# Full ever

Sabrina Luna

#### **Whiskey Creek Press**

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#### **FULL MOON FEVER**

by

Sabrina Luna

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

#### **Published by**

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#### WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

MIDNIGHT ENCOUNTERS BAD MOON RISING by Sabrina Luna

"Simply a great shifter romance. Luna leaves you cheering for Derek and Megan, both as a team and also lovers. The ending will leave you satisfied, while also making the whole story worthwhile."

Denise Kivett
PNR Reviews

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# Other Books by Author Available at Whiskey Creek Press:

www.whiskeycreekpress.com Midnight Encounters Anthology [Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Dedication**

To the ladies and gentlemen of Carolina Romance Writers for your continuing support and encouragement—thank you!

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#### **Chapter 1**

"Damn it!" Jacqueline Hamilton snapped off the radio in frustration. She flexed her hands on the steering wheel of her Volkswagen Beetle, then cast a glance up to the early evening sky. Gray, puffy clouds loomed overhead and the moon was hiding. "Fine time for a wintry mix warning," she grumbled, depressing the accelerator. She had to reach Heather Grove for her assignment and avoid getting stuck in the oncoming weather.

It was all her editor's fault. "I swear, he's sending me out here on a wild goose chase!" But she'd wanted it bad. So bad, she could taste it. This was her big chance to prove herself as a competent, full-time columnist for The Inside-View magazine.

"Jac, you have a good news-sense. You really know how to go after a story, no matter how strange it may seem." Frank Collins, her editor had grinned at her over his chaotic-looking desk.

"Thanks." She'd blushed, recalling her most recent story about a 'haunted' pirate ship. She hadn't found anything 'ghostly' about the ship. No phantoms—just a few squeaky boards and cold air that leaked in through the narrow wooden planks. But, being a creative writer, she'd managed to squeeze out a story on the ship based on its infamous history.

"That's why I want you to take this story in Heather Grove. Our contact has claimed it's a town with a dark, supernatural secret. I think it would be right up your alley."

"Up my alley, huh?" Jac raised an eyebrow in his direction.
"I guess you're right. I have enjoyed writing articles with the supernatural slant, so a haunted town might be interesting."

"Oh, it's not haunted," Frank corrected. "Our contact says the town's run by a pack of werewolves."

"Werewolves? Ah shit, Frank, what the hell do you mean werewolves?" Jac rolled her eyes. "This is the twenty-first century! What kind of moron told you that bullshit?"

Frank chuckled. "That moron has forwarded some information to my email that is quite interesting. So, I figured I'd send you out there to investigate and come back with a dynamite story for The Inside-View. Besides, this could be your shot at getting a full-time position here, Jac."

Jac eyed the man with a thin smile, but her mind was spinning. A full-time position at the magazine? The offer was tempting. The Inside-View's reputation as a premier magazine in the southeast was growing. For the last few months, Jac had been putting in extra hours, writing stories and editing copies with the hopes of a permanent position with the magazine.

Jac's gut clutched. She'd had enough of journalism and its harsh lifestyle. Lifestyle? Working for a twenty-four/seven metropolitan newspaper meant having no life. She knew that for a fact. She was ready for something bigger, something better and The Inside-View fit the bill.

Writing articles for the magazine would give me more leisure time, a steadier paycheck and maybe a chance to write a novel. It could be the answer to her dilemma.

"Oh, all right. You got me, Frank." She sighed and took the assignment folder from her editor's extended hand. "So, when's my deadline?"

The next thing Jac knew she was on the highway, heading for a remote Southern town. Turning off the interstate, she proceeded down a narrow strip of road, passing a green sign which read Heather Grove 3 miles. She sighed with relief, knowing she wasn't far from her destination.

From what little information she'd found on Heather Grove, the town was founded by the descendants of several Scottish clans in the eighteenth century. This captured her interest since her mother's side of the family traced their linage back to the Highlands of Scotland.

However, the whole idea of a werewolf story was ludicrous, but Jac figured she'd be able to creatively piece together something based on the town's history and a few anecdotes from the townsfolk. Anything to meet her deadline and nail down the full-time job offer that Frank was dangling over her head.

"That sneaky bastard," Jac grumbled. "He has some nerve to—Oh my God!"

A large blurry object shot out in front of her car. Startled, Jac slammed on the brakes and jerked the steering wheel. The Volkswagen careened off the asphalt and skidded, landing in a ditch with a resounding crunch.

Time stood still. Jac's heart pounded against her ribs as she struggled to calm her jangled nerves. "Shit, shit, shit!" she cursed, slowly reaching into the floorboard of the Volkswagen to retrieve her tossed bag. Thankfully, her laptop

case was well-padded. She only prayed her cell phone was still working.

Drawing a deep breath, she flipped open the uberthin phone and, with trembling fingers, dialed 9-1-1.

\* \* \* \*

A loud crack drew Ray McShaw's attention over to the other side of the bar. Balls scattered over the green felt. Rhonda Morrison drew away from the table with a smug smile on her face and a pool cue in her hand.

Ray chuckled. Surely everyone who hung around The Red Lion knew she was an ace. Fat chance! There was always one in the crowd who thought he could beat her. Ray shook his head in disbelief, drawing a frosty mug of beer to his lips.

"You're going to have to let someone win one day," he'd joked with her earlier over a plate of fresh, hot fries from the bar's kitchen.

"Are you trying to spoil my fun, Ray?" she asked, her mouth twisting into a playful pout.

"Crushing a guy's ego's no way to win him over, Ron."

"Heck, the guys around here are chumps!" Rhonda exclaimed, then narrowed her gaze. "Besides, the good ones are taken ... or not even looking."

Ouch! Her well-targeted jibe had hit the mark. "Now, don't you start on me, too. Is that all you women think about?" Ray speared a hand through his thick, dark hair in frustration. "Just because Megan's got her a mate, that doesn't mean Ritchie and I have to settle down, ya know?"

Rhonda gave an exasperated sigh, then went silent as she continued munching on the plate of fries. Deep down, Ray knew she meant well. However, he and his twin brother, Ritchie, were appointed guardians and protectors of their pack. The sithech blood coursed strongly in their veins ... the blood of the wolf.

Since their father's death a few years before, Ray had taken his place on the pack council. He was more serious about pack affairs than his twin, who'd rather spend time out of town. Heather Grove was too confining for Ritchie, but Ray loved his hometown and his sithech kin. He would do anything to keep them safe ... even if it meant having to firmly lay down pack law.

Recently, Ray had done his duty and, along with the council, had removed Jerry MacDonald from his seat, lowering the jerk's status within the pack. Hell, MacDonald was lucky that Ray hadn't killed him for attacking Derek Lee and his little sister, Megan, on Halloween. Damn lucky.

But Ray had heart and saw to it that MacDonald was sent to the hospital down in Columbia to receive extra medical and mental attention. However, there had been no word from the doctors about how long MacDonald would be under their specialized care.

"The place is pretty crowded tonight, Jim!" Ray yelled over the bar to his friend, Jim Douglas, making himself heard over the loud music.

"Yep, considering the weatherman's storm warnings, we're doing fair." Jim shrugged his big shoulders, wiping another beer mug dry. "Can I get ya another beer?"

"No, I'm heading back to the house. This cold goes straight through to my bones. All I need is a hot shower and a warm bed." He winked.

"Warm bed, huh? Anyone I know?" Jim flashed him a feral grin.

"That's not what I meant." Ray shook his head. "The full moon's coming and all you wolf-hounds can think of is s-e-x ... sex," he quipped. "But I'd rather you fellas fuck yourselves silly than lose your cool and tear up the town."

Jim laughed at his departing comment as Ray said his 'goodbyes' around the bar. His gaze met Rhonda's over at the pool table. Giving her a quick nod, Ray turned and headed out the door.

The silvery moonlight made the frosted ground glisten beneath his cowboy boots. He tromped through the parking lot to his black 1966 Chevy pickup. She was a classic, in need of some exterior repair, but under her hood was some haulass, raw power. Ray slid behind the wheel and turned the key. The engine roared to life.

As he waited for her to warm up, Ray gazed through the windshield at the faint light shining out through the heavily clouded night sky. The moon reminded him of a woman ... cool and very unpredictable. The irony made him chuckle.

The lunar effects on the sithech were truly the stuff of folktales and, now, urban legends. Those with wolfblood experienced a heightened sense of aggression or arousal during the full moon phase. As pack guardian, he'd have to dispel his own bouts with moon fever. Yet he could already

feel its silvery caress in his veins. Ray cursed under his breath.

The February moon was gaining strength every night as it swelled to fullness. Ray understood too well the unpredictability of the moon. He also knew to be prepared for anything to happen.

Buzz! Buzz!

Ray reached down, unclipping the cell phone from his hip and flipped it open.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Ray, did I catch you at a bad time?" It was Ernie Campbell, one of the pack's town hall connections and twenty-four/seven computer geek.

"No, man. Just heading home from the Lion. What's up?"

There was silence on the other end for a moment. Ray's stomach rumbled with nerves. His sithech senses flared with sudden alertness. "What's up?" he repeated, slowly.

"Uh, we might have some trouble here." Ernie's thin voice quivered through the receiver. "Someone's been trying to hack the, uh, computer database."

"Trying? Did they succeed?" Ray asked, leaning back against the truck's headrest and closed his eyes, pulling his focus inward. The only drawback about using cell phones was the inability to say too much about pack-related matters.

"Hmm, not sure yet. I can let you know something by morning," Ernie replied. Even through the thin receiver, Ray could hear his friend clacking away on the keyboard.

"Why don't we meet for breakfast in the morning at the diner? Then, you can tell me what you've found. Okay?" Ray

could almost see Ernie in his mind's eye hunched over his computer with his curly red hair sticking out in disarray. Under any other circumstances, he would've laughed, but his senses told him this was no laughing matter.

"Yeah, I copy that. Tomorrow morning at the diner. I should have something for you on it," Ernie confirmed. "Sorry to bother ya. Later."

The phone snapped off. Ray gave a deep sigh, returning the phone to his hip. Damn, if it wasn't one fire to put out, it was another. But that was his job, his life's calling. Times may have changed since his forefathers had assumed the mantle as pack guardians, but his duty was the same—to protect the sithech, no matter what the cost.

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#### **Chapter 2**

Jac was shivering, not from the accident, but from the below thirty degree temperature. The police officer had offered to let her stay warm in his car. She'd declined. Sometimes she wished she wasn't so stubborn, but she'd wanted to watch as the police and the wrecker service took care of her crunched up little Volkswagen.

Snuggling deeper into her fur coat, Jac gave a heavy sigh. This incident might put a snag on her deadline for the magazine. But then again, having a portable laptop with WiFi connection, she figured she'd just email her editor the story when she was finished. Jac was deep in a mental daze when the officer returned.

"Homer's set to go. He'll take good care of your car," he reassured her with a smile. "Now, let me get one more thing straight for my report, Miss Hamilton—

"That's Ms. Hamilton," Jac quickly corrected him.

Even though it was dark, she could have sworn she saw the officer blush.

"Sorry, ma'am," he apologized then continued. "So, you say a big animal crossed in front of your vehicle?"

"Yes, that's right. It looked like a big dog."

"A big dog, huh? Do you think it could possibly be a deer?"

"No, it wasn't a deer." Jac shook her head. "I'm sure about it."

"There are lots of deer around here, Ms. Hamilton. You might not have been paying attention."

"But, Officer, I was paying attention since I'm not familiar with the road." Jac felt her temper boiling inside her, warming her from the inside out. But she did her best to play it cool with the policeman. "I know it was not a deer because it ran across the road like a big dog. A fast, big dog."

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll put that in my report," the officer replied with a tight smile.

The low rumble of an engine at her back drew her attention. Jac glanced over her shoulder to see an older model black truck pull up behind the squad car.

"Excuse me a moment," the officer muttered with a polite nod, then headed over to the truck.

Jac returned her attention to the wrecker. The Volkswagen was strapped onto the metal bed and was ready to go.
Whatever I make on this story will have to go toward the auto bills. Damn that dog! The service man approached with a clipboard to take her information.

After she was done, she signed on the dotted line. The man handed her a business card.

"Now, come by tomorrow and I'll have my mechanic give you a good estimate on your Bug, little lady. Derek's the best in town. He'll do ya right." The older man grinned.

Little lady? This town's right out of the stone ages. Jac managed a smile as she thanked him.

"Bruce'll see ya into town. You best get inside and get yourself warm." The man winked, then headed back to the wrecker.

"Bruce?" Heather Grove was a real Mayberry. Everyone knew everyone else on a first-name basis. Jac let out an

exasperated sigh and swung her laptop bag over her shoulder.

The police officer was returning, but he had a friend in tow. Walking along beside him was a tall, dark stranger who moved like a symphony in motion. Jac's heart did a nervous flip. Holy moly! For the first time this evening, she felt her frozen lips curl into a real smile. The stranger was definitely eye candy. Yum!

He looked a tad over six feet in his cowboy boots. Despite his tall frame, he walked with the agility of an athlete. Jac swallowed hard. He was wearing a flannel shirt with dark blue jeans and nothing more than a windbreaker jacket that flapped as he matched the officer's big strides.

The two men stopped, towering over her. "This is my buddy, Ray McShaw." The policeman nodded to the other man. "I have some business to attend to, but he'll make sure you get to Pete's place with no problem."

"Pete's place?" Jac inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Bruce means The Starlight Motel. That is where you're staying, right, ma'am?" The tall, dark man's voice was as sexy as he appeared.

Stunned, Jac slowly nodded. How did they know where she was staying?

"It's the only hotel in town," Ray assured her unspoken question. "We deduced you're just visiting, otherwise you'd have more luggage."

Jac glanced down at her lone suitcase. "Yes, I travel light." Before she could reach for it, Ray grasped the handle. "Please, allow me." His grin sent a lusty, heated wave of

desire through her frigid body. Now that he was closer, Jac got a better look at the policeman's buddy.

Ray had dark, wavy hair with a hint of gray brushing his temples. His features were chiseled, all masculine and well-defined. His mouth, however, looked both expressive and lush ... very kissable. Jac drew a deep breath to clear her head. For the last few years she'd been so buried in her writing, she'd been avoiding the opposite sex.

"How am I supposed to have a decent career when I get involved with a man?" she recalled asking her roommate. "It just can't be done ... no way, no how." Her roommate had said she was crazy. And, maybe, she was.

"Wow, it's refreshing to see a gal who doesn't try to pack several suitcases full of stuff."

"Oh really?" Jac didn't know if he was serious or if he was just kidding. "Why's that?"

"My sister packed three suitcases for her honeymoon last month. Three. Can you imagine? I swear, that gal's got a screw loose." He chuckled, shaking his head.

Jac smiled. His sense of humor just added a few more points to his score.

