland's strokes pushed her even higher, gaining momentum. His mouth closed on her neck, and she arched, offering herself to him. Offering him everything she was—the shewolf, the mate.

He growled, pumping harder inside her, and she knew he had finally reached the precipice. His teeth scored her neck one more time, and she fought the tremor rising in her body.

She couldn't hold back anymore. Her control crumbled around her, and her body bucked against his. His fangs punctured her flesh, sending a fresh wave of heat through her. Her body exploded. Her scream was far more wolfish than human, howling in her pleasure. She trembled as she felt his saliva slip into her blood stream, sending her orgasm into overdrive. He nuzzled and licked her flesh, ingesting the warm, life giving fluids.

Her orgasm slowly subsided, and images crashed into her mind. Ryland, at his grandparent's home, when he'd believed he was their child. He'd loved them with all his heart. And then they were gone. Overwhelming sadness washed over her, until she saw herself through his eyes. Inside, he knew she was different. A special child in his lonely world. He'd withstood the teasing from the rest of the boys in the pack just so he could be by her side.

But then he was with Joshua. His life was filled with loneliness and violence. She saw his father through his eyes while Joshua glared down at him, forcing him to learn the hardships of what he called life. Yet always the boy remembered a time he was loved, clinging to the memories like a lifeline. She saw him grow into manhood, hating what his father had become, hating the life he was forced to live. A beating he'd received at the hand of the man who he thought was his brother, ending with the slice of that sliver blade on his face. Her heart cried out for the man whose self-loathing grew even while he'd struggled for ways to offset everything his brother/father had done.

And then she felt his love for her. So powerful and strong that it took her breath away. She barely felt the tears coursing down her cheeks. Tears for a boy's lost childhood. Tears for a man's lost soul. Tears for a love whose heartwarming foundation encircled her, comforting her.

* * * *

Ryland tasted the sweetness of her blood. It trickled down his throat, enhancing every sensation as he released his seed into her body. Her emotions and memories barraged his mind, one after the other of males vying for her attention. Ryland fought against the jealousy burning in his soul when he felt her contempt for the wolveren, each wanting her for reasons other than love. They wanted her for the power. Other memories flashed in his mind, sounds of males talking about her body, calling her ugly, and mannish. Yet they would mate her if it meant they could take control of the pack. The words had dug deep into her soul, hurting at a time when a young girl's self image was most fragile.

He saw her love of the forest, the happiness the outdoors gave her. And then he saw that awful day, through her eyes, when she'd been captured. He saw the torture and felt every searing slice of her skin when the humans had cut her, taunting her father, demanding he work with them, allow them to control his pack. Her bravery was unsettling. She'd never screamed, and she'd never cried, but, inside, her soul had shrieked with pain.

Finally, he felt her love for him, and it soothed away the hurt. It was strong and warm, powerful. It strengthened his soul, and he licked at her wound on her shoulder. Slowly, he came back to himself, but the memories of her love stayed warm, tucked away in his heart. Memories of her torture still burned in his mind. A shudder ran through his entire body. She had endured such pain. Her strength impressed him as no one else's had.

They collapsed to the ground, and Ryland rolled to the side, dragging her into his arms. Where she belonged. She snuggled against his chest, and, with his thumb, he brushed the tears from her cheeks. Their legs intertwined. Neither spoke for several long minutes. There was nothing more to be said.

Only *True Mates* experienced the melding of emotions and memories. Some said it was to enforce the love and respect for each other which was needed for full commitment. Others felt it was a curse. There would be no secrets between them now.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered at last.

Ryland frowned. "For what?" he said, looking down at her.

"For all you went through. You didn't deserve such treatment. Joshua was an asshole."

Ryland shrugged. "It was nothing. Really." And it wasn't. Not in comparison to her pain. He was a male, he was expected to be tough, and Joshua had ensured he was. "Compared to the pain you suffered, it's nothing. Nora, if they weren't already dead, I'd torture them the same way they tortured you."

Tears filled her eyes, and he brushed them away with his thumb. He rolled until he was over her, caging her body beneath his. "Those boys were idiots when you were younger. Nora, you have always been beautiful."

