



The Wolves of Pray
Book One

Pray

By

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Pray

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Dedication

For the Twinks at my crit group, Chapter by Chapter. Y'all are the bomb, like tick tick, I couldn't have done it without you.

And for Bean, who opened her door with a beaming smile and a "Hi Babe!" whenever I came knocking, almost as if she'd been waiting for me all along.

I *miss* you.

Chapter One

Pray, Montana, October 23, 2009

Amalie cursed under her breath and shot the GPS suctioned to the windshield the evil eye. Right before the finish line, twenty-four hours into her twenty-five hour journey, the thing was on the fritz.

She'd hated it from the second she'd turned it on. The bitchy, smug recorded voice calling out instructions—a bewildering ten seconds too late—really rubbed her the wrong way. She'd dubbed the unit “Carole” after her sister, who rubbed her the exact same way. Carole—the GPS—had clearly decided the distaste was mutual, and was giving her the electronic equivalent of the middle finger by conking out in the middle of nowhere.

With a snort of disgust, Amalie pulled off to the side of the narrow road to use her blessedly silent map to try and figure out where the hell she was. She popped the SUV into park and stepped out of the car, the crisp air hitting her like a slap. As she turned to open the back door, a trickle of unrest skittered up her spine. She brushed off the sensation, chalking it up to her intense dislike of being lost.

She reached into the back seat and rifled through her well-worn pack to find the map and a highlighter. After grabbing her thermos of coffee, she tramped over to a birch tree a dozen yards from the road and sank down to spread out her map. The shrubs behind her rustled. She turned her head quickly toward the sound but saw nothing. *Probably just a rabbit or a deer.*

Up close, some might consider the forest intimidating, the hulking trees, the encroaching darkness, but to Amalie it represented freedom in the purest sense: freedom from the phone, the smell of exhaust, the sounds of horns blaring, and most of all, people. The woods were awe-inspiring, sure, and maybe a little creepy as dusk began to settle. Nevertheless, once she found her way to the entrance point, she would be hiking every inch of it for the better part of the next week. What better way to call attention to the plight of wolves in the area than to photograph them in their environment?

As she looked up and took in the beauty of the Montana sky, which somehow seemed bigger and bluer than any other sky, some of her tension drained away. This was supposed to be a working vacation, and she'd promised herself she would enjoy it.

Amalie reluctantly tore her gaze from the glorious view and turned her focus to getting back on the road. She pored over the map, relieved to find where she'd missed a turn. Carole had only cost her about fifteen minutes or so, and it was a relief not to have to backtrack very far.

She pulled the top off the marker with her teeth, snapped it onto the back and carefully highlighted her route so she could see it easily while driving. Satisfied, she leaned back against the tree and sipped her coffee, soothed by the warmth and the scent of Irish cream wafting from the thermos.

Just as her lids began to drift closed for a minute of rest and meditation, she saw a flash of brown. Amalie turned her head sharply and then chuckled. City life was clearly making her soft. She was going to be photographing all sorts of wildlife over the next week and jumping at every little thing wasn't going to cut it. She needed to get a grip.

As she stood to gather her belongings, she froze as another sound came from behind her. This time, there was no chance it was her imagination.

Her heart tripped and her mouth grew dry at the low, menacing growl. She didn't dare move as her body trembled from the strain of remaining still, despite every instinct urging her to flee. The growl continued, accompanied by the sound of slow, deliberate movement and the crunching of leaves, growing louder by the second.

Staying still was no longer an option. Whatever owned the sound was almost upon her and she refused to cower like a child. Straightening slowly and turning to face the beast, her blood ran cold. A large brown wolf crouched low, moving steadily closer, already less than fifteen yards away.

Wolves don't attack humans , especially a lone wolf, she reminded herself. This particular wolf had obviously not gotten the memo, though, because its amber gaze locked on her, ears flattening against its skull as it padded closer.

Amalie gripped the highlighter tightly and cursed her bad luck that it wasn't a pen or sharpened pencil that she might've used as a weapon. Now, the best she could hope for would be to strike the wolf in the eye with the open highlighter when it attacked. The worst? Well...she wouldn't miss.

As the wolf moved closer, Amalie tried to think. She could make a run for the car. It wasn't far, and she was fast. But even if she managed to get there, the time it took to open the door and get in would surely seal her doom. She had the thermos of coffee. While the liquid wasn't hot enough to damage the thickly furred creature, the thermos itself was heavy and could be used as a bludgeon of sorts. Though the wolf seemed large, she might be able to aim a good swing and disorient it enough to dash to the car.

Either way, she was out of time—the wolf was closing in. She reached down slowly to grab the thermos, afraid that any quick movement would escalate the situation. She realized her mistake instantly. Her bent form was at its smallest and off balance when the beast leapt upon her. She slammed into the ground and the air whooshed from her lungs. The highlighter flew from her grasp, but she held on to the thermos. Doing her best to cover her neck and face with her free hand, she struggled for air. The wolf's jaws closed around her side, puncturing her clothes and sinking into her flesh.

She let out an ear-piercing scream as she swung the thermos into the animal's head. The wolf released her for a moment and glared at her malevolently. She raised her arm to deliver a second blow, but another low growl—this one behind her—stayed her hand. With mounting horror

she realized that any slim hope she'd had of escaping this nightmare alive had just evaporated. Holding off one wolf had been a pipe dream, but fighting off a whole pack? Impossible.

Her thoughts derailed as she realized her initial attacker had ceased moving as well. The brown wolf peeled back its lips, let out an answering growl, and slowly stepped off of her, moving toward the sound behind her.

Everything seemed to slow as Amalie rolled to her uninjured side. She barely made it to her knees when the excruciating pain of the bite finally registered through her haze of shock. She fell back onto her side with a cry and turned her head to see the brown wolf approaching another wolf, this one much larger. *A timber wolf, male.*

Try as she might to formulate a plan, or move, or do...*something*, she could not take her eyes off the creature. He was magnificent. The largest wolf she'd ever seen, his coat a burnished bronze. He was so compelling that for a brief, surreal moment she cursed herself for not grabbing her camera when she got out of the car.

The timber wolf stopped growling and, as if he felt her watching him, moved his gaze to hers. She gasped. His eyes were a molten gold flecked with green, and exuded the warmest, most intelligent light. In her peripheral vision, she saw the smaller brown wolf move to take advantage of the timber wolf's distraction.

She screamed as it lunged, and the timber wolf feinted to the right. Amalie cringed as the smaller wolf closed its jaws onto his powerful neck muscles. He'd moved just in time, and was spared a killing bite to the jugular. He snarled in fury as he shook off his attacker and they began to fight in earnest, snarling and snapping at one another.

Amalie shook her head to clear it and fought the darkness threatening to pull her under. Struggling to her hands and knees, she tried to inch her way toward the car, all the while watching the battle. A scant few feet from the car, her vision began to blur. She looked down at her side where a trail of thick, bright red blood flowed steadily from the wound. Nausea threatened and she was forced to stop. Helpless, she turned to watch the battling wolves.

The smaller one wasn't faring well and seemed to finally recognize it was outmatched. It broke away and started to run. Amalie waited for the massive timber wolf to pursue his foe, but instead, he turned his magnificent head in her direction and, panting from exertion, loped toward her. She tried to scuttle the last few feet to the car, but the last of her strength seeped away.

Amalie lay on her stomach and closed her eyes, willing death to take her before the timber wolf's teeth tore into her flesh. Ironical that the very animals she had come here to save would kill her. She looked once again into the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. This time, however, they belonged to the face of a man. Then, she knew no more.

Chapter Two

Liam Albrecht was in a foul mood. And when Liam suffered, they all suffered with him. He prowled the large study in circles like a shark hunting its prey. All of his pent up frustration, anger, and worry had filled him with nervous energy and a violent sense of anxiety. He could cheerfully strangle someone right now.

The woman would live; he was certain of it. And while he was inexplicably relieved and comforted by that knowledge, it was also going to cause problems, *major* problems. His contemplation was interrupted by distant footsteps coming from the far end of the hallway. He could tell by the quick, purposeful stride and the faint scent of lemon it was Maggie. When the knock on the door came a minute later, he was seated behind his enormous walnut desk with his hands folded in front of him, awaiting her arrival.

She didn't wait to be invited in, but swept through the door like a storm, stalked over to the desk and hissed, "What have you done, Liam? What the *hell* have you done?"

Narrowing his eyes, he stared at her hard for a long moment before she let out a shaky sigh and looked away.

"Let's pretend that did not just happen and start over again, shall we?" He hated to pull rank, but she knew better than to challenge him.