Bruce was already in his patrol car as she and Ray headed for the black truck. "I'll pop your bags in the bed here and we'll be off. You look like a frozen popsicle."

She frowned at his analogy. "Well, the website I checked didn't state that Heather Grove was expecting such miserable weather for my trip."

Ray grinned, placing the suitcase into the back of the truck, then held out his hand. "Next?"

"Oh," Jac blinked. "This is my laptop. I'll just carry it with me."

"Okay. That's fine, Miss..." He paused, then shook his head. "Now, where's my manners? I don't even know your name."

"I'm Jacqueline Hamilton, but you can call me Jac."

"Jac, I like that. It's sassy sounding." In the dim moonlight, his eyes roamed over her, checking her out from head to toe. If her face weren't so darn cold, she would've blushed like a schoolgirl. Then Ray turned his attention back to the truck. "Well, let's not stand out here in the cold. Let's get to town so you can warm up."

Ray swung open the passenger door. The metal hinges gave a loud squeak. "Oh, geez! That sounds like an angry elephant, doesn't it? I'm sorry about that. I just need to fix her up with a squirt of WD-40." He grinned, then offered her his hand to help her up into the cab.

Even through the cold, Jac's fingers tingled at their touch. Knowing my luck, it's a case of frost bite setting in. She climbed into the seat, fastening the seatbelt. As Ray slammed the door closed and headed around the truck, Jac felt the weight of everything upon her ... the trip, the accident and the frigid cold.

Tonight, she knew she would sleep well.

Before he pulled the truck door open, Ray took a deep breath. The crisp night air cleared his head. From the moment he'd laid eyes on Jac, he felt something spark inside him. Damn! Earlier he'd been ribbing the boys at the bar for being

wolf-hounds. Now, he could feel the ebbing of the moon deep in his sithech-blood. What freakin' irony!

Even through layers of clothing, Ray could tell that Jac was petite, yet curvaceous. She reminded him of his grandmother's bedtime stories of the Picts—the ancient folk of Scotland. Her shimmering eyes matched the rich darkness of her shoulder-length hair and were accented by her winter-kissed cheeks.

Jac was lovely, despite her wild-eyed appearance. Ray could sense her nervousness in the aura surrounding her. The distorted energy she gave off made him want to pull her into his arms and comfort her. Yet, she was a stranger. He knew nothing about her, but Ray knew he'd like to get to know her better. And, from the looks of her car, she'll be in town a while until Derek gets her back on the road again.

Climbing up into the cab, Ray started the truck and flicked the heat on high. "You must be cold." He grinned over at her. "Don't worry; you'll be warm in no time."

"Thanks," she nodded. Even in the dim light of the cab, Ray was mesmerized by the rich darkness of her eyes and her lush lips as she smiled over at him.

"I'm really sorry if I'm putting you out," she apologized.

He pulled the truck from beside the road and headed toward town. "Oh, it's no problem," Ray assured her. "I'm just helping Bruce out."

"So, you and Bruce are really old friends, huh?"

"Yeah, our parents were best friends. We grew up together. He's like a brother to me," Ray recalled. "But that's

enough about me. So, tell me Jac, what brings you to Heather Grove in the dead of winter?"

Ray glanced over at her. Jac folded her arms over her chest, gazing out the window. "I'm on business, you might say. I'm a freelance writer and I'm here to write a story," she replied casually.

"The best time to come to Heather Grove's during the spring when we have our annual festival. It's really lovely here with all the flowers in bloom. It's like an Easter basket come to life."

The sound of her laughter filled the cab. She turned to face him. There was something in her smile that made his heart stir. "That sounds really nice, but I'm afraid my boss won't wait till spring for this story."

"Is your boss difficult?"

Jac pursed her lips together, as if in thought then shook her head. "No, not really. I'm just on a deadline. I'm trying to make the next issue of The Inside-View. Have you ever read the magazine?"

"Nope. I don't read magazines." Ray chuckled. "Unless you count the one with centerfolds."

"I thought most guys read that magazine for the articles," Jac quipped back with a cheeky smile.

"Touché!" he acknowledged.

Just ahead, The Starlight Motel loomed over the dashboard. The ride had been too damn short. Ray was just starting to enjoy her company. The dark-haired beauty was delightful and witty, despite the tiredness he sensed in her aura.

Ray turned into the parking lot and shut off the truck. An uncomfortable silence fell between them. He angled his head, smiling over at her. "Hey, you know, I was only kidding about the centerfolds."

"Sure you were." She rolled her eyes. Her smile lit up all the way to her eyes as she reached for the door handle, then paused. "Thanks again for the ride."

The huskiness of her tone sent a bolt of lust down his spine to his groin. Ray straightened in his seat, clearing his throat. "No problem," he simply replied and swung open his door.

A sharp breeze bitterly surrounded him as he stepped down from the truck. With a hard shiver, Ray was grateful the icy wind had cooled his lusty, moon-induced thoughts. "I'll just grab the suitcase out of the back while you check-in, then be on my way," he replied, attempting to ward off the effects of the moon that seeped through his veins.

However, a gut feeling told Ray he'd see Jac again soon. And, for once, he liked what his gut was telling him.

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#### **Chapter 3**

"You feel so wonderful." His voice rumbled in her ear sending a wave of desire coursing through her. The warmth of his naked body over hers spiked the pleasurable sensations of their conjoined bodies. "I never thought—"

Jac silenced him with a kiss, pressing her lips against his with all the fierce passion that simmered inside her. He tasted of cinnamon and primal lust as she slipped her tongue between his lips. In the back of her mind, she wondered where he'd been all her life. Her heart panged at the thought of all the lonely nights she'd been through, but now, with her body wrapped around his, she knew he was worth waiting for.

He pulled his lips from hers, trailing kisses down the column of her throat. Jac let out a low moan as the heat of his mouth stirred emotions buried deep inside her. Her sex was slick with moisture and ached with longing as he gently rocked his body against her. The pleasure of his cock inside her increased the erotic sensations. It racked her body with such passion, it was unbelievable. Then she was falling, falling into pitch darkness. She let out a shout, crashing down onto the cold ground.

Jac sat up, naked and cold in a dark, wooded glade. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as she glanced around, terrified. Where was he? Before she could call out, she saw a pair of glowing, wild eyes peering through the dark foliage. A low snarl echoed around her. Run! Scrambling to her feet, Jac began to run through the trees, through the thick grove of

bushes. The creature was hot on her trail. She could hear its heavy panting and the snapping of twigs and the swish of brush as it drew closer and closer.

Her legs went rubbery. She lost her footing and fell, face first, onto the hard, cold ground. Jac rolled onto her back, just in time to see a black, furry creature leap into the air. Air whooshed from her lungs as the creature landed on top of her, its large, lupus-like face only inches from hers.

Jac was scared out of her wits. A scream ripped from her throat. She flailed her arms, attempting to fight. "Get off me!"

"Get off me!" Jac shouted, flinging the covers onto the floor. Her heart was racing as she sat up, looking around. Where was she? It took a moment to get her bearings. The room slowly came into focus. She was in bed, in a hotel room ... alone.

There was no dark woods, no hideous wolf-creature attacking her. It was all a dream.

"More like a nightmare," she muttered, retrieving the blanket and wrapping herself in the warm, comforting material. "Damn," Jac cursed under her breath, curling up in the bed once again. Listening to her heartbeat return to a normal pace, the nightmare gradually dissipated as she began to focus on the day ahead.

"Time to get busy." She sighed, tossing the blanket aside and rising from the bed. A manila folder lay beside her laptop bag. Jac flipped it open, scanning its contents. Her editor's contact had provided nothing more than a few transcriptions of town hall council meetings, a genealogical family tree and a clipping from the local newspaper.

She scanned the scrap of paper. It was of a sighting of a half-man, half-wolf spotted in town on Halloween. "A werewolf on Halloween, huh?" Jac shook her head, slipping the news clipping back into the assignment folder. "I still think it's all a big farce," she grumbled, but decided to get down to business—but only after a shower and a cup of coffee. These were the two things she needed every morning to jumpstart her brain.

\* \* \* \*

There was no coffeepot provided in her room and no Wi-Fi connection. Disgruntled, Jac decided to head out. Closing the motel door behind her, she noticed the sky was still cloudy and the air crisp and chilled. Thankfully, there hadn't been any precipitation overnight. Dressed casually in her Nikes, blue jeans and favorite heavy sweater, Jac headed to the hotel lobby. She adjusted the laptop bag over her shoulder and stepped into the small office to be pleasantly greeted by The Starlight Motel's elderly owner.

"Good morning." She returned a grin to the gentleman behind the counter. She'd briefly met Mr. Campbell last night during her late check-in. The motel owner winked. "You're an early bird. After such a nerve-racking night, I'd thought you'd sleep in this morning."

"I'm on a deadline. My boss can't wait." She gave a soft sigh then added, "So where can I find a Wi-Fi connection and a decent cup of coffee in town?"

"Wi-Fi?" The older man had a faraway look in his eyes, then blinked. "Oh yeah. That's one of those Internet computer hook-ups. Right, dear?"

"Uh, yes, sir. I need one for my laptop." Jac placed a hand on the pack over her shoulder. "I always check my email in the morning."

"I don't understand all that computer stuff." Mr. Campbell wrinkled his nose, as if he disapproved of technology, then his face lit up. "You sound like Ernie, my nephew. He's the brains in our family. He loves computers and things of that nature. Why, ever since he was little, he used to take things apart ... electronic gadgets and gizmos. But putting them back together was a problem for a while ... until he got older."

Mr. Campbell's amusing story made Jac grin. "It's handy to have someone around who knows about computers and electronics," she acknowledged politely. "Now, where can I find a Wi-Fi connection and a cup of coffee?"

The gentleman gave her directions to a family diner, Jewel's. Thankfully, it was in walking distance and, according to Mr. Campbell, a favorite haunt for Heather Grove's more computer savvy crowd.

"Thanks so much!" Jac breathed a sigh of relief as she headed out the door. From what she'd experienced of Heather Grove, so far, it was a very rural little town. However, it does seem to have a quaint, unique charm. She strolled past the shops on Main Street.

Although she enjoyed city living, Jac wondered if she could settle down into the quiet serenity of a small town. Yes, and then I could write my great American novel. The wistful

thought made her laugh out loud as she rounded the corner. A big smile spread across her face. The tantalizing scent of coffee was drawing her like a magnet to the diner up ahead.

\* \* \* \*

"And, after a few more attempts, I was able to figure out what ISP he used," Ernie Campbell concluded, then angled his head, glaring over the table at Ray. "Hey, are you even listening to me?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm following you," Ray returned his gaze from the busy morning crowd in the diner to the wide-eyed youth. "So, the computer hacker's located in the area, right?"

"Bingo! I'm ninety-nine point nine percent sure it's a local hack, but the bastard's outsmarted me. I can't get a trace. Unfortunately, the slimeball managed to get into the council's system and even snooped around on the tree, too." Ernie frowned.

"Snooped around on the tree?" Ray repeated, perplexed. "Now, what do you mean by that, Einstein?"

"He's searched the database with all our family records in it. You know, our family trees?" Ernie arched an eyebrow. "Our genealogical records?"

Ray's gut clenched. "That's not good." He shook his head. "Do you think we need to call an emergency pack meeting?"

"And tell them what? Someone's hacking into the computer records of Heather Grove and we don't know why? What good's that gonna do, Ray?"

"Guess you're right. Just keep an eye on it, Ernie." Ray let out an exasperated sigh, spearing a hand through his hair.

"Mind if I join you two?" A familiar voice sharply drew the guys' attention away from their deep discussion.

"Shit, Taylor, don't you know not to sneak up on a private conversation," Ernie cursed, glaring up at the tall man looming over the table.

"Who's sneaking?" Bruce Taylor flashed a grin. "Besides, any wolf within a few feet can hear exactly what y'all are talking about."

"No wolves in here," Ray glanced around the diner. "Just us and Mary Lynn, but she's up to her eyeballs in customers. Take a seat." He nodded, indicating for his friend to join them.

Bruce pulled out a chair and sat down with a heavy sigh. Ray glanced over, wrinkling his brow with genuine concern. "Were you busy last night?"

"Yeah, this full moon's going to be a doozy," his friend grumbled. "It's already getting a few riled up. I answered two calls after I left you last night. A domestic disturbance call and a fight over at The Red Lion."

"Sheez! Was anybody hurt?" Ernie interjected.

"Nope, thankfully not. But I have a feeling it's going to be a crazy next few days." Bruce shook his head. "Speaking of which, what're you two yammering about?"

Ernie glanced at Ray, who shrugged, sitting back in his chair. "Oh, nothing to worry about, I don't think. Ernie's got it all under control."

A wide grin spread over the red-headed youth's face. Ray could sense his comment had stroked the computer geek's ego.

"Yeah, like Ray said, nothing to worry about. I'm on it." Ernie quickly rose from his seat. "If I learn anymore, Ray, you'll be the first to know. Well, I gotta run now. I've got things to do."

Ray was deep in thought for a moment as Ernie left the table. Sipping his coffee, he returned his attention to Bruce, who was giving a breakfast order to the attentive blonde waitress. With a wide smile and a wink, she turned, heading toward the kitchen.

"Mary Lynn's trying to catch your attention, bro." Bruce chuckled, his own gaze appreciating the view of the waitress' rounded backside before she went behind the counter.

"Looks like she's got your attention, too." Ray smirked.

"You know, she's liked you since high school, Ray. Why haven't you asked her out?"

Bruce turned to face him. Even though his friend was smiling, his eyes were serious.

"She's not my type." Ray shifted in his chair. "Maybe you should ask her out."

"Maybe I should." Bruce straightened his shoulders.
"You're so damn picky."

Ray chuckled, but knew his buddy was right. Women literally threw themselves at him, whether they were average or ones with sithech-blood. On some level, they sensed his alpha nature. For the last few years, however, Ray'd put his love life on hold for duty ... duty to his pack.

"I worry about you, man." Bruce shook his head.

"Oh, there's no need to worry about me." Ray playfully slapped his buddy on the back. "I'm fine. Really."

The soft tinkle of a bell drew his attention to the diner's entrance and in walked Jac Hamilton. Ray's heart flipped in his chest. He licked his dry lips. His skin prickled. He glanced over at Bruce, who was watching him intently from under an arched eyebrow.

"What?" Ray narrowed his gaze.

You know what, you big, bad wolf, Bruce conveyed with a smirk. His buddy loved to use their sithech-mind link to communicate, especially when ribbing him, then cleared his throat. "Even though I'm off-duty, maybe I should go over and check—"

"Oh, no you don't." Ray's voice sounded like a feral growl, even to him.

"Okay." Bruce held up his hands in mock-surrender. "You do it."

Ray sighed then nodded. He glanced over to the booth where Jac had taken a seat, her laptop open and her fingers pecking away at the keys.