She refused to meet his eyes, instead, watching his mouth. "How would you know?"

He smiled. "Because you were beautiful as a child, and you are even more beautiful now. Your body is perfect."

"No it's not."

"Yes, it is. You still think I lied, don't you?" Not waiting for an answer, he ran a hand from her right shoulder to her breast. "It's perfect." He leaned in, lathing her nipple with his tongue, his golden hair caressing her flesh. "A perfect size, and a perfect taste," he murmured. His hands trailed to her hips. "A woman's hips cradle her mate and help bear her children. These are strong hips, and they fit perfectly against mine."

She bit back a moan as he slipped back inside her, his strokes slow, sensuous. He made her almost believe she was beautiful.

"Don't argue with me," he whispered in her ear, as though he knew exactly what she was thinking. "I say you are beautiful, and I am the only one who matters. I am proud to have you at my side."

Tears leaked from the corner of her eyes. He only hoped they were tears of relief, tears to release old pain.

His thrusts increased in speed, lost in her silky grip, relishing when her hips met each drive, sending him deeper inside her.

Emotions rolled between them, teasing him with the scents as they became one. Loneliness. Pain. Love. They rolled over them, twining their hearts together.

"Never...alone...", she gasped.

His brow furrowed, and then cleared. "Never alone again," he murmured, his lips against hers. He kissed her with all the gentleness in his heart. He'd been so blind when he'd thought he could keep her out. He knew now there had never been a hope of keeping her away from his heart. Their souls had always known, even if their minds hadn't. They came in unison, their bodies completely in tune, burning and exploding together as one. When the last tremors eased, Ryland kissed her softly once more.

"Mine," he whispered, and then tipped his head back and howled his celebration.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Nora sat up, smiling, but not just at the sun peeking through the trees. Ryland grinned sheepishly next to her when he handed her the remnants of the T-shirt she'd worn the night before.

"Sorry about that."

She laughed. "I should keep it as a souvenir."

He laughed and helped her stand, drawing her against his hard body. "I'm going to go tell Brogan to handle the pack for a few days and you and I are going to spend the next forty-eight hours alone. Just you and me."

She gave an approving growl, her hands caressing his hard chest. God, she loved his body.

"That sounds perfect, except if Brogan is busy, you might want to offer it to Gerard instead." They walked into the compound and to the den's main door. "While you do that, I'll make us some food. We'll need sustenance."

"Hmm. How about some of those spectacular pancakes?"

"The ones that smelled so good?"

He chuckled and drew her in for one last kiss before walking down the long hallway. "Nothing will ever smell better than you."

He released her and turned away. Nora stared after him, watching him lope down the hall, a smile curving her lips. Her fingers moved to her mouth, relishing the delicious feel of the swelling lips. Swollen from his kisses. Such sweet decadence, making love outside, beneath the stars.

Humming, she went inside and headed to the kitchen.

* * * *

Ryland moved down the hallway, unable to stop smiling. In his mind, he could hear Nora's humming song. Before he'd marked her, he could occasionally hear her thoughts, but this was different. Years ago, he'd heard from his grandparents how *True Mates* could hear each other's thoughts, but he hadn't expected it to be like this. It was as though he was inside her mind, and she inside his. It would take some getting used to.

He entered Brogan's den without knocking. He didn't realize what he'd done until he was already inside, and by then, it was too late. He shrugged. It's not like he hadn't been rude before.

"Hey, Brogan," he called.

There was no answer. He inhaled. His second was definitely home. But then there were other scents. Mary was here. His smile widened. Perhaps Brogan was a bit preoccupied. He stepped closer to the living room when he caught a third scent. Jackie. Puzzled, his grin wavered. Now what the hell was she doing here?

"Brogan," he called again, striding into the living room. Brogan was sitting in a hard wooden chair, facing him, his arms behind him. His face eyes were wide, and he shook his head. It was then Ryland realized the male was tied, and tape was over his mouth.

"Well, look who's here," drawled Jackie. "I didn't expect you. What an excellent change in plans."