She took a deep breath before she spoke again, this time, pasting a smile on her face. "I apologize. Yes, let's start again. Please tell me what happened out there. Rumors are running rampant and I'm... We're *all* very concerned."

"I understand your concerns, but I'm not in the habit of explaining myself. I would never do anything to jeopardize this family. Trust me. Please let the rest of the pack know I've called a meeting with the area alphas for tomorrow night. I would rather control the situation and have the discussion on our turf than wait for them to contact me. Hopefully, the opportunity to speak and obtain answers will appease them for now. I have to work. Shut the door behind you." He picked up the file on his desk and spun his chair around to face the fireplace.

Silence reigned for a taut moment, but finally Maggie's heels sounded on the floor and the door closed with a defiant snap.

Liam let out a long, pent up breath and looked down at the file in front of him. He opened the cover and stared into the face of the woman at the root of all his troubles: Amalie Baptista. He took in the line of her jaw, the stubborn little chin, high cheekbones, and lips that were just a touch too full. But it was her eyes, those damn eyes, that had done him in. A brown so rich they were almost black, almond shaped, and tilted up at the corner. They laughed up at him from the photograph, almost mockingly.

He groaned and sat back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, and repeated Maggie's question, "What have you done, Liam? What the *hell* have you done?"

* * * * *

Amalie awoke groggy and confused. She tried to sit up but regretted it immediately as a throbbing ache in her side registered through the fog. Damn, she felt like someone had tried to rip her guts out.

She gasped as memories assailed her. Someone, no, *something*, had tried to rip her guts out. She'd been attacked by wolves! *No, not wolves*, she mentally corrected herself, *wolf*. She struggled to figure out what had happened after the dark-haired stranger rescued her, but gave up as her head began to pound from the effort.

Where was she? She jerked upright. Pain was eclipsed by fear and confusion as she did a quick survey of the room. It was dimly lit, opulent, and the size of her entire apartment back home. Not a hospital, and

definitely not something she could afford in the way of a hotel room. Had the man who'd helped her brought her to his house?

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and realized she had nothing on but a t-shirt, so large it stopped only a few inches short of her knees. She heard footsteps outside the doorway and scuttled back under the blankets, covering herself from chin to toes.

She chided herself for the silly reaction. The visitor was likely the man who had saved her from bleeding to death. Odds were he wasn't going to molest her. Then again, maybe he was some creeper who'd saved her only to fatten her up, befriend her, and then Buffalo Bill her later.

A soft knock sounded.

"Amalie? May I come in?" A deep, oddly familiar voice.

"Yes." *After all, if he planned on making a dress out of her skin, would he really have knocked?*

As the knob turned, a tingle ran through her. Not born of fear, but of anticipation, which she didn't understand. The door swung open, and she recognized him immediately: the stranger who'd helped her. A bit of the tension seeped out of her. She was glad he hadn't been a figment of her imagination. Stepping into the room, he closed the door behind him. Her breath came out in a gasp as she met his gaze in the dim light.

"Hello," he said after a long moment.

She remained mute and continued to stare at him. The man was...well, beautiful. Over six feet tall with dark hair, he was muscular without being bulky. His face was carved from stone. The severity of his straight nose and sharp cheekbones was undercut by the raw sensuality of his sculpted mouth. And while she took in those details with a quick glance, she was drawn again and again to those eyes. So familiar, a mix of gold and green she'd seen only once before, they burned into hers with an intensity that made her shiver.

* * * * *

Liam drank in the sight of the striking woman lying in his bed and fought a surge of possessiveness. From the second he'd laid eyes on her, he'd suffered a fierce—and puzzling—need to claim her. He tried to keep

his voice calm and his presence as non-threatening as possible. Not an easy feat when he wanted to dig his fingers into her hair and kiss her senseless.

"How are you feeling?" Liam asked as he walked toward her.

"I'm okay. I mean, my side hurts and I have a terrible headache, but I'm okay." She backed up on the bed, her eyes wide.

She looked like she was about to run screaming from the room, so he went to the fireplace under the pretense of adding wood in order to give her some space. The last thing he needed was for her to get spooked and take off. Then he'd have to chase her down, and that wouldn't earn her trust, which he desperately needed if he was going to get them out of this mess.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What were you doing out there? And how did you manage to get us away from the wolves?"

He paused a moment, trying to think of how to answer each question without scaring her, but knowing there was little time for coddling. Tomorrow night he had to meet with the others. He needed to have both a good explanation for his behavior and a resolution to the problem. The alternative was not something he wanted to think about.

He started off slowly, "My name is Liam Albrecht. You're in my home just outside of Pray, Montana, a few miles from where you were attacked. I was out hiking when I heard the commotion. Now, I'm going to get you some food and something to drink. There's some aspirin on your nightstand along with a bottle of water. I'll be back soon. Try to rest while I'm gone. I'll answer all of your questions when I get back. Don't be afraid, Amalie. You're safe here." He turned to go.

"Wait!" she called, her voice shrill with panic. "Don't go. Something...strange happened out there. I can't remember, but I know something isn't..." she trailed off, confusion clouding her dark eyes. He hated leaving her like this, but she needed time to rest and sustenance. If she didn't regain some of her strength before he told her the truth, the shock could send her into a tailspin.

"One hour. I promise." He left, shutting the door behind him.

Chapter Three

Liam finally made his way back to Amalie's room—his room, rather, not that he planned on sharing it with her—with a dinner tray. He knocked, but received no answer. He let himself in, shutting the door behind him, and looked toward the bed. Amalie was sprawled out, dressed in only his t-shirt, the blankets kicked to the floor during what appeared to be a fitful sleep. He set the tray on a table next to the bed and meant to leave, but his mouth went dry as he stood over her. *Man, was she gorgeous.* Long, shapely legs and that ass... He pushed away the carnal thoughts.

She muttered softly in her sleep. He strained to understand what she was saying but all he could make out was the word “hot.” Unfortunately, that was enough. He'd hoped for half a day, maybe more, to explain before she began to show any symptoms. Now, however, it seemed he'd be lucky if he had a few hours before she sensed something amiss within her.

He laid his hand gently on her back and spoke her name to wake her. She was indeed hot, the heat of her skin burning through the t-shirt.

Amalie's body instantly pressed back toward his touch. She moaned, and he swore under his breath as he tried to remain detached. He needed to help her deal with the changes she was going through, not take advantage of her weakness. Liam tried to pull his hand away, but she protested, rolling onto her back. Eyes still closed, she sat up and pulled the t-shirt over her head. She sank back onto the bed, naked but for the bandage on her side. Her breasts were magnificent, golden and full. His pulse thrummed at the sight.

She took his hand again, and pressed it to her shoulder, moving it down her arm, then back up and over to the other arm. The whole time, she made sleepy, sexy humming sounds in the back of her throat.

He groaned out loud, trying desperately to steel himself against her silken skin and erotic murmurs, but he simply couldn't pull his hands away. Her eyes flickered open. She peered at him through a thick fringe of black lashes. Her face was flushed; her brown eyes glassy, and her breathing came short and choppy.

"I feel...funny. Hot," Amalie said. "But no pain at all. What did you give me? Surely aspirin wouldn't have helped that much. Everything seems so crisp and clear. And something is strange. I should be mortified right now. But I'm entirely unconcerned about being naked in front of you."

In fact, as her gaze raked over his body, she seemed rather put out that he wasn't naked as well. Taking the hand she still held, she cradled her cheek with his palm. Then, with slow but infinite purpose, she dragged his fingertips down her neck and across her breast. She arched into his grasp until he cupped her. Her nipple pebbled beneath his touch and she quivered. He pulled his hand back as if burned. She leaned up and wrapped her arms around his neck, then kissed him, her mouth open and hot.

Liam struggled for sanity as she licked at him gently, pressing for entry into his mouth. Helplessly, almost of its own volition, his hand moved back to cover her breast, kneading first one then the other. He growled as she bit and sucked at his bottom lip.

She pulled him onto the bed and climbed over him, straddling him as he sat on the edge. She rode his denim-encased erection and pushed his mouth down to her breast. He was helpless to resist her naked flesh offered so willingly. He latched onto her nipple and sucked hard. She gasped and held his head even closer.

His body temperature rose as Amalie ground her softness against his throbbing cock. He needed to push her away, to focus on the things he needed to tell her, but she was making it damned near impossible. If he didn't stop now, there would be no stopping.

Calling on the last shred of his rapidly waning willpower, he tore his mouth from her breast. "Amalie, we can't. You're going to hurt yourself. There are things we need to discuss. Dammit!" he ground out as she continued to flex her hips rhythmically against him. He grabbed her hands and pinned them behind her. Unfortunately, that only succeeded in thrusting her gorgeous breasts an inch from his face. He closed his eyes, but the sight of her ripe body was burned into his brain.