She appeared better rested; the color of her aura glowed bright in the diner's light. Jac slipped on a pair of glasses, and then scanned the flat screen, totally unaware of his gaze.

Summoning up his nerve, Ray slid back the chair and rose to his feet.

"Good luck, man."

Ray grunted in response then made his way from the table through the crowded diner. His senses were acute; his focus was only on Jac as he stopped in front of the booth. He waited. She didn't look up. Finally, he cleared his throat.

Like a sleeper awakening from a deep sleep, she glanced up and blinked. The illusion of her eyes behind the glasses reminded him of an owl. He half-expected her to say who. However, much to his relief, she didn't.

"Oh! Hi, Ray! I didn't hear you walk up."

"Good morning, Jac." He grinned. "Mind if I join you?"

Jac was pleasantly stunned to see him again. And so soon, too. She quickly removed her glasses. "Uh, sure. Please sit down," she offered, shifting the computer aside to view both the screen and Ray.

Her heart was pounding wildly in her chest as he slid into the opposite seat. For a tall, well-built man, Ray moved with an easy grace. Jac recalled the lusty encounter in her dream. She blushed. Surely, it wasn't him. We don't even know each other.

"Is something wrong?" He angled his head, giving her a curious gaze.

And what a gaze it was. His eyes were a deep, rich indigo that totally mesmerized her. Suddenly, the room felt warm ... very warm. Jac shifted in her seat, attempting to regain her composure.

"Uh, it's nothing." She managed to give him a reassuring smile. "You just remind me of someone."

"That's funny." Ray chuckled. "I don't think you've meet my twin brother."

"You have a twin? How cool!"

"Yeah, he lives here, but travels around a lot. Ritchie has a bad case of wanderlust." Ray sighed.

"Ah! Ritchie's the adventurous type, huh?"

"You could say that." Ray nodded, then glanced over to her laptop. "I see you're already busy this morning."

Jac noticed Ray had smoothly switched subjects, but went with the flow. "Yeah, it's a part of my morning routine. I always check my email with my first cup of coffee. Speaking of which, I haven't got my coffee yet." She frowned, glancing across the diner at her wayward waitress.

"I'll go remind her." Ray rose from his seat. "I think Mary Lynn's preoccupied with Bruce at the moment," he added, flashing a wicked smile.

Before Jac could protest, he swaggered over to where the blonde was chatting with his buddy. Taking advantage of the free moment, Jac scanned down the flat computer screen.

Damn! More spam! She tapped the delete key until an email caught her attention. The subject read Meeting. It was from her editor. Clicking open the electronic letter, Jac scanned its contents. He'd arranged an interview for her with a public relations manager in the town hall at noon.

Just what's Frank getting me into? Jac sank her teeth into her bottom lip. I can just hear it now. Excuse me, Mister PR Manager, do you have any werewolves running around town? Yeah right.

"Here you go." A husky drawl drew her attention back to Ray. He placed a steaming cup of coffee on the table in front of her. The heady aroma filled her senses as she flipped the screen down on her laptop.

"Thanks." She reached for the plastic tray of sugar and creamer. "I can sure use a good cup before I head over to the garage and check on my car."

"Your Volkswagen's in good hands. The mechanic's an ace." Ray grinned, adding with a wink, "He's also my brother-in-law."

"Oh, really? How convenient." She smiled then sipped her coffee. Ray's mere presence made her feel better. It radiated a unique sense of steadfastness and comfort, stirring something inside her. And that something hadn't been stirred in a long time.

She sat down her coffee cup and eyed him thoughtfully. "So, tell me, Ray, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a construction supervisor. We've been working on an addition to the elementary school, but the weather's been unreasonable lately."

"Ah, so that explains why you're not at work." She nodded toward the window. Gray, fluffy clouds loomed in the morning sky, blocking out the sunlight.

"Yep, cold and wet," he agreed, shaking his head. "It's not good for working outdoors."

Jac glanced down at her watch. "Oh, geez! Where does time go?" Anxiety clutched in her gut. Without a car, getting around town was hopeless. Then, genius struck. She smiled over at Ray and cleared her throat. "Uh, Ray, can I ask you a favor?"

"Yeah, sure." The corners of his mouth turned up into a wide grin. "Whatcha got in mind?"

Oh, if he only knew! Jac drew a deep breath, struggling to clear the erotic images in her head before she spoke.

"I need a lift to the garage. Could I get a ride over, if it's not too much trouble?" She nodded in the direction of the

large diner window. "The weather's nasty and I prefer not to walk."

"It'd be my pleasure." His tender voice wrapped around her like a warm blanket. He reached over the table and took her hand. "Anything to help you out, Jac."

"Thanks." Her body was tingling at his unexpected touch.
"You're a real gentleman."

"Shh." He hushed her with a wink. "Don't say that too loud or you might ruin my reputation."

"Okay. You're secret's safe with me." Jac chuckled, giving his hand a tender squeeze before she reluctantly withdrew hers. "And I really appreciate it, too."

"I'll go warm up the truck." Ray rose gracefully from his seat, smoothing his hands down over his jeans. "When you're ready, just come on out. I'll be waiting."

She watched him leave, appreciating the way the faded denim accented his rear. Ooo, yummy! Jac sighed, shaking the vision of studliness out of her head and quickly packed up her laptop. With a final sip of coffee, she paid her waitress then headed for the exit.

She couldn't help but smile as Ray's words lingered in her mind. I'll be waiting. Was that a lusty promise in his tone or was it her imagination?

Jac wasn't sure. Somehow, she was determined to find out.

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#### **Chapter 4**

Within the warm cab, Ray switched off the radio and glanced to the diner door. Any minute Jac would be heading out to the truck. He drew a breath, attempting to calm his nerves.

He'd felt foolish reaching out and taking her hand. But the heat of their touch and the silkiness of her hand in his had struck a chord deep within him. A chord that resonated through his entire being. He wanted her ... bad. The moon fever was escalating, too. The heightened lunar energy would only complicate things. And also, it was only one night away from full zenith. "I'll just have to keep my distance," he vowed.

Jac would never understand. Not only was she a stranger, but she was also human.

Ray cringed. Usually the sithech and full-blooded humans didn't mix. "It'd be like oil and vinegar," he muttered. "It just won't work. I got a bad feeling about this." He sighed.

She also wrote for a magazine. That could spell trouble for him in a different way. Ray's wolf sensibilities were on alert. Damn. I'd better watch what I say around her. He couldn't win for losing.

With a loud squeak, the passenger door swung open. Jac climbed up into the truck cab. Just looking at her made his resistance weaken. She looked like an angel in blue jeans. The heady scent of vanilla and musk filled his senses. She

smiled over at him. Her lips were simply luscious beneath her dark sparkling eyes.

"I'm ready." She gently placed her bag into the floorboard and rubbed her hands together. "Let's go."

"Where's your coat?" He frowned. She was only dressed in an oversized sweater and jeans. "You're bound to catch a cold running around like that."

Jac shrugged. "I was too preoccupied this morning. I forgot."

"That's no excuse." He shook his head and reached behind the seat. Finding his wool-lined, denim jacket, he offered it to her with a smile. "Here. The temperature's going to dip and you'll be a bit warmer."

She took the jacket and slid it on. "Well, it's way too big," she observed, pushing the sleeves up. "But it's warm.

Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He nodded.

"Are you always this nice to strangers?" She angled her head, gazing over at him perplexed.

"I'm always nice to strangers," he replied softly. "As long as they're not too strange."

Jac gave an amused chuckle.

Leaning in a bit closer, Ray let her essence fill his senses. He wanted to kiss her ... right then, right there. Jac didn't back away. She smiled up at him. She was studying him with an intense gaze, then darted her tongue over her lips. The gesture was so tempting, so inviting. His cock thickened automatically in response.

Before he could blink, Jac placed a tender kiss on his cheek. Ray's breath caught in his throat.

A horn blasted outside the cab, shattering the magical moment. As if the kiss had never happened, Jac turned her attention back to her seatbelt. His heart sank a notch. Sharply, he glanced out the windshield and silently cursed the thoughtless driver, then cleared his throat.

"Well, we'd better be getting you to the garage." He straightened in the seat, snapping his seatbelt into place. Putting the truck into gear, he pulled out of the diner parking lot.

Silence lingered between them as the truck headed down the road. Despite the briefness of the kiss, his cheek tingled from the warmth of her lips. It was a sensation that spread from his cheek straight to his groin. Attempting to banish the wayward thoughts from his mind, Ray switched on the radio.

Me and Bobby McGee filled the confines of the cab. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked over at Jac, who was quietly swaying to the music in the passenger seat. Ray exhaled a soft sigh and hoped the bluesy wailing of Janis Joplin would bring him back to his senses. The last thing in the world he wanted was to fall head-over-heels for her. She was not sithech, she was human. And he would end up with a broken heart.

Jac didn't know what had come over her. One second she'd been gazing into Ray's indigo-blue eyes, the next second she'd kissed his cheek. It must be pheromones. She'd read recently online about the effect of male pheromones on the

female species. It was nothing more than a simple, natural reaction. That has to be it.

Ray's scent permeated the borrowed jacket. Heady musk and warm spice. The scent was making her libido go wild. No wonder she'd impulsively kissed his cheek. If it hadn't been for the interruption, there was no telling what else might have happened. She winced at the thought. Business before pleasure. However, the wayward kiss brought a smile to her lips.

Jac's stomach tightened again as the garage appeared over the dashboard. It was going to be one of those days.

\* \* \* \*

The damage to the Volkswagen didn't look too extensive in the daylight. Relieved, Jac listened to the mechanic going through the list of estimates. It wasn't as bad as she'd expected. Thank goodness. Her gaze drifted over the man Ray'd introduced as his brother-in-law, Derek Lee.

He wasn't as tall as Ray, but gave off the same assured attitude that most of the men she'd met in Heather Grove seemed to project. His blonde hair was pulled back from his face revealing an intense pair of hazel eyes.

"There's nothing to worry about, Ms. Hamilton. I'll have you back on the road in just a couple of days." He smiled, handing her the clipboard. Drawing her gaze away from the mechanic, she glanced over the list and then signed on the dotted line.

"Good. I have a deadline to meet and I'd like to be out of town before any bad weather comes through."

"So, you're in town on business?" He arched an eyebrow.

"Yes. I write features for The Inside-View magazine." She returned his smile, glancing over to the garage office where Ray was waiting for her. "Heather Grove's a unique little town. Time seems to change slowly around here."

"Ah, you've noticed that, too." Derek laughed. "Since I've moved here, it's taken me a while to get used to the slower paced lifestyle, but I like it."

"I'm a city girl." Jac chuckled, shaking her head. "I don't know if I could get used to it."

Derek took back the clipboard. "If you find the right person, it's worth it."

"I'm sure." She nodded. "Ray told me his sister and you are newlyweds."

"Yes, you could say it was love at first sight." A slow grin spread over his face. "It was like we were meant to be together. I was drawn to her and now she's stuck with me." Derek winked.

The young man's words echoed in her head as he led her back to the garage office. Deep in her heart, Jac longed for that kind of connection with someone. Something earth shattering, profound. But Cupid never failed in giving her a raw deal in the romance department. The last guy she dated was the head of The Inside-View's art department and he turned out to be a total jerk.

A cold gust of wind whipped around her. Jac snuggled deeper into the jacket, letting the musky scent fill her senses. Even though she'd only known Ray a very short time, she felt an irritable draw to him. Girl, that's just your libido talking.

Derek opened the door and ushered her into the small office space, out of the frosty weather.

Ray was leaned back against a cluttered desk with a Styrofoam coffee cup in his hand. He was busy chatting with a young, redheaded woman. Their conversation came to an abrupt stop. Ray smiled over at them. "So, what's the diagnosis, Doc?"

"Not too bad." Derek returned the clipboard to a peg on the wall beside a NASCAR calendar. "I should have her back on the road within a few days."

Jac's heart hammered in her chest as Ray's indigo eyes met her gaze.

"See? What did I tell you? Derek's an ace mechanic. He knows his stuff. You're in good hands, Jac."

Derek crossed the room, wrapping his arms around the other woman. "Ms. Hamilton, this is Megan."

"Please, call me Jac." She politely nodded. "Nice to meet you, Megan."

"Likewise." Megan smiled, her green eyes sparkling in the florescent lighting of the office. "Ray was telling me you're a writer."

"That's right." Derek grinned. "A magazine writer."

"Oh, really?" Genuine interest shone on Megan's face.
"What kind of story are you writing?"

They'd think she was nuts if she told them about the werewolf-story idea. "Just a piece on Heather Grove's history and its Scottish roots." She shrugged, nonchalantly. "My editor thinks the travel section of our magazine should feature historical locations."

"What a wonderful idea." Megan smiled. "Our town's loaded with history."

The hair on the back of Jac's neck prickled. She glanced around the room. Nothing was out of the ordinary, but she sensed there was an uneasy sensation stirring in the small room. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. It was time for her to leave.

"Well, I hate to cut this short, but I have an appointment at the town hall around noon. So, I need to head back to the motel to change clothes."

Before Ray could offer her a ride, Megan spoke up. "I'm going that way, Jac. I can give you a lift."

"Are you sure it's no problem?"

"Not at all." Megan grinned. "I'm on my way to work at the veterinary clinic. I can drop you off."

"That'll be great," Jac replied while Megan gave her husband a tender kiss on the lips.

"Your dinner's in the fridge. Just heat it in the microwave. I'll be home by nine." The redhead turned her attention to Ray, who was eyeing her with a thin smile. "We'll talk later. Okay, bro?"

"Sure thing." Ray nodded then turned, smiling over at Jac.

"And don't let my sister's driving scare you."

Megan stepped over to the desk and gave her brother a light punch on the arm. "At least I'm a safer driver than you." "Who says?" Ray blinked, perplexed.

"Our insurance agent, of course." She grinned, heading for the door. "I'm ready, Jac. Let's go."

Jac tugged the laptop bag over her shoulder. Whatever it had been, the sensation had vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

It's stress. Just plain old stress. She took a deep breath, willing herself to relax and dismissed the uncomfortable feeling.

"Derek, if you have any questions about the car, please call me on my cell phone." Saying goodbye to both men, she turned and followed Megan out the door.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Megan's Honda pulled out of the parking lot, Derek spun around to face Ray. "What the hell was that all about?" His eyes flashed with anger. "You and Meg were mind-talking ... and in front of an outsider. What gives?"

Ray didn't turn from the window, shrugging his shoulders. "I was just reminding sis to be careful of what she says to Jac. She's in town writing a story for her magazine and we can't be too careful."

"So, why did you block my mind, too? Huh?"

Ray turned around to face him. "Sorry, Derek, it's an old habit. I'm still not used to having another sithech in the family. No hard feelings, okay?" A thin smile curled over his lips.

