

A romantic couple, a man and a woman, are shown in a close embrace, about to kiss. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. The woman has long, wavy red hair. The background is dark and moody. The entire image is framed with a rough, textured border.

Loose Id

A Taste of Scarlet

Evanne Lorraine

A Taste of Scarlet

Evanne Lorraine



www.loose-id.com

A Taste of Scarlet

Copyright © January 2011 by Evanne Lorraine

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-925-6

Editor: Mary Harper

Cover Artist: Marci Gass

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.



<http://www.loose-id.com>

Chapter One

Still fuzzy from a long day's sleep, Scarlet perched on the edge of the couch, tying her boots and soaking in the peace and quiet and the fresh country air. The living room's picture window framed a postcard view to the west. Rich green mountain forest edged the pale gold pasture. Closer to the old farmhouse, her grandfather's prized lawn was framed by small trees and shrubs he'd selected with such love and care. Nearby maple trees were already shedding bright autumn leaves.

The late Saturday afternoon sun sparked fire off raindrops still clinging to the newly bared branches. With a little start, Scarlet realized the sun was heading for the horizon. Hastily, she finished knotting her bootlaces, grabbed her favorite soft brown hoodie, tugged it on, and stuffed her mini-wallet inside the top's kangaroo pocket.

If she didn't hurry, the market would close for the weekend. Though missing a few meals would improve her hipline, eating nothing but canned goods until the only grocery store in Cedar Grove reopened on Monday did not appeal to her. Neither did the thought of wasting hours on a drive back to Treeland to buy groceries. Not when she could use those same hours accomplishing the task she'd come to the mountains to do: seek the help of the legendary werewolf whisperer. With a little luck, she'd find the whisperer and become an integrated werewolf, the Omega her pack needed so desperately.

For the million and tenth time, she wondered what kind of werewolf the whisperer was—a sensitive Psi, maybe even a female, she hoped.

Once outside, she eyed the long drive curving down the hill toward town. With the time it took to open the garage, start the car, and navigate the winding road, walking would be almost as quick. She grimaced at her full hips. A fast walk would do her good. Besides, the shortcut through the woods beckoned like an old friend.

Twilight faded rapidly in the mountains. To the east, a ghost moon shimmered through wispy clouds. As she stepped into the old-growth forest, a sudden chill that had nothing to do with the lengthening shadows of the coming night made her shiver. Danger waited for her, lurking somewhere in the near future.

Ignoring the prickle of premonition, she pulled her hoodie more snugly around her neck and hurried along the woodland path to town.

Fifteen minutes later, the last glow of the afternoon sun lingered over the mountains as she crossed Main Street.

The town of Cedar Grove hadn't changed much in the decade since she'd last visited. The same storefronts filled one solid block and still reminded her of a western movie set. A post office, a tiny library, a hardware store, a feed and seed with a fuel station attached, three taverns, and Morton's all crowded together. A pristine white church, two dozen fat, comfortable bungalows, a two-story block of concrete, an all-grades-in-one school, and a park were scattered along the stretch of two-lane asphalt between the storefronts and the bridge that marked the end of the tiny community.

On the threshold of Morton's Market, her steps slowed and then halted. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck quivered in warning. Every instinct she possessed shrieked that an Alpha male lurked inside.

Her heart stuttered and tripped into overdrive, her mind racing as she stared at the store. The business's open hours—ten to six—were lettered on the glass doors right under the words MORTON'S GROCERIES, MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY. Tomorrow was Sunday. She squinted at the clock on the back wall. The plain black-and-white face read a quarter to six.

On any other night, she would have tucked her dormant tail between her legs and run back through the woods all the way to the safety of the old house. But not tonight. How could she track the whisperer if she was too cowardly even to buy groceries?

Her arm trembled as she reached for the handle. No cringing, she reminded herself firmly. She was on a mission. Wimping out at the first sign of an Alpha wouldn't cut it. She wasn't a submissive Beta, and even a flawed Omega did not cower. Besides, she was still in charge, not her inner bitch. Nothing would ever change unless Scarlet took action.

Abruptly she pushed into the store. Grabbing a basket, she scurried toward the dairy section clear in the back.

She spotted the Alpha instantly. Aggression rolled off shoulders big enough to block the coming moonlight. Even in human form, he prowled toward her—a powerful male in his prime, pure lethal poetry in motion, and scary as hell.

As Scarlet fought to hold her ground, she felt her inner wolf hum for the first time in a decade. Her breath caught; she was afraid to breathe, afraid to believe. She'd endured so many treatments, sessions with the visiting Omega, meetings with Alphas to overcome her phobia of the dominant males, but nothing had worked to restore her damaged connection to her inner Omega bitch.

Hope beat wildly at her Omega's gentle but unmistakable nudge toward the Alpha, infusing Scarlet with badly needed courage. Perhaps the connection wasn't as damaged as she and the pack had believed. The link responding so soon made her impulsive trip to the mountains seem more like a valid inspiration and less like a desperate chase after myths.

Her wolf's message came through loud and clear: this Alpha was different.

In a good way?

Gradually her heart rate slowed to something almost normal, her knees firmed, and she took a step forward. Alpha or not, her wolf had responded to him, and that was all that mattered.

Suddenly she couldn't look directly at him. A weird tingling washed over her skin. If she'd been wearing fur, it would have fluffed. In challenge or dare, she wondered. Definitely not in terror, which was freakily strange for her.

Determined and more than a little curious, she braved another step.

As he came closer, she forced herself to meet his gaze. Instantly his dark gray eyes pinned her in place.

She quickly dropped her focus to the floor, quivering with tension, but she didn't panic. Her inner bitch made a throaty sound of approval. The sudden urge to grovel and show him her throat washed over her, making staying upright a challenge.

When she darted another look, he'd halved the distance separating them. He stopped, glanced down at his hip, and glared at an insistent buzz from his pager. A deep rumble of irritation issued from his throat. The sound was so loud, she could've sworn it shook the pyramid display of microwave popcorn on his left.

Once again, she sensed his focus locking on her.

"Stay," he growled at her. Then he whirled and strode off, disappearing down the soups and spices aisle.

For a few seconds, she remained glued to the spot. Slowly the tension eased, and she pried loose her death grip on her shopping basket. The strangest part of the encounter was the need she felt to obey him. For the past decade, she'd been terrified of all Alphas, some more than others, but none of them had ever compelled her to do anything. She'd never considered the difference between fear and obedience until now.

Finally free of his power, she scurried toward the dairy section, still shaken and not at all sure she could have defied him if he hadn't left. Then she dashed on through the frozen section, scored a gallon of coffee ice cream, and grabbed a squirt bottle of chocolate sauce. Two jars of Nutella joined the rest of the items in her basket. She quickly headed toward the front of the store, but a tempting display of Honey Crisp apples beckoned her to detour.

Apples and Nutella—practically health food, she mused. Her belly growled. Less rattled with each passing second, she added a can of coffee, backtracked for a pint of cream, fresh eggs, bacon, and bread. Hips be damned. She needed strength. A female did not thrive on Nutella alone.

With the Alpha gone, the too-brief connection with her inner bitch disappeared.

The store's familiar aromas of earthy root vegetables, slightly sour spilled milk, aging meat, and pine-scented cleaner calmed her until she was certain her usual nervousness around Alphas had exaggerated the episode with the strange male.

Her boots made businesslike taps on the industrial vinyl floor as she hurried to the checkout.

An old-fashioned shiny counter bell sat on the customer's check-writing shelf. She gave it a pat. A round face sporting Benjamin Franklin-style glasses and smelling faintly of bay rum popped up from behind the counter, beaming. "You must be Charlie's granddaughter."

Scarlet drew back, startled. Then she registered his infectious grin. It was a smile that made it impossible not to smile back. "Yes, I am."

"Heard he'd left the place to you." He nodded to himself with satisfaction. "Charlie used to bring you in here when you were just a little bit of a girl. You haven't been back for a while. But I'd have known those auburn curls and Charlie's chin anywhere." He pulled the groceries from her basket, setting each item on the counter and inspecting them. "Cracked egg. Wait right here. I'll get another carton."

Scarlet darted a nervous peek toward where she'd last seen the Alpha. "Please don't bother."

"No bother." The grocer, Frank Coleson—according to his name tag—hitched off, favoring one hip, and vanished in the direction of the dairy section.

When he returned with a new carton, Scarlet glanced back at the store's front windows where the gloom of night continued to thicken.

Fear hadn't been what she'd felt with the Alpha. Not exactly. Whatever she'd felt, though it wasn't quite fear, was still scary. She wasn't anxious to test his strange power with a second encounter.

With painstaking deliberation, the grocer checked each item's price as he rang up her total and then printed a receipt. He pushed his glasses farther up his nose and tilted his head, peering at the cash register tape.

"Better double-check." His eyes flickered from the groceries to the itemized bill and back again, ticking off each purchase during his meticulous bagging.

She swallowed a sigh of frustration, but she couldn't bring herself to snap at him. Surely her reluctance had nothing to do with obeying the Alpha's command to stay?

Finally he gave a happy little bounce. "Everything's copacetic, ready to go."

"What do I owe you?" Scarlet pulled out her wallet.

Mr. Coleson shook his head, clearly offended. "Oh no, we'll send a monthly bill."

"Then thank you." She reached for the sack of groceries.

He frowned, clutching the bag to his concave chest. "I'll carry your order out to your car."

Scarlet took a quick scan of the store. Seeing no sign of the dominant male, she again reached for her groceries. "Thank you, but that's not necessary. I walked."

Approaching footsteps thudded, growing louder the closer they came until the sound drowned out everything except the pounding of her heart.

He was back. Scarlet fought an urge to run.

Her inner bitch hummed back to life, startling Scarlet again. A response to the Alpha? There was nothing else it could be. The Omega stretched, arching her back, and sniffed appreciatively, all but shoving Scarlet toward the Alpha.

Oh what she wouldn't give for five minutes of solid communication with her long-dormant wolf.

While Scarlet was distracted by her inner bitch, the beaming Mr. Coleson set her groceries on the counter behind him.

“Sheriff, good to see you. Have you met Scarlet?”

“Fraid not.”

Sheriff? Didn’t that just put the frosting on her cake? For the first time, she registered the uniform. How to make an Alpha even worse—give him a badge and gun. She turned, making herself meet the male’s gaze.

Blinking to dissipate the power of his stormy gray eyes, she took in his strong nose, heavy brows, and full lips quirking at the corners. Like most Alphas, he was breath-catchingly gorgeous and dripping with sensual charisma. No doubt he’d worn out batons staving off the local women.

A whiff of his leather, woods, and wild-animal-sex fragrance liquefied her knees.

“Scarlet walked,” Mr. Coleson said reprovingly. “She needs a ride home.”

“I’ll handle it.” The sheriff unloaded a loaf of rye, a package of Havarti, and a bag of chips on the counter, watching her all the while. “Ring me up.”

“Sure thing.” The traitorous Mr. Coleson moved jauntily, ringing and bagging.

Clearly he was oblivious to the tension between her and the sheriff, not to mention unaffected by the Alpha’s incredible scent. Good thing too; if he noticed they weren’t exactly human, there’d be hell to pay. She didn’t need more complications.

Despite her effort to stand still, Scarlet fidgeted under the weight of the sheriff’s scrutiny, wishing she could grab her groceries and go, but his steady gaze held her as surely as if she’d been bound and gagged. An image of herself in cruel silver chains with a filthy rag stuffed in her mouth flashed through her mind’s eye, leaving her shaky and nauseated. Her inner bitch’s presence vanished.

The sheriff took both bags in one capable-looking hand, cupped her elbow with the other, and steered her out of the store. “Take it easy, Red. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Now he read minds too? No, he’d probably caught scent of her fear. Goddess knew the depressing tang was all she could smell. There was nothing she could do about her telltale odor, but she didn’t have to cower and snivel. She straightened her spine. “Thanks.”

“You here for a visit?”

“Something like that.”

His light grip on her arm firmed until her bones felt the squeeze. He stopped.

Instantly she regretted evading his question.

“May I see some identification?” His sensual mouth tightened, and Alpha power edged the mild words.

She fought the rising tide of fear at the sharp tone of his suspicion and lost the battle. She looked away from his tight face, unable to meet his eyes, and then darted peeks at him through her lashes. Technically he’d asked a nice, respectful question, but she wasn’t silly enough to believe refusing to answer was a real option.

Tingling licks of flame teased her skin wherever his gaze brushed it; it felt as if he’d actually touched her. While she fumbled for her ID, heat streaked up her neck. Great. The redhead’s curse—an ugly blush was searing her face.

After an age, her clumsy fingers extracted her driver’s license from the leather case.

He took the identification and studied it with a stony expression. “Any other picture ID?”

“No.” She bit her tongue to keep from adding anything else she’d regret.

“Is this your current address?”

For a second, she thought his gray eyes warmed. A wild imagination was so not helpful. Especially not when dealing with Alphas, a subspecies of werewolf totally missing the humor gene. She almost answered yes automatically before she caught the trick in his question. With a lift of her chin, she said, "It's my permanent address. Currently I'm staying at my grandfather's place. He left it to me."

He didn't answer right away.

"Satisfied?" she hissed like a shrew.

This time she didn't imagine the sparkle in his eyes or the quirk at one corner of his surprisingly generous lips, and new hot spots sparked to life in her breasts and between her legs.

"No." He gave her another long, slow perusal, finally handing back her driver's license. "Not by a long shot."

Although her face heated to a record-setting level, she didn't back down. If he realized how much his dominance got to her, he would push harder. That's the way it always worked with Alphas. She stretched her neck and tilted her chin. "Give me my groceries. Unless you're going to arrest me, I'm leaving."

"Hold on, Red." He clamped her wrist firmly. "I'm taking you home."

The clasp felt possessive, almost gentle, and way too good. She tugged on her arm. Again his grip tightened.

She stilled, resenting his easy command over her. "I can walk."

One of the sheriff's eyebrows rose, seeming to question her sanity.

"It's less than a mile," she spoke up, hating herself for being scared of her own reactions, hating herself more for bothering to justify a perfectly reasonable action, and hating herself most of all for letting his Alpha mojo work all too well, putting her instantly on the defensive.

The raised eyebrow lowered back to level and then kept going down. Its twin joined it in a scowl. "You want to walk home alone, in the dark?"

Scarlet made an effort to project the kind of confidence Gracie—the visiting Omega, a *real* Omega—always manifested so effortlessly, and lifted her chin higher for good measure. “Yes.”

“Not happening. You’re riding with me.” The Alpha practically growled.

“Great. That’s just wonderful.” She twisted, trying to loosen his hold.

He quelled her pitiful rebellion with a glance.

Muttering about abuse of power and police brutality, she allowed him to tow her since her only alternative was a scuffling match she was destined to lose and because she couldn’t defy him to save her soul.

For the first time, all the talk of Alphas and their power made sense. That absolute compulsion to obey him gripped her much tighter than his hand. Worse, she had the feeling he wasn’t even trying.

Staying logical while inhaling his drugging scent was a real challenge, so she breathed through her mouth and struggled to think. If he were cooperative, the sheriff could be a huge help finding the whisperer.

Not trusting her human instincts about the male, Scarlet waited for a sign from her Omega. The inner bitch nudged her closer to the Alpha, panting enthusiastically.

Perfect. That’s no help at all. She needed to heal her wolf connection, not make a scene by seducing the sheriff. Already irritated by the bitch’s popping in and out and frightened by the strength of her inner wolf’s excitement, Scarlet slammed shut the dysfunctional link.

Her inner bitch was impossible to understand. For about the millionth time, Scarlet reminded herself of the need to heal the link to her Omega to fully integrate her wolf.

After overhearing Hunter—the Treeland pack’s Alpha—begging for a healer to help the young males facing their first perilous transitions, Scarlet had new, more urgent reasons than ever to mend the connection with her inner bitch.

Werewolves were amazingly tough, immune to human diseases, fast healers, and long-lived. Though strong and durable in many ways, werewolves had frightening weaknesses. Pregnancy and birthing were both difficult and complications all too common. Mixed bloods who shifted at all faced a fifty percent chance of dying during their initial shift.

Only one in ten werewolf pups was female. One in a thousand females was Omega. Few packs had an Omega of their own. The lack of healers meant more females dying from pregnancy complications, plus more mothers and pups lost in birthing. Without an Omega, too many of the pack's most vulnerable members were at risk. Healing her shifter link was the only way Scarlet could access her wolf's healing gift.

Unfortunately Scarlet and the inner bitch shared an ugly history. Nothing she'd tried had worked. She shuddered as a brief memory from the terrifying encounters with the Tulalip pack's Alphas that she'd endured flickered through her mind—a rare flashback from the ordeal. As of late, the memories were resurfacing more frequently, adding a new layer of urgency to her quest. Unable to tolerate the grim past for long, she distracted herself by studying the sheriff.

Rippling muscles under a crisp uniform made a great distraction. He juggled the grocery bags one-handed while maintaining his firm grip on her with his other hand.

Handcuffs would have been so much more convenient. He had a pair hooked to his utility belt. She almost pointed this out, but for once she didn't give in to her first impulse and swallowed the tart words.

The county car she'd been expecting wasn't waiting. What waited was worse. Much worse. A giant white SUV with a light bar on the roof, an extra heavy-duty front grill, and iridescent official Pacific County decals on the side waited. His rig wasn't even close to the relatively low-profile patrol car she'd expected him to drive. Not that it should matter to her what the neighbors thought; they were the least of her troubles.

When, still gripping her wrist, he began rummaging in his pocket for his keys, she rolled her eyes. “You can let go of me. I’m not going to run away.”

He didn’t even bother to glance at her. “Good to know.”

“I’m not a coward.”

“But you’re afraid. I wonder why.” His voice stayed mild, but his iron grasp of her wrist stayed firm.

She told herself it wasn’t as if he was hurting her. His hand was warm, slightly roughened, strong, and big. Very big. But echoes of the old fear rose, chilling her blood, freezing her mind. She held still and breathed through it. While she clung to her precarious hold on reality, his rough fingers rubbed tiny circles on her wrist.

Strangely, his touch actually calmed her. Could he be the whisperer? Dear Goddess, please no, not an Alpha. Her fear surged again, overwhelming both her reason and good intentions. Fighting the terror, she breathed eight slow counts in, eight out, and repeated. When the panic finally eased, she found him staring straight through her soul.

“What?” she asked too defensively, tugging to free her arm.

“You tell me, Red.” After a few beats of silence, he shrugged. “Looked a whole lot like a panic attack from where I’m standing. Are you afraid of all Alphas, or am I just lucky?”

He sounded almost hurt. A sensitive Alpha? Not possible. Too shaken to manage a coherent explanation, she kept her mouth zipped.

Chapter Two

Daniel kept his hold on Scarlet gentle, rubbing little circles on her wrist to let her know she wasn't alone. He tamped down his anger because it would scare her.

He suspected what had happened. Some asshole Alpha had abused her. It was the only explanation that made sense. Hurting any female was intolerable. The thought of someone damaging Scarlet's wild spirit made him want to tear into the son of a bitch until there wasn't enough left of the bastard to feed a vulture.

Once she was breathing easier, Daniel released her wrist and instantly missed the softness of her skin against his fingers.

Shit, since when did he start getting mushy about holding a woman's arm? But then Red wasn't exactly a woman, was she?

While he guided her into the county's SUV, he sniffed, subtly trying to sort out the female's emotions. Her underlying fragrance was a major distraction. Something in her scent triggered an old memory. He almost caught the thread; then it danced out of reach. Strange, because Scarlet was young, midtwenties. She probably hadn't even had her first heat.

Something about her drew him closer. She was scared, but she wasn't the usual submissive Beta. She sure as hell wasn't a dominant Alpha bitch. He didn't know what kind of werewolf she was, and that was real odd. She spit and hissed, and yet she drew him.

It was her scent. Underneath the fear, curiosity, and maybe interest, she smelled like wild strawberries with cream—sweet and lush. The urge for more teased him, so he edged nearer, reaching past her to rummage in the glove box for nothing in particular.

Her breath hissed in as he brushed the top of her thigh. Damned if that little hiss didn't rev his arousal up a level.

He pulled out an unneeded citation pad, then casually tucked it into the side panel. Then he caught her wrist again and rubbed the pulse point. Absently he felt the smooth ridges of old scars and fed the information into the back of his mind.

"You okay?" he asked, not bothering with an excuse for touching her or for holding on too long. He'd always had a thing for strawberries, especially wild ones, coated with cream.

"Fine, thanks." She glared at him and then turned to stare out the window, but her pulse bounded against his fingers and her fragrance grew stronger.

Maybe it had simply been too damn long since he'd had a taste of something sweet and wild. His inner wolf made a rude do-ya-think sound. Daniel ignored him and rearranged his legs to ease the strain on his hard cock.

He was patient, even if the inner wolf wasn't. If she stuck around, sooner or later he'd get answers to his questions.

During the short ride out of town, Red didn't say boo. The silence didn't bother him. But he'd hoped it would work on her. It did most people.

It seemed the little redhead was as stubborn as she was skittish and spunky. Pushing her was his job, his choice, and his personal pleasure. Maybe he'd bent the line, but a new female werewolf prancing into town acting as if she were pure human was unprecedented. As sheriff, he was required to check her out thoroughly. "Where are you staying?"

"The Connor place, it's just—"

He cut her off with a curt nod. "I know it." He should've made the connection sooner. He'd seen enough photos of her. If he hadn't been so busy sniffing after her, he'd have figured out she was Charlie's granddaughter. His best friend's granddaughter. Didn't that make him feel like the dirtiest old wolf around?

Would Charlie have been horrified or pleased by his attraction to Scarlet? After some ear-scratching thought, Daniel decided—hoped—his old friend would have been pleased.

Ah hell, where did he think this was going? Charlie's granddaughter made her as close to royalty as the packs got. Charlie's line was purebloods clear back before the first pack had immigrated to North America. At one time, Charlie had been the Sardar—the Alpha of Alphas, ruling the whole North American continent—and Daniel's friend.

What this meant for him was no romps through the forest with Scarlet. Not without a whole slew of complications, pressures, and mating dances. Though she might be worth a complication or three.

Forget about it, he told the horny old wolf clawing at his gut.

Skittish or not, she'd have her pick of Alpha dogs; there was no reason for her to settle for a lone wolf, even if he were crazy enough to court her. And he damn well wasn't that crazy. Been there, done that, and was still paying through the nose for the mistake.

It was a damn good bet the shy female had come to the mountains to catch a break from all the Treeland pack Alphas hitting on her.

His wolf growled.

Daniel gnashed his teeth at the thought of those animals touching her. Telling himself he was way out of line didn't help.

Too soon, he ran out of road and turned into Charlie's long drive. Out of habit, he assessed the gravel surface and made a mental note to talk to Harrison—the shiftless caretaker who lived in the barn—about doing a fill pass next summer.

Clouds hid the nearly full moon, but he felt its pull. The wolf inside him stirred again, restless. Out of the corner of his eye, he checked out his passenger. Her knuckles gleamed white from her grip on the oh-shit handle.

So Red wasn't as calm as she pretended. Like he needed another clue; the scent of her fear still stung his sensitive nose. What the hell was scaring her?

He tried teasing her. "I'm not going to bite—unless you're into that."

"No thanks," she huffed.

Her fear level lowered a little. He bit back a grin of satisfaction, imagining what other signs of tension were hidden under the loose top and track pants. Full-color video of breasts tipped with hard little berries streamed past his mind's eye while he kept stealing glances at the female, comparing reality to his speculation.

Wasn't he a nasty animal? He needed to keep her safe. Where the hell were these thoughts coming from?

The minute his rig rolled to a stop, she pried her fingers off the handle, undid her safety belt, and tried to leave. He used his long arms and quick reflexes to foil the escape attempt by encircling her upper arm firmly. "Hold on there, Red. I'm coming in with you. I need to check the house."

"That's not necessary."

He nodded to let her know he'd heard. "I'm still stopping."

Scarlet flinched. "Great."

He slid his hand down her arm until he held her wrist, keeping her with him for a couple of extra seconds. When he caught himself making circles on the soft inner skin, he still didn't let go. Tracing the faint ridges of her scars, he scowled, wondering what the hell had happened to leave those marks. Damaging a werewolf wasn't easy.

The little female wasn't ready for interrogation, so he held off asking about them and kept his tone mild. "No point in making a fuss about me doing my job, is there?"

"No." She chewed her lip, searching his face for a couple of seconds. "Have I done something to"—she paused, maybe searching for the right words—"upset you?"

“Nope. I take an interest in everyone in Cedar Grove,” he lied smoothly. Since he’d first seen her as she approached Morton’s, she’d been disturbing his peace—big time. But there was no need to give her more of an advantage by telling her so. “Charlie was a friend of mine. Promised him I’d keep an eye on the place. I’m Daniel, by the way.”

“It’s almost nice to meet you, Daniel.” She turned away from him.

Surprised, he said, “Honest. That’s a start.”

“I didn’t know you were friends with my grandfather. He never mentioned you.”

“No reason you would.” He ignored the wolf inside clawing, wanting out. Apparently he was fed up with waiting for Daniel to get with the program.

The wolf wasn’t subtle, and he sure as hell wasn’t political, which was why Daniel stayed in charge eighty percent of the time. He was political—only because he had no choice. He could pull off the lone wolf shit as much as he wanted, but at the end of the day, he had a son, and that meant ties to the Treeland pack.

He clamped down on the hunger threatening to override his control. She wasn’t just another available bitch passing through his territory, and those were the only kind he allowed himself to enjoy. Since Dana, his ex, had blown off their pack vows with a lame I-was-in-heat explanation, casual encounters were the extent of his pathetic sex life.

The local humans were off-limits for all the usual reasons. It took a real rare woman to handle werewolf sex, and he wasn’t into death and destruction as part of the fun.