She pushed against him and he opened his eyes. Desperation shone in her gaze. "Don't stop."

He frowned. She would not, *could* not listen to what he had to say in her current state. He needed her relaxed, and there was only one way to get her there.

Liam took a deep, steadying breath and lifted her away from his body. Unfortunately her delectable scent filled his head—pears and womanhood. *Okay, no more nose breathing.* Amalie struggled as he pressed her down onto the mattress, straddling her. He ran his hands over her lithe body, stroking her heated flesh as she arched and gasped.

She tried to touch him, but he barked, "If you touch me again I'll stop."

Her hands stilled instantly. She arched towards him as he plucked at her nipple and slid one hand slowly between her legs. He dipped one finger into her heat, thrusting with long, firm strokes. She whimpered and her hips began to pump up and down in the rhythm he set, her head tossing back and forth.

Liam bit his lip hard enough to draw blood as he tried to control his instinct, which urged him to bury himself inside her. She was so wet and so tight. He was losing his mind from the effort of holding back. Her mouth was open, her breath coming in short pants, all while she watched him slide his finger in and out of her pussy. He bent low to suck her nipple as he plunged a second finger deep into her. She tensed for a moment, then let out a low, long groan and began to ride his hand in earnest. Her hips arched as he drove his fingers into her again and again, suckling her nipple and murmuring words of encouragement. The blood pounded in his ears as his own body screamed for release.

"That's it baby, let me feel you," he ground out. She came, her flesh pulsing around his fingers as she let out a long, low scream. His cock twitched and jerked in perfect rhythm with her clenching pussy.

Amalie called Liam's name as a storm unlike anything she'd ever experienced consumed her. She groaned as the last wave rippled through her, and she fell back.

As she began to regain her senses, his fingers left her. He swiftly lifted himself up and stood at the foot of the bed.

"What... Why are you going? Did I do something wrong?" she asked, her cheeks hot and her heart pounding.

"Amalie," he said, his voice low and strained, "we need to talk and we had to get that out of the way before you could listen, but I won't take advantage of you more than the situation demands." He looked away from her and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Please cover yourself."

Amalie quickly pulled the sheets up to her neck and closed her eyes in mortification. She'd taken advantage of a stranger. And he didn't even want her. What had come over her?

She heard drawers opening and closing and opened her eyes a crack to see Liam standing over the bed with a couple of t-shirts, gym pants, and a pair of boxer shorts. Those were his clothes. She was in *his* room.

"Get dressed and hop back into bed. Start to work on that tray of food. The liquids will do you good and you need to eat to keep up your strength because of the injury. I'll be back in a few minutes and hopefully by that time we'll both be in a better frame of mind to have this discussion." He handed her one of the shirts and the boxers, and retreated to the open door of the bathroom, leaving her to stare after him, more confused than ever.

Chapter Four

Once in his bathroom, Liam locked the door and turned against the cool wood, banging his forehead once, then a second time. This situation, already dire, was getting worse by the second. He had to get a handle on things or it would mean disaster for them all.

God, she was amazing. Those legs, that mouth, those eyes... His cock throbbed insistently. There was no way he could go back out there like this. He would take a quick, cold shower and try to get a grip before facing her again.

He turned the shower on warm to lessen the shock of getting in and took off his clothes, his erection springing out in relief as he removed his jeans. He stepped under the spray and tried to think of anything but Amalie, inching the nozzle toward cold.

But visions of her sprawled across his bed, those firm, perfect breasts on display, assailed him. He gritted his teeth and made it colder.

He'd never felt anything sexier than his fingers moving inside her tight, wet warmth as she came. Liam turned the nozzle to full on frigid, the water steaming off of his overheated body, and still he throbbed and ached.

Screw it.

He turned the water back to warm and took his aching cock in his fist, squeezing firmly, and let out a low groan. He pumped his hand slowly up and down, allowing the memory of her to wash over him: her scent, the sound of her breath catching in her throat as he touched her, the silk of her skin.

He worked himself faster, his breath coming in pants as he saw her stretched under him, her hips jerking and twisting, his fingers sliding in and out of her.

With a shaking hand planted firmly against the tile, he held himself up as the pressure built low in his stomach. He squeezed his cock tighter, imagining it was Amalie's hand stroking him. Heat pooled in his belly. His movements grew more urgent, until he came in a rush of sensation, groaning her name over and over. He closed his eyes and let the warm water sluice over his face as he tried to catch his breath.

And still, Amalie crowded his senses. God, she was sexy. And he was in trouble. Big trouble.

* * * * *

As soon as Liam left the room, Amalie threw off the covers and dove into the clothes he'd given her. She was still hot, but not as hot as before. Suddenly she was starving. Her stomach growled fiercely as she surveyed the tray of food. Cold roasted chicken, coleslaw, a roll, and iced tea. She'd just put the first forkful in her mouth when she heard the sound of the shower being turned on. *He was naked.* Her pulse pounded and her nipples grew taut.

Willing herself not to think about him, or what she'd just done, Amalie took a deep drink of her cold tea. She settled in to the meal in earnest, almost on autopilot and was just finishing the last bite when she heard what sounded like a low groan from the bathroom. Frozen, she listened intently. Another groan.

Her cheeks burned as realization set in. Liam hadn't left because he didn't want her. He'd left because he did. *Too much.* She was at once pleased and embarrassed. Pleased he wanted her as much as she wanted him, but embarrassed she'd heard what was surely meant to be private.

The door opened a few minutes later and Liam came out fully dressed in a pair of gym pants slung low on his hips and a t-shirt that clung to his broad chest. She couldn't meet his gaze as he dragged a chair next to the bed and lowered himself into it.

"I apologize. I wasn't as quiet as I might have been, and I can tell by the way you're fastidiously avoiding my gaze that you heard me. I hope I didn't embarrass or disgust you, but trust me, it was a necessary evil." He flashed her a rueful smile.

Amalie forgot to breathe for a moment as she took his full measure. The smile, combined with his disarming honesty and damn sexy body, stole her wits. She'd been far from disgusted by his activities, and was only disappointed she didn't get to watch. Not that she was going to tell him that.

All of a sudden, she was really hot again.

"Something is seriously wrong with me," she croaked. "Maybe the bite is infected." Amalie lowered her hand to the bandaged wound on her side and was surprised to feel no pain at all when she touched it gingerly. She pressed harder, still nothing.

She looked questioningly at Liam and reached down to remove the bandage. Her jaw dropped when her flesh was revealed. Aside from being a little pink like a newly healed scrape, it looked fine. No stitches, no wound, and no scar.

"What is this?" she whispered, staring at him.

He met her gaze and spoke quietly, "I'm going to explain everything, but I need to ask you to be quiet until I'm done. I know you have questions but we don't have a lot of time and we need to get through this as quickly as possible. Can you do that?" he asked.

She nodded dumbly, somehow knowing that what he said over the next few minutes was going to change her life in some profound way.

He cleared his throat. "I'm a werewolf. And now, so are you."

Amalie's head began to spin as she struggled to drag air into her suddenly tight lungs. *Holy crap.* She'd almost had sex with a guy who was bat-shit crazy. She was in his bed right now with no weapon, no phone, and no hope of overtaking him. Frantic, she searched the room for an escape route.

"Stop. Look at me."

She did as he commanded.

"Come off the bed and stand before me."

Again, to her confusion, she complied.

It was like her body was not her own. She was inclined, compelled to follow his demands despite her conscious mind urging her to fight or take flight. He was crazy, and she was serving herself up to him.

She tried to fight the pull as he urged her, wordlessly now, to meet his gaze. Panic lapped at her as she willed herself to look away, but couldn't.

"I'm the alpha male of this pack," he said. "Your instincts, though not fully developed, will not allow you to easily disobey me. My mind is going to touch yours again. Don't be afraid, Amalie."

She gasped as visions rushed her consciousness, almost like forgotten memories. Wolves, a dozen or more, running together. She envied their camaraderie as she watched them in her mind's eye, moving almost as one. A flash and the wolves became people. They gathered and talked and laughed, like a large, boisterous family. Another flash, and she saw a tiny brown wolf pup nuzzled by a large white wolf, clearly its mother. Then, an image of the wolf pup alone, howling for his mother's return.

The final vision caused her to cry out. The white wolf, her beautiful fur matted with blood and gore, bullet holes riddling her body, dead at the feet of a man with a gun. Amalie's heart broke, not only for the white she-wolf and her pup, but also for herself. She felt like she'd just lost a loved one. Tears streamed down her face and she turned away in embarrassment. *What was happening to her?*

Chapter Five

Liam watched Amalie and waited, guilt weighing heavily upon him. Barging into her thoughts had been a necessary evil, but that didn't make it any easier. The last thing he wanted was to hurt this woman, which scared the hell out of him. He barely knew her...and he shouldn't care. The family came first, before anyone or anything. But for some reason, she'd felt like a part of him from the very first. And when she looked at him, it was as if he'd found something he didn't know he'd been looking for.