Confusion clouded Ryland's mind, and he looked from Mary to Jackie. Mary sat on the sofa, her red eyes were wide, and two rivers of tears coursed down her cheeks. Jackie stood behind Brogan, her hand at his throat. It took a moment before realization to set in. She had a blade at his throat. Ryland's nostrils widened. *Silver.*

"What's going on, Jackie?"

"I thought you were smarter than that, Ryland. Can't you figure it out?"

"So it wasn't Kirstin who killed all those males after all, was it?"

Laughter barked from her throat. "Kirstin didn't have the sense God gave her. She was a psycho who snapped."

"And you?" asked Ryland, his brow arched. "You don't usually tie up your victims. What are you doing?"

"Teaching Mary," she scoffed. "The little bitch thinks this animal loves her, and I want her to see him for what he really is before he dies."

"I see," said Ryland, careful to keep his voice even. He needed to get to her, get the blade out of her hand before she did any damage. It looked like a scalpel.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, nodding to her weapon of choice.

"This ol' thing?" she asked, wiggling the blade, scraping it against Brogan's flesh. "It was a gift."

"From who?"

"None of your damned business. Sit down."

"And if I don't?" he asked, taking one step closer, stopping when she pierced the flesh along Brogan's throat. Blood trickled, boiling beneath the touch of silver. "Okay, I'll sit."

He moved to the couch and sat beside Mary, patting her leg. She jumped, but didn't utter a sound.

"Mary, tie him up."

Mary moved, like a robot, to retrieve a length of rope lying on the easy chair across the room. Ryland could see she'd retreated to some dark corner in her mind and worked only on automatic pilot, operating like a trained slave. Ryland frowned and glanced at Brogan. His best friend's eyes watched the woman he wanted tie Ryland's hands behind his back. He didn't fight her. Whatever was happening was not Mary's fault.

"Excellent," cooed Jackie. "Take the tape and cover his mouth."

Damn. He'd hoped to be able to talk Jackie down, or maybe talk Mary into getting help. Mary ripped the tape from the roll and placed it over Ryland's lips, though she didn't press very hard. Not that it mattered. He couldn't exactly surprise Jackie without being able to talk, disarming her from a distance.

He thought of Nora, and fear suddenly stabbed his heart. What if she felt his concern? Would she charge in, with both fists flying?

"Now, Mary. Look at his blood. It's not human. Can't you see what they are? They are animals." Mary sliced another cut along Brogan's throat. Just shallow enough to allow blood to trickle, but enough for the silver to burn his flesh.

Mary didn't respond, though a glitter of something shone in her eyes. Anger, thought Ryland.

"They raped you," continued Jackie. "Just as surely as if they'd done the deed themselves."

"No," whispered Mary.

"No? Of course, they did. Look at them. They even smell like animals."

"They smell nice," said Mary, louder this time.

Good girl. Maybe she wasn't so terrified after all.

Though her words had a different affect on their captor. Jackie shrieked, and charged, grabbing Mary by her hair. Mary screamed, struggling to get away. Ryland lurched from his seat, shoving his body into Jackie. The two crashed to the floor. He rolled to his knees, but before he could stand, she was there, her blade at his throat.

* * * *

Nora hummed her tune and pulled the eggs out of the refrigerator. This time, there would be no awkward silences during breakfast. They were so close she could almost feel his thoughts. He was worried about Brogan.

Nora furrowed her brow, confused. Maybe Mary had told Brogan she wasn't interested in being his mate after all.

Images flashed into her mind, and she gasped, her pulse accelerating. Images of Brogan tied up, Mary wrapping ropes around Ryland's hands.

The eggs crashed to the floor. She ran to the front door and charged out. Ripping the shirt from her body, she shifted on the run, barely noticing the feel of the change in her body, and she landed on four feet instead of two. Fear for Ryland gave her speed as she charged toward the door she knew housed Brogan's den.