"Yeah, okay." Derek cracked his knuckles. "Don't worry. Meg'll be careful, I'm sure."

"I hope so." Ray's gut tightened as he thought of Jac. She seemed trustworthy, yet he got the feeling something was strangely amiss. It was times like this when he wished his

intuition was as finely tuned as his sister's. However, Megan had once confessed to him that her psychic abilities were both a blessing and a burden.

"Well, I'd better get started on Ms. Hamilton's car." Derek headed toward the door. "That is," he stopped and winked at Ray, "unless someone wants me to take my time with the repairs."

A low growl escaped from Ray's throat before he could stop himself.

"Hey, it's just an idea." Derek held up his hands. "Calm down, would ya? Is this full moon getting to you?"

"Ah, Hell's bells! It's not the damn moon fever," Ray grumbled, curling his fingers into his belt loops. "I mean, why can't a guy like someone without everyone knowing?"

"Not when you're sithech." Derek grinned. "Besides, your scent's all over her."

"That's because she's wearing my jacket." Ray shook his head in disbelief as his brother-in-law pulled open the door.

A cold draft of air blew in, making both men curse before Derek slammed the door behind him. But even the frigidness of the blast didn't cool Ray's passion. He imagined her spread out beneath him. He struggled to keep focused on his duties to the pack, but the previous conversation with his sister still haunted him.

"You like her, don't you?" Megan had asked, offering him a steaming cup of coffee from the garage's coffeepot.

"She's nice ... for a stranger, but she won't be in town long." Ray flashed his sister a grin, taking hold of the cup. "Besides, I have other things on my mind."

"Like what, bro?" Megan raised an eyebrow.

"Just pack related stuff." He shrugged.

"That's what you say every full moon, Ray." Megan frowned. "You need to get a life."

He couldn't help but laugh. Once again his little sister was right. "I take my duties to the pack seriously. You know that."

"But if you're not careful, you're going to turn into Dad."
Megan chuckled. "Remember when we were kids? Every full
moon, he was always preoccupied with the pack. I don't know
about you, but it used to drive me nuts."

"Yeah, I remember." Ray nodded then sipped his coffee.
"Things are different, Meg. I know it's my duty to protect the pack, but I'm not going to let it overshadow my life."

"Uh-huh." Megan folded her arms over her chest. "So, have you asked her out yet?"

"Geez! When are y'all going to get off my back?" Ray shook his head.

"Y'all?"

"Yeah—you, Rhonda and Bruce. It's nerve-racking!" he grumbled.

Megan let out a snort of laughter then angled her head, studying him with a softer, gentler smile. "We just care about you, bro. That's all."

"Well, y'all have a funny way of showing it." He smirked.

They sure did, but their sithech-blood ran thick. Ray was touched they cared about his well-being. However, he really wished they'd stop being so nosy. "Maybe this is one of the reasons Ritchie disappears out of town every few months," he

mumbled as his thoughts turned to his twin. For once, Ray felt a tiny pang of envy at his brother's nomadic lifestyle.

He tossed the empty cup into the trashcan, contemplating the day ahead. Since the uncertainty of the weather, he'd a few days off from the latest construction project. Ray glanced over at the clock on the wall. It was almost noon. Several of his crew members would be heading to The Red Lion for a couple of games of high-stakes pool.

Ray rubbed his palms together, grinning. With any luck, he could double his money in no time. He decided to head over to the bar.

\* \* \* \*

Jac had never been more embarrassed in her entire journalism career. Her interview with Mr. J.T. White, head of public relations for Heather Grove, had been going smooth. However, when she changed the topic to wolves, things started to slide downhill.

Her heart was pounding in her chest as she managed a thin smile. "So, Mr. White, you're denying my source's reports of wild wolves in Heather Grove?"

"My dear, that's complete hogwash." The older gentleman flashed her a wide, toothy grin. Mister White definitely lived up to his name. The older man seated across the mahogany desk had a head full of stark white hair. Jac guessed he was close to retirement age. However, the sparkle in his cobalt-blue eyes told her the PR manager was still as sharp as a tack.

"I've lived here all my life and have never seen any wolves, Miss Hamilton. Your friend's sorely mistaken."

"My source," she corrected, straightening in the chair. "My editor has sent me the files with claims about wolves in the local area. I was hoping you could help shed some light on the subject, Mr. White."

The gentleman blinked then leaned forward and steepled his fingers together. "Now, when I was a little boy, my mama used to tell me that if I didn't behave, the big, bad wolves would come and take me away." He chuckled, then shook his head. "But I repeat, I haven't seen any wolves around here. I'll swear it on my family bible."

Frustration boiled in her veins, but Jac remained calm. If the town's public relations manager was denying her source's claims, she would have to pull out her ace.

Reaching into the folder on her lap, she retrieved the tiny newspaper clipping she'd slid into the assignment folder. "Then perhaps you can explain this." She held it up between two fingers. "Would you like to tell me about the werewolf sighting last Halloween? This small article's from your local newspaper."

"T-that was a mistake. That local rag didn't get the facts right worth a damn!"

"What do you mean?" Jac leaned forward, still dangling the slip of newspaper.

Mr. White's face went pale as his grin faded into a thin, tight line. He was silent.

From the look on the older man's face, Jac knew she'd struck a nerve. She pressed on.

"According to the article there was a wolfman running amok on Halloween during the full moon. Since you're in public relations, Mr. White, would you care to fill me in on the facts?"

"Why? There's nothing to tell." Mr. White shrugged his shoulders. "A local man got drunk, put on a Halloween mask and started some trouble, that's all."

"Was he arrested?" Jac poised a pen to her notepad.

"Yeah, sort of. He was also a bit nutty." Mr. White gestured a finger to his temple. "You know, mental."

"What's his name?"

"Oh, there's no need to bring up dirty laundry, Miss." He frowned, folding his arms over his chest. "The police arrested him and sent him down to Columbia. You know, to get his head checked, but it's something I'd rather not discuss."

"If you won't answer my questions, Mr. White, then perhaps the police department will." Jac squared her jaw and began to rise from the chair.

"Hold on!" Mr. White abruptly stood. "His name's Jerry MacDonald. His family's pretty prominent in town and so is one of the folks he attacked. Like I said before, it's best to forget about it. No use stirring up trouble, Miss Hamilton."

Jac jotted down the name and then slowly rose from her seat. "Well, thank you for your time, Mr. White." She extended her hand.

"It was my pleasure." His hand was clammy as he shook hers. "If you have any other questions, please feel free to contact my office."

Once she was out in the hallway, Jac drew a deep breath to calm her nerves. She'd interviewed many people in her career, but she was glad this interview was over. Strolling down the marble-tiled hallway, she tugged the laptop bag over her shoulder and pushed open the door.

A cold blast of air greeted her. Damn, it's getting colder! Jac cast her eyes to the sky. Big, fluffy snow clouds loomed overhead. She buttoned up the jacket, thankful that Ray had let her borrow it earlier. The warmth of the jacket instantly made her feel better as she caught a whiff of his telltale scent. There was something about him that stirred her libido like an aphrodisiac. Jac smiled and started down the sidewalk toward Jewel's Family Diner.

After a bite of lunch, she was planning to access the WiFi and Google up a few answers.

Answers to questions Mr. White wouldn't answer.

\* \* \* \*

Ray stared at the wide-screen TV over the bar, watching the storm's multicolored patterns swirl over a map of the surrounding area. He'd already won an extra fifty playing pool, but decided to quit when Rhonda Morrison breezed into The Red Lion. If she played, no one would win but her.

Sipping on a plain coke over ice, his thoughts returned to Jac. Maybe I should ask her out. What harm could it do? He gave a soft sigh. It had been a long time since any woman had sparked his interest. However, Ray couldn't shake the fact she was human, but she seemed to be open-minded. If he told her about his sithech-blood, maybe she'd understand.

But then again, he'd have a better chance at winning the lottery.

"There are flurries outside." A voice pulled him back to the moment. Ernie Campbell slid up into the empty barstool at his side. "The school's closing early and so are some of the businesses. I think everyone's heading to the grocery store for bread and milk."

"Yeah, bread and milk are the staples of a southern snowfall." Ray chuckled, shaking his head.

Ernie leaned in closer. "I've got a bit of news about you know," he said in a lower voice.

Ray raised an eyebrow, the smile faded from his face. "What's up?"

"I did a little bit more work on tracing that damn hacker. It's local, all right. It seems this SOB is using a wireless over at the diner."

Ray frowned. "It could be anyone with a wireless in town," he shrugged. "Everyone heads over to the diner to link up."

"Yeah, I know." Ernie shifted in seat. "I took the liberty and went by the diner. I asked Mary Lynn if she's seen anyone using a wireless and acting, uh, funny."

"And?"

"Nothing. She said no one seemed out of the ordinary," Ernie sighed. "Hell, there are at least a dozen people in the diner at any given hour checking emails or playing online games."

"So, we're at a dead end." Ray took another sip of coke.

"Not unless he tries again, but I doubt it." Ernie held up his hands in frustration.

Ray sat back and gave Ernie a friendly pat on the back. "Well, you did your best. Come on, let me buy you a drink." Ray inclined his head toward the bar with a smile. "You deserve a little something for your hard work."

He could sense the younger man's frustration. What he lacked in brawn, he made up for in brains. Ray had overridden the pack to let Ernie into the tight-knit council. Several members had complained, but Ray'd stood his ground ... and was glad he did.

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#### **Chapter 5**

The snow was falling harder outside the diner window, but Jac barely noticed. Her eyes had been glued to her laptop screen since she'd arrived, her fingers pecking away on the keys. Jac was searching, but, so far, her online search had been unsuccessful.

Without taking her eyes from the screen, she picked up her coffee and took a sip. Jac wrinkled her nose. The coffee was cold. "Excuse me?" She lifted the mug into the air, signaling to the only employee left in the diner ... the cook.

The man reminded her of Mel from the '70's TV sit-com, Alice, but with a nicer disposition. He came to her table with a steaming carafe of freshly brewed coffee and refilled the mug. "If it keeps this up, we'll be up to our eyeballs by morning," he said with a slow, Southern drawl and nodded to the window.

Jac glanced out and shivered at the thought. Flashing him a smile, she politely thanked him and then reached for the cream and sugar. Besides the cook and herself, there was only a young couple in the diner. Occupying the back booth, they sat across from one another, oblivious to their surroundings. From their expressions, Jac could tell they were in love.

Reclining in her seat, she sipped her coffee and watched the love-struck couple. They were so absorbed in each other that the world around them didn't exist. I wish Ray were

here. The fleeting thought took her by surprise. It had been a long time since she'd been enamored with a man.

But Ray was no ordinary man.

He was kind and gentle, yet rough around the edges. There was also something mysterious about Ray. Mysterious and compelling at the same time. If only...

A bell chimed. Jac quickly glanced to the door, but her heart sank. It was a customer picking up a to-go order. I've got to get him off my mind and focus on this deadline. She shook her head. With a sigh, she turned her attention back to the screen.

She read through the files she'd managed to locate, but there was no other record of Jerry MacDonald's arrest on Halloween night. Perhaps it'd been nothing more than a simple case of public drunkenness or, worse, insanity. But why was Mr. White so upset when I asked about it in his office? Jac sighed, massaging her temples with her fingertips.

"So, where's Mary Lynn?" She overheard the customer at the counter ask.

"Snow's falling harder, so I sent her home early," the cook replied. "I think I can handle this big crowd." The cook and the customer both laughed, but Jac was relieved the waitress was gone. She'd made Jac feel uneasy when she'd returned to the diner to work and grab a quick bite to eat.

"I have a lightly grilled ham and cheese on whole wheat." Mary Lynn had confirmed her lunch order with a thin smile. "Will there be anything else?"

"Maybe a tad more coffee, if you please." Jac smiled up at the waitress.

"Sure thing." The blonde nodded, jotting the order onto the receipt pad. "So, you're here by yourself. Where's Ray?"

"Ray?" Jac blinked, startled. "Um, I haven't seen him since this morning."

"I saw you two leave together after breakfast."

"Well, my car's over at the garage. Ray offered me a lift. He's a real gentleman."

"Uh-huh." Mary Lynn's eyes appeared to shimmer in the fluorescent lighting. She lowered her voice. "Ya know, some folks aren't all they appear to be." The blonde flashed her a smile, the expression not quite reaching her eyes.

"Thanks. I'll remember that." Jac had managed a weak smile. Mary Lynn pivoted on her heel and headed behind the counter to the kitchen.

She didn't know what the waitress was alluding to, but it was obvious Mary Lynn was jealous. Jac shrugged it off and returned her attention back to the computer screen.

Now, it was late in the afternoon and, taking another sip of coffee, she glanced out the window. There was an inch of powdery snow on the ground. Jac reached into the jacket pocket, pulling out a scrap of paper with Ray's cell phone number written on it. She smiled, recalling how his sister had insisted she have it.

"If you need a ride back to the hotel, just call him. I'm sure Ray won't mind. Really." Megan had grinned, handing her the scrap of paper.

Even though she'd love to see Ray again, Jac thought against it. He's probably snuggled up by the fireplace somewhere. Besides, I'd rather walk back to the hotel.

Looking out the restaurant window, she marveled how the small town looked like a picture postcard, covered in a thin layer of powdery white snow beneath a soft, gray sky. Smiling, Jac stuffed the phone number back into her pocket with a dreamy sigh and repacked her laptop.

"Not leaving so soon, are ya?" The cook angled his head, smiling over the counter while he took her money.

"Oh yes." She returned his smile. "I'm walking back to the hotel."

"Best be careful, Miss. There might be some ice out there," he added with a nod.

Assuring the cook she'd be fine, Jac buttoned the denim jacket and pushed open the glass door. A sharp snap of cold air instantly stung her cheeks. Muttering a curse under her breath, she searched for the sidewalk under the crunchy layer of snow then headed up Main Street.

When she was about a block from the restaurant, Jac's boot slipped in a small patch of ice. A tiny yelp escaped from her lips as she struggled for balance. Fortunately, she remained upright, but her heart was doing summersaults.

"If I fall, my computer's done for." She shook her head, clutching her laptop to her chest. "Maybe I should call Ray."

Before she could reach into the oversized pocket of the jacket, a low growl echoed through an alley close to where she stood on the sidewalk. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck bristled. Jac swallowed hard, turning her gaze to the narrow space between the buildings. No streetlights. Just pitch darkness.

Once again, a low, throaty growl echoed off the brick walls. Then she saw something move in the inky blackness. A pair of amber eyes gazing at her, moving closer.

"N-nice doggie," Jac uttered, taking a step back. "I-I'm not going to hurt you."

The snarling creature stepped out of the shadows. It was a wolf ... an angry wolf with its ears flat against its head and tawny-color fur bristling over its body.