Since Charlie’s death and the departure of his entourage, Daniel had been the lone wolf in town. Stopping by to check on his old friend’s place had nothing to do with the kind of professional protection he provided for every Cedar Grove citizen. Making sure that worthless Harrison hadn’t burned down the place was the least he could do. He owed Charlie that much and more.

The old male had saved his sanity back when keeping Daniel level had been a full-time, thankless job.

Figuring there was no need to hide his speed with Red; he zipped around the rig and held her door. He offered her an arm, forcing himself to practice civilized manners that were a far cry from his primitive nature. Damn, why'd she have to smell so good?

She ignored his offer of help, jumping down and hightailing it for the back door.

He got her groceries and trailed her into the old farmhouse. No reason not to enjoy the view of her backside in motion.

At the porch, she wiped her boots on a wiry welcome mat. Quietly she opened the door and stepped inside. Half expecting her to try to shut him out, he sped up and closed the gap between them. When she turned in surprise, her hip bumped against his erection. A *woof* escaped from his throat.

She blushed, which put a big fat yes mark inside the did-she-notice-anything box. "Sorry about that." He shifted the groceries and made a show of adjusting his utility belt—a lame move. Like the female couldn't tell a flashlight from a hard-on.

Slapping himself was out of the question, and it didn't look like she was going to take care of it. He was a typical horny wolf—a sorry situation, but damned if he was going to let a little awkwardness with Red interfere with honoring his promise to his friend.

Red crossed into the living room and stopped, facing the portrait of Charlie and Myrna that hung over the couch. Her face smoothed into a slow, sweet smile. Without her normal glare, her beauty made his breath catch.

He had to clear his throat before he said, "Where do you want this?"

She reached for the grocery bag. "I'll take it."

He let her have the sack. "Want me to start a fire?"

"That'd be lovely, but there's no wood."

"I'll handle it," he said with plenty of casual manliness and headed back outside to the woodpile. A stack of dry splits greeted him. There were even a couple of neatly tied kindling bundles. Nice to see Harrison did something around the place besides brew and guzzle his hooch.

In no time, he had a crackling fire going and wandered back toward the kitchen.

"Would you like something to eat or a drink?" she asked politely.

Her own wild fragrance still held a tang of fear. The damn near irresistible combination of sweet, wild, and scared was enough to make earning her trust a challenge. He reminded himself he was out of the wolf guide business. Healing them was great. The problem came when they were too far gone to recover their humanity.

He shook off the grim thoughts like water off his fur. None of that applied to Red anyway. Only males lost their human connection and went rogue. Badly damaged females died. And Red was rock-solid grounded in human. Maybe too human...

Nothing he needed to worry about. Flirting with a pretty female was something even an old lone wolf could enjoy.

"What've you got?" He peered inside the bag still parked on the counter and then hauled out the giant economy bottle of chocolate sauce. "Planning a little splurge?"

"As you see, there's ice cream, chocolate syrup, Nutella, apples, cream, eggs, bacon, and bread. I also have diet cola, water, an assortment of canned food, and stale crackers." She paused to take a breath after rattling off the list. "Now, what would you like?"

He was fairly certain her delicious body wasn't on the menu. "No meat?"

"Just the bacon and some Spam."

“I’ll have whatever you’re fixing.” He settled himself back in the doorway, leaning against the frame where he could protect her from anyone other than himself.

Unreasonably pleased with himself for covering the room’s only access point, he stood guard as she washed and dried two of the succulent apples, hauled out a cutting board and a chef’s knife, and got busy.

With deft moves, she cut the fruit, arranging the slices like the spokes of a fancy wheel in two bowls. Every now and then she paused to take a deep breath, and the tang of her fear lessened. Each helping got a generous dollop of Nutella, which looked a lot like chocolate frosting, in the center of the apple slices. Then she sprayed the cutting board with something lemony, wiped it down, and stashed the used utensils in the dishwasher.

At last she turned, and her wide, wanting eyes fixed on him. His wolf circled and shoved hard, pushing Daniel closer.

Then he made a big mistake.

For just a second, he let go of his self-control and simply inhaled her wild berry essence. A musky arousal blended with her sweetness. Absolutely delicious.

Only one thought survived the intoxication of her nearness—a hope she’d take pity on him and touch him, anywhere. Maybe if he was really lucky, her lips would be involved.

He stood still as a rock, waiting and aching.

She dropped her gaze and shivered. Unable to stop, he held out a hand, hoping for impossible. Instinctively he knew the first move belonged to Scarlet.

Wary and shy, she moved closer and nested her fingers with his. He pulled her in nice and tight. His wolf pushed for more. But Daniel just held her.

Time slowed, expanded, and then restarted, accelerating to match the beating of two hearts. His eyelids grew heavy and closed. The warmth of her soft fingers woven with his kept the dream of her touching more of him alive.

Then soft, moist velvet brushed his lips. The pressure was so light it hardly counted as a kiss. But it rocked his world. Keeping his eyes closed, he savored the feeling of her breath on his mouth. Slowly he raised one arm. When she didn't pull away, he framed her face with a rough palm and breathed in.

This close, her wild berry fragrance had a deeper layer of sweet cream, and the musky trace of desire was stronger. He inhaled again, sorting through the notes. Another underlying blend of surprise, curiosity, and courage tugged at his heart.

Tentatively she brushed her mouth across his again. He held her gently, letting her make the choices, softening his mouth in a blatant invitation to explore. A sweet, hot tongue probed the inside of his upper lip, sweeping suddenly sensitive teeth before darting in to slide against his tongue and retreat.

The taste of her, like her scent but hotter, sang in his mouth as she licked and nibbled and explored his mouth like he was dessert. Soft curves pressed against his hard need, and the rest of the world vanished in an explosion of sensation.

His intention to keep this tender and reassuring blew off, along with his good sense and way too much of his restraint. Nothing existed except for the mounds of her breasts against his chest, her hard nipples dueling with his, and the perfection of her filling his arms, leaning into him.

She swallowed, and the suction on his tongue thrilled him stupid. Thrusting his tongue into her willing mouth, he stroked each nook and tooth, pushing deeper, stronger, closer. And she let him, welcomed him, made a humming noise in her throat that shot straight to his crotch, tightening his pants and squeezing his balls.

Nothing in his long life had prepared him for real mouth-to-mouth contact with Scarlet. The heat he felt revved into a burning drive to claim her. His normal protectiveness became a savage urge to mark, to mate, to make her his.

What had been a red-hot attraction when he'd first seen her was now like a teenage male's wet dream compared to this raw hunger. The force of his need smoked into meltdown territory.

Shaken to his core by the power of his reaction, he forced himself to step back. “You okay?”

Her simple nod made him happy.

He was in such big trouble.

But stepping out of his arms was way too easy for her. He glowered at her back as she moved away, stopping the possessive growl that rumbled in his chest a second away from going audible. What the hell was happening?

Then wolfie boy settled down, as content as if they’d got laid.

By the time she set the food on a tray, adding a couple of checkered napkins, Daniel was totally sapped out. That she’d fixed food for him with her own hands thrilled him way more than the snack should. Her caring gesture made him want to go out and kill something to drop at her feet. Instead he shadowed her into the living room, joined her on the couch, and waited for her to take the first bite.

Neat white teeth nipped a piece of apple dipped in the spread, and then her eyes closed in reverent appreciation. He dipped a slice and popped it into his mouth, keeping his eyes open and trained on her while he chewed, absently noting chocolate and something else—peanut butter or an uptown cousin. Not meat, but real tasty. But it could have been cardboard with a side of sawdust and he would’ve munched it down.

A drop of chocolate clung to one corner of her mouth. He couldn’t take his eyes away from that damned drop.

“Is something wrong?” She leaned toward him, her hand lifting toward her face.

Knowing touching her was dangerous, he caught her wrist before he could stop himself. “You have a drop of chocolate.”

Her fingers fluttered in his grasp.

“I’ll fix it.” His voice deepened to pure gravel. He moved slowly, closed the gap between them, and lapped up the bit of chocolate clinging to the corner of her lips.

His control smoked off like a felon with warrants as an irresistible craving for another taste of Scarlet sizzled to life, sparking a wildfire of hunger. He licked his way inside her mouth, savoring the heady flavors of apple, chocolate, and wild berries, reveling in the sleekness of her mouth, drawing her breath deep into his chest.

While he ravished her mouth, the last of her doubts disappeared from her scent, and her musky arousal grew stronger. He kept kissing her. One taste of Scarlet wasn't even close to enough.

He released her wrist because he needed both hands to hold her face, angling her carefully for a more complete penetration. His tongue slid against hers, tasting, drinking, breathing her.

His body strained, needing to be closer. Under her skin might be almost close enough. The heady rush of excitement roared through him, simmering his veins, heating his bones, tightening his muscles, and swelling his cock way past hard, racing toward desperate.

When he finally let her go with a last series of nuzzles and nips, they were both breathing in shallow pants.

"I'm not afraid of you." If she hadn't sounded quite so surprised, he might've shrugged off her odd statement and gone back to kissing her. Kissing her again was absolutely number one on his to-do list.

"That's good," he said carefully, waiting for clues.

"It's amazing." She stared at him with something like stunned wonder on her face, like his claws and fangs were showing.

As she continued to study him with no sign of an intention to remove clothes, uneasiness stirred with the wolf in his gut.

Her perfect lips parted. "Are you the whisperer?"

Chapter Three

Whisperer. Damn. The word worked as instant buzzkill, dousing his aching arousal with a bucket of icy reality.

Daniel pushed away from the coffee table, away from her, and got his legs under him. Ready to run. He couldn't face those pretty brown eyes full of hope. "Not anymore."

"What do you mean, not anymore?" Her tone was sharp enough that he didn't need the smoky smell of her anger.

Shit, he hadn't seen this one coming, and he damn well should have. Young, beautiful pack princess wanders into his territory and finds his cranky old ass irresistible. Sure thing. Nothing suspicious there.

Before she asked a bunch of questions he didn't want to answer, he grumbled, "I'll swing by later tonight, make sure everything is okay."

"That's not necessary." Her voice was cool. The smoke had cleared, but now the chilly odor of disappointment pinched his nose, and that was worse.

"Try and stop me." He strode out of the house without waiting for more politeness.

Once outside, he paused and scrubbed a hand over his sappy mug before climbing into the county's SUV. What the hell had just happened to him? He was still on duty. He pointed the rig toward the Marchland's place. Maybe tonight he'd catch that sneaky vampire, Harrison, stealing sheep.

Once parked behind the scrub that obscured the utility access road, he had an excellent view of the fields and outbuildings. His thoughts zoomed back to Scarlet.

His first instinct about her had been right. The female was trouble and pure temptation. Temptation he wasn't sampling. No way, no how, not happening.

He was out of the wolf spirit guide business.

His gut twisted at the memory of the months he'd lived in wolf form, not able to face the pack. He'd run from his work, from the pack, even from his son. Charlie had saved him from madness. Nothing would make him risk his humanity again.

The Marchland's farm remained boring and peaceful. Sheep made pale blobs of fluff on the dark, rolling meadow. Daniel counted the lumps, moved his butt to relieve the strain of sitting, and settled in to the unrelieved dullness of surveillance.

After he was off duty, he'd strip and let the old male out to make his rounds. The wolf always loped around Charlie's before calling it a night. A promise was a promise.

Speaking of promises, he hauled out his cell and punched in Hunter's number. When the Treeland Alpha picked up, Daniel said, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't come over there and kick your mangy ass."

"Now what's got your panties all knotted up?"

"A certain Treeland pack female came looking for me. You want to play like you didn't sic her on me?"

"Scarlet's in Cedar Grove?"

"Yeah."

"That's a relief. She took off without a word to anyone."

"Yeah? Why would she do that? You been putting the moves on her?" Daniel growled at his old friend, ready to rip him a new breathing hole.

"Easy, I never touched her. I tried setting her up with a few of the pack Alphas. Standard protocol with a damaged female. She needs the security only a strong male can give her. None of them worked out. End of story."

"Hold on one second." Daniel drew a breath, gathering his missing cool. "What the hell happened to her?"

“Ask her.”

Daniel recounted the sheep. Damn, there was one missing. The Marchlands were going to go postal. And they were not his biggest problem.

“Are you honestly going to try to clam up on a story every pup in the pack knows?”

“Not every—oh hell. No one knows for sure what happened to Scarlet after the Tulalip pack snatched her and her mother.”

Daniel sucked in a surprised breath while his brain burned some serious overtime connecting the dots. Scarlet’s mother must have been Charlie’s daughter. His friend’s only child had been raped and murdered by rogues.

Her death had nearly broken Charlie. His wife never recovered. She had passed away less than a year after losing their daughter. Charlie had never talked about the attack. Once in a while, he’d head over to Treeland for a week or more. When he had returned, the lines in his face had been etched a little deeper.

Respecting Charlie’s right to private wounds, Daniel had looked out for his place while he was away and never pried.

The death of Charlie’s daughter had been big pack news. Daniel thought back; this had gone down at least ten years ago. There’d been no mention of his granddaughter being taken with her mother, so the Treeland pack must have kept a lid on Scarlet’s trauma.

Hunter continued, “What went down wasn’t pretty. She was raped, tortured, probably forced to watch her mother’s death. When we found her, she’d shifted into wolf form.”

“So she’s not a latent.”

“No. Not technically. You going to let me tell this?”

“Go on,” Daniel said.

“Scarlet’s wolf wouldn’t let anyone near her except for the Omega. They stayed in a safe room for a week before she shifted back to human. That was her last shift. She lost her wolf.”

“Pack law won’t let her mate a pureblood unless she can shift, so you decided to play matchmaker with a traumatized female.” Daniel’s ears twitched with fury.

“Back off, pal. First, it’s been ten years. Second, Scarlet wants to heal her shattered wolf connection. And third, she’s an Omega. The pack needs her.”

An Omega. So that was the first off whiff Daniel had caught from her. No wonder he hadn’t pegged her wolf type. Omegas were real rare.

Hunter didn’t say, *your son needs her*. He didn’t have to. Daniel heard the message loud and painfully clear. To hide his fear, he blustered, “Fine, I get it. If you didn’t sic her on me, then how’d she find me?”

“She’s wounded, not stupid.”

“So you didn’t send her?”

“Thought I said that.” Hunter paused. “We good?”

“Yeah.” Daniel ended the call. Damn, kicking Hunter’s ass would have made him feel a whole lot better. Would’ve been good for Hunter too. Shit.

His inner wolf was still restless, still sniffing around for Red like some hopeful horny teenage male. Daniel wasn’t any better, and he knew it. He snorted at himself in disgust. What was doing his thinking? Like he didn’t know.

Damn, he was going to have to try to help her. But if things went bad, he couldn’t be the one to put her down. Not after his failure. He coughed, muscles tensing as he fought the gag reflex at the memories of disaster and shame that threatened to choke him. He broke out in a cold sweat.

After scrubbing his face, he redialed Hunter. The call went straight to voice mail. He made it short. “Call me.”

Hunter would have to handle cleanup, and he better bring his enforcers with him. Because they’d probably need to take out Daniel too.

He lowered the window. The cold night air didn't help clear his head of the old nightmare of how his last attempt at fixing a damaged wolf had gone wrong. Horribly wrong.

The fallout from his career disaster had gone on and on; his marriage had been an early casualty. He and Dana had been doomed from the get-go, but leaving her alone so much of the time while he roamed the continent fixing broken wolves had accelerated the slide to divorce. Dropping off the map for months had lit a match to the kindling of her anger and resentment at his neglect. She'd been unhappy for years, and he'd been so wrapped up with saving everyone except his wife that he'd ignored every clue. To give the female credit, she'd waited until he'd got his act together enough to stand in front of her before she let him know she'd chosen to keep another male's bed warm.

One good thing came out of the marriage—Jake. The boy had a smile that lit up the gloomiest day. Smart too, and that wasn't just Dad bragging. The kid was an honor student with an off-the-charts IQ.

Daniel hadn't been around when Dana had come into heat, so there was no way he was the boy's biological father, but he'd fallen hard for the kid at first sight.

Jake was the son of his soul. The boy was the reason Daniel still maintained a civil relationship with Dana. With the whole Treeland pack, in truth.

Now the boy was becoming a man. Every time he thought about the dangers ahead, his eyes got blurry. He had to shake his head to clear his vision. Pure wuss. Jake going through the change scared him. With a part-human mother, Jake fell into the high-risk category. Half of mixed-blood male werewolves never shifted. Most of those who made the transition died.

Daniel prayed for two things. First, he prayed Jake never shifted. Second, he prayed if Jake changed, that he survived the ordeal.

Whipping out his cell, he did the only thing that ever helped when worrying about Jake gripped him. He dialed his son.

“Hey, bud, how’s it going?” Daniel waited for Jake’s answer, silently cursing the voice that came back deeper than yesterday’s. Typically a mixed blood werewolf’s first transition happened during puberty. Like the kid’s body didn’t have enough going on already.

“I’m good. How ’bout you, Pop?”

“Good, son, I’m good.” Daniel rubbed his chest where the skin over his heart pinched.

* * *

Scarlet continued to fume over Daniel’s gruff “not anymore” while she gathered the snack bowls. Grumbling as she made her way into the kitchen, her mind reargued with the stubborn sheriff. No matter how cleverly she worded her request, he still refused to help.

Why was she surprised? The sheriff was another ordinary Alpha jerk convinced he ruled the world—or at least his territory. In this particular case, he might have a point.

An urge to grin tugged her lips until she gave in to the smile and then laughed aloud at her describing Daniel as an ordinary Alpha jerk. He’d touched her, and she hadn’t gone all clammy and nauseated like she had with every other Alpha male the Treeland pack Alpha had arranged to help her.

For that feat alone, Daniel deserved his own special class.

She noticed he’d never specifically denied being the whisperer. A positive sign. Although no closer to healing her wolf link, she couldn’t quit. There was too much at stake. For the pack. For her.

The pack needed a healer. Gracie, the traveling Omega, covered the West Coast from the Juneau pack all the way down to Mendocino. She did a phenomenal job. But an Omega stretched so thin meant heartbreaking choices of who to save, who to heal, and who to let die.

Even though her wolf was dormant—up until meeting Daniel—the pack had stood by her. Without a wolf, Scarlet had no standing, but she had a job, protection, shelter, and safety. She wasn't like Daniel. She couldn't survive as a lone wolf. No female could. She owed the pack a life debt.

A damaged wolf connection had also put her out of the mating game. And because of the fact that there wasn't a pack Alpha she could tolerate, let alone mate with, no pure bred wolf would accept an infertile mate and females were only fertile in wolf form. None of that should matter. But it did. One day she wanted pups of her own to love.

Packs ran according to a strict dominance hierarchy. Except for her. She was one of a kind, a damaged Omega. She had no pack role. Something—probably the *only* thing—she and Daniel had in common.

Because her bond had been damaged at such a young age, she'd never been on a hunt, never raced through the moonlight, never howled the pack song. Running with the pack meant shifting, and she couldn't.

Like any wolf, she craved touch, needed the closeness of her kind. But for her there was no jockeying with the Alpha bitches, no happy following with the Betas. The aloof intellectual Gammas were all business and kept a polite distance. The touchy Lambdas gave her and the rest of the females a wide berth, and even the sensitive Psis who empathized with everyone turned away if she came too close.

Working in the medical clinic at pack headquarters, she survived on the impersonal and fleeting contact with patients. Gracie's rare visits were the only times she received real hugs and the soothing strokes she craved.

Until Daniel had touched her, she hadn't even realized she'd been dying a little each day.

Her hunger for touch went a long way toward explaining her reaction to him. He'd woken her dormant wolf, and he'd held her and kissed her. She sighed with pleasure at the memory of his hands stroking her wrist, cupping her face, holding her tight.

If holding and kissing stirred her wolf and made her want to purr, just imagine what sex could do.

He was the answer, she was sure of it. Her inner wolf hummed in approval.

Daniel had said he would return later tonight. Whatever else he was or wasn't, he had impressed her as a male who meant what he said.

Good. She would be waiting.

She might not have mating experience, but she was a nurse. His arousal had been obvious. The almost full moon intensified desire in werewolves—another factor in her favor. Daniel didn't stand a chance.

Hastily Scarlet stowed the rest of the groceries and began to form a plan.

A quiet knock at the back door made her jump. Had he forgotten something? She opened the door. Doyle Harrison gave her an old-fashioned bow.

Elegant and ageless as the last time she'd seen him, more than ten years ago. He'd always smelled so wonderful. She sniffed delicately, but his magic fragrance was gone or at least undetectable to her human nose.

At the scarcely mature age of twenty-five, she'd already lived two lives. The carefree childhood of a pup and the past decade as a dormant.

She smiled. "Mr. Harrison."

"Doyle." He straightened slowly, looking hurt. "Did you forget?"

"Of course not." She tugged him inside. His arm was like ice. "Come in. Daniel—the sheriff made a nice fire."

"Thought I heard him sniffing around earlier."

"He gave me a ride home from the store."

"Actually I came over to warn you to stay away from him. He's not stable. Don't trust him."

"But he was Charlie's friend."

Doyle made a noise she would have described as a snort from anyone less refined. "Charlie couldn't resist a stray."

This was true. Charlie had collected wounded wolves, but Daniel was nothing like the jumpy wolves that had trailed her grandfather everywhere. “Can I get you something to drink—hot chocolate?”

“No, I can’t stay. Call me if you need anything. I’ll stop by tomorrow evening.” He let himself out the back door.

A glance at the clock sent her racing upstairs. There was much to do and little time to do it. She started by unpacking, following up that flurry of activity with making a fresh, tight bed, arranging the necessities of life in the tiny bathroom, and sniffing the towels. A comforting trace of sunshine and lavender lingered.

Every few minutes, she stopped and let the memory of Daniel’s touch shiver along her nerves, raising fine hairs in excitement.

After the bedroom and bathroom pleased both her eyes and her nose, she stripped, tossed her clothes into the hamper, and crossed to the shower. While waiting for the hot water to make it upstairs, she wondered how someone as protective as Daniel could turn his back on such a desperately needed gift.

More to the point, could she change his mind? She needed him. No, she corrected herself, she needed his gift. Healing her damaged wolf link was her goal. She had no idea what a whisperer did. Was sex the key? The Omega responded sensually to Daniel, so sex seemed like her best bet. But could she seduce him?

Right, Ms. Shakes So Hard Her Teeth Rattle If An Alpha Tries To Touch Her, she would be fabulous at seduction.

She’d never had consensual sex. Her terror of Alphas had made it impossible. Yet there’d been a moment with Daniel when they’d kissed and fear hadn’t been a problem. She’d felt brave, warm, and actually safe in his arms.

The flicker of hope in her chest glowed a little brighter; dreams she’d been afraid to hope for seemed possible. Details began to take shape as she rinsed her hair. The sheriff was attracted to her, and the inner bitch was crushing on him in a major way. Seducing an interested male shouldn’t be all that difficult.

Calculating she had at least an hour before Daniel returned, she lathered on shaving gel and applied the razor.

The shower, shampoo, and shaving took fifteen minutes; patting herself dry and smoothing lotion on her arms and legs made it a half hour. Blow-drying her hair took forever.

An hour after starting the grooming session, she brushed mascara across the tips of her lashes, slicked on lip gloss, and wrapped herself in a fluffy peach towel. Tucking the ends firmly between her breasts, she dashed downstairs.

Candles would've been a nice touch, but her safety margin of minutes had evaporated. Quickly draping the bath towel to protect the sofa, she positioned herself in what she fervently hoped was a seductive pose. She braced her elbows on the arm of the couch, arched her back slightly to thrust her breasts for maximum advantage, sucked in her belly, and angled her best feature—her long legs—to preserve a little mystery.

She tried hard to remember the sweet, wild wanting she'd felt when Daniel had kissed her. But she wasn't sure it worked. Her mouth stayed as dry as the forest after a fire. She shivered, and her nipples furled, tight and aching, but from excitement or nerves?

Her heart was pounding so hard she was surprised her breasts didn't bounce. She refused to think about the possibility of rejection. No risk, no reward.

She went all in.

Within minutes, a magnificent gray wolf prowled past the front steps. Frozen in place, she stared at the male until he disappeared from sight.

This was good, better than Daniel in human form. Her teeth clacked like nervous castanets. Perfect, she insisted stubbornly, willing it to be true. Things couldn't be better. His wolf would call forth her inner bitch.

In spite of her pep talk, his low growl startled her. The giant werewolf stood on his hind legs, powerful shoulders bunched, fierce snout nosing the front-room window.

It took every bit of courage she possessed to stay put. She smiled at him shakily, wishing she could bare matching fangs.

Then the connection to the inner bitch hummed to life.

Scarlet sighed in relief.

The Omega arched her rump, tongue lolling.

Electricity zinged Scarlet from her toes to her scalp, missing nothing in between. Long-dormant pathways sparked to life. New strength surged into her muscles, her eyesight sharpened, and her nostrils flared as she caught fresh scents.

This time there was no doubt about her arousal. The Omega wanted Daniel, and Scarlet's body responded to her wolf's sure need for this male. Although he was still outside the house, she inhaled and could smell the intoxicating bouquet of aroused male werewolf.

It was working. Her senses were sharpening. The Omega was awake.

A snarl rumbled out of the male. Without warning, he sprang. The glass shattered, and the giant wolf leaped into the living room. Up close, the smell of his arousal coated her receptors.

He should have been her worst nightmare, prowling toward her. But the Omega's confidence and desire infused Scarlet with passion.

The inner bitch moved, reaching for the male.

Scarlet dug her fingers into the couch cushion so viciously she expected to shred the upholstery. Holding her ground, she let the Alpha come to her.

The slaving beast stopped, shuddered, and then began to shift. In a blur, the gorgeous, sexed-up wolf disappeared. Only a full-blooded werewolf could shift so fast.

Daniel braced on hands and knees. And then he uncoiled, rising slowly.

Naked Daniel.

She intended to glare at him, but he was very naked, very beautiful in his bronze skin and rippling muscles, and very aroused. His shaft was long, thick, and

totally riveting, with an oddly vulnerable, shiny, plump head thrusting out of its collar. Below his cock, a puckered sack hung, a heavy weight dangling between his legs. Then it began to tighten.