He wished there had been a kinder, gentler way to explain things, but time was of the essence. He could tell by her dazed expression and the slump of her shoulders that she accepted what he said as the truth. She just needed time to process it.

"So now what?" she asked wearily when her tears finally dried. "When the moon is full I turn into a wolf and start killing people? Thanks, but I'd rather be dead." Her eyes were dull with shock, her cheeks still flushed from the insidious changes taking place inside of her.

"No, Amalie. It doesn't have to be that way. That's not how we are. You have a choice. But we can talk more about that later. Here is what you need to know now.

"Your body is changing. And yes, the moon does play a role this first time. Lucky for you the next full moon will be in a few days, so this intermittent period that is causing you discomfort will be short. Turning is uncomfortable at first, mostly because you can't control what is happening, not due to any pain. The physical aspects of transforming are

mild, but it can be scary. I'll be with you every step of the way. After the initial change, you'll have the ability to change at will. It takes practice, but within a few months you'll be able to transition without much effort at all."

"Will I know I'm human when I'm a wolf? Will I feel and think like myself? What if I hurt someone?" she asked, the color draining from her face.

"You'll still have conscious thought, but you'll need to hunt and eat meat. You'll be stronger, faster, and heal more quickly. We're not immortal, but we're damn hard to kill, and werewolves live exceptionally long lives. Two hundred years, sometimes more, barring an unnatural death."

Liam paused for a moment to see if she was absorbing all of the information, or if she had tuned him out. Her clear, focused eyes met his, urging him on, so he continued, "All of your senses will be amplified. Your appetite for all things will increase and have a keener edge. Although we're not 'better' than humans, we're physically superior, and keeping our super-engines running optimally takes more of everything."

"More of everything?" she asked, sounding a little dazed.

"Yes, which is why you needed that orgasm. Even so, I want to apologize. I needed to talk to you, and because of your body's newfound hunger, you couldn't hear me." He smiled. "Maybe I'm just rationalizing my behavior because I wanted to touch you so badly, but I truly didn't see any alternative at the time. I won't let it happen again."

"So, you're saying that I only want you like this because I'm changing? And I would've behaved that way with anyone who'd walked into the room?" Amalie asked, her voice shrill as twin spots of color blossomed on her cheeks. "Am I just going to walk around grinding myself on every guy I see?"

A stab of male satisfaction speared through him as Amalie spoke of wanting him in the present tense, followed swiftly by a bolt of white hot fury at the thought of her rubbing her body against another man. Tamping down his emotions as best he could, he tried to be reasonable in his answer.

"I'm not certain. I've never seen anyone go through the first change. I'd like to believe it's just because I'm so damn irresistible, but I'm not that arrogant." Except, he was. There was no way she would've been that responsive, that sensual, with just anyone. "But there are deeper issues at play here. Amalie, all of the wolves in our pack were born, not turned. Turning a human into a werewolf is not only against the law within the wolf pack of Pray, it's a violation of the Supreme Laws of Wolves by which we are all governed."

"So the wolf who bit me...he's part of your pack? Will he be arrested or..."

"His name is Mikhail. He's a member of another pack, and shouldn't have been in our territory at all. He won't be arrested. There are no 'were-police'. If he'd been trying to turn you, his pack's alpha would've punished him. But Mikhail wasn't trying to turn you. He was trying to kill you. Unfortunately, hunting humans is not against our laws. Many pack leaders forbid the practice, but . . ." Liam had to look away from the horror on Amalie's face before he could continue. "Some don't. They say that hunting a human is no worse than a human hunting a deer for food. So, in the eyes of his alpha, the only law he broke was trespassing on our territory to hunt."

Amalie's eyes hardened. "Well, in the real world we call that attempted murder."

He ignored her sarcasm and dove to the heart of the problem. "Before turning was outlawed, werewolves would 'gift' a beloved human friend or lover with the bite, in order to bestow long life and superior health. In many cases, the human didn't ask for this and turned against their wolf companion, resulting in accusations and witch hunts. In other cases, turned werewolves abused their newfound power without care."

Liam took Amalie's hand and tried to ignore the electricity that arced between them. "I have a very real problem in that you've been bitten by a werewolf and are alive to tell the tale. Someone must be held accountable for your turning. And, as I'm the one who interfered and stopped Mikhail from killing you, I'm responsible."

"So you'll be punished for saving my life?" Amalie asked, her nostrils flaring. "That's absurd. What kind of man would you be if you ignored someone getting mauled?"

"Don't you see? I'm not a man. I'm the alpha male of a wolf pack. I'm *half animal*. Things are not so black and white in my — *our* world."

She swallowed visibly, her neck muscles moving. "So what now?"

"The area packs will meet, a trial of sorts will be held, and a course of action will be voted upon. There are a lot of gray areas here as it wasn't my intention to turn you. But in the eyes of some, I should have let nature take its course."

He didn't want to tell her the rest, but most of his apprehension was for himself, not her. What would keep the other packs from deciding to rectify his wrongdoing by eliminating the problem altogether? He seethed at the idea of someone hurting her.

She lifted her chin, steely determination lighting her eyes. "I'm coming with you. I'll explain what happened and everything will be okay. Well, as okay as things could be, considering."

A surge of pride coursed through him. He'd known instinctively she would be a loyal friend and a fierce enemy. Her offer to stand by him as they faced their accusers only served to strengthen his resolve to protect her. He nodded. "They'll want to see you anyway. And when they do, maybe they'll understand why I had no choice."

She tipped her head to the side, her gaze questioning.

"You have no real sense of how special you are, do you?" He longed to tell her why she was extraordinary, but he'd given her so much life-changing information. She needed time to process everything. "Enough for now. I've given you a lot to think about, and your body needs to rest for the changes to come."

He got up from the chair and walked toward the door. Feeling her gaze on his back, he stopped at the doorway and turned to face her. His heart lurched at the need etched plainly on her face.

He gripped the doorknob, lust racing through him. "Fair warning: you need to stop looking at me like that. Tonight I was as much of a gentleman as a wolf like me can possibly be. But, if you're smart, you'll

keep your distance. I can't promise I'll be able to manage my desire a second time."

She met his gaze in the dim light and replied steadily, "I'll make you a deal, Chief. If you stop looking at me like you want to bend me over something, I'll stop looking back like I want you to." And with that she rolled to her side, and closed her eyes.

As he walked out, Liam shook his head, his mouth twisting into a wry smile. She was amazing. In one day she'd shown him she possessed incredible beauty and strength, loyalty, and a sense of humor. And passion...he couldn't forget the passion. She was on fire, and he wanted her for his own. Now he just had to determine if she wanted him for real, or if her desire was due to her transformation. Only time would tell.

Chapter Six

Amalie awoke the next morning, shocked that she'd slept at all. Initially, after Liam had left, she'd tossed and turned, trying to let everything sink in. Eventually though, the need for sleep had overpowered her and silenced her churning mind.

She looked at the clock next to the bed. 6:00 a.m. She was starving. And hot. What else was new?

Not sure whether she should leave the room, she tiptoed to the door and peered into the corridor. The house was quiet, so she padded lightly down the hall to a set of stairs then cautiously descended into the kitchen. Liam sat at the table alone with a steaming cup of coffee before him.

He raked her with a lengthy, appreciative perusal, from her almost bare legs to her too-tight top. She wondered if he'd given her the boxer shorts and t-shirt for his own enjoyment instead of her comfort. "Good morning," he drawled.

Her nipples tightened under his hot stare, and she turned away quickly. She plucked at the shirt ineffectually, mortified to see it was almost transparent in the morning light.

"Stop looking at me like that." Her voice sounded unnaturally husky, much to her annoyance. "I can't help—" she broke off as a male voice behind her boomed.

"Well, hello there! I'm Billy. And you must be Amalie."

She turned to face a large blond man with emerald green eyes. Gorgeous. He wiggled his eyebrows and bowed gallantly.

Amalie blushed to the roots of her hair. Stammering a quick hello, she turned to Liam and blurted, "I'm hungry but I don't have any clothes, so I'm just going to leave now." And with that, she ran back up the stairs to his room.

She shut the door behind her, threw herself on the bed, and covered her face. What was wrong with her? Every time she got near Liam she wanted to jump his bones, and now his friend had seen her half naked.

She cringed as the door opened and closed.