Every fiber of her being said to run, but fear overwhelmed her. Jac shook from head to toe, her gaze locked on the wolf. She was petrified, afraid to look away as the wolf arched its back; its sharp front teeth catching the light.

Summoning up her nerve, Jac attempted to slide another step away from the approaching wolf. Holding her breath, she slowly inched her foot back. There was a harsh snarl. The wolf dashed at her, its incisors bared as it leaped straight for her.

There was no time to scream. Oof! The breath swooshed out of her. She fell back hard onto the sidewalk with her laptop bag shielding her from the full weight of the wolf.

Instinctively, she threw up an arm, blocking her face from the wolf's snapping jaws. The thick denim ripped as the large predator tugged viciously at the sleeve. Reacting in a blurred haze, Jac bent her knee and thrust a kick upward.

The wolf yelped releasing the jacket sleeve as her blow knocked it a few feet away onto the icy pavement.

Jac scrambled to her feet, running for her life in the direction of the restaurant. In the distance, a pair of headlights beamed, coming down the street.

"Help me!" she wailed, not looking behind to see if the wolf was on her heels or not. Her foot slipped on a patch of ice. Jac's wayward skid brought her to her knees and sent her rolling into the street until she stopped, flat on her back.

A low groan escaped from her lips as bursting stars of pain clouded her vision.

Everything around her went black.

\* \* \* \*

"How are you feeling, Jacqueline?"

The woman's voice was soft and melodic. Jac blinked, attempting to get her bearings. Her body twinged with aches as she propped herself on her elbows and glanced around the room. She was stretched out on a medical table beneath a high-powered light. The woman was wearing a white coat with a stethoscope around her neck and a worried expression upon her face.

"I'm ... sore," she managed, although her throat was dry.
"May I have a drink of water?"

"Certainly," the woman replied, crossing to the water cooler on the far side of the room. "I'm Doctor Allison Browne and you're at the urgent care facility."

Jac gave a relieved sigh and slowly sat up, taking the cup of water the doctor offered.

"Glad to see you've come to, Jacqueline. You had a nasty tumble, but nothing's broken and there's no sign of serious injuries." Doctor Browne flashed a thin smile. "However, I feel you're going to be sore for the next couple of days."

"Oh!" Jac was now fully alert. "D-did they catch the rabid wolf? Please, God, tell me they did." A shiver rippled down her spine as the memories came flooding back.

"There, there." The woman reached over, gently patting her hand. "You're going to be fine."

"Fine? Fine?" Jac snatched her hand away, her eyes wide with fear. "How can you say that? I nearly had my arm ripped off by a wild wolf on ... on Main Street!"

Her stomach was churning.

Doctor Browne didn't reply. Instead, she crossed to the door and partially opened it. "She's awake now. I think you should come in," she said to someone on the other side.

The door swung fully open. Jac's heart leapt in her chest at the sight of Ray entering the room.

His handsome face was pale and drawn. In two bold strides, he was by her side.

"Are you okay, Jac?" His brows knitted with concern.

"Ray, you look as bad as I feel." Jac smirked, yet she reached out, taking hold of his hand. His roughened yet warm touch instantly calmed her. He enclosed her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Damn, I've been worried sick about you." His voice was thick with emotion. "You've been out cold since they brought you in."

Jac was so enraptured by Ray's appearance she barely heard the doctor excuse herself and closed the door.

"Ray, have they found the wild wolf that was chasing me? It attacked me near the alley, but I managed to kick it off and run, but the ice ... it was slippery and..."

Her voice trailed off as Ray straightened his stance. "Bruce was the first cop on the scene. He's already filled me in on all the details of your attack." Jac could have sworn she saw a flicker of anger in his eyes. His jaw tightened into a hard line. "Lucky for you, you're one tough woman. It took some balls to ward off that crazed wolf."

"Balls? I was scared shitless, Ray." Jac shivered recalling the struggle.

"Well, don't worry. The wolf'll be taken care of soon ... I promise."

"Thanks, Ray. That makes me feel better." She smiled up at him.

He brought her hand to his lips and placed a feathery light kiss upon her knuckles. Jac blushed as a warm rush of heat washed through her body. For someone she'd just met, he made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

Like a bolt of lightning, a worrisome thought flashed through her mind.

"Oh! What about my laptop?" she exclaimed. The last thing she remembered before her tumble was clutching it to her chest. "My story notes and interview were on the hard drive!"

Ray gave a heavy sigh, slipping his hand from hers. "Your computer's still in one piece, which is more than I can say for the jacket I let you borrow." His expression darkened.

Jac recalled the wolf's snapping jaws and the ripping of the sleeve. Her stomach tightened. "Oh geez, Ray, I'm sorry about your jacket. I—"

"Hey," he interrupted her, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. "The jacket's just a jacket. The important thing is you're not hurt."

The tenderness in his voice opened the floodgates to her emotions. Tears of fear and frustration swelled in the corners of her eyes.

"Ah, come here," he gently coaxed, pulling her into his comforting embrace. She buried herself in his arms and let her tears silently trickle down her cheeks.

"Everything's gonna be fine now, you'll see." His voice was reassuring as he ran a soothing hand down her back. "You're going to be okay, aren't you?"

Jac gazed up into his eyes and nodded. "Sure, I'm all right." She sniffled, wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Everyone needs a good cry now and then," he replied with an sympathetic smile.

Jac nodded in agreement, trying to remember the last time she'd cried. It seemed like a long time ago ... and there had been no one around to comfort her.

"Thanks, Ray."

"For what?"

"For, you know, holding me. Letting me cry." She smiled up at him. "I needed that."

Before he could reply, the examination room door cracked slightly open. Someone cleared their throat. Regretfully, Jac backed away from Ray's embrace and straightened on the edge of the table.

"Ray, we're going to have to finish up with Jacqueline," Dr. Browne said as she reentered the room with a nurse. "Would you please wait in the hall?"

"Certainly," Ray politely nodded to the ladies, then returned his attention to her. "I'll be waiting for you outside."

Ray stepped out into the hall, closing the door behind him and drew a deep breath. Damn! His sithech-senses were amped up just from holding her close. Control. I must stay in control. Every fiber of his being knew the moon was swelling to fullness, even from behind the looming snow clouds.

His desire quickly turned to anger as he thought of the attack on Jac. His hands balled into tight fists at his side. It's enough to make a good wolf go bad. He briskly headed toward the exit. If I get my paws on the wolf that did this I'll—

"Ray!" A voice pierced his thoughts. "Ray, hey, hold up!"
He quickly glanced over his shoulder to see Ernie jaunting
down the corridor in his direction. Finally, Ernie caught up.
"W-we need to talk," he puffed, clearly out of breath. "In
private."

The young man took the laptop bag from his shoulder and gingerly handed it to Ray.

"What's wrong?" Ray's sithech-senses flared, picking up a disturbing simmer in Ernie's aura.

"Let's go outside." Ernie angled his head to the exit door and swung it open before Ray could reply.

They stepped out into the frosty night air. A blanket of pure white snow draped the surroundings, on cars and in the soccer field beside the center. The clouds had briefly parted,

making the silvery moonbeams sparkle on the freshly fallen snow.

"What the hell's going on, Ern?" Ray frowned turning to face his friend. "Talk to me!"

"It's about your lady friend." Ernie swallowed hard. "I did what you asked, I was checking to make sure her laptop wasn't damaged."

"Yeah, go on." Ray nodded.

"Well, it seems she's been asking questions, uh, about wolves ... wolves in Heather Grove."

"To whom?" Ray arched an eyebrow.

"J.T. White at the town hall, that's who!" Ernie exclaimed. "She's writing a story for her magazine about—

"Ernie! Have you been snooping through Jac's computer files?" Ray growled through clinched teeth.

The young man's eyes widened. He took a giant step back from Ray, holding up his hands. "Whoa, man, it's not like I was being nosy. Just checking to make sure nothing was damaged, but I came across the article."

"And, naturally, you read it." Ray sighed.

"Yeah, it caught my attention." His eyes narrowed.

"Especially when it mentioned what happened last Halloween."

He glared at Ernie, but was speechless. The blood simmering in his veins had suddenly gone cold.

"Take a look at this," Ernie continued, pulling a newspaper clipping from his jacket pocket. "It was in one of her research folders."

"Sheez! You went through her folders, too?" Ray shook his head in disbelief as he took the scrap of paper from Ernie's extended fingers.

Squinting under the parking lot lamp, Ray skimmed the article. His stomach tightened as he recalled MacDonald's lunatic attack on Megan and Derek during the Samhain full moon.

"This story was retracted the next day," Ray replied. "It took some doing, but our town hall connections managed to squash any rumors about werewolves running wild. I wonder how she got a hold of this." He frowned.

"Your lady friend is a journalist," Ernie reminded him in a solemn tone. "It's her job to dig up the dirt for those supermarket rags."

Ray unzipped the laptop bag on his shoulder and dropped the clipping into a battered folder. He let out an exasperated sigh. "You might have a point there, Ern."

"Sorry, Ray, but you're one of the pack guardians." He shrugged. "I thought you should know."

Ray strolled over to his truck and swung open the creaky door. Gently, he placed the laptop on the floorboard, then slammed the door shut. As he walked back toward the entrance where Ernie was waiting, his mind was spinning.

"So, what was J.T.'s answer to Jac's questions?"

"According to her notes, he was being very vague. She even jotted down he seemed angry about the clipping. And, get this," Ernie added, then chuckled. "Old J.T. even swore on his family Bible there were no werewolves in Heather Grove."

Ray wasn't smiling as he gazed into Ernie's eyes. "Jessie Theodore White's a quarter sithech," he mused out loud. "And Jac made him angry, asking his questions about us ... about the pack."

The young man's eyes widened at the same time something clicked in Ray's brain.

"H-he didn't attack her, did he?" Ernie stammered. "I mean, I know the moon's almost full and all, but—"

Ray had already unclipped the cell phone from his belt and depressed a number stored in memory. "I don't know, Ernie, but we're going to find out."

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#### **Chapter 6**

"Ah, come on, Ray, Jessie's as harmless as a pup." Although Bruce had a good point, something bad was gnawing at Ray's insides.

Seated in the warmth of the truck cab, Ray gripped the cell phone tightly to his ear. "Still, all the same, I think you should check it out. Just to be sure."

There was a heavy sigh on the other end of the phone, followed by a pause. "All right, bro. If you're getting bad vibes from this, I'll do it ... but only for you."

A grin spread over Ray's face. "Thanks, Bruce. I owe ya one, man."

"What about Ms. Hamilton? How are we going to get her out of town? Her car's still in the shop and more nasty weather's on the way."

"We're not, but I think she'll need to be kept safe."

"What do ya mean? Ray, you're not going to do anything you'll regret later, are you?"

Ray sighed, shifting in the driver's seat with aggravation. "I'm just planning to keep her safe ... and that's all. She's scared, bruised and a bit confused at the moment."

There was another pause. Ray felt his fellow sithech psychically nudging his mind.

"Get out of my head, Taylor," Ray warned. "Or I swear I'll—"

"You're taking her back to your place," Bruce interrupted, reading his mind. "Damn it! Don't make this situation worse than it already is, man."

"Lay off," Ray snapped. "I know what I'm doing. Now, check out Jessie and get back with me."

He quickly flipped the cell phone shut and let out a sigh of frustration. The full moon's effects were strong. It seemed that everyone was getting under his skin and making his nerves itch with irritation.

Everything'll be back to normal when the moon starts to wane.

Familiar voices drew his attention back to the glass doors of the center as Jac exited the building with Ernie by her side.

Ray swung open the door and stepped down into the snow-covered parking lot. "Watch your step, guys. The ground's getting slicker with ice," he called out as they approached.

His heart panged watching Jac cross the parking lot with caution. He knew it was partly from her bruises and, the other half, his warning.

"I appreciate you checking my laptop, Ernie," Jac said as they approached the truck. "It's good to know someone around here has some computer expertise."

"Don't mention, it." He grinned, thumbing in Ray's direction. "It was all his idea."

"Oh?" She angled her head, smiling over at him.

Her smile made him tingle from head to toe. Ray modestly cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, you said your story's important. I didn't want you to screw up your deadline."

He turned his gaze back to Ernie, asking if the young man needed a ride back to town.

"Nope," Ernie declined with a shake of his head. "I'm heading back to my place to catch a few Z's. It's getting late, so I'll see y'all later."

After saying their goodbyes, Ray tugged open the truck door and offered Jac a hand up into the cab.

As he rounded the truck, Ray's stomach coiled with nerves. Taking Jac back to his place was the only sure way to keep her safe from the rogue wolf until it was apprehended. But could he keep her safe from himself as the moon fever stirred in his own sithech-blood?

"Thank goodness this laptop case has extra padding," Jac said as he slid into the driver's seat, slamming the door behind him. "I was worried it might've got damaged in the tumble."

"It's safe and so are you." Ray flashed a thin smile. "I'm glad you weren't severely hurt or worse."

"Yeah, I know." There was a quiver in her voice. An uneasy silence fell between them. Ray put the truck in gear and headed slowly out of the parking lot. His heart ached as he detected a shimmer of fear in her aura.

"I'm taking you back to the motel," he said, breaking the silence. "I need you to pack your bags, check out and come back to the truck."

Jac glared over at him, her mouth open, yet she was speechless.

"I'm taking you home with me," Ray said evenly.

"Why?" she retorted. "The doctor said my bruises were nothing serious and I'd heal. Besides, I can take care of myself."

Ray cut his gaze over to the passenger seat. He could sense her confusion. "Yeah, I'm sure you can. It's nothing like that," he replied, keeping his voice neutral. "You're going to have to trust me."

"Trust you? What's this all about, Ray?" She folded her arms over her chest. Her mouth was drawn into a tight line across her face, but her cheeks were glowing with color.

Ray's heart sank at her outburst. He wished he could tell her the whole truth, but he couldn't. Even though she was human, every instinct in his sithech-nature was going haywire. He had to keep her safe. Why? He wasn't sure.

"I have a gut-feeling you're in danger, Jac."

\* \* \* \*

Ray had been vague when she tried to question him. It was like asking a brick wall questions. Frustrated, she'd given up ... for the time being. They rode in silence back to The Starlight Motel. She wanted to protest a bit more, but didn't. It was unexplainable. Something deep inside her trusted Ray.

While she quickly packed her bag, Ray went to the office and checked her out of the motel. They walked in silence back out to the truck. Yet, her mind was spinning with lots of unanswered questions. However, it had been a long day. The attack had left her shaky and she was thoroughly exhausted.

He tossed her suitcase into the back of the truck, then swung open the door and helped her climb up into the cab.

Jac let out a low groan as she shifted in the passenger seat.

"Are you okay?" Ray gently inquired, concern clouding his eyes.

"Considering I feel like a PetSmart chew toy, I think I'll be okay." She managed a weak smile. Ray gave a soft chuckle, closed the door, then rounded the truck.