The entry was ajar. Ryland's scent trailed through the open door. Careful to not make a sound, she poked her nose in. Ryland's scent filled her lungs. But she waited, sorting through the scents. Brogan was easy to pick out. And then there was Mary. But Jackie was also here. *What the hell was she doing here?*

She thought about Jackie's words last night before they all went to sleep. Had Kristin not been the killer after all? Had she only wanted to kill the baby so her twin would go home with her, like she said?

Nora stalked forward, her body low to the ground, each step cutting away a piece of her heart. She wanted to charge in, explode into a flurry of sharp teeth, but without knowing what was happening, she couldn't. Ryland's emotions were all over the place, ranging from calm one moment, to agitated, to fury.

A crash sounded. The hell with easy! She charged forward, skidding to a stop inside the living room.

Ryland was on the floor and the bitch, Jackie, had a blade to his throat. Nora didn't need to inhale to know what it was. It was that same damned silver scalpel. She could still smell her blood on it.

Her eyes turned red, skewing her sight. She focused in on the bitch with the blade at her mate's throat. Her growl rumbled through the air, and she charged.

Jackie saw her at the last minute, and with a single swipe, the blade sliced a shallow cut across Ryland's throat. His eyes widened, and blood burst outward.

Nora leaped, flying through the air, her teeth clamping Jackie's wrist. She twisted her head until she heard the bone snap. The woman screamed, but Nora didn't hesitate. She released the woman's arm and dove for her throat. Fury

unlike anything she'd ever felt roared in her mind. With one single move, she clamped her jaws about the woman's neck, pressing inward on her windpipe. Her teeth pierced the soft flesh, and blood spurted outward. Jackie tried to scream, but the only sound was a gurgle. When the last whisper rattled from her throat, Nora released her, dropping the bitch to the floor.

She spun to see Ryland on the floor, his face pale, his eyes closed. Nora flashed to human form in an instant, running to him. Mary was already there, struggling to staunch the flow of blood.

"Get out of the way," she snarled, pulling Ryland's head into her lap. Blood gushed at the movement, and she swallowed a sob. "Release him," she nodded to Brogan. Mary stepped back, and although she heard the woman's sobs, she couldn't deal with her right now.

"Hold on, Ryland," Nora whispered. His eyelids fluttered, and in her mind, she could feel their connection weakening.

I love you.

"Stop it, Ryland. You're going to be fine."

Brogan knelt beside her. "The blade was silver. The cut is too deep."

Nora turned her tear filled eyes to Ryland's second. "No," she whispered. "Oh, God," she cried. There was a way to save him. "Brogan, run to Ryland's den. In the bag by the door in Ryland's bathroom is a container of Quick Stop. Hurry."

"But—"

"Do it! Fast! Before he dies!"

Brogan didn't hesitate any longer, but turned, charging out his front door.

"Hang on, Ryland. Just a few more minutes. You'll be okay."

His lips moved, and he reached for her. "Shh... Don't talk. Just save your strength."

How corny could she get? Her mate lay in her lap dying, and she's telling him to save his strength.

Tell Brogan to let my brother have the pack.

His voice in her head was weaker. "I will do no such thing, Ryland. You're going to be just fine."

Mary cocked her head at them, her sobs stopping for the moment. She didn't have time to tell the woman she could hear Ryland in her head. "Brogan will be back any minute. Anna found a cure for silver poisoning. It's what stopped the bleeding on my back."

If he heard her, he gave no indication. His breathing grew labored, and his face more pale. Where was Brogan with the damned Styptic Powder?

The door burst open, and the male ran inside. In his hands, he carried two of the bottles of powder. "I didn't know how much we'd need."

Nora merely nodded, yanking one of the small canisters from his hands. She twisted the lid off and whispered into Ryland's ear, "This is gonna hurt. Are you ready?"

His eyes fluttered. There was no response in her mind, and that alone terrified her more than the blood loss. She poured the entire jar's contents onto the wound.

Ryland's body bucked in her lap while he gritted his teeth. No sound came from his throat, but in her mind, she heard the scream of excruciating pain. To be

safe, she grabbed another bottle and uncapped it. She was about to pour it on, when Brogan caught her hand.

"No, wait. It's working. He's stopped bleeding," he said in awe.