"I brought you some fruit for now. Once I find you better clothes, I'll come back and take you downstairs for something more substantial."

"Go away," she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

Liam stared down at her and tried to ignore his jealousy. Regardless of what he'd told her, she might very well be drawn to someone else, and Billy was, well, Billy. "Amalie, none of this is your fault. Your physical reactions right now are no reflection on you as a person. Billy is quite a specimen, and I'd be surprised if you weren't attracted to him, given your current state of transition. In a few days you'll be back in control and this will be a distant memory."

She raised her head and gave him a narrowed-eyed stare. "What are you talking about? I'm not attracted to that big oaf. I don't even know him. Some *stranger* just saw my boobs and witnessed us about to jump each other in the kitchen. I'm marinating in my shame. That's a purely *human* reaction, I assure you." She flopped face down back onto the pillow and covered her head with the blanket.

Liam was both shocked and elated. She'd been flustered in the kitchen because she was embarrassed. Not hot for Billy, just mortified. *Sweet.*

He reached down and lifted the blanket off of her, uncovering her backside and legs. Amalie struggled to wrestle the blanket from him but stopped abruptly when he pressed his hand to her shoulder and slowly slid it down her back and over the delicious curve of her ass, stopping to rest on her hip. He squeezed the fullness there sharply, and she let out a strangled squeak.

"Liam," she said into the pillow. "Do not mess with me right now. I'm in a fragile state and I can't take it."

He remained silent for a moment, slipping his hand over the mound of her firm behind, hardening instantly at the feel of her.

"Oh, Amalie, I'm not messing with you. Tell me to stop and I will. But tell me now," he said, as he slid his hand under the waistband of her boxer shorts and squeezed her bare flesh. She writhed beneath his touch, but did not speak a word. He gripped the shorts in his hand and pulled them roughly down her legs, stopping at the back of her knees to caress her lightly there before moving back up her body.

"This needs to come off," he growled, as he grabbed the neck of her t-shirt with both hands. It tore easily in his powerful grip and a moment later lay in tattered halves around her. He wrapped a fist in her long dark hair and pulled, turning her head sharply to one side. He licked and bit at her neck, gently at first then harder as he parted her legs with his hand. He slid one finger down the cleft between her cheeks then slipped into her moist heat as he reached her core. She whimpered and pressed back against his hand.

He worked her with his finger as he trailed his tongue from her neck to her back and down to her bottom. He bit one cheek, and then lapped delicately at the tender spot with his tongue. Grasping her hips, he tossed her onto her back. Her sex glistened moistly just inches from his mouth. It took all of his willpower not to bury his face between her legs and stay there for eternity. But he wanted to tease her. He wanted to make it last.

He closed his teeth over the flesh on her hip then her thigh, kissing and touching all around, but avoiding the sweet spot. She began to squirm.

"What is it, love? Tell me what you want," he whispered darkly.

"Please," she whimpered.

"Please what?"

"Please put your mouth on me, Liam."

"Where? Show me." His cock pulsed as he watched her hand slide between her thighs, and down into her slit.

"Damn, you're sexy."

He took her hand and thrust one of her fingers into her pussy, pressing deep. He almost came just from the sight of it. At the same time, he bent and covered her with his tongue, lapping then sucking. She cried out and moved against his mouth. He quickened the pace, licking and suckling harder and faster. She pulled her hand from his grasp and grabbed his hair, tugging sharply.

"Not this time," she hissed, and pulled him up until he covered her.

She reached between them, clasped his cock through his gym pants, and squeezed. The blood rushed from his head. He was perilously close to exploding.

With a vicious tug he pulled her boxers the rest of the way off, then ripped away his pants and shirt and tossed them aside.

She lifted a hand to his chest, stilling him.

Dear God, she wanted to stop. He closed his eyes in agony and put a hand to the bed, steeling himself to get up and try to walk away.

A puff of warm breath on his stomach was the only warning he had before Amalie's hot mouth closed over his cock. He froze as the remaining blood in his head drained south.

He struggled to stay still as she sucked his flesh, exerting every ounce of control not to thrust himself deep into her hungry mouth. He looked down to where her dark, shiny hair caressed his hips. Her head bobbed over him as she continued her torture.

"Deeper," he groaned, his thighs flexing as she drew him further into the wet cavern of her mouth. His hips moved of their own accord as she sucked him off, harder and deeper each time, until the sensitive head of his cock bumped the back of her throat. He gripped her hair and held her there for a long moment as he willed himself not to come. With a gasp, he pulled her away. The drag of her lips and tongue as she expelled him almost sent him over the edge.

He looked down again and she gave him a siren's smile. Then she slid up his body and pressed her swollen lips to his.

He nipped her sharply, and she moaned.

"No more teasing," he rasped.

He moved over her, positioning himself between her legs. She pulled him close so they were chest to chest, and rubbed her breasts over his torso and stomach. His breathing grew labored as she guided him to her hot pussy. She surged upward, seeking his cock.

Liam pinned her hips with his hands. She couldn't take all of him so quickly. Slowly, he slid into her, inch by inch. Halfway, he pulled out and began the steady slide back in. She struggled against him, begging with her body to take more. He gritted his teeth, fighting to maintain control. Amalie growled, then reached back and gripped his ass with both hands. She pulled him into her until he was seated to the hilt. Gasping, she stilled as her body stretched to accommodate him.

Liam's body screamed for release. He wanted to pump in and out of her until she begged him to let her come. But she lay so quiet, the tiny part of his brain that was still functioning was afraid he'd injured her. To his immense relief she began to bounce her hips against his. He started to say a silent prayer of thanks but was cut short as her slick inner walls squeezed him. He moved too, matching her rhythm with long, slow, deep strokes. They moved faster, and he bent his head to lick and suck her nipple as he plunged into her again and again.

Her body tensed, tightening around him, and a low, vibrating moan started deep in her throat. He swelled to the point of pain and thrust further into her. His stomach grew tight and a tingling sensation spread to his loins. She called his name, her nails digging into his back.

"I'm here," he murmured as she sobbed and convulsed. He tried to wait so she could come again and again, but she gripped him so tightly, her pussy milking him like a fist. Then she pressed her luscious lips to his, and stabbed her tongue into his mouth. She rolled her hips, and her thighs squeezed him. All conscious thought fled as his body flexed one last time. He thrust deep, groaning her name as his body exploded, and he emptied himself into Amalie.

Chapter Seven

Amalie awoke a few hours later to find herself cocooned in Liam's strong arms as he slept. She looked at the clock then burrowed deeper into the covers. At that moment, she felt fabulous, despite the upcoming meeting. She pressed her head to Liam's shoulder and kissed him on the neck. He stirred and squeezed her closer.

"Good morning again, love."

Unfamiliar warmth spread through her at the endearment. Was it merely an offhand remark, or did it truly reflect some depth of feeling?

"Good morning again to you too."

He stroked his fingers along her bare spine. "We have the whole day before the trial, and I'd like to spend it with you."

"I'd like that," she responded, careful to keep her tone light. It wouldn't do to let him know how close she felt to him already, as if they'd been lovers for years instead of hours. Or how the promise of spending the day with him was as thrilling as the bike Santa had brought one Christmas morning. But at the same time, she wasn't going to turn away the opportunity to spend time with him. Especially since their time could be so short. After the trial, it could all be over.

What if she never saw Liam again? Amalie swallowed the lump suddenly lodged in her throat. Choosing not to examine that too closely, she asked the question that had been in the back of her mind since the night before.

"Liam, the image of the white wolf has been haunting me. Would you tell me about her?"

His smile disappeared. Her stomach churned. His eyes lost focus, and his mind seemed to wander, perhaps to some distant memory. "Sara was a member of our pack. Her mate is...was Sean. They have a son, Ryan. We'd taken him on a hunt. Sean had been away on business, but Ryan had begged to come along. Sara agreed, but wanted to start him with something small. The two of them went away from where we hunted larger game so she could teach him to track rabbits." He smiled then and her heart tripped. "Little Ryan was off the wall with excitement, hoping to call his dad that night and tell him about his first rabbit."

Liam's eyes turned glassy, and Amalie held him tightly as she tried to control her own emotions.

"Sara was careful to stay in the most remote part of the forest as Ryan still hadn't mastered changing yet. Sometimes he shifted back and forth when trying to maintain wolf form, and she wouldn't risk anyone witnessing him shift. I was with the rest of the pack. We'd already taken down an elk when we heard the shots."

Liam began to tremble, his voice breaking as he took a breath. Tears burned down Amalie's cheeks as she waited for him to continue.