Yeah, I'll get to the bottom of this. She buckled her seatbelt. But only after a hot bath and a good night's sleep.

"Ray." She cast him a sidelong glance as he settled into his seat. "I don't know what this is all about, but I'm gonna trust you."

"Thanks, Jac." The worried expression on his face softened into a smile. He turned the key and the truck rumbled to life.

Jac gave a heavy sigh, reclining back in the seat and closed her eyes.

Within moments, she was sound asleep.

\* \* \* \*

She woke up to the hissing of a coffeepot, followed by the unmistakable aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since lunch the day before. Slowly, Jac opened her eyes and blinked, attempting to recall where she was. Then it dawned on her. She was at Ray's house.

Her mind was fuzzy as she rose from the bed. She breathed a small sigh of relief when she noticed she was still in her clothes ... minus her boots and the jacket. Not recalling

the ride home, she deduced Ray had carried her in and tucked her into the bed.

She swung her feet over the side of the large bed and got up, padding over to the closed door. The house was quiet, except for the gurgling of the coffeepot. After opening the door, she made her way down a small hallway, following the scent of the coffee.

Around the corner was a small kitchen area complete with a table and two chairs. Jac smiled, opening the cabinet above the coffeepot. Bingo! She found a set of hodge-podge mugs with various landmarks and states painted on them. Deciding on the one marked Las Vegas she lifted the carafe from the coffeemaker and began to pour herself a cup.

"Good morning." A familiar voice came from the kitchen entrance. "I didn't realize you'd be up so early." Ray pulled a chair out from the table and sat down, removing his boots. They were coated with a layer of crushed snow and dirt; he placed them beside a crumpled sack on the floor.

"And I see you're up with the birds." She grinned, nodding over to the half-empty sack of bird seed.

"The weather's messy out there. I figured the little ones won't mind a handout this morning for breakfast." He smiled.

Jac placed a hand over her stomach. "Yeah, I'm a bit hungry, too."

"Great! I'll get started making you some breakfast." He grinned. "Afterwards, you can take a shower and change into some fresh clothes."

Adding the condiments to her coffee, Jac giggled. "Sometimes, Ray, you spook me. It's like you're reading my mind."

"Really?" He blinked. "I usually only do that with certain people." A curious expression clouded his face.

Seeing his uneasiness, Jac decided to change the subject.

"Who's the traveler?" she asked, holding up the coffee mug. "Someone's been to Vegas, Seattle and Yellowstone State Park."

"That'd be Ritchie," Ray replied as he rose to his feet. "Like I said, he's a bit of a wanderer and travels around a lot."

"And all you get are the souvenir mugs, right?" She grinned.

"Something like that." He shrugged, placing a frying pan onto the stove. "How do you like your eggs? Scrambled or sunny side up?"

The thought of food made her stomach rumble again.
"Scrambled with cheese," she replied. "That is, if you've got cheese. I don't wanna be too much trouble."

"It's no trouble at all." He grinned as she took a seat at the table, watching him over the rim of her mug. "Besides," he added, "you're my guest."

Jac shifted in the chair and cleared her throat. "Well, if I'm your guest, then why did you say I was in danger last night?"

"Might," he corrected. "You might be in danger. Trust me, Jac, you're just safer here."

Ray busied himself with cooking. Jac took another big sip of coffee. Within a few moments, he placed a steaming plate of breakfast before her.

"Bon appetite."

"Thanks." She eyed her food then glanced up at him. "But after breakfast and a shower, I expect some answers." She jabbed the fork in his direction to accent her point. "If I'm going to trust you, Ray, I'm gonna have to know what the Hell's going on."

Ray straightened, towering over her, but let out an exasperated sigh. "All right." He nodded. "Okay, we'll talk later. I promise."

To his relief, the rest of breakfast had gone relatively smooth ... except when Jac asked about the doggie door.

"What?" He set his empty coffee cup down on the kitchen table.

"The doggie door." She gestured toward the large plastic flap at the bottom of the backdoor. "Do you have a dog?"

"Uh, no. It was there when I bought the house." He shrugged. "Besides, what's the point in replacing a perfectly good door?"

"Well, this is a rural neighborhood. Don't you worry about animals wandering in from the outside?" she inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"They wouldn't dare." He flashed a feral grin.

The sound of Jac's laughter made his heart skip a beat. She was beautiful, her face shining with an inner radiance that made him desire her even more.

"So, how's my cooking?" He rose from his chair and took her empty plate. "Are my eggs as good as the diner's?"

"Yes, they're delicious." She nodded, rising to her feet.
"Now, let me help you with those dirty dishes."

Jac helped him load the dishwasher then headed to the bathroom to take a shower. Her absence would give him time to call Bruce, to see what he might have found out about Jac's attacker.

Standing at the bay window that overlooked the snow-covered lawn, Ray punched the buttons of the wireless phone and waited. The phone rang a good full three rings before Bruce answered.

"Hello?" His voice was groggy with sleep.

"Hey, it's me. Sorry to wake you," Ray apologized.

"Shit, sorry I didn't call last night, man. It was too late," Bruce mumbled.

"It's okay. What's the latest?" Ray asked, pacing up and down the living room rug.

"Nothing, man."

"What? Jessie's clean?"

"Yep." Bruce seemed more alert. "Jessie White was at the store picking up a couple of bags of groceries to drop off at the senior citizens' center when Ms. Hamilton was attacked. I've got several witnesses, plus a video tape and a register receipt if you want proof."

"No, that's not necessary." Ray sighed. "I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed."

"I know," Bruce consoled him. "It seemed like a logical conclusion at the time, but you know how the moon affects everything. It makes us hypersensitive, easily agitated and, well, horny."

Ray chuckled into the phone. "You can say that again." "You got it bad for your new friend, don't you?"

"I told you, it's not like that. I just think she'll be safer here until we track down her attacker."

"And what if we don't?" Bruce inquired. "How are you going to explain this to her, Ray? She's a smart woman. Don't underestimate her."

Ray knew better. He loved the sharpness of her mind as well as the curves of her body. Even just being around her a short time, there was something special about Jac that he found infectious.

"Believe me, I don't. I just wonder who sent her to Heather Grove in search of werewolves. The whole thing sounds strange to me."

"Yep, pretty strange," Bruce agreed. "Well, if you need me, give me a buzz. I'll be on patrol at eighteen hundred hours."

Ray hung up the phone feeling more frustrated than ever. If J.T. was innocent, then anyone in town with sithech-blood could possibly be her attacker.

He flopped down on the end of the sofa and gazed out the window. Watching the small birds gathering at the feeders out in the snowy yard, Ray sank deep into thought. He didn't register Jac was finished with her shower until she spoke from the doorway.

"Wow, I can't believe it snowed even more overnight," Jac exclaimed as she crossed the room.

Newly showered, she wore her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, away from her face. She'd also changed into a fresh pair of fuzzy socks, jeans and a form-fitting knit sweater. Her fresh-scrubbed youthful appearance made his groin twinge with longing. Ray shifted uncomfortably on his end of the sofa

as she sank down on its opposite side. To his relief, she appeared more relaxed and less sore.

"Well, there was another inch of snow last night after we got in, but it's mixed with sleet," he informed her. "The weatherman's saying schools and businesses will be closed for at least another day."

"Good." Jac smirked, folding her arms over her chest.

"Since we can't seem to go anywhere, we have plenty of time for you to explain to me why I might be in danger."

"I can think of other things we can do with our time." He flashed her a flirtatious grin.

Her cheeks turned rosy pink, but she seemed immune to his attempted charm. "Nope, not now." Jac shook her head. "Let's talk, Ray."

With a heavy sigh, he rose to his feet and began to pace back and forth in front of the bay window.

"Ernie found the article you were working on in your computer files the other night," he stated simply. "The article about wolves in Heather Grove."

"Well, the story's a dead end. Mr. White firmly denied there were any wolves in Heather Grove. But now ... now, I'm not so sure." A worried expression dissolved her composure. "After last night, I'd swear the man was lying through his teeth."

"Jessie's a nice man, Jac. He wasn't lying. He was protecting," Ray slowly explained.

"Protecting what? The wolves?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes." Ray nodded. "It goes back a long time ago ... back to Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century."

"Whoa, wait a minute." Jac held up her hand. "What do wolves in Heather Grove now have to do with eighteenth century Scotland?"

"Most of Heather Grove's ancestors are from Scotland. They came to the United States for many reasons, but, mostly to escape the slaughter of wolves throughout the Highlands."

"You mean the killing of wolves like I've seen on those websites like Defenders.org?" Jac's face went pale. "It's disgusting! I can't believe, in this modern age, some people are still killing other creatures so terribly and so brutally just because they're ... they're wolves."

Ray nodded, recalling the photographs Jac mentioned. He, too, was mortified by the cruelty of the senseless slaughter. He stopped pacing and speared a hand through his hair, then glanced over at Jac.

Tears moistened her eyes. "Crying about it won't do them any good, Jac. Only action can save those poor creatures. But here in Heather Grove, the sithech is kept guarded and safe."

"The sithech?"

"Yes, it's an ancient Scot-Gaelic word for wolf," he explained.

She knitted her brow, as if deep in thought, then glanced up at him. "So, Heather Grove is a wolf sanctuary, right?"

"Something like that." He shrugged, then sank down beside her on the sofa. "Only a few of us know. It's an important secret, Jac. If anyone outside of Heather Grove ever found out..."

His voice trailed off, choked with emotion. He lowered his head as the unfinished thought sent a chill down his spine.

"It would be like the eighteenth century slaughter all over again," Jac said in a low voice, finishing his exact thought.

Ray raised his head, gazing into her eyes. "I think I've just had one of those spooky moments you were talking about earlier."

An amused smile spread across Jac's face. It was a smile that warmed his heart and heated his blood. He took her hand and sensed something stirring in the space between them.

In a bold move, he leaned close and gently touched his forehead to hers. Jac's rich and luscious scent surrounded him. It teased his sithech-senses as the full moon fever began to surge within him. Before he consciously realized what he was doing, he lightly brushed his lips against hers before capturing her mouth in a full-blown kiss.

He wanted her ... bad.

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#### **Chapter 7**

It has been so long since Jac had been properly kissed, she thought she'd melt right there on the sofa. The pressure of his lips on hers was absolutely delicious. All thoughts of wolves, sanctuaries and magazine stories dissipated as she yielded to his kiss.

A low moan escaped from her when he removed his lips to dot the curve of her jaw with tiny, light kisses. Jac's senses reeled. Arousal crackled inside her as Ray encircled her in his strong arms and drew her close.

"I've wanted to do this since we met," Ray confessed between kisses. Her heart skipped a beat. Deep down, she did, too. Once again, they were on the same wavelength.

The room suddenly became very warm. Ray's lips trailed from her jaw down the column of her neck. Closing her eyes and tilting her head back, she gave into the pleasurable sensations. "Oh that feels sooo good," she moaned. "Don't stop."

The trail of heated kisses suddenly halted. Jac's eyes snapped open. He raised his head, his gaze meeting hers. There was a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "Don't stop, huh?" he teased.

"Oh, Ray." She gave a playful pout. "Quit toying with me, please."

"Well, I did say I could think of other things we could do since we're snowed in." He chuckled. "That is, if you want to."

There was a glow behind his eyes, despite his jovial mood. A shiver went down Jac's spine. Something about him that she just couldn't put her finger on. Something mysterious, yet sexy at the same time. It made her entire body buzz with erotic electricity.

Jac nervously licked her lips. Yet, there was no doubt she wanted exactly what he did. "Okay." She nodded.

Before she could blink, Ray rose to his feet, scooping her up off the sofa. "Hey! What are you doing?" She gasped as he carried her out of the living room and down the hallway.

"My room's more comfortable." He grinned, bumping the door open with his hip.

Decorated in deep forest greens and ivory, the room was warm and inviting. A vaguely familiar aroma greeted her senses when Ray gently laid her down in the center of his large bed. She propped herself up on her elbows and watched him switch on the CD player by the nightstand.

The mellow harmonies of The Eagles' Hotel California filled the room. Ray peeled off his shirt, revealing his hardened torso to her eager gaze. With a quirky smile, he sank down onto the bed, spreading his body over hers.

"Now, where was I?" he whispered in a low, husky voice.

"You were kissing my—" The words dissolved in her throat, replaced by another low moan of pleasure when Ray's lips brushed her neck with kisses.

"Oh, my God." She panted as a warm hand slid beneath her sweater. Even though his palm was rough, his touch was silk, gliding up her belly to the lacy cups of her bra.

Her skin burned with heat while Ray deftly moved the lace aside, freeing her pebble-hard nipples to his touch. Sinful sensations washed through her body. He brought his lips back to hers for another scorching kiss.

Ray felt the moon zinging through him. The sithech inside him relished the sweet taste of her mouth. His body tingled with excitement while his cock thickened in response, buried in his jeans.

A low growl escaped from the back of his throat. Jac pulled away, gazing up with a dazed smile. "Wow! You sure know how to kiss with gusto," she teased, pressing her body against him.

"Say, why don't we lose these clothes? I'm smothering," Ray suggested. If the truth be known, his skin itched, the sithech-blood pumping through his veins.

He lifted up, giving her enough room to remove her sweater. As she discarded it, his mouth watered at the sight of her breasts accented by the thin, lacy bra.

"Here, let me help you," he offered. His nimble fingers reached around, unhooking the bra.

Jac blushed as he peeled away the lacy material and tossed it aside. "Damn, you're gorgeous!" Ray couldn't help himself. She licked her lips with a nervous gesture of her tongue and pulled the tie from her hair. He stifled a groan. His cock pressed tighter against the denim.

Whether she knew it or not, Jac was melting away every ounce of his self-control.

Jac felt the intenseness of his gaze. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at her with such blatant

longing. Encircling her arms around his shoulders, she drew him back to her. She wanted him desperately with every fiber of her being.

Their lips met again with such heady sensations, Jac was intoxicated. It was a kiss favored with cinnamon and passion. He pulled his lips from hers and gazed down at her, lust shining in his eyes. "Ah, this feels wonderful." He smiled.

Jac's eyes widened in disbelief. "Oh my!"

"What?" Ray's brows knitted together. His expression was tender, yet perplexed.

But, for the life of her, she couldn't remember. "I-I just had a funny sense of déjà vu."

"Déjà vu?" He grinned.

Her cheeks warmed with embarrassment. "Never mind." She shook her head, then lowered a hand to the fly of his denim jeans. "Now, where were we?"

She loved the way Ray closed his eyes, surrendering to her touch as she unfastened his pants and slowly slid the zipper down. His musky scent filled her senses, quickly dissipating the nagging feeling in the back of her mind.