Brogan was right. No more fresh blood seeped from the wound. It was now time for him to shift. "Quick, I need a knife or something. We need to free him."

Mary was there in an instant with a kitchen knife, sawing through the ropes. Once the last fiber snapped, Ryland's arms came forward. He shifted. The scream of pain in her head intensified, and Nora moaned on his behalf.

The wolf lay panting for a time, the golden fur about his neck tainted red. She touched his throat to be sure no more blood flowed from the nearly healed wound. Nora wrapped her arms around his body, holding him in her lap. Tears dripped onto his golden fur, mixing with his blood. *He'll be okay*. She repeated the phrase in her mind like a mantra, praying it was true.

Noises surrounded her as wolverines from the pack poured into the room. Gerard moved toward them.

"Please, little sister," he said. "Let me carry him to his den, so he can rest."

She nodded. Nora knew more than anything he now needed rest and food. Meat especially. He'd lost several pints of blood, the same way she had the night before. God, she hoped this was all over this time.

Thank heaven Anna had brought the styptic powder. What was used primarily in veterinarian clinics to stop the bleeding of dogs' nails when they were clipped too short, had a special meaning for shifters. Anna had discovered it stopped the bleeding from silver injuries. Once again, Nora owed Anna more than her life.

Gerard lifted his brother's body and gently carried him down the hall. Nora stood and wobbled. Brogan was right there, his arm around her, with Mary on the other side.

"What happened?" Nora asked Brogan.

Brogan sighed. "She knocked on the door, and we invited her in. I had no idea she had any negative intentions toward us. But the minute she was inside, she threatened Mary, and before I could disarm her, she'd put that stupid blade against Mary's throat."

"She was about to kill me," whispered Mary. "It's my fault Ryland was hurt."

Nora shook her head. "Not your fault," she said as they entered Ryland's apartment. "But why you? Why not Brogan?"

"Oh, she was about to do that too," said Brogan. "She just went after Mary first because Mary refused to admit I'd raped her."

"She wanted all the rapists to die," said Mary, her voice somewhat stronger. "Before Ryland arrived, she bragged how she'd killed the others without them even seeing it coming. But since we were together, she thought it would be good for me to see my rapist die in front of me."

"Oh, God," whispered Nora.

"But she's dead now," said Brogan, reassuring both of them. "She won't be killing anyone else." They walked into Ryland's living room.

Brogan led her to the sofa and sat her down. He took Mary in his arms, holding her against his body. The sweet sight hit Nora in her stomach, hard. She'd come so close to losing her mate. She stood from the couch. "I have to see him."

Dark Succession

She moved toward the bedroom, and Gerard stepped out. "He's resting. I'm sure when he wakes up, he'll be a bit hungry, but otherwise he should be fine."

She nodded. As she passed him, a thought occurred to her. "Gerard?"

He turned back toward her. "Yes?"

She knew Ryland would never voice his feelings for his new found brother. "You do realize he is happy to have you as his brother, don't you?"

Gerard stared at her for long seconds. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "He lost so much because of Joshua. He has been alone most of his life, with only Joshua to call family. The dark succession to leader of the pack stripped away any chance of being the man he wanted to be. Having a brother gives him hope for some kind of normal family relationship."

Gerard nodded, his gray eyes warming. "I'll do my best to see that happens then."

She gave him a watery smile and turned to join her mate in bed.

Epilogue

Nora grinned when Ryland stepped out of his office.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"You'll see." She quirked a one-sided smile at him and grabbed his hand.

She'd had been busy lately and wouldn't share what she'd been up to. Instead, she'd worked in secret on some project at the end of Hallway Charlie. Now, she led him in that direction.

He so hoped he liked what she'd done in there. He could feel her nervousness beneath the happy façade. Then again, he'd love anything she did. She'd already had huge murals of forest scenes painted in the center room, bringing the entire compound to life. She'd even added plants in the circular courtyard, and the scent had changed everything. He'd laughed every time he'd caught one of the males hiking their leg while in wolf form. Some instincts just couldn't be denied.