"We all immediately reached for Sara's mind to see if they were okay, but she was gone so quickly. We ran as fast as we could, but by the time we got there, Ryan was circling her bloodied body, whimpering. I tried to see what had happened through his consciousness, but he was in shock. It was almost like he didn't even know what had happened. All I could gather was that a large man had come out of nowhere and fired at him. Sara dove in front of him and took the shot.

"Although one shot would have felled a regular wolf, a werewolf like Sara would have healed from that in minutes. But the man kept firing and firing, as if he knew..." Liam's muscles bunched tightly beneath Amalie's hands. She wanted to ease his pain, but it seemed his recounting of the tale might lessen his anguish, if only for a short time.

"Ryan ran, but not far. When the shots ceased, he returned to his mother and we arrived moments later. She'd taken eighteen bullets, some at unbearably close range. There was too much damage inflicted too quickly for her body to heal.

"I wanted to find him and kill him. I could smell him in the area, probably looking for Ryan, but as much as we wanted revenge, we had to get the child-cub to safety. We brought him back to the house and left the women to care for him while we retrieved Sara's body." The flesh around Liam's mouth paled, and Amalie knew what he was going to say next. "She was gone. Her murderer was no ordinary hunter, and I don't think we've seen the last of him."

Amalie hardly knew Liam, but she'd be willing to bet he was right. She stroked his back, drawing calming circles over his smooth flesh with her fingertips. "I suspect your instincts are rarely wrong."

"In the past few months I've tried to work with Ryan to get him to remember the man's face so that we can see him and find him. But he can't, or won't, remember. And I don't blame him. It was the worst day of my life. I can't imagine how awful it was for the boy."

He hugged her close and they rocked together, mourning the loss of Sara. They fell asleep like that, wrapped in one another's arms.

* * * * *

When Amalie awoke next, it was to the sound of her own stomach growling. Liam's low chuckle rang in her ear.

"Hungry, love?"

"Starving."

He went down to the kitchen and came back a little while later, arms laden with a heaping tray of food. They made a picnic on the floor and talked as they ate.

"So, Amalie Baptista, what were you doing in the big, bad forest all alone? Didn't Little Red Riding Hood teach you anything?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

She gave him a cheeky grin. "I love the outdoors. And Little Red Riding Hood *did* teach me something. In fact, the whole reason I came to Pray was to kick off my campaign to reinstate laws to protect the wolf population. I'm a photojournalist and came to document their importance and value to this area. I want the public to see how precious they are."

"I didn't realize you were so passionate about the subject."

Amalie nodded, warming to her topic. "The government's position is horrific. As soon as area residents began to complain about the burgeoning wolf population, Fish, Wildlife, and Parks was more than eager to issue hunting licenses. Never mind the wolves are a bad winter or minor epidemic away from the endangered list. I'll never understand how a person could kill such beautiful creatures. Their capacity for love and ability to nurture and build relationships is almost human-like."

Liam had stopped eating and was staring at her with something akin to wonder.

"What?" she asked.

"You. You're the beautiful creature."

Her face was hot from her passionate diatribe, as well as from his flirtation. "Stop distracting me from my point. It isn't fair that wolves were almost wiped from existence. And for what?" she demanded, pounding Liam's chest for emphasis. "Because they hunted elk that people wanted to hunt for themselves? This earth belongs to all creatures, not just man."

Liam leaned in and kissed her hard on the mouth then grinned. "You're wonderful. And gorgeous to boot. All fired up over something most people couldn't care less about. You really are special, Amalie, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure everyone knows it tonight."

Her heart began to pound and her body temperature spiked as Liam kissed her again, this time with lascivious intent. Pushing the food aside, Liam did as she'd hoped and bent her over on all fours. He entered her quickly, almost violently.

All of her apprehension melted away as he rode her hard from behind, driving his cock in and out at a punishing pace, branding her...owning her.

Without a slow, purposeful build up, her climax struck like a freight train, blurring her vision. She cried out, her legs quivering as she planted her ass flush against his hips, holding him deep while her muscles clutched his throbbing cock.

Liam leaned forward, draping his frame across her back to clamp his teeth on her shoulder. She rotated her hips once, grinding against him. His body tensed. He groaned as his orgasm rocked him.

When her heart stopped racing, Amalie lowered herself to the floor and pressed her face to the soft carpet. Liam followed, sprawling his body over hers, taking the brunt of his weight on his knees. He pressed a soft kiss to her nape, and stroked her side rhythmically as they caught their breath.

They spent the rest of the day in bed, trying to distract each other from thinking about what was to come.

Amalie awoke from a catnap to Liam's mouth on hers. She was deliciously sore, satisfied, and, for once, blessedly cool. The beast growing within her had been sated, at least temporarily. She arched against him and sighed.

"There's nothing I'd rather do than stay here with you, but we have a meeting to attend," he said gently.

Everything came rushing back and Amalie sat up, filled with determination. She'd found complete and total bliss for the first time in her life with Liam. There was no way she was going to let someone take it away before they had a chance to see if a relationship between them could work.

She took his hand and squeezed his fingers. "Let's go."

Chapter Eight

An hour later, Amalie tried to quell her nervousness as they approached the great room of the house where members of the area packs were waiting for them to arrive. She and Liam had risen and dressed quickly, Amalie donning clothes borrowed from Maggie, who she had yet to meet.

They were late. They'd tried to leave earlier, but Amalie had been assailed by a particularly brutal hot flash. Her fear and nervousness were wreaking havoc on her already chaotic body chemistry. Liam had convinced her to lie down for a few minutes while he pressed a cool, damp cloth to her face and forced her to drink two glasses of ice water.

Now, as they prepared to enter the room she said a silent prayer for Liam's safety. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze and released it to open the door. He walked in first and she followed behind, keeping her attention on his back.

Everyone else was already present and seated. She heard murmurs and whispers from the dozens of attendees, but tried to shut them out as he led her past rows of occupied chairs to the center of the room. Her skin felt too tight for her body, and she was beginning to overheat again as her earlier sense of well-being evaporated.

Liam stopped next to a table at the front of the group. He gestured for Amalie to sit at the table and followed suit. Three men sat at a second table. They radiated confidence and power. Clearly they were the other pack leaders.

The room quieted as Liam cleared his throat and began to speak. "We are here to discuss the events that took place on Pray lands two evenings past."

Amalie started at his cool, authoritative tone. Something within her stirred... a sense of pride in him and a bone-deep respect. She understood in a flash that it was the wolf in her recognizing him as the alpha male of her pack. She'd expected to feel resentful at the whole alpha male thing. After all, wasn't she setting women's lib back a hundred years? Not really, because as much as she respected him, he respected her. They each had their place within the pack—assuming they let her stay.

Her gaze was drawn to Liam, to his powerful body pulsing with vitality. In fact, the entire room was focused only on him. She let go of her reservations and embraced the feeling of being a part of something, a part of Liam.

"Thank you all for coming. I would have come to you, but given the circumstances, I thought it best to keep Amalie here until after the change. She has been through quite a lot." Liam spoke respectfully, making eye contact first with the alphas then the rest of the audience.

As he spoke, Amalie's eyes flitted around the room, trying to gauge the mood. She froze as her gaze connected with a pair of amber eyes that seemed familiar: eyes as cold and empty as a child's doll. Mikhail. He gave her a wolf's grin. He looked so pleased, like he knew something she didn't. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Icy fear chilled her heated body, almost paralyzing her. Then, a comforting presence enveloped her, like a warm hug, filled with compassion and support. She looked up and saw Billy watching her, and she knew, as clearly as if he'd spoken the words to her, that he accepted her. Tears of gratitude sprung to her eyes.

Tentatively, she reached out further with her mind but could only feel Liam and Billy. That was okay. She was not alone; she was part of something, a pack of three at least, for as long as she was allowed to stay in Pray. Strengthened, she pulled her gaze away from Billy's and defiantly met Mikhail's malevolent stare. She broke away when Liam's consciousness pulled at her. He wanted her to pay attention. She snapped to it.

Liam had stopped talking and a middle-aged ginger-haired man, one of the alphas, stood.

"I am Joseph, Big Sky Canyon Wolf Pack," he said. "To my left is Alexander of the Kotke Wolf Pack," he gestured to a wiry, sandy-haired man with a cold gleam in his eyes. "And to my right is Niles of the Stone Creek Wolf Pack." He pointed to a very large, almost bear-like man with black, bushy hair and a serious expression.

"I have been chosen by the pack alphas to mediate this inquiry. I've spoken to many of you over the past two days and have gleaned that Amalie was hunted by Mikhail. Liam, you intervened to prevent the kill, but she was bitten. Does anyone dispute this?" he asked, looking specifically to Liam.

No mention of Mikhail hunting on Pray lands? Liam bit back a sharp retort, but managed to rein his emotions. "What you say is true. But why isn't Mikhail up here as well? And why doesn't your narrative include his trespassing?"