She stared for a moment or two more in appreciation of the glorious male in front of her before she remembered how mad she was at him for shifting.

Chapter Four

Daniel braced his hands on his knees and panted, fighting for breath. The wolf had damn near won the battle for control. His gut twisted with fear for how close Scarlet had come to death. When the wolf had caught her scent, he'd tried to block Daniel. The male wanted the naked female, and he didn't care what form she wore.

Knowing she'd never survive werewolf sex in her human form, Daniel had died a thousand deaths struggling with his wolf.

Bright red toenails moved into his view. Scarlet—alive and well and naked. Fury roiled inside him at her recklessness. He straightened, ready to chew her some new respect for werewolf males in general and him in particular.

Scarlet leaped up and nipped the tip of his nose. Not hard enough to draw blood, but hard enough to make his eyes water. "What the hell was that for?"

She darted out of reach, flashing him a dirty look. "For shifting."

"You're mad at me?" Un-fucking-believable, but true. The smoky odor of her anger irritated his abused nostrils.

She hissed at him. "Yes."

"You're pissed because I didn't shred your pretty hide? You're not making sense. Work with me here, Red."

"I was doing fine. I'm not some delicate little flower. I'm a full-grown werewolf." She lowered her voice. "Who has a small shifting problem."

For a second or three, she distracted him from her glare by crossing her arms under a pair of very nice breasts. Then he remembered why he was breathing hard.

Small shifting problem, his ass. She might be slightly tougher than a human, but she was no match for his wolf.

Her chin tilted mulishly. "I was so close. I almost shifted."

"You almost died." He forced the words out between lips still half-numb with a sickening combination of rage and fear.

The criminally negligent female had no business being mad at him when she'd put herself in harm's way. There were consequences for scaring the hell out of an Alpha. It was time she learned the way of the wolf. Lucky for her, he was a great teacher.

She was still talking like he'd messed up some halfway sensible plan. "Werewolf sex is the key. It will fix me."

"You want sex." Technically he hadn't made it a question.

She nodded cautiously.

Way too damn late for caution, Red. His cock throbbed, and his balls rode high and tight and aching. A little rough sex would sure as hell make him feel better. "Fine, assume the position."

Her eyes widened, and she took another step back. "You first."

For a second, he didn't catch her meaning.

When he didn't instantly obey, she flapped her hand. "Go ahead, shift."

The female was certifiable. "Hell no, wolfie boy isn't coming out to play until you're wearing fur and fangs."

Another smoking glare from those pretty eyes scorched his hide. "Then there's no point. You may as well leave. I don't like sex."

He smelled the lie along with her anger. They didn't interfere with her arousal. When he stared at her breasts with their tight tips, she dropped her gaze from his submissively, though her spirit still rebelled against his dominance.

Teaching her to truly submit would free her strong, confident wolf. “That’s a damn shame,” he drawled. “You lost the option to say no right about the time you shed your clothes.”

She tried to bolt.

In a blur of speed, he caught her, spun her around, and captured both wrists in one hand. Holding her nice and secure, he moved up real close, settling in with her backside nested against his front. “You’ll whimper for me to take you.”

“In your dreams,” she growled at him. Actually growled. And then she kicked at him. A heel connected with his shins before he used his longer reach to back out of range.

Damn, that was hot. He frog-marched her to the wall and pinned her there. “Then too.”

“Let me go.” She squirmed in his unbreakable hold.

Much as he enjoyed the squirming, both wolfie boy and he knew she needed mastering—his. He pressed harder, subduing the rebellion. “Negotiations are over.”

“There were negotiations? I missed them.”

More sass? He bit back a grin of admiration. He inhaled, catching a note of smoky anger topping her wild berry fragrance. No tang of fear marred the complex blend.

Angry beat the hell out of scared.

He whispered against the sensitive skin behind her ear, “Those negotiations ended right about when your options ran out—that would have been when you arranged yourself on the sofa like bait. Real tasty bait.”

Heat surged up her neck, warming his lips. The faint notes of musky arousal teased his nose and stiffened his cock. “Embarrassed, Red? A brazen little hussy like you?”

She didn't answer. Gradually her taut muscles gave slightly beneath the insistent press of his bigger, stronger body. This first sign of her sweet submission warmed him like a generous swallow of cognac.

Plainly the female needed a whole lot of training. He was just the male to give it to her. He hoped she was a slow learner—the slower the better. His control was still ragged from the scare she'd given him, and he needed to master himself before he could take care of her the way she deserved. An Alpha dominated his female. That meant earning her respect and obedience before he allowed her emotional and physical release.

He kept her caged and waited until she calmed and leaned into him, accepting her first lesson. Trust.

With infinite patience, he controlled her, taking away her options until her breathing evened out and the pulse under his thumb beat steadily.

Slowly he stroked her from shoulder to wrist. First on her left side, then, switching the hand he used to restrain her wrists, he repeated the same deliberate caresses on her right side. The delicate perfume of her arousal grew stronger.

He nibbled tender kisses along her collarbone. Her tense muscles eased, and she gradually let him take more of her weight. Her perfect, round ass nestled against his cock, which was hard enough to break rock. He held his breath, waiting for her to stiffen in fear.

A small sigh escaped her lips. Not quite a whimper, but headed in the right direction. Pulling her back from the wall, he stole a peek at her breasts. The tips were like pink berries, begging for his attention.

He pinched one stiffened peak, then the other, and she rewarded him with a surprised yip.

“Too hard?” he asked.

Scarlet arched. “Do it again and I'll let you know.”

Her boldness pleased him greatly. But Daniel wouldn't let her get away with challenging his authority in the bedroom. He let go of the engorged nipple. The tip immediately darkened to a deeper pink. "When I ask you a question, the correct answer is either 'yes, Sir' or 'no, Sir.' And remember, I can smell a lie."

"Or what?" she taunted.

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. "Or there will be consequences."

"Like?"

"Still haven't learned enough about consequences, Red? Time for lesson number two."

"What was lesson one?"

"Trust."

She glared over her shoulder at him. "I don't trust you."

"Sure you do. If you didn't trust me, you wouldn't be aroused."

"I'm not," she snapped, tensing under his hold.

No matter how pissed off she looked, he knew she was turned on big time. Apparently he still needed to convince her. He eased her farther away from the wall, turned her so he could see her expression, and started with a simple statement of fact. "You want me."

"I'm furious with you." She growled at him again.

His wolf circled inside, growling back, ready to teach her a whole lot more about wild werewolf sex than she could handle.

Daniel tightened his control over the inner beast and bared his teeth. Whether or not she realized it, feeling safe enough to tell him she was mad was a great big old green light. He kept his voice calm and reasonable. "You're furious and turned on."

"Am not," she snipped stubbornly.

He ignored her defiance and continued mildly. "Your nipples are as hard as my cock."

Her eyes flashed dangerous sparks at him. Good, he'd take mad as a wet owl. It was still a big improvement over cowering and scared.

"Because you pinched them."

And he planned to do it a whole lot more. He moved slowly, tracing the delicate bones in her shoulder, moving to her sternum, and then following the tempting curve of her breasts. "I'll give you that one." He pinched one of the tight tips affectionately and shifted his focus lower, to the damp curls covering her sex. "But you're wet for me, Red." He arched an eyebrow. "Want to tell me why you're creaming for me?"

She kept up the glare while she worried her lush lower lip.

"You don't believe me?"

Stepping behind her again, he spanned the tempting roundness of her belly with his hand while he waited patiently for her answer. The soft skin under his palm heated. Hot enough for him to notice. Considering his core temperature ran between one hundred three and one hundred seven, she was smokin'. But he had enough sense not to push his luck by mentioning body heat was another good indication of female arousal.

Hell, he didn't need anything besides his nose to tell him she was turned on.

Slowly he lowered his arm until his hand covered her sex. He parted her lower lips and slid his fingers through the hot, wet velvet of her feminine folds. Carefully he circled her rigid clit, coaxing it out from under its tiny hood and putting some gentle pressure on the miniature rod.

She gasped.

The satisfying sound swelled his ego and his cock. Using his thumb, he circled again, repeating the same subtle pressing.

After a few more rounds of this tender torture, Scarlet was panting and arching into his hand. He withdrew his hand and pinned her hips to the wall, using his weight to hold her immobile.

Moving his juicy fingers up to where she could see, he bent his head over her shoulder and licked them clean—very thoroughly. “Real wet, Red. Delicious too.”

Her pretty face went through several contortions and a couple of different interesting shades of pink before she muttered, “Is it possible to be furious and aroused?”

“Maybe it is.” He shrugged, too damned pleased with her to deliver a lecture on his rules. First he had another point to make. “But do not make the mistake of lying to me, and do not lie to yourself.”

She looked away. “Because you’ll hurt me?”

A tang of feminine fear hit his nose. Nothing like the first time he’d seen her, but it still hurt that he hadn’t completely won her trust.

He framed her face and carefully turned her head until she met his eyes. “I will never do anything to hurt you. Can you trust me far enough to believe me?”

Her voice dropped. “I don’t know.”

He traced the trail blazed earlier from her collarbone to just short of the nest of auburn curls, because he wanted to and indulging his need to touch helped soothe his inner beast. “Can’t you smell I’m telling you the truth?”

“No.” She turned her face away, speaking so softly he had to lean in close to catch her words. “Not unless the inner bitch is awake.”

He filed away another piece of the Scarlet puzzle. Her wolf connection wasn’t completely shattered. This was good news.

Daniel had no illusions about his nature. He was an Alpha. Dominance came as easy as breathing. With Red, something new happened. He wanted to protect her even more than he wanted to master her. Hell, if it came right down to it, he’d protect her from himself. He’d walk away before he’d damage her.

But he wouldn't quit until he did everything he could think of to earn her complete trust, starting with a few lessons in the pleasures of submission.

As he cupped her shoulder, she flinched. Her quick flair of fear stabbed his nose.

Too soft and he'd lose her. Knowing how far to push a damaged submissive and when to cuddle her was his job. With Scarlet, he explored uncharted territory. She couldn't communicate with her own wolf, let alone his.

The rogues he'd guided back to their humanity in the past had all been males, Alphas who had recognized his dominance and accepted his leadership. He had utilized the common mental connection between pack members. And even then, when he'd known what the hell he was doing, the pack mind meld hadn't always worked.

Bad memories flashed like a waking nightmare. The guide business had damn near killed him. This time the stakes were higher. If he didn't maintain control, his life would be on the line and so would Scarlet's. The possibility chilled his blood. He had to fight past the fear.

It wasn't a single family at risk. The pack's future generations hung in the balance. Jake needed her. The transitioning males, the pregnant females, the abused females—so many members' survival depended on Scarlet's gift.

He snapped the lid firmly on his doubts. Any uncertainty on his part would destroy her first fragile threads of trust. For the pack, for Jake, and for Scarlet, he had to succeed.

Lucky for him, nothing said he couldn't enjoy the hell out of healing Red, 'cause she did it for him in a big way. Wolfie boy *whuffed* an appreciative snout full of her in clear agreement.

Firming his possessive hold on her smooth shoulder, he deliberately ignored her flinch and caged her against the wall. "Rule number one: You belong to me. When I say, what I say, and how I say, you do."

She opened her mouth, probably ready to start an argument. He bit the long tendon in the side of her throat. She froze.

For long seconds, they stayed locked in place. Little by little, she angled her neck, exposing her vulnerable jugular. At last, she made a needy whimper of pure submission, an act of true courage. Brave little female.

He brushed aside her hair, using his thumb to rub at the knots of tension in her nape. "Rule number two: You don't talk unless I ask you a question. When I ask, your answer is 'yes, Sir,' always. If I ask you to do something you absolutely can't handle, then you can say, 'no, Sir.' Once you say no, we're done for the night. Rule number three: the Alpha is always right."

The smell of her fear evaporated. His rules, his strength, his dominance gave her confidence. Damned if that didn't make him feel about ten feet tall and ready to slay anything that scared her. He nuzzled her neck, trailed nips and kisses down her back, and let himself enjoy her full curves, her soft skin, and her delicious fragrance.

He paused at the base of her spine. Then he sucked hard enough to mark her before asking, "Any problem with the rules?"

She shook her head no.

"Good." He swept her feet wide apart, giving him access to her juicy pussy. "You're real wet, Red. Is that for me?"

Her voice rose an octave. "Yes, Sir."

"No lies." He kept his tone stern.

"Yes, Sir."

His open palm slapped a plump cheek. She yipped.

"That was a warning. A lie gets you another swat." He smoothed her wounded ass. Then he leaned over and licked the reddening handprint. "Better?"

"Yes, Sir."

He inhaled a lungful of her musky arousal right along with her response. Shaping her full hips with his hands, he moved lower, kneading her round bottom until the muscles were as pliable as sun-warmed wax.

Someday real soon, he would have her in his bed and he would lick every inch of her tasty body for hours.

Right now, he needed to ready her for mounting. "Hands on the wall."

Once she'd obeyed, he pulled her hips farther from the wall. Using one leg, he widened her stance even farther. Opening her more fully. Letting her anticipation build.

She shivered and waited for his touch.

Now that she was exposed and the air thickened with her desire, taking his time didn't bother him or wolfie boy. Daniel ran his hand down the length of her back, appreciating her satin-smooth skin and full, supple curves. She felt even better than she looked.

Scarlet undulated under his caress.

When he slid one finger between her swollen ruffles and rimmed the mouth of her sex before penetrating her core, first with one finger, then two, she didn't flinch.

Carefully he pumped into her satin sheath, stretching her.

A whimper escaped her lips as he pulled out and then pushed back in, savoring the slick heat, the wet velvet clasp of her pussy around his fingers. So damn tight.

Changing the angle, he rubbed the ridged surface of her engorged G-spot, and she bucked against his hand. He pressed closer, nestling his throbbing cock between the cheeks of her plump ass, loving the way she cushioned him.

She squirmed, whimpering her desire. So sweetly submissive, so responsive. He pushed her nearer to release, gently circling the borders of her clit.

His cock hardened further and thrummed, caught between her fine ass and his hard belly, leaking precum. A heated welcome of fresh excitement gushed from her

channel as feminine muscles clasped and unclasped with each of his deliberate pumps into her pussy.

“I want you to cream for me, Red. I want to feel you come while I finger fuck your tight little cunt,” he whispered in her ear. Then he dipped his head and bit the junction where her neck met her shoulder.

She rode his hand, grinding against him, muscles quivering.

“Come for me, Red. Show me how hot you are. Now.”

“Please, Sir” escaped her lips in a moan.

Using his thumb, he brushed her distended clit. Steaming honey flooded from her core as she screamed, “Daniel!”

His name echoed in the air, cranking his hunger, threatening his control. While her pussy still fluttered from orgasm, he fitted his swollen cockhead to her slick entrance. Carefully he pushed into her tight sheath, one tortuous inch at a time, giving her a chance to adjust to his thicker invasion.

Edging deeper, he reached around her, sliding two fingers through her tender slit and catching and squeezing the rigid nub in a light scissor hold.

She moaned again, softened muscles tensing under his slow thrusts. Tightening his control, he kept a deliberate, even pace, gradually pushing deeper, squeezing her clit, and fighting the climax gathering behind his balls.

When she came again, she whimpered. “Daniel.”

Nothing had ever sounded sweeter.

He gripped her hips with both hands, riding the wave with her as he whispered, “Cream for me. Cream all over me. You’re so beautiful arching into your release. I’m going to drive you wild over and over again until we’re both too tired to move.”

Finally his cock was seated balls-deep in her velvet heat. The aftershocks of her climax milked his shaft, and his wolf rode her with him, pushing, lengthening him, thickening him, making him impossibly harder.

“Mine,” his beast growled.

Before Daniel could react to the wolf’s claim, Scarlet tightened hard around his cock, locking him deep inside her pussy. Control shattered by the perfect bliss of possession, his thoughts slid together until there were no more words, no decisions, just instincts.

“Mine.” His primal roar shook the house as he flooded her channel with explosive blasts of cum.

Chapter Five

When Scarlet opened her eyes, her wolf was silent and her vision was still fuzzy—human. More sex then. She sighed happily, the feel of Daniel stretching her core with his heavy, uncut cock a fine and pleasant ache. Her sheath fluttered with aftershocks of pure pleasure.

Lazily her gaze drifted over the living room wreckage.

An unnaturally pale face peered back at her through a missing windowpane. Startled, her mouth opened, and a scream erupted, piercing the quiet night.

Daniel moved faster than she could track, withdrawing from her body and placing her firmly behind him. This forced her to angle around him to see anything.

“Harrison, get out of here. You’re scaring Scarlet.”

The apparition nodded politely. “Saw the broken window, thought I better check it out. Evening, Scarlet.”

“Nice to see you again, Doyle.” Scarlet peered at him blankly, too exhausted and stunned from Daniel’s lovemaking to think coherently.

Naturally her old friend had come to check on her. Fortunately she’d never seen Doyle move fast, or else he would’ve seen even more of her.

“There were noises too.” Doyle eyed Daniel disapprovingly.

“We’re fine.” Scarlet swallowed a sigh. All things considered, she would have preferred to be dressed for her chat with her old friend. Naked seemed to set the wrong tone.

“Are you certain you’re all right?” Doyle asked quietly.

“She’s fine. Wait for me over at the barn. I’ll be with you in few.”

Daniel used his cold sheriff's business voice, which sounded very different from the tone he used with her. The realization warmed her far more than it should.

"Scarlet," Doyle waited until she met his gaze. "I won't let him hurt you."

"I'm the only one who can help her. Get out of here. Now." Daniel growled.

Doyle ignored him. "You don't have to be afraid of him. I can protect you from deputy dog."

"Sheriff Wolff to you, Harrison."

"Whatever, wolf man."

Doyle knew Daniel was a werewolf? Charlie must have told him. They'd been friends for ages, but it wasn't like Charlie to ignore pack law.

"Thank you, but I'm fine. He won't hurt me." Scarlet bristled; damaged wolf link or not, she wasn't helpless, and she was tired of everyone, even an old family friend, treating her as if she were a pathetic weakling.

"If he does, then he'll answer to me." Doyle nodded at her gravely. With a last pointed look at Daniel, he disappeared.

With another burst of disconcerting speed, Daniel wrapped her in the peach towel. "Get dressed. I'll be right back."

"Great." Scarlet stared at the empty space where he'd stood, and shivered. After detouring for an unauthorized drink of water, she ran up the stairs. All this exercise had to be good for her.

She hurried into the tiny bathroom tucked under the eaves that had once been a closet and ran cold water over a washcloth. She applied the cool dampness to her hot cheeks, soothing the hectic color. Once reassuringly blotch-free, she tugged on undies, jeans, a scoop-necked tee, socks, boots, and topped off her outfit with a sweater before sauntering downstairs.

The coffee ice cream called to her from the kitchen. Reluctantly she ignored the sweet talk of empty calories. She needed a lot more exercise to justify dessert.

Shifting reputedly burned thousands of calories, which was why active werewolves carried practically no body fat while they ate like bears fattening up for hibernation.

She curled on the couch to wait for Daniel and smothered a yawn. She rested her eyes for just a moment. The next thing she knew, a rough hand shook her gently. He was back and even bigger than she remembered. Disappointingly, he was no longer nude.

The male had a fine body in either form. Dressed in civilian clothes—a heavy flannel shirt open over a faded tee and sinfully worn jeans that clung to his powerful thighs like a caress—he still looked good.

Not that she was checking him out. She barely noticed the nick by his Adam's apple where he must've cut himself shaving. When had he found time to shave? Just how long had she rested her eyes?

Summoning a fresh batch of courage, she actually met his gaze. His storm-colored irises were rimmed with pure black. While he stared back at her, she watched his pupils dilate until she felt as if she were falling into him.

He closed the distance between them.

How had she thought he was safe? Wrong. He wasn't safe—not at all safe. Vaguely she remembered Doyle's warning not to trust him. She should be afraid. But he didn't scare her. Encouraging, though very strange since he was as extreme an Alpha as any wolf she'd met.

"Maybe you're not afraid of me because you know I'm not going to hurt you." He spoke the words almost directly into her ear as if he'd read her mind.

When she opened her mouth to argue, he whispered, "Check with your wolf. She knows I'm telling the truth."

She didn't want to talk about the damaged link connection to her silent inner bitch right now. A hug and a few more of his kisses would definitely help make everything better. She moved nearer, inhaling his scent.

"Come on; time to go." His mouth quirked as if he'd read her thoughts again.

Strange. She'd never heard of an unmated pair sharing thoughts. But then, she couldn't read him at all. So it must be a whisperer thing. "Where are we going?"

"My place."

"I really don't think—"

He cut her off, running a hand over hair too short to muss—a sign of frustration. But his tone held no doubts. It was all Alpha, steely with dominance. "Look, Red, I'm not giving you options here. I'm not some woo-woo spirit guide. We're doing this on my terms, starting right here, right now by keeping you safe. This place doesn't qualify. There's no way to secure the house tonight, and Harrison can't be trusted with sheep. I'm sure as hell not letting him guard you. You're staying at my place. End of story."

The living room temperature dropped about twenty degrees. The broken window didn't totally explain the sudden cold spell.

She thought about protesting his bossy approach just on principal, but he had a point, and she needed his help. Besides, she was safe with him. Her wolf rumbled a throaty echo of approval, startling Scarlet but easing her doubts.

Bossiness was part of the Alpha package. A quick peek at his expression settled the question. He radiated determination. This wasn't worth a battle.

"Pack what you want. Take your time." He tapped his watch, looked up, and met her eyes. "Anytime in the next sixty seconds works for me."

"I'll get my things." She made a hasty retreat upstairs.

In spite of his tendency to bark orders and her much more troubling need to obey them, there was something reassuring about him. Perhaps she was finally feeling the flip side of all that Alpha power—protection.

When she was with him, she felt shielded from harm, at least from everyone except him. As hard as she tried to be sensible, her heart didn't seem to have a lick of common sense. The foolish thing kept trying to leap into his keeping.

Dominant males without packs were as rare as Omega females. Daniel was the only lone wolf she'd ever met. Aside from his possible—please, Goddess, let it be true—whisperer talent, she would never have a better chance to have sex without all the speculation and mating dances of a pack alliance. Perhaps sex would be enough to heal her.

The only way to find out if he held the answers was to spend time with him. She grabbed a second sweater for her bag, stuffed the barest necessities into a tote, and raced downstairs. "I'm ready."

"You were quick." Approval rumbled through his words, warming her from the inside out. "Give me the bag."

She handed over the tote.

"What the hell is in here?" He hefted the bag.

"Lotion, eye makeup remover, deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, body wash—"

He held up a palm. "Don't bother."

"Just the bare necessities," she finished reasonably.

Daniel steered her with a broad hand spanning the small of her back as they crossed the lawn to the SUV. His firm touch felt wonderful, and her caution lessened.

Speeding down the road, she shivered. Snuggling into her top, she waited for the heater to thaw out the cab. Finally she noticed his scowl and realized Daniel's mood was what kept the temperature set to deep freeze, she said, "Can you thaw it out just a little?"

"Sorry. Harrison frosts my ass—literally."

The cab warmed slightly. Her breath was still visible. She rubbed her hands to encourage circulation. "Charlie liked him."

"Goddess knows why."

"His eyes." Scarlet started to explain, then paused as the temperature dropped back to subzero. "You're doing it again."

“What about his eyes?” he growled.

“They’re so sad.”

“Vampires have a lot to be sad about,” Daniel said more dryly.

“You think Doyle is a vampire?”

“No, I know he’s a vampire.”

Scarlet bit her lip to keep from arguing. True, she’d never seen him during the day, he was unusually pale, and he recognized Daniel was a werewolf. But a vampire? “Why don’t you like him?”

“I don’t like the way he sniffs around you.”

She opened her mouth to argue and shut it again. Daniel jealous? The idea shouldn’t please her so much, but it did.

“Is it true they’re invisible in sunlight?”

“Ask Harrison.”

“I will,” she snapped, stung by his curtness. “Just a minute. He can’t be a vampire; they only live in little towns they control.”

“Most do.”

“Just not Doyle?” She persisted, still hurt by Daniel’s sudden coldness and unable to accept his unlikely explanation.

Werewolves and vampires maintained a fragile truce. The idea that her grandparents had employed one of the loathed ones for ages challenged everything she’d believed about her family. Either Daniel was lying—and she couldn’t imagine why he would do so—or else she understood nothing about her family. And that was far more disturbing.

Daniel shrugged. “He probably belongs to the Kingston enclave.”

Once again the cab grew icy, and the rest of the journey to his place passed in frigid silence.

When her wolf had stirred, nudging her toward Daniel, Scarlet had begun to hope for more than just healing from him. If her link healed, then love, mating, and pups of her own were all possible. But not if she fell in love with the wrong Alpha.

As the miles passed in a blur of dotted yellow lines and tall timber zigzagged up and down the mountains, she watched Daniel anxiously for signs of interest.

He stayed focused on the road.

By the time he slowed the rig, her wolf was still conspicuously quiet. Reluctantly Scarlet faced the hard truth. She'd made the classic female mistake of confusing sex with true caring.

She regretted ever coming to Cedar Grove, regretted meeting Daniel, and definitely regretted agreeing to stay at his place.

A short time later, the headlights caught and flared on a single reflector. When they drew closer, the flash of red turned out to be mounted on a mailbox-topped post. That was the only distinguishing mark Scarlet noticed in the endless scrub brush crowding the miles of two-lane blacktop.

There must've been other signs, or else Daniel's super-werewolf senses were working overtime. He slowed ahead of time and made the right-angle turn easily. The SUV climbed a steep gravel road, cutting through the dark woods.

Rather than waiting for him to help her out of the rig, Scarlet unsnapped her safety belt before he'd rolled to a complete stop. The engine still ticked as she hopped out. As usual, he'd used his super speed, highlighting her slowness.