With tenderness, he pulled her back and wrapped his arms around her from behind, his palms flat on her rounded belly. Just a few more months and they'd have a son or daughter to play with Sarah and Ian's child. Even now, he was giddy with the idea of being a father.

"Whatever you've done, I'll love it," he whispered in her ear. She shivered as his breath brushed across her flesh. He loved how she did that, responding to him sensually even when he was behaving.

"You had better," she said, her voice husky.

She pried his fingers from over their child and pulled him forward. "Come on, then. It's time."

The door was closed to the outer ring, and he waited for her to open it. He could smell her nervousness, though it wasn't filled with the sour scent of fear. This time it held a pleasant, salty scent to it. He couldn't help wondering what she had created.

All those months ago, after the cleanup, there was only one woman who needed release. Diane. After she gained her freedom, she'd hung around out of guilt over what her cousin had done, but even that was easing. She'd be leaving the pack soon, and it was for the best. The two who'd stayed, Sarah and Mary, had their own mates, and that left Diane alone.

With a flourish, Nora opened the door, and he peeked inside.

The scent of plants and soil rushed at him, followed by wildlife. Birds. Deer. Rodents. His nostrils widened, and he ignored the growling in his stomach.

"The rooms are so big, I decided we could have a few hunts of our own."

He moved inside without speaking. Small trees stretched from Floor to ceiling. The floor had been covered in North Carolina's own version of sandy soil. He wondered how she had managed to root the trees. Birds flew from branch to branch, followed by squirrels that chattered their disgust at their feathered room-mate's behavior.

"We'll have to make a rule that no wildlife be killed, or else we won't be able to keep it filled," she said.

Ryland nodded. "This is amazing." The walls were no longer concrete brick. They'd been knocked out, replaced by a grotto wall, while water babbled over

stones in a small stream. Special switchable ballast lights hung above, providing an almost natural sunlit glow.

When he'd first met Nora, she was as skittish as a young, unsocialized pup. Now, sporting the soft curves of pregnancy, she had a confidence he'd never expected.

That first time he'd caught her scent, he'd been more interested in breaking the dark succession of power, searching for a woman who would never let him become like Joshua. There was no chance of that now.

He smiled at the shewolf before him. Confident. Happy. Loved.

Everything was perfect.

She'd seen to that. Not only had she won his heart, and led his pack, she'd brought him everything a wolven could desire, built entirely underground.

The only thing missing was the moon and stars.

"Don't worry, at night it will look very realistic." She pushed a button and the overhead lights dimmed. In their stead glowed sparkling lights, mimicking the stars from space.

"We can't be outside the way we'd all like, but this gives us the chance to at least experience nature when we have a bad day."

She spun about in front of him, like a child, pleased with her creation. Her arms were wide, embracing the pure wildness of the room that now resembled a true forest. She stopped, facing him, dropping her arms to her sides.

"So, what do you think?"

Ryland drank in the sweet, delicate joy on his *True Mate's* face. "I think," he said, letting the pride show in his voice, "it's wonderful. You've created an amazing legacy for our pack, for us, and for our young."

She grinned. Ryland grabbed her, lifting her off her feet, hugging her to his body, spinning like she had just moments ago.

"I love you, Nora. You are the best thing to ever happen to me."

"And I love you, Ryland. Just remember, I said that first."

He looked at her, puzzled, and then laughed. "Yes, you did."

Excerpt from

SheWolf

by

Teresa D'Amario

A Freya's Bower Paranormal/Werewolf Novel

Anna plunged the hypodermic syringe into the dog's thigh muscle and slowly released the vaccine into the animal. The large shepherd turned his head and glared at her over his shoulder, but made no move to avoid her ministrations.

That's what she liked about this dog. He was old, and while he didn't like getting his annual shots, he certainly didn't put up a fuss.

"Duke looks in great shape for his age, Mrs. Kelfy." She stood from her cramped position on the floor and picked up her pen to sign the rabies certification. A tap on the door drew her attention, and she turned toward it.

"Dr. Calloway, can I have a word with you?"