Joseph nodded stiffly. "It's true we did not expect to deal with his crime of trespass this evening. He was only a few miles outside of his territory, and frankly, his transgression pales in comparison to the events that followed. It's imperative we focus on the more immediate problem. We have not dealt with a turning in a very long time."

Liam flexed his hands to keep them from fisting. This wasn't going well. Joseph was one of the three pack leaders present, but he wasn't Mikhail's pack leader. And that meant that Mikhail had the support of not only his own pack, but the Big Sky Canyon Pack as well. If he already had two of the other three packs aligned with his cause...well, he and Amalie were fighting an uphill battle.

He'd take that fight—he didn't have another choice. "I ask to put that decision to a vote. Mikhail's trespassing was the catalyst for all of the events that followed. I don't see how he can be absolved of guilt. He was on my land when he attacked Amalie. None of this would have happened if he hadn't been on *my land*."

Murmurs of disapproval came from the back of the room. Liam cursed himself for his poor choice of words. To Mikhail's brethren, the Kotke Wolf Pack, calling the hunt an "attack" was offensive. An attack

was vicious and insinuated cruel intentions. While some of the Kotke werewolves held a certain disdain for humans, most did not hate them any more than a man might hate a cow or a turkey. He'd let his own fury and outrage on Amalie's behalf get in the way of the diplomacy that was required of someone in his position.

He decided to push forward rather than call more attention to it by back-pedaling, hoping that though he may have alienated a few, most would see the reason of his argument.

"I don't want to downplay the events that followed, but the events are tied together and should be dealt with together. All those in favor of Mikhail joining us at the inquiry table, lift your hands." As Liam's eyes scanned the room, it was clear the majority agreed with him. He let out a pent-up breath. It was a start.

Mikhail stood and walked over to the table. He passed close enough to Amalie's chair that his body brushed her shoulders. She flinched. Liam longed to kill him where he stood.

Mikhail sat down next to Liam and gave him a mocking grin. Liam's previous interactions with Mikhail had been few, but he'd always seemed like a punk. Clearly Liam's instincts had been correct.

Joseph cleared his throat. "As I was saying, there is no dispute with regard to the events that took place. But right now we have come together for answers to questions and solutions to problems. Prior to your arrival we took a vote about the girl. It was decided, almost unanimously, that she should not be at this meeting. She is a human until the full moon and has no business attending these proceedings. There is nothing she can offer to the discussion and, moreover, we cannot allow her presence to sway us from doing what we know to be right for our race. She has no understanding of our ways and allowing her further insight when she is not yet one of us seems foolhardy to the point of recklessness."

Joseph motioned to a dark-haired woman from the Big Sky Canyon Pack whom Liam considered a friend. "Chandra, please escort the young lady into the sitting room next door."

As she walked toward the table, Chandra refused to meet Liam's eyes. He understood her fear, all of their fears. They were afraid of the unknown, afraid of reliving the horrors their ancestors had suffered.

Having their homes burned and being hunted as demons. And the loss of Sara was so fresh in their minds.

He just wanted them to have the chance to know Amalie, because once they did, they would realize she could be trusted.

He felt Amalie's wild-eyed gaze on him and tried to calm her with his mind.

"Liam, please, I need to stay. What if they hurt you?"

"Don't worry, sweetie," Mikhail whispered silkily, just loud enough for the three of them to hear. "If they kill Liam or send him packing, you and I can finish where we left off."

Chapter Nine

Amalie gasped as Liam growled low in his throat and leapt to his feet. He grabbed the ends of the table and flipped it as if it were a pile of twigs. Mikhail stood and moved, swinging wildly at Liam, landing a glancing blow to his side. Liam's huge fist went flying and connected solidly with Mikhail's jaw, a loud crack sounding through the room.

Amalie grabbed Liam's arm and held tight. He looked down at her, eyes blazing with fury, and she realized he was not himself. He had begun to change, shoulder muscles bunching, the shape of his face altering just slightly. She gaped and pulled her hand back.

A moment later, the alphas latched onto Liam and Mikhail, dragging them apart. Mikhail also struggled not to change, but was having less success than Liam. He was almost completely wolf when Chandra grasped Amalie's arm.

"Come now. It's dangerous for you to be here." She pulled Amalie toward the door.

Amalie looked back at Liam and as their eyes met, the fiery rage in his gaze died out. He touched her mind, reassuring her that he was okay, that everything would be okay. She allowed herself to be led away, knowing she had no alternative. Hadn't she caused him enough grief already? If her presence was going to add fuel to the tension between him and Mikhail, maybe he was better off if she was out of the way.

She stared at him as long as she could, pressing into his mind over and over, just in case she never had the chance to tell him out loud, "I love you. I love you."

* * * * *

Liam struggled against the hands grabbing at him and stilled as he watched Chandra guide Amalie from the great room. His stomach clenched and his heart tripped as realization dawned. As an outsider, she was a problem easily solved. He knew, with gut-wrenching certainty, they wanted to kill her. They hadn't demanded she leave because she didn't belong, but because they didn't want her to know they'd already decided her fate: that it was too dangerous, no, they were too fearful, to allow her to live. And while some probably believed that as a lesser being she didn't deserve such consideration, the majority would have found it cruel to speak of the sentence in front of her.

I love you. I love you .

Liam closed his eyes and tried to quell the nausea that overcame him as Amalie's emotions crowded his brain. He blocked her quickly, sickened he couldn't respond, but knowing if he opened himself to her she would feel his fear.

The loss of Sara weighed so heavily upon him. The knowledge that he'd failed her so completely had almost crippled him. He had been her alpha and he hadn't protected her. Losing Amalie, the thought of never seeing her again... It would break him.

Determined, he turned to the alphas working on calming Mikhail. Liam tried to lift a hand, but realized with a start that his arms were still pinned to his side. He looked up to see Billy's face.

"You okay, Boss? Under control?" He loosened his grip and, at Liam's reassurance, released him completely. He tugged Liam away from the rest and spoke in low tones. "It's bad, man. I tried to tell them. I tried to argue, but they're hell-bent. Even some of our pack... They're just afraid, you know? What happened to Sara is still fresh in their minds. Most humans can't be trusted." Billy's gaze met his with frank honesty. "We argued that any discussion should wait until you arrived, but the Kotke pressed their advantage. It was like they were trying to incite a mob. They're willing to forgive your crime if you demonstrate remorse. But to do so would be to admit saving her was a mistake and one you

wouldn't repeat. They want Amalie destroyed. I'm willing to stand by you, and by Amalie, but you need to convince the rest of them."

Liam nodded once, bile rising in his throat. Desperation clawed at him as he reached out to Billy's consciousness. He allowed Billy to feel the churning in his gut, to see Amalie through his eyes, to feel his terror for her, his rage at the idea of her being hurt. He closed the connection after just a few moments, but it was enough.

Billy's face morphed into a mask of determination. "If you can't sway everyone, then at least show our pack what you showed me. Screw the rest of them. We need to unite on this if we have any hope of saving her."

Around them, the commotion had quieted. The table was righted by one of the alphas and Joseph asked everyone to be seated once again. He sat himself between Liam and Mikhail.

"Let us continue," he said sharply. Werewolves' tempers were sometimes short, and quick bursts of violence between packs were not uncommon. In fact, given the circumstances, the lack of an altercation would have been surprising. Still, Joseph took the opportunity to use the outburst to further his cause, which Liam noted with disgust.

"Already this *human's* presence has caused tension and violence between our packs. We may not always agree, but in order for our survival we must stick together. We cannot allow this mistake to cost us our existence, and I fear that is what is at stake. All those in favor of removing the risk, in the most humane way possible, lift your hands."

When no one immediately stirred, hope flickered within Liam. It died quickly when first one, then two, then many more hands raised. Soon, half the room had their hands in the air, but most would not meet his eyes.

Liam stood.

"Brothers and sisters, lower your hands until I have said my piece. I'm willing to accept any punishment you see fit for my interference. But I cannot accept that you would condone pre-meditated murder. You can try to pretty it up, and tell yourselves you voted to 'correct a mistake' or 'remove a risk'. But if you paint a cow chip gold, at the end of the day, it's

still a piece of shit. And planning to kill an innocent woman is still murder. Is this what we have become?"

As he stared around the room, many squirmed in their seats. Even for the Kotke pack, a hunt was one thing, but cold-blooded murder? Hope rose in Liam's heart.