Ice radiated from his big frame. She missed his warmth, his demands, and his teasing. She did her best to ignore his withdrawal, a strategy about as effective as ignoring the coming full moon.

Already her skin itched from the need to shift. A need that had never been met, she reminded herself. That was why she needed Daniel's help.

She didn't quite believe his explanation of animosity toward Doyle as the total reason for his coldness. Perhaps she'd mistaken his lust for something more—something that would never be there.

Unhappy and uncertain, she stayed quiet. Meanwhile she distracted herself by taking an interest in her surroundings. The meadow contained two buildings: a metal structure that could have been a garage, a workshop, storage, or some combination of those, and an A-frame house.

The front door swung open as he guided her toward the house. Werewolf magic in action.

Maybe she'd be able to do cool tricks soon, she told herself. Another excellent reminder of what she was doing out in the middle of nowhere with a dangerous Alpha.

Full of renewed purpose, she marched ahead. A bump she failed to notice caught her toe, and she started to topple, windmilling frantically. Strong arms caught her, pulled her against his hard body, and kept her upright. For a long moment, he just held her, and she was safe.

Then the last of her fragile confidence fled, remembering her graceless stumble. Suddenly she felt awkward, painfully self-conscious, and way too human. In spite of all her doubts about him, about coming here, and her current klutz-related embarrassment, none of the old Alpha terror chilled her blood.

Her heart beat fast, but no faster than his and definitely not at panic level. She drew in a deep breath, absorbing his potent scent.

He smelled just as wonderful as before—the same intoxicating blend of woods, leather, and wild animal sex.

Her inner bitch whimpered, head lowered, butt arched, ready to romp through the meadow. The flash of connection instantly infused Scarlet with fresh hope. Her wolf trusted him, wanted him. All her life Scarlet had waited for her wolf's instincts. She wasn't going to ignore the Omega's eager stamp of approval.

Besides, a romp in the meadow was one of her favorite fantasies. Chased by a gorgeous wolf determined to ravage her. Of course, she wouldn't run too fast. As the dream unfolded, caution faded and desire sparked along her nerves, pooling in erogenous zones.

Fears eased in her lover's arms, she catalogued her body's response. Her breasts felt tight. A quick peek south confirmed her nipples had snapped to attention. Swollen, achy, and undeniably wet—desire. Still so new, so amazing, and so wow. Just wow.

Naturally Daniel with his super-werewolf nose would notice her reaction to his nearness. Not a bad thing if her wolf was right about his truly caring for her. But a disaster if he only wanted to heal her.

Her breath caught as she realized caution was pointless. Falling in love with him hadn't been a choice. More like a force of nature she couldn't have stopped.

Heat flared, blotching her face. She sighed. The ugly blush always happened just when she wanted to look her best.

Chapter Six

An almost full harvest moon hung low in the night sky, making wolfie boy restless and adding magic highlights to Scarlet's hair. Watching her blush was the next best thing to sniffing her arousal. "Want to share that thought?"

Carefully Daniel unwound his possessive grip on her waist, keeping a steadying hand on her hip. When she stayed put, he let himself stroke her from shoulder to wrist, ending with a squeeze of her soft hand. The caress was pure indulgence. Like every wolf, he craved closeness. It had been too long since he'd allowed himself to touch. Even longer since he'd been touched. His wolf all but purred from the simple contact.

Finally he made himself take half a step away. He kept her hand. When she didn't tug for immediate release, his chest swelled at her acceptance of his hold—a small but important token of trust.

In answer to his question about sharing what she'd been thinking, Scarlet dipped her chin, staring at her feet. "No."

"It's okay, Red. I figured." He laughed and squeezed the hand she'd entrusted to his care.

His eyes zeroed in on her plump mouth. And just that fast, he was in trouble. One minute he teased her, everything fine and in control. The next minute he was kissing her. What started soft and easy rapidly became a whole lot like a starving man feasting on mouthfuls of sweet berries.

She stiffened in his embrace, and her frightened reaction barely registered. Then the sharp tang of her fear hit his nose and clawed straight for his heart. That

made him pull back. He would've chewed off both his arms before he'd hurt her. Just knowing he'd scared her made him feel like worm food.

"I'm okay," she said with a little pat to the arm still gripping her waist, like she was trying to convince both of them. "The fear was just for a second. I'm not afraid now. I know you won't hurt me." She nestled her hand back into his, and he hung on to that small sign of hope.

"I didn't mean to scare you." He was sincere about not wanting her to be afraid of him, but he couldn't apologize for kissing her. That kiss meant more to him than most of the sex he'd ever had. Definitely not including sex with Scarlet. A subject he was trying real hard not to think about. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her again.

As he steered her across the porch, he wished he'd left on a light to welcome her. He should've put the porch light on a sensor so it came on at dusk.

Then he tried to remember how big a mess he'd left that morning. Jake and he were the only ones who ever saw the place; the housekeeping standards had slipped to bachelor pad.

He flipped on the entry light, held the front door open for Scarlet, and set down her bag. While he watched her reaction to his place, he caught the starting curve of her slow smile. Then he stared at her mouth, taking juvenile pride in the way her perfect lips were still wet and swollen from his kiss.

His puffed-up chest put the official seal on it. He was in big trouble.

The lips he couldn't stop watching parted. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Whoa, you don't mess around, do you? Just when I'm thinking you're shy, you haul out the big guns and let me have it."

"You haven't answered me," she pointed out, shooting him a look that hit point-blank.

"Thought I was once."

"What happened?"

“Didn’t work out.” Hell, he was failing the first test she’d given him. If he wanted her to keep on getting naked and trusting him with her secrets, then he’d better get his shit together and give her some of his own truths.

He cleared his throat. “I was married for ten years. We lived together for maybe two out of the ten. She wasn’t happy alone.” He amended his statement in favor of fuller disclosure. “Wasn’t happy with me being gone.”

“Why didn’t you spend more time together?”

It felt real odd to talk about it. He’d locked that part of himself away for so long. But he owed Scarlet every bit of assurance he could give her. The truth was a good start. “Spirit guide—what some call whisperer—my job at the time involved a lot of travel. Guiding rogues back to their humanity is rebuilding confidence. First I had to make contact, which usually meant tracking them. Sometimes for months.”

“How long ago did the marriage end?”

Long enough ago that it took him a minute to work it out. “Five years next May.”

Her pretty eyes turned shiny with sympathy. “That’s tough.”

Since he couldn’t think of anything else to say, he stayed clammed up.

She asked softly, “Do you still miss her?”

“No.” The word came out in a growl. Shit, he was blowing this. He wove his fingers with hers, wanting way more than he had any right to hope for from her.

While he was busy kicking his own ass, she studied him.

When he finally got it together and glanced at her, he was caught by sparks of gold in her brown eyes. She edged closer, and he forgot about her needing gentle handling, his need for space, and every other damn reason they were such a bad idea.

Her sweet mouth pressed against his. In his belly, an ancient hunger, long denied, roared to life. A need for more than sex, more than touching—a need for this female and no other.

He didn't forget how rotten it felt when she was afraid of him. His instinct to push, to dominate wouldn't always work in his favor with Scarlet. He had to balance his need for control with the greater need to build her confidence and to protect her.

Holding her hand lightly, his muscles trembled from the effort of restraining himself while she explored. She nibbled kisses from one side of his mouth to the other, then traced the seam of his lips with the tip of her tongue.

He softened, inviting her to deepen the kiss.

Shyly she darted in, her tongue dancing with his. Framing her face, he pushed back, stroking her mouth with his, her hand with his, and her body with his. The idea that they both had way too many clothes on penetrated the primal soup of urges sloshing between his ears.

He didn't want to let go of her hand, and he didn't want to stop cupping her face. What he needed was a third arm. Red solved the problem by slipping her hand free of his and burrowing it under his shirt. Her slender fingers stroked, and his body rippled in response, eager to prove his fitness. Too bad he didn't have a car handy to bench-press so he could really impress her.

The whole time she petted him, she kept the kiss going until her arousal perfumed the air and he was primed to a hairbreadth from go. It wasn't something he was going to worry about—if he came in his boxers, it might give him back some badly needed control.

His free arm finally caught on and got with the program, circling her waist and pulling her in nice and tight. She stretched up as if she were trying to fit the hard length of his cock into the tender vee at the top of her legs.

A heartbeat later, he noticed what she wanted, cupped her bottom, and lifted her. As it turned out, clothes weren't the big problem he'd thought they'd be. Heat from her core sizzled right through the layers separating them.

It was Scarlet who finally broke the kiss, nibbling downward and stopping to bite his chin. The pain from her tiny nip shot straight to his balls. Desperate need

coiled in the base of his throbbing cock. He was seconds from acting like the animal he truly was.

The opening of “Hells Bells” chimed on his cell phone, yanking him back to reality. Tolling bells meant Hunter was reaching out. With Daniel’s son on the cusp of changing, the pack’s leader was a crucial link.

Then he remembered he’d left a message asking Hunter to call. He dug out the phone. “Sorry, I’ve got to take this.” He kept his eyes locked on Red as he answered. “Yeah?”

Daniel half listened to Hunter while he tried to remember why getting naked with Red again was a bad idea.

“You asked me to call, remember, or are you losing it in your old age?”

His ears twitched in irritation. “Yeah, thanks for getting back to me.”

Brilliant Daniel, get it together. The harder he pushed Scarlet, the greater the risk of her wolf link being irrevocably damaged grew. If she destabilized, he wouldn’t be the one to destroy her. Hunter needed to understand the danger involved and to be on board with taking out the garbage before the situation went critical.

He drew in a deep breath and said, “Wanted to give you a heads-up about a potential cleanup operation.”

“Okay.” Hunter paused, waiting for him to fill in the blanks. “She standing right there?”

“Yeah.”

“Gotcha. How you holding up?”

“Good.” Daniel searched Red’s face. Her calm expression told him her hearing was still human. Thank the Goddess for small mercies. Still, he needed to watch what he said.

“This potential cleanup, how big a party are we talking?”

Daniel’s gut clenched. “How many enforcers do you have?”

“Ah shit, tell me you didn’t bond with her.”

“Not planning on it.” Like he had any choice.

Several seconds went by before Hunter said, “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Just covering the bases.”

“Gotcha, pal. I’ll send a team your way to keep watch. Meanwhile take things as slow as you can.” Hunter paused to clear his throat. “She’s real nervous around dominant males.”

Except for me. Daniel growled in silent satisfaction. “Appreciate the backup.”

“I do not want to lose both of you.”

“I’m with you there.”

“Try to keep me in the loop, and I’ll do the same. Who knows, pal; maybe someday you’ll want to be part of the pack.”

“Don’t hold your breath. I appreciate your help, but I’m not planning a move anytime soon.” *Like ever.*

“I hear you. Take care.” Hunter severed the connection.

Scarlet’s face glowed a pretty pink. “Nothing like pack, is there? I suppose Hunter already gave you my whole pathetic life story.”

“They care about you.”

She nodded, studying the forest floor. “I’m a little burned-out on having everyone tiptoe around me like I’m going to break if they breathe too hard.”

“Come on, Red. You can’t accuse me of being part of that crowd.”

Her plump lips quirked. “No, but don’t you dare start.”

He held out his arms. “Never.”

When she nestled into his chest, her head tucked under his chin, fitting perfectly. Best of all, there wasn’t a tang of fear in her scent. He was content just to hold her. Hell, just being close to Red made him happy. Not the joy-joy rush of snatching a juicy rabbit before it disappeared into its burrow, but a deep-down ease

that made him want to load up with a modest armory and patrol outside while she slept.

Oh shit, this was bonded mate stuff. He cautiously sniffed. The scent of her coming heat hit his nose.

Red pulled her head back to look at him and inhaled deeply. “What’s that lovely smell?”

Not his imagination. The Goddess and his hormones had pulled an end run. His body was throwing off mated male scent like crazy. This time he was the one who stiffened, and not in a sexed-up kind of way. For a few seconds, he flat out refused to believe it had happened.

Sure, lovemaking with Scarlet had been amazing, and wolfie boy wanted her, but it seemed like there should be a ten-second warning buzzer or some damn clue that he was about to be permanently mated.

Hell, he’d married Dana and never bonded. He’d figured it was like a whole lot of life—happened for some and not for others.

No matter what came next, his odds were bad. Forget odds, he was royally fucked. No, it was worse; fucking was a thing of the past unless Red took pity on him. Mated males didn’t play around—ever. Word was they couldn’t. They didn’t even respond to any female except their mate.

Didn’t that just suck ugly, hairy coyote balls?

Worse, mating wasn’t just about the sex. Staying away from her would make him one of the walking dead. If Red rejected him, he turned into some kind of numb-nuts zombie bound to her for as long as he had a heartbeat. Maybe beyond; it’s not like anyone came back with a bulletin from the shade.

Even if she accepted him, it would be like him and Dana all over again. He’d never be enough for her. Eventually she’d want to take her place with the pack that needed her so desperately. He didn’t know if he could handle pack life day in and day out. This was why he always kept things casual.

When it came to Red, casual had just left his territory, burning rubber on its way out of town.

There was no point in trying to fake it, might not even be an option. He met her eyes. “Bonding scent.”

“Really?” A slow smile spread across her face, and his stupid heart beat a little faster. Then she frowned, and his heart sank. “Weren’t you bonded with your wife?”

“Never happened.”

“But you were married.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Bonding isn’t a prerequisite for marriage.”

“Not for humans, but I thought it was for werewolves.”

He shook his head, watching her for clues as to how she felt about what was happening between them.

“So this means you want to have sex with me?”

“No, Red.” Her face crumpled, and he rushed on, needing to fix the pain he’d caused. “I wanted you from the moment I told you I wouldn’t hurt you and you said ‘thanks.’ Now I want you like I want to keep breathing. More, actually.”

Wolfie boy clawed his gut, urging him to show her how hard, how long, and how much he wanted her. He locked his teeth to keep from begging. This bonded mate shit didn’t give a male much choice. He’d have been on his knees in a second if he’d thought it would help.

The frown vanished, and her eyes widened. “Now?”

“Five minutes ago would have been too damn slow.” The growl that passed for his voice scared the hell out of him.

But Red seemed—pleased. Her lips curved into that slow smile again. Yeah, definitely pleased. He was dying to taste more of her sweetness. What he needed to do was get her naked and in his bed. Fast.

Chapter Seven

Oh my dear Goddess. Scarlet gasped. Daniel wanted her. Really wanted her. She didn't know much about bonding, but she knew it was permanent. Talk about commitment.

Since her shattered link put her out of the pack mating game, no one had ever talked about bonding when she was around. Now a million questions bounced through her head. Would it affect her too? She opened her mouth to ask if mating was a two-way thing.

A low growl snapped her teeth shut.

Right. Male mating frenzy. Definitely not the time for long conversations.

Her secret dream—a mate of her own—coming true sent her heart soaring. Since bonding only happened for functioning werewolves, Daniel bonding with her meant her wolf link had to be healing. The miracle she'd been afraid to hope for was happening.

The warm cloud of bliss lasted for another moment before she remembered the basic werewolf physiology she'd absorbed. Bonding only happened with fertile females. She'd never even been in heat. Sanity seeped through the haze of excitement that had clouded her thinking, crushing her dreams. She shook off the moment of despair, mentally rolling her eyes at her own gullibility.

His talk of bonding was an act—it had to be.

Not that it mattered. She didn't have the luxury of self-pity. So her dreams weren't coming true. Daniel offered the only chance of healing her link. She was so not turning tail and running.

The same pack females who thought mating held the answer to her problems had gossiped about the lone wolf sheriff of Cedar Grove. According to the snippets she'd caught, the male was sheer erotic magic, leaving each bitch panting for more. They hadn't lied. He was amazing.

All the same, she needed to remember seduction was just business as usual for him while she enjoyed her time with him. If she forgot, she'd leave him with a mended connection but a shattered heart.

With a firm mental get-real shake, she reminded herself that fairy tales didn't come true for flawed female werewolves—ones that couldn't even shift and had never been in heat.

Her human form was way less than special. Plain, plump, and covered in freakishly pale skin that flashed a blotchy blush over every self-doubt.

To gain some time and composure, she looked around. A freestanding brass fireplace anchored one corner. Next to it, a stack of split logs waited. A giant bag of marshmallows rested against the firewood. A flat-screen TV filled the opposite corner. Two leather couches faced each other across the long side of the living room. One offered a view of a meadow through a picture window. Across from the other, a framed map of the universe with a jumble of floating geometric shapes and blocks of too-tiny-to-read text gave focus to the expanse of white wall.

Through her half-closed lashes, she studied the male who kept a bag of marshmallows and framed prints of the universe handy. Only to find he was staring a hole right through her. She hated that her knees turned to liquid, hated that he had so much control over her body.

Acting a cool confidence she definitely didn't feel, she lifted her chin and willed herself not to blush. "You don't need the bonding line. I'm way into you. Just your scent..."

Her words trailed off as the sheer power of his presence overwhelmed her. She quit trying to talk and concentrated on keeping her heart from leaping out of her chest while she watched him.

For a second, something that looked almost like pain passed over his hard features. Then he muttered, "Same goes, Red. Same goes."

It took her another moment to remember what they were talking about—scent. He liked the way she smelled too. This was real. She swallowed the fist of tears in her throat. Bonding talk meant nothing when it wasn't real.

The confident Alpha looked vulnerable, as if her rejection of his bonding line had hurt him. He was only trying to help her, and hurting him made her chest ache. She needed to say something to encourage him. All she came up with was a totally pathetic murmur she hoped sounded throaty. "I'm not scared."

"Good." His growl was all raw male need and oddly reassuring.

He moved closer. Not scared, she reminded herself, holding still. She was breathing way too fast. "Here?"

He shook his head. "My bed." His voice was so deep and rough it took a second for her to make sense of what he'd said.

"Lead on."

Instead of talking, he scooped her up and took the stairs two at a time.

He moved so rapidly, she lost the chance to study the baby pictures lining the stairwell or ask about the centerpiece, a framed little league shirt with carefully preserved dirt and grass stains. Were they his baby pictures? Had he played baseball? There was so much she didn't know about him. She didn't know how old he was or even his last name.

Another deep breath stalled her growing panic. There would be time to ask questions later. For now she knew he made her feel safe, and that was enough.

He wasn't even breathing hard as his powerful legs made short work of moving them up a flight. Werewolves were strong and fast even in human form, but she wasn't a lightweight. His feat was impressive and downright sexy.

For the first time in forever, she felt dainty and feminine and special. Not because she actually was any of those things, but because at this moment she was

all of that to Daniel. She could tell by the care he took holding her, by the heat in his gaze whenever his eyes met hers, and by the scent that surrounded her.

This was not how she'd imagined sex. There were no hearts, no flowers, and no candy.

She didn't miss a bit of it.

In Daniel's arms, none of those human rituals she'd longed for seemed important. She should have guessed werewolf sex would be raw and primal, an undeniable need that was all about the physical connection—the prelude to the mating dance. For a half a second, she wondered how real mating felt.

She snuggled into the crook between his neck and shoulder, savoring the intoxicating fragrance that emanated from his hard body. With each breath, her lingering doubts lessened and her arousal grew until all she wanted was more of that scent—more of him. She wanted to rub against him. She wanted to roll in that wonderful fragrance. She wanted it on every part of her—in her.

He swept her into the hanging loft, the master bedroom. If there'd been more time to think, she might have been nervous. Instead she inhaled another deep breath of Daniel's addictive scent and let go of the last of her reservations.

This was real. This was right. The heat between them burned clear to her bones. Her inner wolf whimpered eagerly, seconding her choice.

As he crossed to the enormous bed that seemed to fill the entire room, she stiffened. A storm of fear and desire swirled together and blew through her, leaving her mouth as dry as the desert in July. She chided herself because she should be past the old terror. They'd already had sex. Fear didn't make sense.

The inner bitch fell totally silent, almost as if she'd lost interest when Scarlet grew more comfortable with Daniel.

Instead of pouncing on her, he set her down carefully on the neatly made bed. She brushed the cozy flannel cover as she sank into the embrace of a down comforter. While she watched, Daniel kicked off his shoes and socks, shrugged off his shirt, and unfastened his belt.

Scarlet propped herself on her elbows, not wanting to miss a moment of the show.

He spoiled her plan by leaping over her and then lowering himself very slowly until their noses touched. Her eyes crossed as she tried to watch everything at once. Finally she gave up and lowered her lashes, concentrating on the feast for the rest of her senses.

She smiled at his seductive scent. Her ears hummed with the sound of his breath, the beat of his heart, and then the quiet rub of denim on denim as his jeans met hers. Her skin soaked in the heat radiating off all those rippling muscles she couldn't see.

Best of all, his lips pressed against hers.

Seeking more, she angled her head and softened her mouth. His tongue swept inside, and his intoxicating aroma bloomed into delicious flavors. Dark, sweet, hot, and wild, the taste of him whirled into her bloodstream, simmering into more excitement.

She'd worried the old fears would resurface and spoil this moment.

Now, as Daniel settled his weight on her, there was no room for panic. Something deep inside her fluttered, signaling urgent need. Erogenous zones she'd barely realized she had tingled to life. Desire surged and nibbled at her raw nerves until she was tight and edgy.

She swallowed the heady taste of Daniel's need. Sucking on his tongue, she craved more. Even the long, drugging kisses she adored weren't enough. Her hips instinctively arched.

Bucking against a pile of granite would have achieved the same result. She didn't move him an inch. His weight held her. She was totally under his command.

Even though she was surrounded by his hard body, the panic didn't surface. He was strong, dominant, and in control. All of this was true. She loved every bit of his high-handed bossiness. Quite possibly because he was also protective, tender, and caring.

Desire heated her blood. Safety allowed her to bask in the warmth of the flames. Courage was the key to great sex. She'd guessed it, but until Daniel, she'd never found enough nerve to conquer her Alpha phobia.

She edged away from that dangerous line of thought. It would be a huge mistake to read too much into their physical connection.

Stop thinking. Just enjoy the moment. Another deep breath filled her lungs with his wild, hot essence.

When she had first stood next to him, his size had been impressive. Now, horizontal and surrounded by his body, she shrank to tiny. Under his weight, her curves compressed and sank into the duvet covering his bed.

She burrowed her hand between them to explore his rigid abs and follow the happy trail of surprisingly silky hair to the waist of his jeans. The comforting press of hard male levered off her with a one-arm push-up. His free hand captured both of hers and moved them over her head as easily as if she were his personal toy.

"You gonna leave them there? Or do I have to get out the cuffs?"

She arched, reckless, daring him. "You wouldn't."

In a smooth move, he rolled off the bed. Still holding her wrists, he rummaged through a nightstand drawer and came up with pair of leather cuffs linked by a sturdy chain.

In seconds, her shirt and bra were stripped and tossed aside and her wrists had new leather bracelets fastened securely to the heavy oak headboard.

Daniel climbed back on the bed and straddled her hips, parking his butt on her thighs. "Comfy?" The big bad werewolf sheriff growled.

Comfy so wasn't the word she'd use to describe her condition. Excited, aroused, needy—any and all of those fit.

When she didn't answer fast enough, he caught her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "The proper answer in this situation is 'yes, Sir.'"

She parted her lips to reply without having decided what to say. But it didn't matter because she never got a chance to reply. He popped his thumb into her mouth, and she sucked him like hard candy. In truth, Daniel tasted way better than any lollipop.

He hissed, and the bulge behind his zipper jerked. "You're good at suckin'."

For some strange reason, this struck her as the best compliment she'd ever heard. She hummed around his thumb, thinking about all the other parts of him she'd like to taste.

This time with Daniel might be her only chance to experiment, and she'd already lost the use of her hands. She eyed his flat bronze nipples, almost lost in the shield of chest hair, wishing she could touch them. If the cuffs hadn't been such a big turn-on, she'd regret not saluting and barking *yes, Sir*.

She let her teeth scrape the fleshy pad of his thumb and then sucked it better.

This time he growled and removed his thumb. Leaning forward, he replaced it with his tongue. So much better. The man tasted even more delicious than he smelled. She swallowed happily, savoring the kiss she never wanted to end.

While enraptured, the rest of her clothes disappeared. He was so clever about undressing her that she might have missed it altogether except for the change in texture of the thigh parting hers. Hard muscle encased in soft denim nudged between her plump legs. She offered him no more resistance than meadow grass gave thundering paws.

Daniel pulled away, ending the kiss.

Before she protested, his talented mouth nibbled under her jaw and then down the sensitive side of her neck. What he was doing felt way too good for her to complain.

Rough hands molded her body with masterful strokes, skimming her arms, her sides, and then sliding very slowly from the base of her throat to the top of her mound.

“Nothing I like better than damp curls.” His fingers skimmed the springy triangle of hair cushioning her sex.

She sucked in a breath of anticipation, waiting for him to dip between the swollen folds. He chuckled and moved down her legs, kneading and stretching the tense muscles as he worked his way to her feet. Leisurely didn’t begin to describe his pace. The male moved like a tranquilized turtle.

When he reached her feet, he slowed down to massage, which felt amazingly good.

Just when she was starting to feel restless again, a wet mouth closed over her baby toe, jerking a startled moan of pleasure from her lips. “Please,” she begged, not sure exactly what it was she wanted most. Not that it would’ve mattered. In fact, her preferences didn’t seem to count at all.

He treated the other foot to the same slow, erotic torture, setting off jolts of throbbing desire to parts hither and yon. Apparently satisfied with the melted butter where her feet used to be and uninterested in relieving any of her other achy needs, he crawled back up her body until he came to her neck. He began at the base of her throat. This time he placed hot, openmouthed kisses along the same trail his hands had burned.

His slow progress stopped altogether between her breasts. Hot palms cupped the twin weights while he teased the painfully taut nipples with flicks of his thumbs. A wicked tongue traced circles from the top curve of her breast to the sensitized underside. As he repeated the spiral, he moved a fraction closer to the aching peak with each pass.

Meanwhile the lazy flicks of his thumb kept the other nipple tightly beaded as she slowly lost her mind.