Jamie, her newly of-age assistant, stood in the doorway, an odd expression on her face.

"In a minute, Jamie. I'm almost finished here." It was unusual for her assistants to interrupt her with a patient, so it must be important.

"Here you are, Mrs. Kelfy. Give one pill twice per day for ten days and bring him back in a week so we can check on that cut to make sure it's healed up ok." Poor Duke had argued with a barbed wire fence and lost. A little unusual for the big guy, who was already thirteen years old. He was long past the days of dangerous curiosity that plagued young dogs.

"Poor Duke," the woman said.

"He'll be fine. Duke's strong, and even though he's getting older, he's still healthy. Just give him the antibiotics, and he'll heal up beautifully."

The dog's owner nodded and thanked her, then left to pay the bill. Anna headed to the back rooms to talk to her assistant.

"What's up, Jamie?"

Jamie bit her lip. "There's this guy, in room three..."

"Ok, where's the records?" Jamie's smelled sharp, edgy. Confused. "What's the problem?"

"That's just it, Doc. There's no problem. He didn't even bring a pet with him. He said it was for a consultation on his wolf, and he booked the entire afternoon."

"He did what?" The word wolf sent up red flags everywhere. Her assistant went on.

"He booked the entire afternoon appointment block."

Kieran. Who else would be so blatant? If he thought he was getting away cheap, he had another thing coming. "Thanks, Jamie. I'll take care of it."

She stormed to the room and opened the door.

He stood at the aluminum exam table, a magazine open in front of him, his weight propped on his hands as though engrossed in his reading. Though worn and faded, his jeans appeared in good repair. The seams in the shoulders of his black t-shirt stretched to accommodate his powerful chest and biceps. Then her gaze traveled to his face and the dark, hungry, blue eyes that watched her. She swallowed, trying to ease the sudden case of dryness in her throat.

She caught a glimpse of black, square-toed boots on his feet. She'd bet there was a motorcycle out in the parking lot. His scent wafted toward her, spicy and wild. Anna bit her lip. It wouldn't do to let him know just how sexy she found him.

Folding her arms in front of her, she glared at him. "What are you doing here?"

His gaze held hers, a slight quirk to his mouth.

"I'm here for a consultation. Didn't your assistant tell you?"

"Yes, she told me."

“Good. But before we get down to work, let’s have some lunch.”

She glanced at her watch. Lunch was normally at one o’clock, and it was now twelve thirty. “You can’t just blaze in here and take over my appointments, Kieran. I have patients, and they need me.”

“Not today, you don’t. I bought all your time, so you have nothing to worry about.” He spoke over her attempted interruption. “And if you have any emergencies, your very efficient staff can call you.”

Her eyes rolled, and she groaned in frustration. He’d left her alone for three days. Three long days to absorb everything he’d told her. Sometimes she still wondered if it was all a dream and she’d really been drugged after all. Yet the instant she saw him it all tumbled back. Every memory. The wolf, the fight, but most of all, every touch. That brief kiss still burned in her blood.

Realistically, there was no reason to fight it. Except he wasn’t human. For the first time in her life, she was truly attracted to someone. *And why shouldn’t I enjoy it?* Besides, the scientist was fascinated almost as much as the woman.

He waited while she debated in her head, his eyes filled with humor. There it was again, the strange feeling that he could read her thoughts. She certainly hoped not.

“Fine, let me just close up here.”

He nodded, and she headed into the back rooms of the clinic.

“Jamie,” she called, but the girl popped around the corner, a huge smile on her face.

“Right here.”

Anna raised a brow. “Eavesdropping again?”

Her assistant laughed. “What can I say? It’s my best talent.”

Anna chuckled. “Then I guess I don’t have to tell you I’m done for the day, thanks to Kieran. Call me if there are any emergencies.”

She took off her white doctor’s coat and hung it on the rack. Whoever’d chosen white for doctors had a vindictive streak. She went through lab coats faster than she went through dog treats. She snatched a roller with tape on it and cleared any dog hair from her slacks before heading back to Kieran. If she was going to investigate these feelings, she might as well look good.

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