Alexander, Mikhail's alpha, stood. "Bravo, Liam! That was a rousing speech. However, the fact remains that you interfered with the circle of life. When you watch the Discovery Channel and you see the little baby elephant about to be overtaken by the lions, don't you think the cameraman could do something about it? Except he doesn't. Because that is nature, Liam. That is life. It is sometimes cruel and difficult. Survival of the fittest." Some of the audience nodded, but Alexander's speech had only swayed a few. Unfortunately, however, he wasn't finished.

"And what's your plan if she lives, Liam? She stays and becomes part of your pack? What will happen when this woman's loved ones come looking for her? Attention. We end up under a microscope. Her family will ask questions: Are we a cult that convinced her to leave her life behind? Why does she seem so different? You're bringing destruction to our doorstep, and for what? Because you're a sucker for a pretty face?" Alexander sneered in disdain.

"We've already lost one wolf this year to humans. Are you willing to risk us all? Or maybe you think that once she changes she'll go back to her city life and pretend that nothing happened? It's cruel to let her think that. She'll need to move to be near the woods, probably have to quit her job. She'll have nothing in common with family or friends, and they'll start to ask questions then, too. She'll suffer depression from not being with a pack, and eventually she *will* tell someone, if only to share her pain. And then what? This cannot end well, Liam." Alexander's voice rang with sincerity, but Liam saw the crafty look in his cruel eyes.

Liam looked into the faces of his pack and realized he'd lost them. Billy looked at him imploringly. *Show them*, he urged.

Alexander's voice boomed. "All have had their chance to speak. Let us have a final vote. All those in favor of eliminating the woman, hands up." Liam watched helplessly as the hands rose around him. He looked

across the room to see Sean's hand rise, then Maggie's, and then two more from his pack.

Billy was right: he had no other choice. He was losing them. He pressed his consciousness outward as forcefully as he dared, putting everything out there. They would see, through his eyes, Amalie's tears for Sara and her outrage on behalf of the wolves. They would feel his pain and fear, and most of all; they would know how he felt about her. As he poured out his heart and his love, he prayed.

Sean's gaze snapped to meet his. Maggie's hand stilled, only half-raised.

"The woman is my true mate," Liam growled, the rightness of his words lending him strength. "She will stay here with us and become part of our pack. She has only one sister for family, and she will not look for her. You, my pack, have trusted me to safeguard you and make good decisions these past thirty years. I trust and believe in Amalie. If you have faith in me as your alpha you will accept my decision and put your hands down now."

He took a deep breath, and tried to keep his voice steady. "If not, you have two options. You can leave the pack, or, if the majority of you feel I'm wrong, Amalie and I will leave together."

He scanned the room. "For the rest of you, know this: vote or no, brother or not, the first to touch my mate will have to come through me first."

Liam held his breath, as the world seemed to move in slow motion. Hands began to lower, and Liam was relieved to see all of his pack's hands at their sides. He would have followed through on his threat if he'd had to, but losing a member of his pack would have been like losing a limb, and leaving would have been devastating.

He waited to see what the other packs would do. The Kotkes still had their hands high in the air, as did the majority of the Big Sky Canyon. Liam was glad to see that Niles and all of Stone Creek were with him. At least they had one ally.

Joseph looked at him coldly. "This is not how we do things, Liam. A vote must be ca—"

Liam didn't let him finish. "As I said Joseph, a vote is pointless. Regardless of the results, you cannot have her."

Joseph and Alexander stood and called to their respective packs. Joseph, in his ignorance, wanted to cling to the old, rigid ways. He could not accept that Liam was bucking the system, and as the elder, the slight would not be easily forgiven.

As for Alexander, Liam wondered if he had given him too much credit all these years. He sensed a cruelty in him that he had not seen before, and if Mikhail was any indication, some of his pack had a similar nature. Werewolves were just like people in that sense. There were good and bad. He'd maintained ties with the Kotke because he'd believed they needed to stick together. But at what cost? It wasn't worth compromising his morals or beliefs.

They had nothing in common with the wolves of Kotke and had just needed a catalyst to break away from them altogether. And Joseph and the Big Sky wolves needed to be more adaptable. Perhaps someday they could mend fences, but for now Liam felt free and right for the first time in a long while.

Alexander moved toward the door, then turned and met Liam's gaze. "You've not heard the last of this," he promised. "You've made a dangerous enemy in the Kotke. Watch your back." He marched out, his pack following close behind him.

Joseph stood by the door and called to Chandra, who was still in the sitting room with Amalie. The door burst open and Amalie bounded across the room into Liam's arms.

He held her tight. "I love you. I love you so much, Amalie. Will you stay with me?" he murmured into her sweet-smelling hair.

She sobbed and nodded. "Thank God you aren't hurt!" She kissed his face repeatedly. "What happened? Tell me what happened. I was so worried." As he held her body close to his, he touched her mind so she could see what had transpired.

Chandra stood in the center of the room.

"Chandra, let's go. We leave this place now," Joseph barked. He turned, assuming she would follow.

Everyone's attention turned to Chandra, who shook her head slowly. "No, Joseph. In order for a pack to work, wolves must feel their alpha is the best choice to lead them. After what I witnessed tonight and after spending time, albeit short, with Amalie, I'm no longer convinced you're the one I would follow."

She turned to face Liam. "I would like to stay with the wolf pack of Pray, if you will have me."

Liam reached for his wolves, mentally posing the question. Their responses came quickly. It was unanimous; and just like that, they were twelve.

Joseph gave Chandra a steely glare and stormed out of the room.

Niles moved toward the door. He stopped and grasped Liam's hand. He chuckled, his round face wrinkling into a huge grin. "Well, you sure stirred the shit didn't you, boy-o? That's all right. I never liked them anyway. It was time, Liam. And whatever the ramifications, we'll deal with them together." He gestured to his group and they filed out the door.

Finally, it was just Liam and his pack, both old and new. He turned to them. "Thank you. I'm humbled by your trust and I promise I won't disappoint you."

They all came in close and, one by one, hugged him and Amalie. Sean was last in line, and Liam felt his pain.

Amalie held her hand out to him, and, reluctantly, he took it. "I know it was hard for you to put your trust in a human. I promise I will strive to deserve it every day of my life."

"I didn't do it for you. I did it for Liam, and for myself. I can barely get through the day now, but I manage for Ryan's sake. If I allowed Liam to suffer that same pain, what would that make me? I would not willingly put anyone through such grief. For now, I'm withholding judgment on you. It may take me a while, Amalie." With that, he turned and headed upstairs to check on his sleeping son.

"So is it time to eat or what?" Billy asked hopefully, and they all headed into the kitchen, leaving only Liam and Amalie behind.

"You hungry?" Liam asked.

"Nope," she replied, and they both laughed as her stomach growled. "Well, yes then. But we can eat after." She leaned up and nipped at his chin.

"You don't have to tell me twice, woman." He scooped her into his arms and jogged lightly up the stairs to their bedroom where he closed the door and locked it behind them.

Epilogue

October 31, 2009

The air was cold and crisp in Pray, Montana on Halloween night. Under a moon so full it appeared as if it might burst, the forest pulsed with life. A large, male timber wolf padded forward into a clearing. A sable female of uncommon grace and beauty followed close behind him, her nose brushing his flank. They stood bathed in moonbeams and waited as the rest of their pack moved into the light. The male wolf let out a long, soulful howl and all but the sable wolf joined him in song. Their chorus rose and swelled until she, too, was swept up. She tested her voice, letting out a wobbly howl. The wolves nipped and nudged her playfully as she did, both teasing and encouraging. The timber wolf then turned and loped off, picking up speed as the rest followed. Soon they were running. Separate beings moving as one, in perfect harmony with one another and their land.

* * * * *

Just a few miles away in a little cabin, seated in front of a cozy fire sat a man. He poured over maps, jotted coordinates, and absently stroked the good luck charm strapped to his belt: a white wolf's foot.

He laughed to himself as he thought about the past few months. After years of searching he'd finally caught a break. He'd botched the opportunity because he hadn't known everything. But now he did, and soon he would be avenged. Soon everyone who had laughed at him and

mocked him would be a believer. Soon he would have living proof. Proof that monsters exist, and they live in Pray, Montana.

The End

Author Bio

Christine Bell is one half of the happiest couple in the world. She and her husband currently reside in Pennsylvania with a four-pack of teenage boys and their two dogs, Gimli and Pug. When she isn't acting as maid, chef, chauffeur, or therapist, she can be found reading about poker theory and vampires. (Not in the same book, of course. Wait, do they have those?) She hates bugs (except ladybugs on account of their cute outfits) and thinks clowns are creepy as hell. She *loves* writing about love and will never stop writing sexy romance stories, although she also hopes to one day publish something her dad can read without wanting to poke his eyes out with sharp sticks. You can find Christine at: www.chrisbwritin.blogspot.com.