Daniel figured he was going to have the worst case of blue balls in werewolf history, but he didn’t care. Now that he had his mate in his bed, he found he had a

whole lot of patience. He had more urgent needs than to bury himself balls-deep in her heat, though he was absolutely going to get there.

What he really needed to do was drive her to ecstasy and beyond.

He took a minute to admire her, stretched out and bound in his leather. She looked damn good. Her breasts stood high, plump, and proud, with tight little nipples he needed to sample for an hour or three.

He leaned over, captured one sassy tip, and sucked hard, swallowing the sweet taste of wild berries along with his own groans of hunger.

No male worth his fur would satisfy himself until his mate's desire was completely assured. He sniffed subtly, judging her readiness. Close. His lips quirked, and then he focused on driving her crazy with a hunger she couldn't deny.

He nibbled on one ripe berry peak, and Scarlet whimpered. "Feels good?"

Her answer was to arch nearer.

He pulled away from her engorged nipples. Both were wet and a much darker pink than when he'd started. Pushing her was dangerous for both of them, but it was necessary for the healing process. The trick was knowing how far and how hard to push.

He crammed the disaster planning to the back of his thoughts where it belonged and feasted on Scarlet's sweetness. "Did you forget what to say to your master?"

Pretty brown eyes glinted with temper. "I guess so."

That did it. He left the bed, gathered another set of cuffs, calmly captured one ankle, secured it to the footboard, and repeated the procedure with the other delectable leg. He crouched to fully appreciate the results. Her beautiful pussy glistened, rosy and swollen for him. His raw growl of pure possession shook the air.

Red kept darting killer looks at him and baring her teeth—a female's challenge. He inhaled deeply but detected no tang of real fear.

"You're wet for me. Do you need another lesson in what that means?"

“No, Sir.”

“Good.”

He ran a rough palm from hip to ankle, soothing her nervously quivering legs. As he stroked her, he kept his expression blank. Already excited and nervous, the last thing she needed from him was sympathy. What she needed was to trust him absolutely. Then, Goddess willing, he'd guide her to open the link to her wolf and keep it open—the first crucial step to stabilizing her connection.

The catch was if he failed, she would destabilize. And that scared the hell out of him. But a scared guide was worse than no guide at all. He'd helped hundreds of wolves heal damaged links. He reached deep inside, drawing strength from his wolf. For Scarlet's sake, he conquered the soul-eating terror.

“Tell you what, Red. I'm going to give you a special safe word. You say it and the cuffs are history. Understand?”

That snapped her eyes to his. “What's my word?”

He ignored the rule infraction. “Heavy metal.”

“What kind of safe word is heavy metal?”

“One that's not likely to come up in conversation.” He didn't wait for more arguments. “Remember, if you use it, then we're done for tonight.”

“I'm—”

He cut her off before she got into more trouble. “Your answer is either, ‘yes, Sir’ if you understand your safe word and how to use it, or ‘no, Sir’ if you don't understand. Now, what do you want to say to me?”

The silence hurt his keen ears.

Finally she said, “Yes, Sir.”

He bit back a grin at his brave little female. And if he had anything to say about it, she was absolutely his, even if she didn't seem to know it. Yet.

With his mating bond activated, fighting that pull was no more effective than deciding to ignore gravity. He was all in when it came to Red. The only thing that

could make that kind of total commitment tolerable was if she were bound to him as completely.

Mission hopeless summed up the situation. Pack princess and lone wolf sheriff—not in this lifetime. He had to try to heal her connection, no matter what it cost him. His best shot was sex.

He sensed her growing panic. Wearing the cuffs pushed her—triggering her old fears—but that’s exactly what he needed to do right now. Treating her like glass sure as hell wasn’t the answer.

After a few minutes, when his slow strokes weren’t enough to banish her growing panic and stubbornness kept her from using her safe word, he said, “You’re not ready for the ankle cuffs.”

He calmly removed the ankle restraints that had triggered her panic. Then he reached for her right wrist cuff.

“Wait a minute—”

He held the wrist he’d just freed. “You do not have permission to speak.”

“But—”

He shook his head, keeping his expression stern. “Do you remember your safe word?”

Scarlet nodded.

“Did you want to use it?”

“No, but—”

He scowled at her. “No what?”

“No, Sir,” she said, adding a stubborn, “But I—”

Daniel unfastened the other cuff as he cut her off again. “Silence. You’ve already earned five swats. Do you want to try for more?”

He watched her eyes widened. His nose told him the reaction was more surprise than actual fear.

“No, Sir.”

He held her wrist for a moment more, rubbing small circles on the scars before he hauled her over his lap. "The restraints were for your benefit. They made it easier for you to hold still. You've lost that privilege."

"Yes, Sir."

He brought his open hand down on her pale, plump, perfect ass, caressing the smooth flesh rather than delivering the swat he'd promised.

She squirmed under his palm, and he placed the first swat in the center of her right butt cheek. "One." Shifting his aim, he delivered the second spank parallel to the first but on her left cheek. "Two." He paused to consider where to place the third. "Three." He slapped the lower right cheek just above her thigh.

Scarlet gave a muffled squeal.

He ignored it. "Four," he said evenly while he dealt a matching spank to the other side.

Her tender skin bloomed with rosy handprints overlapping the pale globes. "Very pretty," he growled. Stopping to smooth the hot flesh and knead the right cheek earned him a feminine moan that made his erection swell impossibly harder.

"Five." The final slap fell on the center of her ass, overlapping the earlier hand marks. His palm skimmed the hot cheeks, dipping between her legs to rim the slippery mouth of her cunt. The sweet scent of her need pulled his finger inside. The wet velvet flesh clasped him, squeezing the invader with surprising strength.

Blindly he used his thumb to find her clit, and he added a second finger, stretching her. He pumped and rubbed, careful to avoid direct contact with her swollen bud as he continued to tease the engorged ridges of her G-spot.

Her whole body bucked, tensed, and bucked again with a howl of surprised ecstasy. Her silken clasp fluttered around his fingers, bathing him with fresh, hot cream. He kept petting her gently, drawing out the pleasure until she was limp across his lap.

After a final caress of her tender cheeks, he helped her up, tucking her against his chest and holding her. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks, and he wiped them away with his thumbs, crooning nonsense.

Gradually she snuggled closer, easing in his arms. Even more gradually, he began to caress her all over again, using slow, sure strokes down her arms and back.

“Better?” he asked, stopping to toy with and tweak the plump breast overflowing his palm.

“Yes, Sir.” Her voice held a hint of surprise.

She’d answered honestly. He kept his urge to grin in check, moving to the other breast to tease the second rosy nipple straining for his attention. He rolled and tugged on the swollen tip until she wriggled in his lap and moaned again. “Problem?”

“No, Sir.” She sighed.

“Spread your legs.”

There was a second of hesitation, and then the moment of sweet submission when she eased her thighs apart. He didn’t wait for her to have second thoughts, covering her moist slit with one hand while he continued to tease her tightened nipples with the other. “You’re even wetter now, Red.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Honesty and obedience deserve reward,” he whispered, nuzzling her neck and inhaling the wild musk of her excitement. Carefully he parted her swollen folds, tracing the sensitized entrance to her pussy while circling the hot little button poking out of its hood at the top of her sex with his thumb.

Her hips jerked against his hand.

He pinned her using his weight. “No moving, and no coming without permission.”

“No, Sir?”

“No,” he said firmly. “Do you need the restraints to help you obey?”

A long minute ticked by as she chewed on her lower lip and considered his offer.

Finally she said, “Yes, Sir.”

Smart and submissive and his.

Chapter Eight

Scarlet stretched out on the big bed, feeling deliciously wanton under Daniel's rough hands as he positioned her carefully, the wrist cuff to her right side first. Then he tugged her left arm into position, pausing to rub the faded scars. "Want to tell me about these?"

"Permission to speak, Sir?"

"You're always allowed to answer when I ask you a direct question."

"Yes, Sir," she began cautiously. "The scars happened when I was fourteen. I was held by a pack of rogues." Old guilt, shame, and the vague almost memory that she must not have fought hard enough—certain she'd failed a critical test of honor by surviving—shrank her voice. "I don't remember anything that happened during the captivity. When the Treeland pack rescued me, they found my mother dead and my left forepaw mangled."

Daniel continued to rub the old wounds and then pressed a kiss to her wrist before fastening the cuff. "There's not much that would scar a werewolf. A silver knife could do that kind of damage, except the marks are too irregular. It looks like you tried to chew off your paw to escape."

"Maybe," she agreed without enthusiasm.

He stretched out next to her. Framing her face with his hand, he turned her head gently until they were nose to nose. "Don't worry about it. We'll get there. Your wolf still communicates with you, so the link isn't shattered. Together we can fix this."

"But that's what worries me. She's gone silent."

"When did this happen?"

“She’s only stirred once after you shifted to human.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded. “Totally. She was so close at the farmhouse with your wolf. She wanted...”

“What? What did she want?”

“Your wolf.”

Daniel levered off the bed.

His leaving made Scarlet want to curl into a ball and hide at the implied rejection. The wrist restraints stopped her. She’d known this would happen. It hurt more than she would have believed. Ironically the pain brought home how much she loved him. She drew her legs up, protecting her belly, and squeezed her eyes shut, fighting the tears.

Instantly Daniel came back. “Talk to me, Red. What’s wrong?”

She blinked hard to clear the welling tears and managed to choke out, “The connection will never heal unless you trust me enough to take a risk.”

“Okay,” he said cautiously, rubbing comforting circles on her neck and shoulders. “Fill me in on what kind of risk you have in mind.”

“Let your wolf out, but please take off the cuffs first.”

Leaning away, he crossed his arms, rippling distracting muscles. “No way. No how. Not happening.”

Typical Alpha response—so reasonable, so easygoing. She tried again, keeping her voice low, her posture submissive. “You have to trust me.”

“It’s not you I don’t trust, Red. Werewolf mating is rough—too rough for humans. I won’t risk your pretty hide like that.”

“A scratch isn’t going to kill me. Dormant or not, I am still a werewolf, Daniel.”

“Work with me, Red. Try it my way. If you haven’t shifted by tomorrow, we’ll take another look at our options.”

She loved the way he said *we* and *our*, and she softened too easily. Trying once again, she said, “All right; if I haven’t shifted by tomorrow morning, then we try with your wolf.”

“We’ll talk.” Daniel nibbled the tender skin on the inside of her knee. “Now listen, if I let you try the ankle cuffs again, you have to promise to use your safe word if they’re too much.”

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered the lie, determined to push past her old terrors just in case they were what blocked her inner bitch.

Apparently he didn’t sense her lie, or else he ignored it, because he gently helped stretch her right leg and adjusted the padded leather band snugly. Then repeated the same process with her left ankle.

By the time he’d finished with the restraints, she was restless and eager for his touch.

Goddess help her, a couple of orgasms—granted they’d been spectacular, rock-her-world-off-its-axis orgasms—and Scarlet had turned into a sex addict and an optimist.

He settled himself on his haunches between her legs with a hand on each of her knees. “Now where was I?”

Fortunately he didn’t seem to expect an answer as he kissed and nipped his way up her inner thigh. His scent grew stronger. The heady fragrance acted on her like an aphrodisiac. For all she knew, it was one. Whatever it was, it drove her wild. Combined with his wicked tongue, she forgot about everything except the need pulsing in her sex.

“Please, Sir—” she begged for mercy.

Daniel cocked one dark eyebrow in her direction.

She pressed her lips shut, squirming under his hard gaze. Naked and spread-eagle on his bed, there was no way to disguise her excitement. Her nipples beaded painfully. As hard as his cock, was the way he’d put it. Maybe he hurt too.

Selfishly she hoped so. She didn't want to be alone in this desperate, achy need.

Little pants escaped as she remembered how his words sounded and how his hands felt and yearned for him to touch her again.

When he'd threatened to spank her, she'd never been so angry and had definitely never been so turned on. She should have known Daniel didn't threaten.

Her butt still burned from the punishment. The tender flesh was a constant reminder of his dominance, his strength, and his comfort. The snuggling that had followed the spanking had revealed unsuspected tenderness.

Just the memory made her sex flood with fresh cream, the scent of her need blending with his intoxicating aroma—leather, woods, and wildness.

She studied him carefully for some sign he wanted her with the same urgency and sighed. Forlorn, she concluded the going-wild-for-him feeling wasn't reciprocated. As pathetic as this made her one-way crush, it didn't lessen her desire.

The male remained in perfect control. Perversely his indifference made him all the more desirable. Another lusty sigh escaped her lips.

"Do I have to gag you?" he asked sternly.

For a second, ancient memories of a filthy cloth stuffed in her mouth flashed. "No, Sir."

"Good, I have other uses for that pretty mouth."

She remembered his rules in time to keep from asking what he had in mind, but her eyes widened, scanning his face for answers.

A rumbling chuckle sent fresh shivers of desire rippling through her.

He stroked her legs. "In a hurry, Red?" The deep growl of his voice wound her tighter yet.

"Yes, Sir." She bit her lip to keep from blurting questions—questions that would earn her new, unbearably erotic punishments. Waiting for him to allow her relief was hard enough to endure without his adding more erotic torture.

He caressed her hip, making tiny little circles on the sensitive skin. Her nerves jangled and her sex tingled, and it was hard to tell which was which and what exactly excited her so much. His domination thrilled her. Did this make her submissive? An Omega shouldn't be cowed. Perhaps, in this one area...

Though a little equality of need would definitely make her feel better.

She wasn't an idiot. The impressive bulge behind his fly meant he was hard. He must want release too, but he didn't seem to be in any hurry. Though the fiery glints in his gaze made her think he might not be quite as relaxed as he seemed.

Unfortunately Daniel plainly felt no urgency, and she had no idea how she could make him move faster.

Grateful—and frankly amazed—that he'd allowed her the relief of one climax, a part of her wanted to challenge him, to make him lose control.

He leaned in closer, tilted her head, and aligned their mouths. All thoughts flew out of her head as he nibbled her lips and laid siege to her senses.

Every breath filled her lungs with the heady scent that was his alone. Each swallow drugged her with the dangerous flavor of Alpha male power. Even her sense of touch went into overload when he lowered his weight, closing the gap inch by inch until there was no space between her softness and his hardness.

Moving at a leisurely pace, he nibbled his way south, his tantalizing kisses trailing fresh paths of fire on skin that already burned for his touch.

Heat radiated from all those hard muscles and iron control. Her own skin was so hot she was surprised it didn't blister. Like all werewolves, her core temperature ran much hotter than a human's. Around a hundred and three in her case, but normal was nothing like her current fever. Strangely she felt well, better than well actually. Maybe the increased body heat was part of the experience.

Daniel's temperature ran much hotter than hers. His searing lips latched on to one pebbled nipple, and she arched in helpless reaction to the pull of his much too talented mouth.

Time stopped as he tortured her with sheer erotic bliss, sucking first one breast and then the other. His clever fingers found the achy, wet peak his mouth had abandoned and pinched it tenderly, rolling and tugging the sensitized nub. With each caress, flashes of lightning streaked to her sex until her pussy fluttered and gushed eagerly.

His cock branded her thigh, the heavy shaft impossibly long, thick, and hard, and still he made no move to mount her or even remove his jeans.

She would've loved to rub his brush cut, dig into his shoulders, and scratch his back. Her bound hands itched to touch him. Cuffed and spread like a sacrifice, she could only accept the painfully seductive caresses he lavished on her weak flesh.

Arousal, hers and his, perfumed the air. Every breath added to her fevered tension until she started to worry about unapproved climaxes happening from sheer sensory overload. Would he punish her for that? More frightening was the part of her hoping he would.

At last he lifted his head from her breasts, and she braced for the total invasion she knew was next. But all he did was continue the path of openmouthed kisses down her stomach. This time, he didn't stop to explore her belly button or trace the faint ridge of her hip bone. He headed straight for her sex and burrowed in with his nose. Something raspy slicked across her dangerously excited folds.

He was licking her there.

More than licking, he kissed, sucked, and dear Goddess, nibbled. Her back bowed in mindless bliss at another rasp of his tongue across her sensitized tissues. Then his long tongue invaded her empty core, winding her sex into an aching knot of need. Gnawing hunger for more spread through every nerve, pulling them taut until she was ready to shatter.

Her limbs trembled from muscles held rigid for too long, the edges of her vision faded, and her sex pulsed with desperate erotic need.

The fiend slowed his tongue assault and then stopped.

She bit her lip to keep from screaming.

His head lifted from her channel. "I'll tell you when to come."

She found enough energy to open her eyes and glare at him.

Instantly he challenged her. "Who's in charge in this bed, female?"

It killed her to admit it even to herself, but when he went all growly and masterful, she melted. And she couldn't hide it. He could smell her arousal. Could see it—if he cared to look. This too excited her.

To think she'd believed her nursing training had given her a good understanding of the human reproductive systems and their biologic responses. Daniel had taught her more about sex in a few hours than all her college classes put together. She'd been an ignorant idiot. And now she was in way over her head.

If she argued, begged, or said anything at all, then he'd slow down even more or worse, stay stopped.

Wonderful. Her butt still burned from the spanking. She was bound hand and foot and at the total mercy of an Alpha male bent on driving her crazy. And now every fiber of her being ached for the release of another world-rocking orgasm.

Yet she didn't want him to stop. All she really wanted was more of his erotic torture. He wasn't truly cruel. Sooner or later, he would push her past her limits into rapture.

She wondered about her willingness to trust him so completely, so quickly. Though aside from driving her wild with desire, he'd done nothing to ruffle her fur.

Her inner bitch wagged her tail, panting, and lolling her tongue in a feral grin of delighted agreement. Startled but thrilled with the female's presence, Scarlet went with her wolf instincts.

When he spread her feminine lips, exposing her secrets, she swallowed her whimper of impatience and ignored the heat racing up her neck. Naturally the diabolical Alpha male noticed.

"Embarrassed?" He growled.

Remembering he could smell most lies, she licked lips suddenly hot and dry. “Yes, Sir.”

“You’re beautiful here.” A rough finger traced through the valleys and ruffles of her sex. “Beautiful everywhere.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, not believing a word of it. Remembering too late that he’d smell the lie, she held still, shamelessly eager while she waited for consequences.

Daniel just chuckled. “Want a mirror?”

She shook her head.

“Someday I’ll arrange a mirror so you can see for yourself.”

No need to rush on her account, she thought dryly. Inspecting her intimate parts under Daniel’s supervision just might be more fun than she could handle.

His fingers petted her sensitized folds with tender but sure strokes, rimming the opening to her sheath, spreading her juices over her clit and back. The touches were too light to push her over the edge into the release she craved, but too firm to let her arousal wane.

For an endless time, he held her there on the brink of fulfillment until her legs and arms quivered and she squirmed again beneath his relentless caresses.

At last two rough fingers pushed into her core and his mouth covered her clit, sucking hard on the throbbing bundle of nerves.

He paused and looked up, meeting her lust-glazed eyes. “I want you to come for me.”

Permission was all she needed. Her body bucked against his face; a long moan that might have been “Sir” escaped from her throat.

Everything except for the brilliant ecstasy of sheer, sensual satisfaction ceased. Her world exploded, then re-formed under new Daniel-given rules.

When she came back to reality, everything was different. Her sore butt was propped on pillows, a wonderful, warm weight had settled between her legs.

Something hard and hot was stretching her core just short of real pain. The pressure intensified as strong hips flexed and pushed, plunging his cock deeper.

Slowly a hard, hair-dusted chest lowered and touched her swollen nipples.

Damn it, she'd missed the exquisite pleasure-pain moment of his penetration. Her disappointment vanished as his hips angled and then stopped with his pubic bone wedged hard against her sex. His shaft, fully seated, stretched her to capacity and beyond.

Daniel was buried so deep inside her that he nudged her heart.

"Don't move," he warned. "I'm on a hair trigger here, Red." A raspy chuckle escaped. "You're so damn hot and tight and perfect. If you move, I'm going to lose it in seconds. Maybe less. I want to make this good for you."

Her heart swelled with each word he said until it lodged in her throat. She wanted to reassure him, to tell him that he'd already given her pleasure beyond her dreams.

Even if she'd been capable of speech, her vocabulary was sadly restricted. Sexy as dominance was, sometimes his rules really sucked.

"Yes, Sir," she finally managed to murmur unhappily.

"Ah damn, Red. I've got to stroke. I'll make it up to you, promise."

His words reverberated right to her sex. A gush a fresh desire flooded her overfilled channel, easing around his shaft, and then when he plunged back in, her sheath tightened.

Another long, slow, sure stroke and he was seated hard against her pleasure button—as far as he could go.

He groaned, and her internal muscles rippled. His hips circled, rubbing against her swollen clit. Another climax built, rolling through her with the inevitability of destiny.

Her elongated pussy fluttered, eagerly massaging his massive erection from root to crown, pulsing faster and faster, pushing them both over the brink into an endless bliss of blind, hot rapture.

Moments later, when reality finally crept back in, she had the same old human senses. Her inner bitch huffed agreement with Scarlet's disappointment. One thing had changed. She'd admitted, at least to herself, that she'd fallen in love with Daniel.

This was not wise. In fact, since there was no sign he felt the same way, the only word that fit the situation was *disaster*.

Briefly she considered his talk of bonding when she'd asked about the change in his scent. But he'd dropped the subject quickly enough when she'd called him on it.

At least she hadn't blurted out a declaration of unrequited love during a moment of passion. The thin comfort of pride was better than nothing.

Chapter Nine

The following night, the full moon's light softened the forest's dark shadows, lending Daniel extra power while he waited for his heart rate to slow. His lungs were working overtime too, struggling to keep up with the demands of the mating bond.

He didn't give a shit. His cock was hard, and his balls were pumping Red's pussy full of his cum. Nothing else mattered.

Nothing except for her health and comfort.

Suddenly anxious about her well-being, his pleasure ceased. Bonding snapped him to heel like a stray pup instead of a horny old wolf. He levered most of his weight off her. "Are you okay? Are you hungry? Thirsty? You want me to loosen the restraints?"

She smiled at him, and his heart turned to mush. It was already painfully clear that bonded male equaled total wuss, and he didn't care; he just stared at her like the sap he was.

"Yes, Sir. No, Sir. Yes, Sir—"

He cut her off. "Forget about the sir business—that's just for sex."

For a second, he would have sworn he'd caught a flash of pain in her pretty eyes. Then they crinkled at the edges as her smile grew. He forgot about the shards of hurt.

A new scent, the fresh air of moonlight, the cool water of trust, and the pure magic of pheromones blended with Scarlet's sweet wild berry fragrance, filling his nose. Goddess, she was beautiful.

“In that case, please take off the cuffs, and yes, I’d love a glass of water.”

“You need to eat something.”

She rolled her eyes. “Trust me. I could miss several meals without a problem.”

“I like you the way you are.” No, forget that. *Like* was way too mild. He corrected himself. “I love the way you look, especially here.” He palmed the curve of her little belly and inhaled the addictive new fragrance she wore—his.

“That would make you a minority of one.”

“Ah, Red, you’re wrong about that.” He scowled at her. “I’m going to feed you.”

“I’m not hungry, really.” Her stomach rumbled.

“Did you forget I can smell a lie?” He chuckled, reaching for the leg cuff. “Off with these first.” He carefully examined each delicate ankle as he removed the restraints. Not a single bruise, not even a red mark. He kissed each foot because he could and because she tasted so damn sweet.

“Uh, the wrist cuffs?” Red drew her knees together, spoiling his view.

He undid the right cuff and pressed a kiss to her wrist. “Do me a favor?”

“Yes?”

“Wear the one cuff for a little while longer?”

Her lips curved into her special slow smile that was just for him. “Since you asked so nicely, all right.”

That smile lit up his whole territory. Yeah, this bonded male stuff turned him into a complete sap. And even that thought wasn’t enough to wipe the grin off his mug.

He padded downstairs and scowled at the tall drinking glass he’d pulled out for inspection. He needed to be sure it was clean enough for Red. It passed. So he filled it with bottled water and topped it off with a couple of ice cubes. After a few seconds thought, he filled a whole pitcher with mostly ice and took both upstairs.

Once her ice water had been delivered, he padded downstairs and drank from the kitchen faucet. Then he opened the fridge, emptying most of the edibles onto the

counter. He eyed the roast beef, havarti, lettuce, rye, mayo, and mustard and wished he had a better selection. She deserved the very best of everything he could provide.

He took his time carving the meat, scarfing down the first couple of substandard pieces, slicing the rarer, leaner center before he assembled a platter of sandwiches. Grabbing a couple of napkins, he moved on, snagging a bag of chips to round out the meal.

Not exactly a gourmet's repast. He'd have to start stocking fruit, vegetables, fresh dairy—real food. He needed to take excellent care of her.

What the hell was going on with him? Did he really think she was going to fall for him? Ah shit, he was in a world of trouble. He'd forgotten Red was Charlie's granddaughter, a pack princess and he was the lone wolf sheriff of tiny Cedar Grove—a whole lot of nothing special.

Maybe there was a chance for him. He felt guilty for even thinking it, but she hadn't been claimed, and he figured her damaged wolf link was the reason. Ignorant, shortsighted bunch of pencil-dick pack hounds. He should kiss their worthless hides. It was only their stupid dog-pack prejudices that gave him any chance with Red.

If—and it was a gigantic if—she bonded with him before her link healed, then he had a shot. A long shot, but it was enough to make him whistle as he hauled the food up to his female.

She was sitting up and sipping her ice water when he finally showed with the pile of sandwiches. A single padded cuff decorated her left wrist. He couldn't help noticing how good she looked in his leather. His mind leaped ahead, picturing her wearing his collar. His cock rose to salute that idea.

She licked her lips, staring straight at his package. "Yum."

Her comment raised his pole another notch. He handed her a napkin and grinned when she smoothed it over her naked lap. Then he inspected the sandwiches, found the best of the lot, and offered it to her.

“Thank you.” She sat it on her napkin.