It was her turn. She gave him a hand, tugging down the jeans from his waist. As she tossed the denim aside, his stiff cock was revealed to her gaze. She flashed him a wicked grin. For a moment, she could have sworn he blushed.

"Are you modest, Ray? Surely not," she teased, reaching over and stroking over the length of his cock with a light brush of her hand. Ray quivered at her touch. He let out another low, ragged groan. A groan of pure pleasure.

"You're making me crazy." He opened his eyes. They were dark and hooded with passion. He reached for the fastenings of her jeans. "I want you sooo bad."

"Same here." Her body was heavy with lusty heat. It mingled with the strange, impulsive desire to jump his bones.

As soon as he peeled off her jeans, the scent of her arousal filled the room. Moisture tickled between her legs. She lay back on the soft mattress and swiftly wiggled out of her panties.

Jac beckoned him closer with a crooked finger. "Come here."

Ray had never witnessed a more beautiful and inviting sight. A woman who desired him as much as he did her. Mixed emotions flooded through him, along with the heat of the moon. Like a giant magnifier, the power of the moon was amplifying his feelings for Jac Hamilton.

Her musky aroma and willing demeanor was acting like an aphrodisiac, overpowering his self-control. He was hard, his body aching from head to toe. The sithech-blood pumped with intensity through his veins.

Ray quickly rose from the bed and stood over her. He gritted his teeth, balling his fists at his sides as he willed to control the sithech inside him.

"What's wrong?" She angled her head, gazing up at him with a perplexed expression. "Do you need a condom? I have some in my—"

"No. No, that's not it." He shook his head.

Jac rose gracefully from the bed. The sight of her luscious curves was wreaking havoc on him while she stood in front of him.

She snaked her arms around his shoulders. The softness of her belly pressed erotically against his cock. She leaned closer. "I haven't felt this way in a long time, about anybody. You're special, Ray. There's something about you that makes me feel..."

Her silken voice trailed off. However, the look in her eyes pierced his heart. Ray inhaled sharply. His senses were overloaded with lunar-induced desire. She caught him offguard, assaulting his mouth with a hungry kiss.

Heat shot up, flaring between their naked bodies. Ah shit! No! Ray quickly grasped Jac's shoulders and pulled her away from him.

"Back away," he snapped. "Back away, now, Jac!"

His skin began to itch. He was powerless to stop the metamorphosis. The last thing he saw was the hurt on her face. His shape rapidly began to change form. It happened.

Jac fell back onto the bed with a shrill, startled cry. A large, jet-black wolf was standing in the spot where Ray had been. Her heart raced in her chest. She scrambled back on the mattress, clutching a loose sheet to her chest.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped, not taking her eyes off the wolf. Shock and fear coiled in her stomach.

The wolf's ears flattened against his head. He tucked his tail between his legs when his dark gaze met hers.

The creature's eyes were familiar. A shiver went down her spine. "R-ray? Is that you?" she stammered.

The wolf gave a pitiful whimper and then turned, bolting from the room.

Jac leapt to her feet, wrapping the sheet around her before she scrambled after him. Her fear evaporated, she raced down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Her only concern was Ray.

"Ray! Come back!"

When she reached the kitchen, her heart sank in her chest. The doggie door was slapping to and fro. He'd escaped outside. She flipped the latch, pulling open the back door.

Jac called out again, stepping out onto the frigid porch, but was only met with silence. A trail of paw prints marked the snow-covered yard which led out to a large expanse of wooded glade.

"Damn it," she cursed as the biting cold permeated the thin sheet. Stepping back inside, she slammed the door. Her legs wobbled beneath her. Pulling out a chair, she sank down at the kitchen table as the initial wave of shock hit her.

Ray McShaw was a wolf.

Jac palmed her face, her mind racing. What the hell just happened? It was like an episode of The X-Files—with her in the starring role. She drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Pull yourself together. But then again, it's not every day a handsome man morphs into a wolf before my eyes!

A chill passed over her. She stood and headed toward the bedroom. With trembling hands, she picked up her clothes scattered about the room, putting put them back on to ward off the cold.

Her organized, ordinary world had been turned upside down.

\* \* \* \*

Snow crushed under his paws, but Ray didn't notice the bitter cold dampness which clung to his fur. His mind was elsewhere. He'd heard Jac calling out to him when he dashed out of the house, putting a safe distance between them.

His heart ached recalling her fear. It was his fault. He was unable to control the sithech. He had got caught up in the full moon fever ... and it left him stunned and changed.

Cursing the sithech-blood which ran through his veins, he slowed his pace. Sunlight shone through the clouds, but gave little warmth to the snow-covered glade. His wolf senses were alive, picking up on the wildlife in the area. However, Ray was not interested. He was distraught. His loss of control had revealed his secret to Jac. And, more than likely, had frightened her away.

He knew he'd have to return home once he changed back into human form. Being nude out in the snow was not a good idea. But will Jac still be there? It won't surprise me if she's already grabbed the truck keys and headed back to town.

If she was still there, then he would have a lot of explaining to do. It was something he didn't look forward to. Being sithech was difficult enough. Ray realized that revealing it to Jac, who was both human and a reporter, would be like climbing Mount Everest in a blizzard.

Settling down beneath a pine tree, Ray decided to rest until the fever simmered down in his veins. All he could do right now was to be patient and wait it out.

\* \* \* \*

Jac wanted to talk to someone, anyone. The silence in the house, combined with the questions running through her head, were enough to make her crazy. She stepped to the bay window and glanced out. Her heart sank in her chest. There was still no sign of Ray.

The shrill whistle of the teakettle jolted her. She headed to the kitchen, eager for a soothing hot cup of chamomile to ease her nerves. Too bad it's not vervain tea. She poured the hot water into the cup, inhaling the aroma that scented the air. At least chamomile tastes better.

Picking up the steaming cup, she walked back into the living room, then sank down onto the sofa. She was worried about Ray. He'd been gone for over an hour. Jac spotted the cordless phone on the coffee table. She reached over and picked it up. I should call someone, but whom?

Jac yelped with surprise as the phone rang in her hand. "Oh man!" Her heart beat a rapid tattoo as she glanced at the caller ID. Meg showed up on the tiny display. Without hesitating, Jac quickly depressed the button.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jac. It's Megan." A familiar voice came through the receiver. "May I please speak to Ray?"

"Uh, Ray? He's not here." Jac's heart was still thumping in her chest as she rose, pacing into the kitchen.

"What? He's not there?" She could hear the surprise in the woman's voice.

"No, he's, uh, outside." Jac gazed down at the doggie door. What the hell am I supposed to say? She chewed her lip nervously, noting an uncomfortable silence on the other end of the phone.

"Jac, what's wrong?" Megan inquired. "I know something's wrong. I can sense it."

Jac drew a deep breath to calm her nerves, returned to the sofa, the phone pressed against her ear. "Ray ran outside about an hour ago. I haven't seen him since ... and I don't know what to do."

"Wha-"

"He's changed into a wolf." There. She'd said it out loud ... to another person, to Ray's sister. There was silence on the other end of the phone. Oh, good grief. She's going to think I'm nuts! Jac's stomach churned with nerves. She grabbed the cup, taking a big sip of tea to clear her throat.

"Uh, Megan, are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

Jac let out a sigh of relief. "Oh good. For a moment I thought—"

"No, you're not nuts." Even though Megan's voice was calm and soothing, the hair on Jac's neck prickled.

"D-did you just read my mind?" Jac sat up straight on the sofa. "Are you psychic?"

"You can say I'm highly intuitive," Megan replied before she let out an amused chuckle. "Now, about Ray, what happened? Tell me everything."

Jac took another sip of tea, and then proceeded to give Megan a condensed PG-13 version of what had happened earlier in the bedroom.

Psychic or not, she'll be able to figure out what we were really doing.

When she finished, there was another long pause on the other end of the phone. Finally, Megan spoke again.

"He was affected by what's known as moon fever." Meg sighed. "It runs in our family."

"Your family? Then, that means you're ... you're a wolf, too!" Jac reached for the cup, gulping down the last drop then took a deep, calming breath. "Okay, Megan, I wanna know the truth. Please tell me what's going on. I'm worried about Ray."

"You really care about him, don't you?"

Megan's question caught her off-guard. She went silent. Yes, it was true. She was attracted to Ray McShaw from the moment she met him. It was an attraction which tugged on her heart strings. Something she couldn't explain or rationalize, yet it was mysterious and magical.

"Yes, I really care for your brother," she replied in a lower voice. "Now, would you please explain to me, what is moon fever?"

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#### **Chapter 8**

Raising his head from his forepaws, Ray glanced up at the midafternoon sky. Sunlight broke through the dreary clouds and cast a golden glow around him. The entire glade was warming and turned the snow into white, cold mush.

The moon fever which had been brought on by his rapid desire had subsided. Relieved, he rose up on all-fours, trotting back through the tree-lined field. Any other time, he would love to run free in the wooded glade, reeling in the glory of being a male alpha wolf. But, today, he only wanted to return home.

Home.

His heart ached as he thought of the modest dwelling. He'd bought the house right after his first big construction job. It was far enough from the town limits to give him privacy. Yet, it was also close enough to hurry into town in case his pack needed him. He loved living alone ... until now. The sight of Jac making herself comfortable in his surroundings had touched something inside him. Something more than lunar-induced lust.

Then it dawned on him.

She belonged there.

Jac belonged with him.

Ray stopped along the snowy trail and shook his head in disbelief. No! That's not possible! A low grumble of irritation escaped from the back of his throat. However, his gut was telling him otherwise.

A familiar scent snapped his attention back to his surroundings. The aroma of burning wood was coming from the direction of the house. Ray picked up his pace, a wave of panic rippling through him. He galloped up an embankment of white slush then stopped.

From the top of the small hill, he surveyed the property. Nothing appeared wrong. The house was nestled among the snow-capped trees in the afternoon sun, looking as warm and cheery as a Yuletide greeting card. The scent of firewood drifted from the chimney and his truck was still parked in front of the house, where he'd left it the night before.

She's still here! Ray puffed a big breath of relief. He was happy she'd stayed, but he was dreading having to face her and deal with the repercussions of his transformation. Then, again, he had to see her. He had to tell her the truth—even if it meant losing her. Pushing aside his anxiety, Ray made his way down the slick slope. He was extra careful to watch his footing. He had no desire to slide his way down the hill ... tail first.

Reaching the bottom of the slope, he trotted to the back door. Drawing a deep breath, he turned within himself and felt the rapid metamorphosis take place. The sithech retracted while his human form rushed forth until the change was complete. Ray rose to his feet. He cursed under his breath, quivering as an icy chill ran over his naked body.

Motivated by the cold and without a second thought, he rapped on the door. Taking a step back, he waited. He heard her quick footsteps as she raced to the door and swung it open.

"Ray! Thank goodness you're okay!"

There was an expression of relief on her face. His heart skipped a beat.

"Don't just stand there. Get inside." She gestured with a wave of her hand. "You must be freezing."

"Uh, not quite," he replied with a smirk. "I had on my fur coat until a few moments ago."

"Very funny." She shook her head, stepping back to let him enter. "There's a warm blanket on the sofa. You go wrap up by the fire and I'll bring you a cup of hot cocoa."

Grateful he was inside, Ray headed for the living room. Just like she'd said, a blanket was on the sofa. The fire in the hearth filled the room with warmth while Ray sat down, wrapping up in the soft, snuggly material.

"You've been gone a couple of hours," Jac said, crossing the room with a large mug in her hand. "I was getting worried about you."

"You were?" He raised an eyebrow, attempting to sense her mood. But being with her again only scrambled his senses. He had to regain his focus.

"Here." She offered him the steaming mug before she sat down on the floor, Indian-style, in front of him.

Ray nodded with gratitude then took a big sip of cocoa. The chocolaty drink, tasting delicious and comforting, slid down his throat, but Jac held his attention. He focused intently on her from over the rim of the mug.

She appeared unfrazzled, but it was as he'd thought. He could sense faint traces of fear in her aura. After taking a few more sips, he placed the mug on table and cleared his throat.

"Jac, I'm really sorry if I scared you. That was not my intention. Please accept my apology for not telling you the whole truth." He lowered his eyes, staring down at his hands then cast a worried glance back to her. "I won't blame you if you want to go back to the hotel tonight. I can call Bruce and get him to—"

"No." Her eyes widened. She seemed offended by his suggestion. "I'm not leaving. Well, not tonight."

"What? Why not?" He was stunned by her reaction. "Don't lie to me, Jac. I can also sense things most humans can't ... and I can sense your fear. You are afraid of me."

Jac's heart was hammering in her chest. Afraid or not, she didn't want to leave him. Drawing a deep breath, she sat up on her knees and eyed him wearily.

"Well, yeah. Wouldn't you if someone changed into a wolf before your eyes?" She rubbed her sweaty palms over her lap. "I mean it may be normal for your family but—"

"My family? How do you know about my family, Jac?" His voice was low and husky, yet calm.

"Megan called after you ran out. She knew something was wrong."

Ray's serious expression changed. The corners of his mouth curled up into an amused smile. "Yeah, my sister is intuitive. The women in our family have that ability as an extra bonus, you might say."

Jac nodded, tucking a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "She told me about your family, the ancient wolf blood and the way the moon effects your ... your kind."

She studied his face, admiring the way his dark hair accented his features. The quiver of fear inside her dissipated as another feeling emerged. Desire. True desire for the man seated before her. Her body hummed to life. The handsome man on the sofa, wrapped in nothing but a blanket, was having a strange effect on her.

The living room suddenly grew very warm. Like before, the sexual tension crackled between them. Jac wondered if it was just her, but it wasn't. Ray held her gaze. There were inklings of lust mirrored in his eyes. Slowly drawing up on her hands and knees, Jac crawled over to him and stopped.

"Well, I may not be affected by the moon nor am I a wolf, Ray." She smiled up into his face. "But you're certainly having an effect on me."

A serious expression returned to his face. "Jac, you've had two close encounters in the past twenty-four hours with our kind and—"

"I know. I know." She shrugged, "But with you, it's different."

Ray exhaled a slow, steady breath, but remained silent.

"Okay. Sure, I was frightened when you changed," she confessed, "but after your sister explained the sithech to me, I understood better. I still have lots of questions, but that doesn't change how I feel about you, Ray McShaw."

He quietly studied her face, but Jac could tell he was deep in thought. Some of the things she'd said had even surprised her, but it'd been so long since she wanted someone like she wanted Ray. She only prayed he still felt the same way ... at least for one night.

Her nipples hardened beneath her sweater, responding to the invisible attraction between them. It was more than chemistry. It was magical.

"I'm still attracted to you." She smiled up into his face.

Ray shifted on the sofa, letting the blanket fall away from his shoulders. Jac's heart skipped a beat, admiring his finemuscled torso. He leaned forward, offering her a hand.