“Eat.”

“I’m waiting for you.”

“I eat when you are and not before.” He settled on the foot of the bed, where he could watch her.

Only after she’d swallowed a bite did he take a hunk out of the nearest sandwich. He chewed while he opened the bag of chips and looked for a single chip that was anywhere near perfect enough for her.

“This is delicious.” She took another dainty bite.

He gave up on the chips and set them aside. Finishing off his sandwich in a couple of bites, he reached for another and checked to see how she was doing. “Keep eating.”

She shot him an annoyed look, but there was no smoky anger.

“Sorry; I’m being a bully, huh?”

“A little pushy.” Softening her tone, she added, “But you mean well.”

“Yeah, thanks.” This was all so much easier with restraints. He wanted her, needed her, and not just for the phenomenal sex. Though he’d never come so hard or so long in his life. He’d pumped into her for ten minutes or more, and he was ready to go again.

Just the thought of claiming her was enough to make him throb with arousal. Rich bonding scent rolled off his skin, flowed under his tongue, and beaded on his cockhead. His bonding fragrance already marked every inch of his mate. An olfactory brand that warned other males she was taken and that he’d kill anyone who tried to touch her.

Before he did anything else, he owed her some hard truths. He wasn’t exactly pack-sanctioned mating material, and that’s what she deserved. More important, she needed to understand the inherent risks of trying to mend her damaged

connection. He had to level with her. He edged closer. "I need to tell you why I quit serving as wolf guide for the packs."

She wiped her mouth and fingers, smoothed the napkin back in place like she was seated at some fancy restaurant, and calmly waited for him to begin.

"My last assignment for the packs was to track a suspected rogue."

"Was that usual, you tracking an unstable wolf?"

"Fairly typical. About half the time, an Alpha called me in before the wolf deteriorated. The rest of the time, I tracked them."

"Are rogues really like rabid dogs?"

"Not always, but they can be. If the link between the wolf and the human can't be fixed, then they are a danger to themselves and to the packs. They have to be terminated."

She reached over and covered his knee with one soft hand. "That's an awful burden for anyone to carry. You must have suffered greatly."

"Yeah, well, it gets worse. The last rogue I tracked was young. I thought he could be saved if only I could get close enough to help. I passed up chances to take him out. He slaughtered a whole human family."

"Oh, Daniel." Her voice trembled with sorrow, for him.

He should have been crawling on his belly, but he sat right where he was. "It was my fault. Those people died for my mistake—my arrogance."

"How was it your fault?" She frowned at him, and even that looked good on her.

"I didn't kill the rogue the first chance I got."

She pulled back, and somehow she seemed to look down on him. An impossible feat for such a shorty. "Oh, I didn't realize you communicated directly with the Goddess."

He aimed his scowl over her shoulder. When he finally spoke, his voice grated over a knot of suppressed rage and regret. "It was my call to make, and I made the wrong one."

"Had you ever been able to help such a rogue?"

"Sure, that was my job."

"How many of the rogues you tracked killed innocents while you were following them?"

"He was the first."

"So you didn't just arrogantly decide to put that family in harm's way. You made an informed decision to give an unstable male a chance."

"That's not the point." He was the Alpha guide. He should have sensed how far gone the male was. He should have saved him.

She set aside her half-eaten sandwich and her napkin and then cupped his jaw with her soft hand. "That is my point. You were doing a hard job, you did your best, but people still got hurt. You have to forgive yourself. Not even a whisperer can always win."

"It was my job to protect the innocent. I failed. I didn't save them, and I didn't die."

"Thank the Goddess."

When he met her eyes, there was no revulsion, just a whole lot of love shining at him.

Losing Red was going to rip his heart to shreds, but he couldn't let it go, couldn't let her make a mistake about him. He had enough honor left to make her understand there was a reason he was a lone wolf. A whole family of innocents had lost their lives on his watch. He didn't deserve her love.

"It was my job—" he started to explain again.

Red's small hands held him captive while she interrupted. "And you survived."

He was so stunned by the pure love in her expression, he shut up. It would have been damn hard to push words past the sappy lump in his throat anyway. He turned away from her eyes, not worthy to look at her, but he didn't break her hold.

Leaning forward until her nose bumped his, she refused to give up on him. "Listen to me carefully. You can hang on to all that guilt if helps you. It doesn't change my opinion. Bad things happen to good people, and there's nothing you can do to change this sad reality. I know you, Daniel. I know you are a male of honor, and nothing you said changed my mind." She gave his ears a little tug. "Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, but—"

"There are no buts. I want you to repeat after me: Scarlet believes I am a male of honor more than worth my fur."

"Scarlet believes I am a male of honor more than worth my fur." He croaked the words around the lump in his throat, knowing he didn't deserve her.

"If you want to beat yourself up some more, go ahead. But I'm not going to help you play that game."

Overwhelmed by emotion, he covered her mouth with his, showing her in the only way open to him how much her faith in him meant.

After only a few seconds, she pushed against his chest. "Is this the reason you won't join the Treeland pack?"

He wasn't shocked she'd made the connection. Smart female, his Red. "Partly. On the trip home, I had plenty of time to think. My ex and my son are part of Hunter's pack, so it made sense for me to join. But when I stepped off the plane, the first thing out Dana's mouth was 'I want a divorce.'"

"Great timing," Red muttered darkly.

A surprised laugh barked out of his throat. "Dana's specialty, trust me. I took it as a sign pack life wasn't right for me. Besides, sooner or later wolfie boy would challenge Hunter, and I kind of like the old dog."

“Hunter’s old?”

“Almost as old as me.”

“And just how old is that?”

“Too old for a sweet thing like you.” He kissed her nose, then gathered their dinner things. “Is there else anything you want?”

“Just you.”

His heart swelled even more at the surety in her voice. He leaned in again and rubbed noses. “You’ve got me. Give me two seconds and I’ll prove it.”

A shit-eating grin stretched his mug as he loped down the stairs. Maybe there was something to what Red said about blaming himself for things beyond his control. His mood was a whole lot lighter than it’d been in years.

In the kitchen, he dumped the chips, loaded the dishwasher, and wiped the counter. The grin stayed put. With Red around, sappy grins were going to be a fact of life.

As he bolted up the stairs, a new feminine aroma, rich with pheromones and ten times stronger than the musk of Scarlet’s arousal, teased his snout.

Wolfie boy was way ahead of him, circling and clawing to get at Scarlet, while Daniel stood and gaped, generally acting like a moonstruck pup as he stared at the woman writhing restlessly on his bed.

Scarlet’s muffled cry of pain arrowed straight through his chest. With one arm still cuffed to the headboard, her back arched off the mattress and a fine sheen of perspiration covered her flawless skin. The temperature in the whole loft neared the point of spontaneous combustion.

Instantly his shaft thrummed to full, aching hardness. His hold on the thin layer of humanity separating him from the lethal beast inside stretched to frayed strands.

He gripped the door frame to keep from jumping on her. The solid oak splintered under his fingers, reduced to sawdust.

The scent of her need thickened the air. An addictive fragrance that coated his sinuses, filled his lungs, and heated his blood. The sac between his legs grew heavy with seed, an exciting torture of pulsing erotic hunger.

Scarlet was in heat.

The full moon pulled a silent howl from Scarlet as her inner bitch paced, snarled, and snapped at nothing.

A low growl of desperate need left her throat and rippled through air already thick with the fragrance of her aching desire and Daniel's special scent. Her skin burned, and her sex sizzled and spasmed. She arched her spine, curled and uncurled her legs. Nothing eased the spasms gripping her core.

Daniel stood in the doorway. A faint trace of newly cut wood made her narrow her eyes to focus on his big hands. Sections of the heavy door frame crumbled in his grip. Her hopes sank, and the inner bitch snarled.

The ruined woodwork made his feelings pretty darn clear. Sex games were fine, but obviously he didn't want to be the one to relieve this awful burning need that had to be her first heat. So much for all his bonding talk; whatever he felt for her wasn't enough for him to risk his humanity to help her.

Guilt squeezed her heart at her own unfairness. How could she ask that of him? How could she judge him? Daniel had been through so much from helping broken wolves. Coming to Cedar Grove had been a mistake. She'd pushed him and prodded him shamelessly.

Asking him to help her now was cruel and just plain wrong. No matter what was at stake, she would not ask him for more than he was willing to give.

She covered her sex with her free hand and licked her parched lips. "I'll be fine." Rolling to her side, she pulled her knees in tight to cover her vulnerable slit. Her fingers fumbled with the fastening of the last cuff binding her to Daniel's bed.

Another spasm of bone-wrenching desire bowed her back. When it passed, she drew in a deep breath and let it out slow in an effort to gain control of her voice. "Please go. I need to dress, and your presence just makes everything worse. I'll be down in a minute."

The words tumbled out in a breathless pant as another, stronger cramp seized and twisted her body with vicious power. She squeezed her eyes shut and clamped her jaw.

Daniel wrapped himself around her tortured body as the need ripped through her like thousands of needle-sharp teeth.

He gently turned her so her face was sheltered in the crook between his thick neck and his wide shoulder. "Shhh, I've got you. Try to relax. Go ahead and bite me. It'll help."

"I'll be better in a little while. You don't have to stay. I know you don't want to." The words came out in spurts, distorted by her locked molars.

"Ah, Red, you're killing me. I want you more than I want fresh meat. I want you more than I want to howl at the moon. I want you more than my life."

"Then why aren't you in me?" She whimpered as the next spasm clenched her core with searing agony.

He growled softly. "Wolfie boy wants you too, and I'm flat out terrified of what he'll do to you if he gets loose."

Death sounded better to her with each punishing spasm. Daniel's closeness intensified the pain, and yet she needed him much closer. The only relief for the searing heat was a male's seed bathing her melting core.

She would've begged, in spite of her noble intentions, but a contraction bowed her back and shorted out both thought and speech. When the spasm abated for a moment, her muscles still trembled from the unrelieved tension. She had no words. Uncurling, she parted her legs in a mute plea.

Daniel covered her body with his and plunged into her slick core with brutal force. His possession stretched her to the point of pain, and she welcomed the rough easing of the awful emptiness.

She wrapped her legs around him, gripped him tightly, and drummed her heels on his ass. Demanding what she needed—the hot spurts of his seed.

A wild yearning possessed her. She had what she needed from him. And yet she wanted more—the mating bond, his love, everything he was and everything they could be together. Even locked together wasn't close enough.

The first thick spurts of his semen washed the tip of her womb, driving her into a free fall of ecstasy. Endless moments of bliss erased the horrible cramps while she and her inner bitch drifted in blissful submission to her mate.

But too soon the spine-bowing grip of need returned. She clamped her teeth to hold back the cry of pain. Daniel responded, his shaft hardening to readiness inside her.

He withdrew, and the cramps snapped her into a ball of misery. Gently he positioned her on her knees. Her inner wolf hummed with approval, lending Scarlet strength and arching her butt.

Behind her, Daniel sniffed and growled. "Oh yeah. I've got what you need."

Big hands grasped her hips, and he sheathed his full length in a single, mighty thrust. She braced against the headboard to keep her head from being pounded against the hard oak, but his fierce possession was exactly what she needed.

Bucking under him like the wild bitch she was, she snapped and snarled, demanding more. He didn't back down an inch, smashing into her, mastering her, dominating her with a force that melted her heart and her core.

Hot honey ran from her channel in a river of desire, slicking his possession. The intoxicating scent of him surrounded her, soothing her edgy hunger and promising the satisfaction she craved.

When he leaned over her, her wolf leant her strength to support his weight as his hips ground against her and his teeth nipped her shoulder blade. The blessed relief of his sperm bathed her sex with hot mercy. An orgasm seized her without warning, plunging her into rapture like a shooting star across the night sky.

Again, before she'd recovered from the last climax, an Alpha's growl of possession rumbled from behind her as he gripped her hips and pounded into her hungry sex with long, masterful strokes.

She whimpered and shuddered in surrender, begging for release from the pain, begging for the healing rush of his thick, hot cum.

Again her body responded, gushing fresh cream around his shaft, easing and tightening in a desperate cycle. Her hips ground against his hardness while her feminine sheath milked the cock filling her so completely.

At last his scalding seed gushed against the mouth of her womb, granting her sweet relief and melting her very bones as he pushed her over the edge into ecstasy.

He levered off her and gently pulled her so she was sitting supported by his broad chest. Wordlessly he poured fresh ice water, offered her a drink, and kept her from draining the glass. "Easy, Red. Not too fast."

The small period of respite let her draw a cool breath and steal a salty lap from the heavy pad of Daniel's pec before the wild need hit again, bending her in half.

Immediately he was there. Parting her thighs, his heavy cock pushing into her swollen tissues, forcing her body to submit. His possession eased the worst of the cramps.

The inner bitch whimpered and writhed, wanting, needing. For once the snap of instant connection didn't make Scarlet jump. She and her wolf were locked in the same cycle of unrelenting desire, her need for Daniel's sperm all-consuming. Heat allowed no choices.

Time after time, she begged him to possess her to ease the spasms, and her connection with her wolf stayed strong and solid, as much a part of her as her limbs.

Time after time, he pressed his body into hers until they were both sore, sweaty, and exhausted. And still her body demanded more of his seed.

“Please,” she croaked, crawling across his sprawled thighs.

His erection lengthened and hardened against his belly. He didn’t open his eyes, simply saying, “I’m yours. Use me.”

Daniel had no body fat to begin with, but now his hip bones jutted. His shaft was an angry red, the crown a deeper wine shade. The small slit in the voluptuous crown leaked a drop of his precious essence.

She lapped it up, dragging a hoarse groan from him.

Straddling his lean hips, she palmed his cock, positioned him at her entrance, and sank down, forcing the hot length into her pussy. She gripped his shoulders, her nails digging in and ripping ragged rivers in his bronze hide. The coppery scent of fresh blood made her more feral.

Daniel groaned. “Don’t stop now, Red. Tear off a piece of me. Mark me.”

Thrusting into her with a strength that told her up until now he’d been holding back, he pressed his wrist to her mouth. “Scar me.”

Her canines elongated, and she bit hard, piercing his flesh, drinking his blood. The excruciating spasms of her core eased to flutters as her sore walls milked his rod until his seed gushed once again in thick blasts, coating her sex with the life-giving essence and the sweet mercy of rapture.

At long last, she was satisfied. Even with her wolf’s strength, she didn’t have the energy to roll off him and simply collapsed on his chest. She drifted somewhere between dreams and waking. It felt almost as if Daniel kissed her hair and whispered words of love.

Her lips curved at the tender thought.

A cool washcloth gently cleaned her sore slit. Then he cuddled her into a sitting position, and coaxed her to take sips of water.

Pushing away the glass, she said, “Let me see your poor wrist.”

“See? It’s already healing.” He held up the mangled limb for her inspection, his eyes shining with weird pride.

She trembled, examining the wound. “Dear Goddess, I nearly severed the artery.”

“Nah. Gonna have a nice scar though.”

She shook her head. Males were so strange.

“I’m proud to wear your mark.” He grinned. “It’s a wolf thing.”

More like an Alpha thing, but she didn’t have the energy to argue.

“Is it over? Are you okay?”

“Yes, thank you for...everything.”

“My pleasure,” he growled.

His growl was pure Daniel and so very real her heart gave a funny extra flutter.

He caressed her thighs, and she spread her legs obediently. A sudden hiss of indrawn breath made her try to clamp them together. His firm grip held her open for his inspection. The scowl on his face did nothing to put her at ease.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re bleeding.”

Relief flooded through her abused muscles. A little bloody show was perfectly normal with mating heat. She opened her mouth to reassure Daniel.

He dropped the washcloth in his scramble off the bed.

As she watched, he shuddered and shifted. His transformation from human form to werewolf was smooth and nearly instantaneous.

She sat completely still as the gorgeous gray male prowled toward her.

Chapter Ten

Daniel lost control. In wolf form, he moved toward Scarlet with a slow deliberation that scared the hell out of the small awareness left—his last piece of humanity.

Her special scent called to his wolf like heroin calls an addict. The sweet copper smell of her blood added a seductive top note to her already irresistible fragrance. His roar of possession rippled through the air.

Wolfie boy didn't waste time. He burrowed his head between her thighs and used his long tongue to lap her tender folds, working her over thoroughly.

Scarlet melted like butter left in the sun, making happy little whimpers as the old male cleaned away every trace of blood, pleased her into boneless bliss, and soothed her sore sheath.

Aside from having at least a century shaved off Daniel's life expectancy, everything was fine. Apparently the only thing wolfie boy had wanted was his own taste of Scarlet.

Daniel relaxed as his human awareness settled into a passenger role while the old wolf took exquisite care of his mate.

Then Scarlet gasped, caught in the throes of the ultimate fulfillment, shimmered, and shifted into werewolf form.

Her wolf was sleek, round, and red. Beautiful.

His wolf leaned into her with a powerful shoulder. Immediately she ducked under him, playfully nipping his ruff and baring her own throat.

The old male nosed her, taking her scent deep in his lungs, her layers of delicate aromatic markers a thousand times richer to his snout than his human nose could appreciate.

With a contented *whuff*, Scarlet settled, curled on her side, and tucked her nose into the base of her tail. Daniel circled until he faced the room's entrance. Then he settled on his belly, rested his snout on his forepaws, and curved his tail around his mate's hindquarters.

A deep contentment seeped into him, strengthening the link between his humanity and his true form. As he dozed, with one eye open to a narrow slit, he realized that the mating bond with Scarlet grew stronger in wolf form. None of his human concerns worried wolfie boy.

Too soon the purr of a powerful engine coming up his drive wiped the peace right off his furry mug. He recognized the throaty sound of the Treeland pack Hummer.

His human awareness dimly remembered asking Hunter for backup. His wolf wasn't interested in why the intruders approached his den. With Scarlet asleep in his bed, rational thought drowned under his snarled warning.

Seconds later, the pounding of heavy fists rattled the front door. "Open up."

The sharp tang of fear leaking in from the porch only fueled his fierce determination. He growled in challenge.

Fiery traces—the odor—seared his snout and slowed his heavy paws. A cautious sniff brought a trace of his son's familiar smell. Jake's unique blend of dearness was almost masked by the sharp pepper scent of pain.

While Daniel crouched in the entryway, sifting through the different scent traces, his visitors lost patience. A second round of knocking splintered the jamb and split the door.

A glowering Alpha in human form stepped through the debris, carrying the limp body of Daniel's son.

“Shift now, Daniel,” Hunter said mildly. He had no need to shout. His voice carried the full weight of the pack.

Half a dozen huge male werewolves prowled behind their Alpha. Enforcers. Lethal menace rolled off broad shoulders, raised hackles, and bared teeth. A passing cloud dulled the full moon’s glow. Death stalked into Daniel’s den, anxious to claim the losers.

The part of him still capable of unraveling the conflict of loyalties shut down, blocked by the overriding need to protect what was his. He snarled, defending the entrance to his den. Defending his mate.

Hunter stepped aside, signaling the enforcers by a tilt of his head.

Stiff legged, pack wolves filed farther into his house, positioning themselves in a half circle around him. The Alpha males reeked of smoky anger, sharp tangs of fear, and the teeth-chilling metal of pack determination.

Another scent—the cool water of trust and the clean fur of comfort—tugged Daniel’s nose and his heart. Scarlet stood behind him. She nosed him gently but insistently.

Helpless to resist his mate’s request, bristling with hostility, he moved to let her pass. When she brushed past, caressing him, the link to his humanity snapped back in place, clearer than it had been in centuries. Even this new strength didn’t keep him from grumbling at the pack males while he caught up with his mate. He stalked, tail still and high, at her side, keeping himself between Scarlet and the enforcers.

“Take it easy, pal. Your bonding scent is all over your female. No one is going try to put the moves on your mate.” Hunter angled his head, exposing his neck, a gesture of respect, for Scarlet. “Where do you want the boy?”

She led the way to the big brown couch facing the window.

After Hunter carefully lowered Jake, she settled on her haunches, gently nudging the too-still form with her snout and making soft woofing sounds.

Jake stirred, burying his fingers in her thick ruff. His muffled cries of pain tore new holes in Daniel's heart.

Inside the female's body, at first there seemed to be two separate minds—the woman, Scarlet, and the werewolf, the nameless Omega.

Though Scarlet was aware of everything, including a stream of sensory information the wolf sifted, she was mute except for shared thoughts with her wolf self. Gradually she realized this wasn't telepathy. Recovered memory fit the phenomena of shifting better, as if she'd reclaimed parts of herself lost during a prolonged bout of amnesia.

The Omega's wisdom, ancient old lore rediscovered, each new perception revisited a world rich in scents, flavors, textures, sounds, and images. The sensory data melded with primeval instincts coded into her DNA. The wolf had no need for words when her senses told her so much.

Daniel's tinge of smoke mixed with pepper meant worry about the boy eroded his normal calm strength.

She filtered out the distraction, focusing on the young male. His pepper-pain odor bit her sensitive nose, blocking other smells.

His muffled cries were the only sound she heard. During a mixed-blood male's first transition, every cell in his body burst and then reformed. If he lived, each cell would function in its new dual nature. If he'd been full-blood, he would have been born as pup and phased easily between pup and human baby.

Cautiously, so as not to jar him, Scarlet moved closer to the suffering boy. Finally she was wedged next to him on the couch, touching as much of his body as she could.

Hours passed with no change in his raging fever or his restless thrashing while pain racked his lanky body. His eyes opened to narrow slits, flickered, and then rolled back, unseeing. The fiery smell grew stronger.

Ignoring the irritation of her receptors, she gently nudged the boy's arm with her cold snout. His temperature worried her. He was too hot, even for a werewolf. His taut skin undulated with the cellular shifts happening beneath the surface. Every sign and every instinct told her that he was already dangerously weakened.

The boy's hot fingers dug into her ruff. He clung to her thick pelt with the last spurts of frantic strength, holding on to her for dear life. The cruel grip would've made dormant Scarlet yelp with pain, but now she barely noticed. She pressed herself more firmly against the boy's tortured body. Instinct replaced reason as she absorbed his pain, leeching away the mind-killing fever while silently praying for the Goddess to spare his life.

From time to time, Daniel's huge gray wolf prowled past. She couldn't spare him more than a reassuring glance, all her energy honed on easing the boy's crisis.

More time passed in a blur of the young male's suffering and her unceasing comfort.

Finally, in the wee hours of the next morning, a golden wolf slowly emerged from the male's body, whole and healthy but exhausted. He shook himself once, sighed, and then circled twice on the soft leather before he curled into a ball and slept.

Scarlet rose stiffly, stretching her cramped haunches and yawning.

The predawn pearling was just beginning to lighten the night sky when she leaped off the couch. She picked her way through a jumbled pile of furry bodies—the pack males.

"Where the hell was Dana when my son nearly died?" Daniel's voice drifted in from the kitchen, slowing her steps.

The deep rumble of Hunter's response sent her scooting to the loft. Whether the discussion involved pack business or Daniel's private concerns, she didn't want to hear anything more. Daniel had never mentioned one of the pack's pretrans males was his son.

A fairly telling omission. What else had he decided she didn't need to know? Had Doyle been right about not trusting him?

Too smart too late—story of her life.

For a few seconds, she distracted herself, taking comfort from the ease and power of her wolf form—her true form. Padding silently into the loft, she nosed her clothes into a pile and shifted back to human form as smooth as if she'd done it a thousand times.

If she had to deal with Daniel and the rest of the pack Alphas, she wanted to be dressed. In fact, chain mail sounded good. Pity she didn't have a suit of armor handy.

Scarlet finished tying a double knot on her right boot and then pulled the laces taut on the left while she sifted through the few facts she knew about Daniel and Dana, information that plainly included significant gaps.

The Treeland pack had seven enforcers, seventy soldiers, a few hundred active members, thousands of civilians, at least twenty non-werewolves mated to pack members, and dozens of mixed-blood members. Some wolves attended every function; others showed up only for monthly hunts or even less often. Then there were members away at college, serving in the military, or just out of the territory for business or pleasure.

With so many members, it wasn't strange that Scarlet had never connected the elegant blonde female, Dana, flitting in and out of pack headquarters, with Daniel. And there was no family resemblance between Jake and either of his parents.

Then she caught a trace of the sex she and Daniel had shared during her mating heat, now dry and stale. She wrinkled her nose. If she could smell the sex in human form, the pack males would definitely notice.

If she'd known where Daniel kept his clean linens, she would've stripped the bed and made it fresh. She definitely didn't want to poke through Daniel's cupboards and drawers; she'd already had all the surprises she could handle for one

day. So she settled for turning and fluffing the duvet, along with plumping and smoothing the pillows. At least the telltale aroma of mating was less blatant.

Then it hit. Her sense of smell wasn't the only upgrade. Her eyesight was razor-sharp, both near and far. Her hearing picked up quiet conversations behind closed doors and a room away.

Oh, how she would love to taste Daniel now. She could only imagine how delicious he would be on her new and improved tongue. She ran her fingers over the duvet she'd just fluffed. Her sense of touch was also enhanced. Possibilities tumbled through her mind. Perhaps she'd be able to feel Daniel's reactions faster, more intensely. Becoming even more responsive to his touch seemed impossible, but she would keep an open mind.

Then she remembered the snippet of conversation she'd caught. She hoped he had a good reason for failing to mention his son happened to be one of the mixed-blood, pretrans males. With effort, she tripped a trap on that line of thought. For once she had some good news to share with Gracie.

The master bath and the closet were the loft's only options for privacy. Scarlet chose the bathroom, closed the door softly, splashed her face, rinsed her mouth, and called Gracie.

"Are you all right?" Gracie asked sharply.

"Fine. I'm fine. Something wonderful happened."

"Yes?"

Scarlet heard the smile in the Omega's voice and smiled back in spite of herself. "I finally shifted."

"Oh thank the Goddess. I'm so glad. Tell me everything."

The bathroom door opened. Daniel stared at her, relief racing across his features and softening his worried scowl.

"The first of the young males went through his transition, and he's doing well." Scarlet finished hurriedly. "I'll fill you in on the details later."

“I’m dying to hear every detail. Call me as soon as you can.”

“Of course. Thanks, Gracie.”

After ending the call, Scarlet took in the dark circles under Daniel’s eyes and the lines around them that seemed to be a little deeper this morning. Every time she looked at him, she found new details to love. This morning she saw him with wolf eyes, which meant she saw him much more clearly. He was more gorgeous than ever.

But if he didn’t have a totally great explanation for not telling her about his son’s status, then gorgeous wasn’t going to save him. She faked a yawn. “Good morning.”

Daniel nodded. “You’re exhausted.” He steered her out of the bathroom and through the loft, pausing at the top of the stairs. “Thank you for my son’s life.”

Her words of angry accusation and demand dried on her tongue at his heartfelt gratitude.

As they descended, his hand dropped away from her back.

“Wait here. I’m going to put Jake to bed; then I’ll take you home.” His tone was low, flat, and formal. His scent had extra notes, a confusing mixture of his wonderful fragrance, smoke, sweet tenderness, and fresh snow that she didn’t know how to interpret.

Instinctively she knew this wasn’t just about forgetting to mention his son had been one of the high-risk males. Scarlet’s stomach knotted into a ball of dread. The only thing that would make this situation even worse was if the Alphas woke up and she had to make conversation with the pack enforcers. She darted an uneasy glance toward the sleeping pile of fur. A tail twitched, small woofs escaped, but the males continued to doze.

Briefly she wondered why they were here. Hunter seldom went anywhere alone, but half a dozen alphas seemed like more escort than one pretrans male and the pack leader required.

Daniel carefully scooped up the giant golden wolf, still sound asleep.

As he moved toward her, Scarlet held out a palm, wordlessly asking him to wait. She ran a hand lightly over the boy's muzzle. The Omega instincts melded smoothly with her nursing education, each side strengthening the other. His nose was reassuringly cool. She checked his pulse, then listened to his lungs and heart. There was no sign of infection or distress. The young male snored lightly through her quick evaluation.

He's fine, she mouthed.

Daniel nodded curtly and strode down the hall.

His coldness left her bewildered. What did he have to be mad about?

She wandered outside and paced by the county's SUV, too restless to wait calmly. She didn't wait long.

Winter gray sheriff's eyes stared right through her. "Ready?"

She considered a screaming tantrum. Reluctantly she opted for an adult attitude and just asked, "Why are you angry?"

He held the door for her. "I'm not."

"Right, then why are you acting like this?"

Her question went unanswered while he helped her up, circled the SUV, climbed in, and started the rig. The powerful engine idled for a few moments. He rested his right arm along the top of the seat back, craning his neck to look behind him, turned, and then drove to the county highway.

Since he was ignoring her questions, she asked another. "Why didn't you tell me your son was one of the pretrans males?"

Icy silence was all the answer he offered.

She stared at the trees streaming by the tinted passenger window.

When she darted a peek at Daniel, his eyes were on the road. Though he was inches from her, he might as well have been in another county. There was no trace of the leather, woods, and wild animal fragrance she loved. A fresh snow smell

seeped into the cab and grew stronger. The scent chilled her blood. She rubbed her arms, trying to banish the sudden cold.

Why was Daniel acting like this? His son was fine. He should be happy. She was the one who should be cold and angry. She tumbled the facts in her mind, looking for an explanation that fit. Her stomach clenched as the answer snapped into place.

She should have listened to her instincts from the beginning. All his talk of bonding with her had been just that, talk—a line. How had he explained whispering to her? Something about giving the damaged wolf back his self-confidence. In her case, making her feel desirable had worked great. To be fair, she hadn't left him much choice when she had come into heat.

Now he was angry. Because of her new pack standing? Did he expect her to insist on a formal mating?

Her inner wolf stirred and whined. But Scarlet was too busy blinking back tears to listen to her unhappy Omega.

As all the implications hit, making it clear just how big a fool she'd been, a hot surge of temper flooded her. The nerve of the male. *Thanks anyway, Sheriff, Sir.* She bristled at the insult of his behavior. He could have skipped the bonding talk. She'd rather live the rest of her life with a broken heart than tie herself to him in some tragic mockery of a true bond.

Daniel's heart shredded into strips of loss, so completely ruined he wondered how it kept beating. Now that Scarlet was the Omega, everything was changed.

Except for the mating bond—nothing altered that. He was irrevocably hers for as long as there was breath in his body. No other woman would ever arouse him. He'd want to kill any male who looked at Scarlet. He couldn't even lie to her worth a damn. That sucked big time.

Jake would have died without Scarlet's gift. How could he deny her healing gift to the sick, the injured, and the part-blood males facing their first transition?

Scarlet wasn't his to keep. An Omega belonged to the whole pack.

Time for him to act like a male worth his fur. Time to do the right thing. Starting with keeping his trap shut instead of begging her to choose him and to hell with the damn pack.

She fidgeted, nibbling on her full lower lip. "I understand why you're upset."

Sure she did. He ground his molars hard enough to pulverize diamonds. Lucky for him, werewolves were made of tougher stuff.

Scarlet licked her lips with a quick darts. "You're all worked up over nothing. You don't owe me anything. Jake's transition did me a big favor. I needed to test my connection with the Omega to be certain I can serve the pack. Gracie has been stretched way too thin."

A beat went by while he kept his jaws clamped.

"Great," she muttered. "That's perfect. Thanks for everything. By the way, the sex was hot, but the courtship act—total overkill, Sir. I'm not in the market for a mate." Her little chin lifted. "And for the record, I would never have denied a pack member the gift of healing."

He knew she'd lashed out at him because her pride was hurt. He heard the pain in her voice, smelled her fresh snow sadness, and he regretted hurting her for even a minute. But it was better this way. Better for her to hate him.

He loved her too much to stand in her way. An Omega was venerated by the pack. That was her rightful place—Scarlet's destiny.

His heart whined that if she'd truly cared for him, she'd work out something with the pack so she could be with him. But he wasn't that lucky. For the Goddess's own reasons, mating bonds affected only males. He'd seen wolves without their mates and shuddered with new empathy for their raw pain. Walking dead, condemned to live their entire lifespan in misery.

Now he was joining their ranks. Daily pity parties—looking forward to it.

The first rays of dawn spiked through the rugged peaks to the east as he rolled to a stop next to the old farmhouse.

“Thanks for taking care of Jake,” he said gruffly.

“My pleasure.” Her profile was regal and distant with her focus trained on the passenger’s window.

He watched her from the edge of his vision, memorizing her features, wondering if he’d ever see her again. Sure he would; he’d find reasons to visit the pack. Maybe even stay awhile. Each time he saw her would be like getting raked by badger claws, and he’d take it because just seeing her, catching a trace of her sweet wild berry essence...

She gave a little shiver. “I better get inside.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Don’t bother.”

Damn, he’d hurt her, which made him want to howl in pain. “I’ll be back later to check on the place. You’ll want to head for Treeland soon. I’ll look after things here, like always.”

“Great.” Scarlet scampered out of his rig in a whole lot of hurry to get away from him, leaving behind the rich blend of her sweet scent and the tantalizing smells of moonlight, magic, and trust mixed with fresh sadness.

Daniel damn near bent the steering column to keep from going after her and begging. His own thick scent of fresh snow filled the rig, so strong that he expected flakes to start falling.

Chapter Eleven

Daniel's ride home passed in a blur. When he entered the house, the ruined front door grated on an already raw temper. Homey cooking smells of pancakes, sausage, and bacon coming from his house were a welcome surprise.

"Hey you're back." Jake grinned, moving toward him with the sure grace of a fully transitioned male.

Remembering the painfully awkward gait of most posttrans, Daniel's heart swelled with admiration for Scarlet's skill. Before he got more sappy, the scent of his son's love—equal parts sunshine, cool water, and clean fur—wrapped around his bleeding heart. He gave the boy's newly broadened shoulders a fierce squeeze.

Hunter stuck his head out of the kitchen, solving the chef mystery. "Come on; breakfast is ready."

"Smells great," Jake said.

"Thanks for cooking." Daniel hauled his tired butt into the kitchen, pulled out a chair, and parked it.

"Sometimes I do that," the pack Alpha said, snapping his napkin. Turning to Jake, he grinned. "Look at you. I'm glad I don't have a daughter."

Jake ducked his head, forking in a mouthful of sausage.

"Where're the enforcers?" Daniel helped himself to the bacon.

"Sent them to scout out a new door," Hunter said.

Daniel chewed and swallowed. "You didn't have to do that. I'd have replaced it. My fault for going werewolf on your ass."

Hunter tipped his head toward Jake.

Grateful for any distraction from the hole in his heart, Daniel said, "Jake's heard worse."

When the last of the food was demolished, Jake disappeared into the great room.

Hunter watched Daniel with something way too close to pity. Now even the Treeland Alpha felt sorry for him. Shit. Daniel smelled his own sappy fresh snow sadness.

At least Hunter didn't make him feel worse by offering him a hankie or a hug. Instead he poured himself another cup of coffee, lifting the pot in a silent question.

"No thanks."

"Where's Scarlet?"

Daniel shrugged. "Probably catching a nap at her place before she drives to Treeland."

"You took her over to Charlie's?"

"Where else?"

"Okay. If that's how you want to play it."

"I don't have a choice," Daniel snapped.

"Bullshit."

Daniel ran a hand over his brush cut and said quietly, "I'm not right for her."

"You're wrong. Even an ornery, old, blind wolf could see she loves you." Hunter's words held way too much you-poor-sap sympathy.

Daniel didn't rise to the bait.

"Your loss, pal."

"You got that part right," Daniel grumbled.

"We'll be leaving as soon as the guys finish with the door."

"Fine. I'm going talk to Jake."

The boy, now more man than Daniel wanted to admit, paused his first-person-shooter video game and met his eyes with a grin. "Hey, Pop." The grin faded. "Did Hunter say something about how I have school tomorrow so we have to go?"

Daniel shook his head, inhaling Jake's familiar smell, letting it work its magic. "Nah, but if he had, he'd have been right. Don't forget I'm picking you up next Friday night. You can patrol with me."

"Wolf form?" Jake's eyes widened.

Daniel cocked an eyebrow. "How else?"

"Cool."

* * *

When Daniel had rolled to a stop at the farmhouse, Scarlet had gathered the tatters of her pride and walked away from him, leaving the best part of her heart in his rough hands.

At least she could throw herself into the Omega's duties. With a pack the size of Treeland's, there was always someone in need of healing.

The pack had protected her even though she had been unable to shift and totally useless as a werewolf. When the pack females whispered behind her back that mating would cure the breach between her and the inner werewolf, Scarlet had pretended not to hear. She should have listened. As it happened, they'd been right. Just thinking about it made her want to cry.

She swallowed the knot of feelings clogging her throat. If she showered and packed quickly, she could be on the road in a few hours.

Wounded pride and temper propelled Scarlet into the house. She slammed the door behind her, already planning to leave.

A shower was essential. Daniel's evocative fragrance clung to her skin, driving her crazy. She couldn't handle seeing him, hearing him, or smelling him.

There was no point in staying in Cedar Grove when he didn't want her. In fact, she should sell the place. She would never come back here, but she couldn't deprive Doyle of his home when he'd been nothing but kind to her.

She should stay to say good-bye to him, but she didn't want to be anywhere near Charlie's place when Daniel made his nightly rounds. If Doyle wasn't awake by the time she was ready to go, though it was rude, she would just leave him a note.

Her cell phone rang, and Scarlet flipped it open eagerly. Not Daniel. She forced a smile into her voice. "Hi, Grace?"

"Thank goodness. When you didn't call back, I got worried. Shifting and healing both take a great deal of energy, and males can be completely clueless about making sure a healer is properly fed and rested. They seem to think we're indestructible."

"I'm sorry you worried. Everything is fine, just a little tired."

"No wonder with everything going on."

"Yes, lots of excitement."

"Where are my manners? Congratulations on your bonding. Hunter told me all about it. I'm so thrilled for you. Now you have a bonding ceremony to plan. Alphas are so impatient, but I've always loved fall mating sanctions, and there's your welcome home party."

Scarlet's ear twitched. Bonding? Ceremony? Party? "Exactly what did Hunter say?"

"Just that you wore Daniel's bonding scent."

After all the fantastic sex during her heat, naturally she smelled like Daniel. Naturally Hunter noticed; he just hadn't understood the cause.

Scarlet blinked away the sudden welling of tears. "Daniel doesn't want me."

"I doubt that." Gracie laughed merrily. "Bonded males do not lose interest. Though it is possible..."

"What's possible?" Scarlet asked impatiently.

“Hunter did say something about Daniel letting you go. I didn’t take it seriously. I’m sure he’ll change his mind.” Gracie’s tone was rich with notes of concern and misplaced confidence.

Ready for a change of subject, Scarlet asked, “Who’s planning the welcome home party?”

“I am.” Gracie giggled again. “Things went very well in Juneau. I’ll be in Treeland tomorrow. Besides, the pack owes me a party or two, and having a new Omega to welcome gives me a great excuse to plan a gala night.”

Wishing Gracie was close enough to hug, Scarlet managed a watery chuckle.

* * *

After Jake and the pack took off, Daniel took a shower, suited up, and prowled around Cedar Grove in the county’s SUV, hoping for a crime wave.

Sundays in Cedar Grove were entirely too peaceful. Once church service was over, half the population went home to early dinners, and the other half woke up and headed for the taverns. Since there were three taverns in town and only one church, he figured human sin paid better than preaching. Not a shock.

The normal rowdiness never rose above a warning level for the usual crowd. By seven he’d already broken up two bar fights and driven Pete Jenkins, one of the perpetual drunks, home. Pete’s wife hauled her husband inside, spitting tobacco on Daniel’s boot in her fury. He used the hazmat kit to clean up and returned to making his rounds.

When he checked in with dispatch halfway through his shift, Paul Marchland had called. Eager for distraction, Daniel jumped on the complaint.

Vampire stink clung to the paddock gate where one less sheep milled—a clue he couldn’t share with the irate farmer.

“Blackie is still hiding under the front steps. Wouldn’t even come out for dinner. He’s a good dog, but whatever critter is stealing my sheep scares the old boy. McKinley tells me he lost a ram and two ewes last month. There’s been wolves

out here for years. One of them must've gone loco. If you can't put a stop to this, Sheriff, then we're going to get up a hunting party."

The only wolves roaming these mountains were werewolves. Local farmers taking potshots at Daniel or any of the other wolves who passed through his territory now and then was a plan for disaster.

Thank the Goddess Scarlet was headed back for Treeland. At least he didn't have to worry about trigger-happy farmers peppering her pretty hide with buckshot or worse.

Harrison had a bad attitude toward humans and no respect for their property. He had to quit stealing sheep or else Daniel was going to bite his head off at the neck and enjoy every mouthful of his polluted blood. "Give me twenty-four hours."

Paul nodded curtly. "I'll pass the word."

Time to catch Harrison for a little attitude adjustment chat. If he didn't see reason, then chewing the bloodsucker's head off his scrawny neck would be a bright spot of moonlight in a damn shitty night. True, Scarlet would lose a caretaker. But what the hell. Daniel could take care of the farmhouse. It would give him a fine reason to call her and torture himself.

Before he arrived at the farmhouse, AC/DC blared, announcing Hunter.

"Yeah?" Daniel growled.

"Don't bite my head off, pal. Our Omega Gracie asked me to be sure you got an invitation to a party the pack is holding."

"Thanks anyway." Daniel's thumb edged toward the End Call icon.

"Scarlet is the guest of honor."

"That's peachy. The answer is still no."

"Might want to rethink your hard-ass stand, pal. Bonding lasts forever. How long do you think your wolf is going to tolerate separation from your mate before you lose it?"

"Not an issue. The connection is real solid."

“Thanks to Scarlet. Away from her, destabilization is only a matter of time.”

Damn, Hunter was probably right. Which abso-fucking-lutely sucked.

“Cut me some slack here, Daniel. I don’t want to have to kill your ugly ass.”

Daniel softened his growl. “Can’t make it. Give her my regrets.”

“Take care.”

“Yeah, sure, you too.” This time his finger didn’t hesitate to end the call.

Evil thoughts of pack life filled his head. Next year Scarlet would come into heat again. His cock gave a hopeful jerk at the thought.

Unmated females entered special lockdown quarters during their fertile periods. The idea of Red alone and aching for hours twisted his gut into knots. But it wouldn’t play that way, would it? Every damn single male in the pack would be crawling on his belly, sniffing after the Omega, inhaling her sweet scent.

Something tugged at his memory, then vanished when the loss of Scarlet sucker punched his belly again. The smell of fresh snow filled the SUV.

Daniel rolled down the window, preferring the cold wind of reality to the smell of his own self-pity.

The air held a nip of real frost. Five years ago on a night like this, he’d been tracking a rogue male through the rugged terrain of the Rockies. November was late to get caught in the mountains. Game was thin. Weather always a stiff breeze away from a serious snowstorm. He’d had the young male in his sights twice that afternoon. He hadn’t fired, figuring the rogue was tiring and might let down his guard enough for Daniel to get close enough to work some magic. Damn, he hated to lose one.

It should have been safe. No one should’ve been camping at that elevation, sure as hell not a greenhorn family.

There they’d been: Mom, Dad, and two kids, kitted out in REI gear and roasting weenies over a bright campfire. The rogue had fallen on them like the

starving beast he was. It happened way too fast. Never a clean shot. When the rogue was finished, there wasn't enough left of them to bury.

Then, too late, much too late, Daniel had taken out the damaged male.

Hunter was right. That was going to be his fate.

Since he was a male without his mate, death was looking good. But he couldn't be sure he wouldn't hurt innocents. And he sure as hell didn't want Hunter to have to kill him. Nasty business, killing another male. Worse, killing a friend.

Suicide was damn near impossible and another emotional kick in the balls for Hunter. For Jake. Not an option.

It looked like he'd have to slick up his sorry ass and do some courting and hope like hell Scarlet took pity on him.

Right after he kicked a little vampire ass and put an end to the damn sheep stealing.

* * *

As Scarlet climbed the stairs, fatigue smashed into her and bore down. The sensation made her legs feel like she was wearing lead thigh highs, and her teeth began to clatter.

She made it to the bathroom on sheer determination. Numb fingers struggled to peel off her clothes while the water heated. When she finally staggered into the shower, not even the hot water warmed her icy blood. Dizzy and shivering, she turned off the water and lurched out of the bathroom. She snagged a towel, caught herself on the counter, and wrapped the terry cloth around her freezing body. Her vision grayed out as she reeled toward the bed and collapsed.

Later a strong arm, much too cool to belong to Daniel, braced her back. A soothing fragrance from her youth, cool sea air, roused her from a coma-like sleep.

"Here we go. She's waking up. Open your mouth."

She couldn't think of any reason not to obey. A spoonful of chocolate sauce and coffee ice cream melted on her tongue. She swallowed. Famished, she opened for

more, as eager as a hungry baby bird. After a couple more mouthfuls, Doyle offered a sport's bottle.

Scarlet sipped and grimaced. "What's that?"

"Enhanced water. Very good for what ails you. Keep drinking, please."

When he was satisfied with her fluid intake, he blotted her mouth with a napkin and resumed feeding her ice cream. "What's wrong with that wolf? Dropping you off here after you'd drained yourself helping those worthless dogs."

"Not worthless," Scarlet said between clacking teeth and mouthfuls of ice cream.

"Worthless is as worthless does," Doyle said darkly.

Scarlet's teeth slowed their nervous chattering. She held out a hand for the bowl. "I can feed myself."

"Of course." He gave her the ice cream and the napkin he'd held at the ready. Then Doyle turned his head and sneezed. "What happened to you? You smell like the sheriff." He stood and backed away, his sad eyes watering. "Sorry."

Scarlet blinked away her own sudden welling of tears; she was still pitifully weak and downright weepy. "I took a shower. I'm sure the scent will fade soon."

"I doubt that. There's only one explanation for the way his sten—scent is all over you. He's bonded to you."

She wished, but that dream had already died. Already tired of repeating the pathetic story, she shook her head. "I'm afraid you're mistaken. Daniel doesn't want me."

"From what I've heard, bonded wolves don't lose interest. Though deputy dog does have an overdeveloped conscience. If he thought letting you go was best for you, then he might set his own needs aside."

"Really?"

He patted her shoulder, tactfully keeping his nose averted. "Really. He's a disgusting dog, but werewolves, especially Alphas, can't help themselves. It's their

nature.” His tone darkened to match the dangerous lights in his eyes. “Though their barbaric ways are no excuse for neglecting your health and safety.”

Scarlet recalled what Gracie had said about Daniel’s bonding scent, trying to remember her exact words.

Cool fingers gently took the bowl from her and pulled one of the afghans she’d crocheted for Charlie over her. “Snuggle in. I’m going to fix you some real food.”

For a second or two, she considered arguing, but she was just too tired. Her eyes grew too heavy to keep open, ending any protest she might have made.

As he went down the stairs, she heard Doyle mutter under his breath. “Lowlife wolves. Didn’t even have the decency to feed her.”

There was no real malice in the vampire’s grouching, and Scarlet smiled. It was nice having someone on her side. On the edge of sleep, she wondered if Daniel was truly bonded to her. After she rested for a bit, she intended to interrogate a certain sheriff, and this time she would be in full possession of her werewolf senses.

The delicious aroma of broiled steak roused her from her nap. She arranged the pillows to cushion her back from the ironwork headboard. “It smells fantastic. Where did you find steak?”

The vampire grinned tightly as he settled a tray table over her legs. “I keep a fairly well-stocked freezer.”

“Thank you.” Her belly rumbled. She sliced off a bite of steak, dipped it in a ramekin of béarnaise sauce, and chewed. “This is wonderful. You should be a chef at some four-star restaurant, not taking care of an empty house in the woods.”

“I like it right here, and it’s a good thing I was around. You were close to shocking out when I found you. What happened that the wolves let you shift so much without food or rest?”

“Only once.” Scarlet chewed and swallowed another bite of the perfectly rare meat. “I only shifted once to wolf form and once back.”

“Burns a lot of energy.”

“How do you know so much about werewolves?” Scarlet sliced off another bite.

Doyle’s dark eyes glittered. “I’ve been around for a few centuries, picked up bits of trivia here and there. And your grandfather and I were together since the war.”

“World War II?”

“War of the Roses. Charlie saved my bacon. Now he was a male worth his fur. Most dogs at least take care of their own. Frankly I’m surprised the sheriff didn’t look after you better. Usually—” He cocked his head. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

Scarlet set down her knife and fork.

“Keep eating. You need the protein.” Then he was gone. The vampire moved as fast as a werewolf, although not quite as fast as Daniel.

This time she’d been saved by a vampire.

Memories from the weeks of her teenage captivity flashed in a confusing collage of sensory data. Her wolf had suffered the abuses, the rapes, and the helpless fury over her mother’s death. Her wolf had absorbed every injury, saving Scarlet.

She bowed her head and thanked the Goddess for her life.

Daniel deserved her gratitude, but she wasn’t going to beg him to love her. If the bonding between them existed, how could he let her go without a fight? She weighed what Gracie and Doyle had said; perhaps he was being noble and putting the pack first. He’d have to trust her to honor her pack responsibilities.

A mated male put his mate first always. She set her chin. An Omega deserved first place—*she* deserved first place—in his heart.

Chapter Twelve

The county's rig bounced over the rough spots on Route 10, rattling the dash and worsening Daniel's permanently rotten mood. He ignored the potholes, slowing only when he turned onto the gravel drive to the old farmhouse.

Naturally he thought about his last trip over the same road with Scarlet. She hadn't even bothered to say good-bye. No reason for her to, but it still cut like badger claws. The misery threatening to leak from his eyes would seal his fate as a hopeless case, so he swallowed hard and slammed the lid shut on the unbearable loss. He had to find a way to keep going, to keep sane.

Looking after the place was still his responsibility. Keeping his promise to Charlie had pushed him through more than a few dark times. He wasn't going to blow off the duty now. Time for him to start thinking about someone besides himself. He circled the old house, noting the living room window had been replaced.

That wouldn't buy Harrison any leniency on the sheep-stealing charges, but for now, he turned a blind eye toward the barn that hid Harrison's plush digs and a gleaming still. The fermented sheep's blood wafting through the crisp autumn air offended his nose, but then everything about the bloodsucker bothered him.

Once he'd circled the house, his legs made short work of the path to the front door. He scraped his boots on the welcome mat, then tipped up the laughing pig statue by the front steps to help himself to the key.

The key was gone.

Daniel unsnapped his holster, drew his gun, and tried the knob.

As the door swung open, the hinges squeaked faintly. He drew his weapon and silently prowled inside.

Harrison lounged against the stairwell. "Can I help you with something, Sheriff?"

The vampire's words were polite enough, but his attitude grated on Daniel's raw temper. "As a matter of fact, I have a list. Stop breathing is number one. The rest is backup in case you can't handle the no-air thing."

"Funny for a lowlife cur like you." The vampire bared his fangs.

"Careful, vampire. I'm one of the few creatures capable of killing you, and you have no idea how much that appeals to me." Daniel holstered his weapon.

"If you had a pack, I might worry. One old wolf? Don't flatter yourself. Or maybe you're the one who's looking for death? Suicide isn't easy for your kind, is it?"

Daniel growled low in his throat.

While he'd been busy trading insults with Harrison, Scarlet had slipped down the stairs, suddenly stepping from behind the bloodsucker. "Is there an actual complaint, Sheriff? Or are you just harassing Doyle, who is practically a member of my family?"

"What happened to you? Why are you so pale? Did that bloodsucker hurt you?"

Scarlet narrowed her eyes at him as if he'd asked her a stupid question. "No. In fact, Doyle probably saved my life."

"Thanks to you and your dog-pack friends, Scarlet nearly shocked out." Harrison's cold lips stretched in an unholy smirk that didn't touch his shifty eyes.

What really twisted Daniel's guts was the stark truth that the bloodsucker was right. He'd been so caught up in self-pity, he'd never thought of how much energy Scarlet had spent between shifting, easing Jake's agony, and then shifting back again. He'd never offered her even a drink of water or a crust of bread when she needed plenty of fluids, a whole lot of carbs and protein, and rest. He'd failed to properly care for his mate.

Thanks to having his head shoved up his ass, he owed the damn vampire for doing what should have been his job and saving her life. A real shitty state of affairs

that pretty much ruled out his plan to chew the old bloodsucker's head off his scrawny neck.

"Thank you for taking care of Scarlet."

"I didn't do it for you."

Daniel gripped his self-loathing tighter and said, "I know that. I appreciate it anyway." Then he forced the words that needed to be said. "I owe you."

"Thank you for stopping, Sheriff." Scarlet's dismissal dripped ice.

When he didn't turn tail and run, she angled her face toward the vampire. "Would you be so kind as to show our visitor the way out?"

Her looking to Harrison for protection from him hurt like a thousand cuts from a silver knife. The only thing he could smell was the stink of vampire. His ears heated and twitched. He planted his size fourteens. "I'm not leaving yet."

Scarlet stared right through him. "Just say whatever it is you need to say."

He read the *then go* in her rigid spine and chilled voice as clearly as if she'd said the words. His hopes shredded.

He swallowed the lump of sadness threatening to cut off his air and focused on business. "Marchland lost another sheep last night." He locked on Scarlet's widened eyes. "Your buddy here has been stealing sheep for months."

"An empty accusation," Harrison said.

Scarlet narrowed her focus on the vampire's pasty mug. "Did you take any of the missing sheep?"

"Might've."

"I'll read that as a yes then." She met Daniel's eyes with nothing but a whole lot of cool expectation, as if saying, *Your turn, Sheriff*.

He spoke to the vampire. "The sheep stealing has to stop. The farmers think wolves are taking their stock. They're planning their own hunting party. You don't want the humans taking shots at Scarlet."

"Of course not, but—"

“No buts.” Daniel widened his stance and loosened the muscles in his shoulders, more than ready to dance with the vampire.

“Didn’t Charlie used to have sheep in the north pasture?” Scarlet asked.

Harrison bobbed his pasty head. “He did.”

“I’ve always liked the way the meadow looked with a flock grazing. I suppose they were a lot of work for you?”

“Not at all. Nothing compared to mowing.”

“If it’s not too much bother, could you take care of buying us some sheep? It seems a shame to let perfectly good grazing land go to waste.” Scarlet looked at the old bloodsucker with a hopeful expression.

“If that’s what you want. Of course I’ll be happy to take care of it for you. I’d best get busy and check the fencing right away.”

“Now?” Scarlet’s voice rose in alarm.

Daniel swallowed hard. Shit, he’d failed to take care of her, leaving her to Harrison’s tender mercies. Thank the Goddess the bloodsucker had stepped up. Every time he thought about the vampire feeding Scarlet, Daniel’s heart pinched with jealousy. Worse, now she didn’t want to be alone with Daniel. He didn’t blame her. He didn’t deserve a second chance.

“Of course, now.” Harrison vanished.

Scarlet blinked, paling. “Where’d he go?”

“North pasture would be my guess.”

“But...he just disappeared.”

“Vampires do that. Scramble their damn molecules through space. Crazy way to travel.”

Scarlet sank onto the bottom step. “But...”

Daniel sat next to her.

“Don’t.” She scooted away from him.

“First time you’ve seen one teleport?”

“Yes, I keep forgetting what he is. Doyle seems so—normal.”

She sounded so bewildered and so sincere. Here they were, a couple of werewolves, and she was shocked by a vampire’s transporting, which—after all—was pretty standard stuff. He started to chuckle.

“Are you laughing at me?”

Between belly-shaking guffaws, he said, “Laughing with you.”

“I’m not laughing.”

He mopped his eyes. “You should. Come on; we’re werewolves, Red. Not exactly your everyday average Jones couple—”

“We’re a couple?”

Obviously he’d missed a step somewhere, because she still smelled a little sad. Alphas did not beg, but he’d have to make an exception unless she warmed up in a hurry.

Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he pulled her closer and got way too thrilled when she didn’t shrink from his touch. “Sure, we’re—”

Scarlet shushed him with a finger to his mouth. “Shut up, Sheriff, and kiss me.”

His laughter lightened into a flare of hope. Carefully he cupped her head, moving slow and sure. He brushed his lips across hers, savoring the softness, the sweet wild taste, and the way she molded against him so damn perfectly. Another stealthy brush of his lips, a questing lick at the edge of her smile, and she sighed against his mouth. He swallowed the sound of her sweet surrender.

Then she parted for him. He licked his way inside the wet velvet of her mouth, exploring and claiming his mate. Encouraged by her generous acceptance of him, he slid his tongue against hers.

Soon the teasing game of chase and retreat grew heated and urgent as he plunged and she sucked on his thrusting tongue. While they kissed, her warm

curves softened, melting against his hard edges. He stroked her from nape to tailbone, kneading the tension from her back.

Finally he tore himself away from her mouth and nuzzled her jaw.

She tilted her neck, exposing the vulnerable blue line of her jugular, the ultimate gesture of submission.

He licked the vein. Then he trailed nipping kisses down the delicate tendon on the side of her throat. Then he paused, inhaled deeply, and a satisfied grin tugged the edges of his mouth. "There's that smell again."

This time he recognized the fragrance of love. Wolfie boy snorted a what-took-you-so-long sound of affectionate disgust. Right, like the old male hadn't been sweatin' too.

Daniel ignored his wolf's posturing. Didn't matter.

Scarlet loved him.

Chapter Thirteen

Scarlet sniffed delicately, opening her wolf awareness, but she detected nothing except Daniel's intoxicating fragrance. "What smell?"

His grin widened until it dazzled her. "You plus moonlight, magic, and trust. It's love. You love me."

Everything inside her heated and softened as she met his gaze. "How could I not?"

Instead of declaring his love, he leaned back far enough to study her expression. "I expected you to be on your way back to Treeland."

"Now why would you think that?" She widened her eyes, wriggled out of his embrace, stood, and moved out of reach.

"Something about a welcome home party for a certain Omega," he growled.

"That might've been a bit premature. But Gracie is hard to resist, and I wanted to be certain you'd save the date. What kind of celebration would it be without you?"

He glared at her with playful fierceness. "You set me up. I've heard Omegas are real tricky—dangerous—females."

She shot him a warning look, still wanting the words of love he'd never said. She backed farther away and recklessly dared him. "Careful there, wolfie boy. I bite."

"Now that's hot," he growled. "Come over here and say it again."

Instead of obeying, she kept moving. Shrugging off her top, she flung the sweater at him, slowing him for a second.

She loped through the dark kitchen. “I don’t think so, Sheriff. You’ve got handcuffs.”

“And I know how to use them.” He batted away the sweater, shedding clothes and closing the distance separating them.

Scarlet darted a peek over her shoulder and almost quit running.

He prowled after her—naked—his body rippling with sharply defined musculature under hair-dusted, gleaming bronze skin. Her focus stopped at the front of his pelvic wall where his cock, heavy and uncut and beautiful, jutted.

She let him catch her in the mudroom. Caging her with strong arms, he bit her bottom lip, holding it captive between his teeth.

Now that she’d been safely caught, she traced his upper lip with the tip of her tongue, winding her arms around his neck and teasing her fingers across the soft bristles of his hair. A lifetime of touching Daniel wouldn’t be long enough. Her skin hungered for his.

Gently he unwound her arms, holding them over her head while he backed her against the washing machine and stripped the rest of her clothes with a smooth efficiency she didn’t want to think about too hard.

Releasing her hands for a second, Daniel slipped off her red lace bra. His breath hissed in sharply. “You are so beautiful it’s hard to believe you’re real. Harder to believe you’re mine.”

Questions and doubts burned away under the heat in his eyes, the gentle caress of his rough hands, and his deep voice. His words reached deep inside, turning her sex liquid with desire and melting her wolf heart.

The rasp of his blunt fingers tracing a lazy line from her face to the top curve of her breast made her shiver with erotic anticipation. He drew a workman’s rough knuckle over the fine skin of her areola, puckering the excited tip.

In his usual, maddeningly lazy pattern, he moved on to torture the other aching breast.

She sighed with frustration.

“Problem?” He continued to roll her taut nipple between rough fingers.

Taming an Alpha wasn’t the goal, probably wasn’t even possible. Besides, she loved him exactly as he was. Since she’d already lost her heart, handing him extra advantages wasn’t what she wanted. No, sir. She needed all the edge she could gather. How to even the playing field?

On an inspired impulse, she said, “Yes, Sir.”

He cocked an eyebrow, inviting her to continue.

For a second or two, she weighed the benefits of breaking his rules. So far she’d found his punishments shamelessly satisfying. Still hoping to accelerate his pace, she stuck to his preapproved script. “Permission to speak, Sir?”

“Talk.” His hands drifted lower.

“Could you go a teeny bit faster, Sir?”

His eyes met hers. Then he resumed his thorough mapping of her erogenous zones. “No way. Speed doesn’t work for me, Red. I like to take my time and savor every delectable part of your body.”

He cupped a generous hip, rubbing his thumb over the barely discernable upper ridge of her pelvic girdle. “It’d be a crime to skip over this sweet spot.” His demanding hand slid down to shape her rear cheek. “Or this one.”

Another sigh escaped her. “Yes, Sir. But—”

“Butt, ah yes, I love your butt. Everything I’d ever dreamed of in an ass. World-class, Red.” His voice was deep and rich with approval.

She melted further as his fingers explored the seam between her cheeks.

“There’s not gonna be an inch of you I haven’t licked.” He boosted her atop the washer, shouldering her knees apart.

Scarlet wasn’t totally certain if he’d meant the licking thing as a threat or promise, but either way, it sent heat racing up her neck.

“You’re blushing.” Daniel chuckled without looking up.

“How can you tell, Sir?”

His eyes remained locked on the ginger fuzz covering her slit. “Little kick of spice in your scent.” He thumbed apart her outer lips. “So beautiful, every part of you.” Leaning closer, he inhaled. “Now that’s my kind of perfume. You smell like wild berries and cream. Have I mentioned how much I love to eat berries and cream?”

“Do you feel hungry, Sir?” she asked hopefully.

He chuckled, sliding a thick finger through her ruffles to rim her entrance. When his rough finger penetrated her slit, her hips twitched and she whimpered.

With tender attention to detail, he spread some of the cream spilling from her core around the edges of her needy clit. Then his mouth replaced clever hands, and he sucked her tiny rod, gently, harder, and then back to gentle suction, varying the pressure and the pace until her legs trembled and her entire sex was engorged, aching, and pulsing with need.

At last he caught the nub of raw nerve endings ever so carefully between his teeth. She clutched his shoulders. Her muscles tensed. Her sheath fluttered.

With exquisite tenderness, he nibbled. She arched and exploded, screaming his name. When the fireworks inside finally fizzled to occasional sparks, she pried open her heavy eyelids. Daniel looked back at her with a satisfied grin stretching his face.

She bent her head, kissing the stubborn jawline that framed his smile. “Don’t you want to join me, Sir?”

“It’s a criminal offense to interfere with an officer of the law.”

“Yes, Sir.” She nipped the side of his neck, then licked the small wound. The red mark vanished. She blinked. The bite had healed. Her voice rose in alarm. “Daniel?”

Instantly he was alert and ready to defend her. “What’s wrong?”

“I just healed your neck.”

His shoulders eased. "Thanks, Red."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm in human form."

"Very nice," he growled.

"I healed you while in human form." When he didn't say anything, she asked, "Have you ever heard of an Omega healing except in wolf form?"

"No, I haven't. You're something special."

"Do you think so?"

"Absolutely."

She nibbled her lower lip. "I'm talking about the healing gift."

"I'm talking the whole you. Healing in both forms is a good thing. Quit worrying about it; worrying is my job." He closed the gap between them, stroking a raspy thumb over her lip.

Daniel's touch held magic, strengthening her connection to her wolf, to him, and banishing all her fears.

Best of all, he needed her touch just as desperately. She sighed and snuggled into the hard body sheltering hers with bone-deep contentment. Strong hands molded her hills and valleys while he kissed the pulse in her temple and followed the vein along her face to her neck. His mouth awoke previously dormant hot zones.

Once again, desire sizzled through her nerves, swelling, pulsing, aching for release. His breath hovered above turgid nipples, quivering for his erotic torture. As he drove her wild with need, his control held steady, taunting her.

Defying an Alpha was risky, but until she could make him as crazy with hunger for her as she was for him, true mating was impossible.

With each touch, each kiss, each fulfillment, the connection between them strengthened until she hardly knew where she ended and he began. She hoped the bonding truly was a two-way link—she almost believed. But even if theirs was not a true mating, she would never regret a single moment of her time with Daniel.

With each new intimacy, her love for Daniel grew stronger. She would risk anything, even the bliss of rapture when he possessed her, for a chance at true mating. She pinched the nearest male nipple, startling him into releasing her breast. Ignoring the loss of her own pleasure, she pinched his other nipple and moved in to nip.

Capturing her face, he said, "What the hell, Red?"

Her hands were free, and she used one to cup his sac. The other wrapped around his impressive erection.

"This one-way seduction isn't working for me, Sir."

He bristled.

"I understand you need to be in charge. But I need to participate."

"I can live with that." He covered her mouth with his in a tail-curling kiss. Sneakily he removed her hands during the distraction of his scorching kiss.

"No fair, Sir."

"I'm real fair. Strictly rules-and-order kinda of male."

"As long as they're your rules, Sir," she muttered.

He chuckled. "Smart female."

His thumb rubbed against her cheek, and she tilted into his caress, craving him, craving the magic of her mate's touch. With all due deliberation and then some, he laved the same trail of thrills his hands had traveled earlier. She sighed and melted a little more with each lap of his long, silken tongue.

Carefully he lifted her off the washer and guided her gently until she bent at the hips with her upper torso resting on the warmed metal and her too-full bottom on display.

If she'd been even a tiny bit less excited, she would have been self-conscious. But the moment she squirmed under the pressure of his stare, he spanked her left cheek.

The slap stung and tingled in all her favorite places. Before she considered the consequences, she wiggled again. A second spank lit her right cheek, setting off new sparks of pleasure-pain. Though she wanted to move, wanted to rub the tender flesh, wanted to complain, and really wanted to beg for more, she held still.

Tenderly Daniel kneaded her stinging cheeks until she panted, making needy, inarticulate noises, already riding the edge of another climax. Alone.

She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from pleading with him to join her. Then his thumbs widened the seam of her burning cheeks and his silken tongue slid down the crack.

Too startled to even blush, she gasped and stiffened as the point of his tongue circled her anus and then pressed inside her exit-only sphincter. For a long moment she froze, not at all sure there was anything arousing about having her back passage tongued. Gradually she unwound.

She was a werewolf, for Goddess's sake. Silly to act all prissy about something so natural. When she spent more time in wolf form, she'd probably lick her own rear clean. Certainly she'd clean her pups' bottoms.

Once past a human's bias that had nothing to do with her, she relaxed and enjoyed Daniel's tender probe. When he slid a finger inside her sheath while he licked the puckered entrance, the reaction plunged from pleasant to *holy cow*. She whimpered and jerked, helpless under his determined dual assault.

"You're so hot, tight, and wet for me. Fucking perfect." The words rushed from his lips in a rough grumble of steamy breath.

His body burned, branding her. Slippery fingers left her aching core, circling the borders of her clit with gentle pressure. Tension coiled in every square inch of her body, the promise of release only a heartbeat away.

Then the thick weight of his erection pressed against her excited vulva, seeking entrance. His smooth cockhead pushed in, stretching her sheath. Her channel lengthened and widened, accepting his invasion with gentle lashings of

fresh cream. When he stroked deeper, his voluptuous crown teased the interior ridges of her engorged G-spot, and her hips bucked.

“Again,” he said, hoarse with passion, pulling back and plunging past the same eager bundle of nerves.

At his demand, once again every cell of her body raced toward the point of no return. As her very essence dissolved in a storm of rapture, she screamed, “Please, Daniel.”

He plunged once more, burying himself to the root. Long, hot, ropy blasts of steamy semen bathed her core.

“You’re killing me, mate,” he rasped.

A ripple of aftershocks fluttered through her sex. His cock pulsed in her core, splashing more sperm, giving her comfort.

The talk of her killing him was an obvious exaggeration. She swallowed a sudden lump of sadness because calling her mate was probably the same kind of teasing figure of speech. Not once had Daniel said the words of love she longed to hear. Each kiss, each wickedly sensual caress bound her heart more completely to his. She’d already admitted she loved him. If she said *I love you* right this moment, even if he said the words back, the meaning wouldn’t be the same. If he didn’t say the words—she couldn’t stand to hear evasions. Yet she couldn’t just give up.

Gathering her courage, she said, “When I asked Gracie to be certain Hunter invited you to the party, it wasn’t just because I have more fun when you’re with me.” She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. “When you’re not with me, I’m not whole. I’m not me. I can’t be an Omega without you. It’s just not possible.”

He tightened his hold on her. “I’m sorry, Red. I’m not ready to be part of the dog pack. I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready for pack life. What I am sure of is that I need to be with you more than I need fresh meat.”

She was so eager for hope, her heart beat faster. For a werewolf, fresh meat was vital. What could be more romantic than having this powerful male admit his need for her?

“Good, because a healer with a broken heart isn’t worth her fur. The connection I need most is the one with you.” She held her breath, waiting.

“You make me want to purr.” His words rumbled next to her ear in something that sounded so much better than a purr.

She forced her thoughts back to their conversation, needing Daniel to believe in the possibility of compromise. To believe they could work through this—through anything—as long as they were together. She twisted around to meet his gaze.

“We can manage something with the pack. After all, Gracie’s covered all the packs in the Pacific Northwest by herself for years. She’s never spent more than a few months at a time at Treeland headquarters. The pack can survive with an Omega who lives a few hours away.” She paused, wondering, still hoping. “You tolerated Hunter and the enforcers.”

“Yeah, I did, only because I needed them to kill me if you went rogue.”

She searched his eyes, finding only stark truth staring back at her. She inhaled nothing other than his intoxicating bonding scent. Daniel was deadly serious. “Dear Goddess, why?”

“Rogues are a danger to humans and wolves; they must be terminated. You know this is true.” He kissed her temple.

“I understand pack law. If I went rogue, then the pack would’ve had to terminate me.” There were worse deaths than an enforcer’s silver bullet. “But I do not understand why you would ask the enforcers to kill you.”

He leaned back and gaped at her for a heartbeat, gripping her upper arms hard enough to leave serious bruises if she’d been human. “You still don’t get it. Listen to me, Scarlet. Love isn’t a strong enough word for what I feel for you. You are my breath, my heart, my life. I would kill to be with you. I belong to you.” He cleared his throat. “Would you accept my collar at a mating ceremony?”

Scarlet beamed at him. “Yes, Sir.”

This was all the romance she'd hoped for and more. Her eyes filled with tears of sheer joy. There were many details of mating signals, customs, and rituals she still wasn't certain about, but she was totally certain Daniel was her mate, and she was his.

"And I belong to you," she promised him, stretching for a kiss.

Daniel bent his head, covering her mouth with his. Then he fitted his cock at her entrance and thrust into her core.

Fresh cream gushed from her channel, mingling with his last climax, her inner thighs tightened, and her heels pressed into his very fine ass. His hips rocked against her mound with long, controlled, powerful thrusts.

A fine sheen of sweat misted between them, adding a new slippery texture to the ripples of his torso. She licked the tender vee of his collarbone and sighed happily at the taste, essence of Daniel, sweet and salty goodness—and all hers.

"This time, I want to take things a little slower."

Scarlet groaned rebelliously. In truth, she was totally thrilled to go along with Daniel's plan and well aware his nose told him exactly how she felt. With him in charge, slow was exactly how she wanted to make love with Daniel forever.

Chapter Fourteen

One month later, a glorious autumn sunset splashed fire across the temple grounds. The entry gate bells tinkled merrily, announcing each new guest's arrival. The evening air was still warm, or maybe it was all the nervous heat Daniel threw off that made the dressing room so hot.

He sniffed the air, seeking Scarlet's scent, finding only the familiar reassurance of his old friend Hunter's strength.

"I love a pine fire. Nice to have a fall ceremony. Been a long time," Hunter said.

Daniel ignored his attempt at distraction, tugging his penguin suit and patting his empty pockets. "You have the collar?"

Muttering something, Hunter touched his chest. When Daniel stared at him, he turned up the volume. "Got it right here, pal."

"Got what?"

"Your back, and a damned good thing too. Try to dial it back a notch. You've got another ten minutes. If she's on time." Hunter grabbed Daniel on his next pass and squeezed his shoulders, forcing the pack's calming strength into him.

"Thanks."

Normally Daniel wouldn't have let Hunter mess with his mood. If Daniel had allowed it, he would've given him serious grief.

Mating changed a male. As strung out as he felt, the bond with Scarlet glowed in his chest. A ceremony couldn't strengthen his commitment. But females liked these things. And there wasn't a damn thing he wouldn't do to make Scarlet happy.

A temple bell rang, announcing that Daniel's mate approached the pavilion. Hunter marched with him to his place in front of the guests, where Gracie and the cleric already waited.

Every head swiveled with him, watching Scarlet approach. He bit back a growl of jealousy. She belonged to him. Let the dogs stare.

She wore a traditional red gown to symbolize fertility, her hair swept into a fancy arrangement off her neck, a sign of respect for her mate and to accept his collar.

Daniel held out his hand. She accepted it with a tilt of head to expose her throat. He gathered her close, resting his chin on the top of her head.

Behind them, he heard the entire pack scooting to the edge of their seats, ears twitching to catch the couple's exchange of promises.

The cleric asked, "Who bears witness for this male on his mating eve?"

Hunter took a step forward. "I bear witness for Daniel, a male of honor, worthy of his fur."

The cleric nodded his approval, and Hunter took his place on Daniel's left. "Who bears witness for this female on her mating eve?"

Gracie declared Scarlet worthy and moved to Scarlet's right.

Tilting his head respectfully, the cleric said, "May the Goddess hear your promises. Daniel?"

Daniel carefully turned Scarlet in his arms, still sheltering her. "I promise yours will be the name I cry aloud in the night and yours the face I wake to each day. I promise you the first bite of my kill and the first drink from my stream. I promise to put your needs before mine, your honor before mine, and your life before mine. My heart is yours for as long as I draw breath."

When Daniel paused, Hunter placed the collar in his outstretched palm. "As a token of my love and honor, please accept my collar."

Scarlet bowed her neck, and Daniel fastened the simple gold chain.

The cleric faced her. "May the Goddess hear your promises. Scarlet?"

She spoke clearly. "I promise yours will be the name I cry aloud in the night and yours the face I wake to each day. I promise you the first bite of my kill and the first drink from my stream. I promise to put your needs before mine, your honor before mine, and your life before mine. My heart is yours for as long as I draw breath."

Gracie handed her a collar.

"As a token of my love and honor, please accept my collar."

Daniel bent his head for Scarlet, and she secured his matching gold chain. Then he captured her hand, holding it against his neck.

"Being wolves of worth, Daniel and Scarlet have spoken their promises before the Goddess and the pack. Let every wolf honor their bond. So the Goddess bids; so be it." The cleric beamed at the newly bound male. "You may claim your mate."

Daniel growled, swept Scarlet into his arms, and strode from the pavilion.

No one interfered.

* * *

Scarlet smiled in delight when she spotted one of Treeland's enforcers holding the door of a limo for them. The padded interior and dark-tinted windows made the passenger compartment feel like a private den, especially when Daniel raised the partition between them and the driver.

Scarlet just couldn't stop smiling as Daniel settled them on the roomy back seat and arranged her to face him as the luxurious car merged smoothly into traffic.

A laced decorative black corset emphasized her plumped breasts and cinched waist, setting off the rich red of her traditional gown.

As Daniel patiently unlaced the garment, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Sir."

"I don't want you wearing anything but my collar for at least a month."

She snuggled her nose into the base of his neck, inhaling his wonderful bonding scent. “And fur, Sir?”

“And fur,” Daniel agreed.

Though speech wasn’t really necessary. Her connection to his thoughts was almost as strong as the link with her own wolf. Surprising him would be next to impossible. But Omegas thrived on challenges.

He nipped at her ear. “What kind of surprise?”

“Certainly not my red panties.”

With the corset already discarded, he tugged her dress off, leaving her in a red lace bustier, garter belt, sheer black stockings, and very tiny red lace panties.

“Those are my kind of surprise presents, and I love unwrapping presents.”

Before she really registered his intention, her wrists were bound behind her. So, she noted, fast action was one key to surprising a mind-reading mate.

Carefully Daniel folded down the scrap of lace covering her beaded nipples. “My favorite dessert, ripe berries. Very nice, Red.”

Nuzzling her already aching peaks, he growled.

Although she knew Daniel planned a long, slow ride through the night, the sound of his possession sent urgent signals searing along her nerves until every part of her quivered, waiting for him to claim her.

He tenderly nipped the nearest nipple, rolling its twin between his fingers. When his mouth switched to the other breast, his hand cupped her mound.

“Are you wet for me?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I’m in the mood to spoil you, mate.”

She held her breath.

“What do you want?”

“Fuck me hard, please, Sir.”

Daniel tore away the tiny red panties, freed his cock, and fit himself to her entrance with a speed she deeply appreciated. The thick length of him thrust all the way into her excited sex, filling her to capacity and thrilling her with that extra girth when his cock was fully seated.

“I know what you want. Go ahead. Come for me,” his deep gravelly voice urged her.

She obeyed.

THE END

Evanne Lorraine

When I'm not writing dangerously sexy stories, I'm gardening, walking the dog, or sleeping. Oh yeah, if it's too cold and wet to garden then I'm scouring the house, reading good books, or watching movies.