"Well, why don't you climb up here?" The sexy rumble in his voice sent goose bumps over her arms.

Jac nodded, placing her hand in his. She reeled from the warmth of his familiar touch while he effortlessly drew her into his lap. He smelled like fresh soil, dark and earthy, mingled with the sensual scent of musk. An untamed aroma which spiked her lust.

"Mmm! You smell good." She giggled. "I just wanna rip off this blanket and do wild things to you!" To accent her point, she wiggled her bottom against his taunt thighs.

"Hold on, woman," Ray groaned. "You do realize you're propositioning a sithech?"

Jac raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?" She smirked.

"It's not nice to tease a horny wolf," he added with a playful grin. "Wolves are known for their vivacious sexual appetites. Especially during a full moon."

His jovial mood made her laugh out loud. "Yep." She nodded. "It's called full moon fever."

A lusty expression crossed his face then softened. "But this time, Jac, I will control myself better. I don't want to scare you again ... ever."

Ever.

It sounded so permanent. Emotion caught in Ray's throat. His own promise took him off-guard. To his relief, Jac only nodded. With a seductive gesture, she drew her hands over his bare chest. The heat radiating from her palms wiped his mind clean of anything but her close presence.

He'd been reining in his senses, trying to calmly apologize to her and remain in control, but now he was possessed. Encircling his arms around her waist, his mouth slanted over hers. His tongue swiped into her mouth for a deeper, longer kiss. She tasted like chocolate and sex while her tongue dueled with his. She felt so good his arms. And, despite her clothing, he could smell her hormonal attraction to him. The hot, musky scent washed over him, tugging at his heart and his groin. Ray detected no trace of fear in her anymore. She was just a vibrant woman who was a perfect match to his passionate nature.

He pulled away, gazing into her dark, dilated eyes. Her cheeks were flushed with desire and her lips swollen from their heated kisses. "You're amazing," he growled.

Her nipples brushed against his chest, teasing him from beneath her sweater. Ray snatched the bottom hem of her sweater, swiping it over her head. To his delight, she was wearing no bra. He lowered his head, flicking his tongue over the puckered tips. Jac moaned, writhing wildly against his mouth.

"Oh God!" she panted. "That feels goooood."

A wave of smug satisfaction washed over him, knowing he was pleasing her. He suckled her breasts until her body went

limp in his arms. The sound of her raspy breathing filled the living room.

Still embracing Jac in his arms, he rose, effortlessly lifting her. He laid her out upon the carpet in front of the roaring fire. The snaps and pops of the blaze echoed the excitement coursing through his veins. His body was white-hot with desire and his cock was hard as a rock between his thighs.

As if reading his mind, Jac slid a hand to his erection, encircling her fingers around his girth. He gasped, channeling the primal, raw emotions which now pumped through his veins. Ray's senses were thick with a cloud of pure lust.

Jac loved the feeling of the velvety firmness in her hands while she stroked his length. She knew he would be long and round enough to fill her. Moisture trickled from her pussylips. Her sex clutched with longing. She wanted him—all of him—inside her.

"A condom," she panted. "In my bag." Jac gestured to her laptop bag beside the sofa. A moment of clarity flickered in his eyes. Ray reached over, unzipping the side pouch. Her heart drummed madly in her chest. She shimmied out of her pants, tossing them aside then waited. Her entire body was ablaze with anticipation.

With a quick rip, he'd opened the packet, deftly rolling the latex into place before positioning his body over her. He leaned in, kissing her. Jac's senses reeled, her breath stolen away by his heated kisses while a gentle hand drifted down over her belly to the slick folds of her sex.

Ray slid a finger into her pussy and began to stroke inside her. Jac trembled, the world around her dissolving into a

happy blur. She moaned against his lips, her entire being reaching out to the man making love to her.

I want more.

Ray peeled his lips from hers and gazed into her eyes. "More, huh?" He flashed a feral grin. The fine hairs covering her body stood on end, but the sensation was washed away by the wild desire coursing through her veins.

"Yes, more," she pleaded softly.

Without hesitation, Ray pressed the tip of his cock to the heated entrance of her sex and rocked his hips forward. A low moan escaped from his lips as her slick tightness surrounded him. He was caught up in the sheer joy that was echoing through his body.

Jac stirred beneath him. With an excited whimper, she curled her legs over his shoulders and took him deeper inside her velvety canal.

"Oh God! Oh yesss," he hissed, acutely sensing every twinge of pleasure which rippled within her. Lust racked his body, yet his mind went silent. His hips rocked, thrusting into her with heated strokes. The world spiraled like a pinwheel.

Ray gritted his teeth, desperately attempting to prolong the intimate connection. But buried deep inside his lover's body, holding off was next to impossible. Her pussy fluttered wildly then gripped him tighter. Jac gave a loud moan of pleasure and release. The delicious impact of her orgasm rippled through his cock. Ray also felt it in his heart.

She was his everything.

She was his mate.

And with that, he came.

\* \* \* \*

Jac stirred from deep sleep, feeling all warm and fuzzy. The harsh glare of the morning sun momentarily stunned her. She squinted open her eyes. For a moment, she couldn't recall where she was. She glanced around and it all came back to her.

She was lying on the sofa's pullout bed. In the fireplace, ashes smoldered from the remains of last night's fire. Jac snuggled beneath the blanket with her head resting on one of the sofa's plush pillows.

Sunlight streamed in through the bay window, reflecting the brightness of the white snow outside. Birds were chirping in the distance and, from the direction of the kitchen, she heard someone shuffling around.

Jac propped herself up on her elbows. The spot on the mattress beside her bore a large indention. The scent of sex still lingered in the air. A smile curled over her lips. There was a delicious feeling of satisfaction between her legs, yet other muscles in her body ached, reminding her of the repercussions of unbridled sex.

"Good morning." His warm, husky voice was like music to her ears. "I thought I'd return the favor." He grinned, stepping close to the sofabed, and planted a tender kiss on her forehead. In his hand was a steaming mug. The aroma of coffee filled her senses as he gingerly offered her the mug.

"Ah, that smells good. Thanks." She grinned up at him. Wearing nothing except a pair of burgundy jogging pants, he

was freshly showered and still damp. The scent of soap and manly goodness filled the room. Ray was too fine for words.

She fondly recalled their passionate encounter in front of the fire the night before. Heat trickled down her spine. Jac did her best to control the emotions swirling inside her and took a sip of hot coffee.

Ray crossed to the window and looked out. "It's a beautiful morning. The weather's clearing up." He turned to her and smiled. "I was thinking about heading into town and taking you with me."

"Sure. I'll grab a quick shower then we can go. Anyway, I'll need to stop by the diner to check my email and contact my editor."

The smile on Ray's face faded to a concerned expression. "Are you still going to write the wolf article for The Inside-View?" He angled his head, placing his hands firmly on his hips. "I'd advise you against it."

"What do you mean, 'advise me against it'?" She scowled, placing the half-empty mug on the table beside the sofabed. "It's my job ... my career. I'm up for a promotion and this story will be the clincher. If I don't meet my deadline, it's back to shuffling papers and editing other reporters' work."

"I'm sorry, Jac, but you're still not out of danger." Ray gave a heavy sigh.

"I'm not?" Her stomach churned with renewed nervousness. "What do you mean?"

"It's just a hunch, but we think someone found out about your story and might be stalking you in wolf-form." Ray

frowned. "And until we catch the sithech who attacked you, you're not safe."

A shiver went down her spine. "We? We who?"

"Me, Bruce and Ernie," Ray replied with a soft sigh. "As long as we're around, we promise to keep you safe—so don't worry."

"Oh my! They're wolves, too!" Jac's eyes widened. It was all so unbelievable, but she knew he was telling her the truth.

Ray gave a light chuckle and nodded. "Yes, they're sithech, too. Bruce and I are also pack guardians and Ernie's intraining, if we can keep him away from the computer long enough."

He turned from the window and took a seat on the edge of the mattress. Giving her a compassionate smile, he scooped up her hand and affectionately squeezed it.

Ray's tenderness soothed her nerves. Clearing his throat, he continued. "According to statistics, twenty percent of Heather Grove's population is descendants of the sithech, Jac. Some have more or less of the blood in them, but they're all wolf."

Silence fell between them a moment. Jac thought about it a minute, then grinned. "Well, they say every small town has its secrets. Why should Heather Grove be any different?"

"You have a good point." Ray returned her grin. "However, when the moon is full in this town, it magnifies the sithech-blood. All sorts of weird things happen. We jokingly call it the three-F's—fear, fighting and fucking."

She felt her cheeks sting with color. Her stomach flipped a nervous flop. "Ray, about last night ... was that just, you know, fucking?"

Ray's face went serious again. He shook his head. "No, Jac, it wasn't." He leaned closer, brushing her lips with a soft kiss. A familiar heat rose up her spine. She desperately wanted the kiss to deepen, but he drew away. "What we did last night wasn't just a 'fuck', Jac. I'd like to believe we made love."

Jac's lips formed a silent 'o' as he stood, removing his hand from hers. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest. Did he just say love? Jac's gaze followed him as he strolled back to the kitchen. He was so sure, so confident ... and she was flabbergasted. Stunned.

She raised a palm to her forehead, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Oh Jac! You're falling in love with a ... with a wolfman! It was so surreal, so unbelievable, Jac gave a nervous giggle.

"Hey!" Ray called out from the kitchen, breaking through her rambling thoughts. "You'd better hit the shower soon. We're leaving for town in one hour."

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#### **Chapter 9**

The ride into town was pleasant enough. Ray grumbled a bit when Jac had switched his classic rock radio station to one that played retro 80's hits. However, as he stole a glance over to her, shifting through papers in her battered folder in the passenger seat, he found it difficult to be grumpy with her.

Damn, man, what happened to you last night? He'd always played by his own rules, but, for some reason, he'd given into her without too much protest. Ray pushed aside his nagging conscience and cleared his throat.

"So, what are you going to tell your editor about the article?"

Jac shook her head. "I don't know. So many things have happened in the past twelve hours or so, it's hard to tell." She shrugged.

"You can always write an article about Heather Grove's tranquil beauty," he suggested.

"It is a nice town." She nodded in agreement. "But my editor's expecting a story that will sell lots of magazines. It all boils down to the almighty dollar."

"Humph. That doesn't sound creative or fun." Ray frowned. "Say, have you ever thought of writing a novel?" He smiled over at her, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, I've thought about it. You know, writing the great American novel? Maybe one of these days, I will." Her soft dreamy voice tugged at his heart.

"You should." He nodded as Jewel's appeared over the dashboard, straight ahead. Ray tapped the breaks and flicked on his signal, pulling the truck to a smooth stop in front of the diner's entrance.

"Aren't you going to park?" Jac asked, stuffing her papers back into her laptop bag.

"No, I thought I'd head over to the garage and check on your car."

"Oh? Are you trying to get rid of me already?" Jac made a face, but he could tell she was just kidding.

"No, not likely." He smirked.

Jac flashed him a smile. It was her smile which had won his heart. She was such a beautiful, intelligent and funny woman. Just the thought of her leaving town filled him with an unnamable dread. Once again, pushing his doubts aside, he gestured to the diner door.

"Why don't you go inside and set up your laptop? I'll meet you here after I'm done at the garage."

"All right." Jac nodded, reaching for the door handle.

"Jac?" She stopped in mid-motion. "I meant what I said back at the house."

"What's that?"

"You still could be in danger. So be careful and keep your eyes open. Okay?"

"All right. Okay." She winked, then swung the door open and stepped down out of the cab.

She flashed him a smile and slammed the truck door.

Ray watched until she'd entered the diner before he put the truck back into gear and pulled out of the parking lot. His

emotions were in mild chaos. No woman had ever affected him this way.

But this wasn't just any woman. It was Jac Hamilton. Deep in his gut, Ray knew she was his mate.

There were only two problems. One, she was human and Ray wasn't sure if she'd be receptive to the idea of being a wolfblood's mate. And, second, as far as he knew, another sithech was still trying to kill her. Ray exhaled a heavy sigh while he changed gears. Sometimes being a pack guardian really bites!

\* \* \* \*

The diner was fairly busy. Jac found a vacant booth and slipped in, surveying the room around her. The scent of homestyle cooking was making her stomach growl. After she'd set up her laptop, she reached for a menu.

"Well, hello there. I'm surprised to see you're still in town."

Jac glanced up from the menu. Mary Lynn stood in front of the booth with her pen poised on her notepad.

"Yes, I'm still around," she casually replied.

"So, are you expecting someone else?" She gestured to the empty seat in front of Jac.

"Maybe a little later." Jac shrugged, then placed her order.

Mary Lynn flashed a lopsided smile. "We're a bit busy today, but your breakfast will be ready soon," the waitress assured her, then headed for the bustling kitchen.

Jac returned her attention back to the screen. Damn. She shook her head. Her editor had emailed her over a dozen times. Maybe I should've called him after the attack. But she

didn't want Frank Collins to know she was having difficulty with her assignment.

Drawing a deep breath, she decided to send Frank a quick email. I'll just tell him I'm still investigating the story. Her fingers flicked over the keyboard then she paused. Her fingers hovered over the flat keys when the hair on the back of her neck rose. Someone was watching her. She knew it.

She raised her eyes from the screen, glancing around the diner. The place was busy with the usual breakfast crowd. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but then Jac spotted a lone man seated at the counter, sipping on his coffee. He was a mature gentleman with thinning red hair. Dressed in a jacket, white dress shirt and tie, she deduced he was a businessman.

He glanced in her direction and met her gaze. The gentleman gave a lazy nod of his head in greeting. Jac blushed. Returning a nod she then lowered her eyes back to the computer screen.

Damn it! I'm getting paranoid!

A few moments later, she hit the send button, satisfied her vague response to her editor's emails would pacify him until she could figure out what to do. After Mary Lynn brought over her breakfast, she ate, mentally pondering her dilemma.

From all she learned from Ray and Megan about the sithech, her interview with Mr. White was worthless. Pretty much everything the older man had denied was, in one way or another, true. There were wolves in Heather Grove, but not ordinary animals. They were humans with the blood of wolves who were affected by the moon.

Jac reached into her bag and pulled out the rumpled folder, scanning her notes. Surely there's something here I can create into a sellable story. A wave of sadness suddenly overwhelmed her as something dawned on her. When I get the promotion, I'll have to stay in Charlotte.

Sighing with frustration, she took a sip of coffee as her emotions toiled. She knew it was all so sudden, but her feelings for Ray had escalated during their short time together. And, if she left Heather Grove, where would that leave their budding relationship?

And he won't leave here. This is his home. He's also a guardian of his pack. Jac palmed her face, attempting to shut out the world around her and think. There's gotta be an answer...

"Uh, excuse me, Miss." A deep, gravelly voice caught Jac's attention.

Whisking her hand from her face, she gazed up. A gentleman was standing in front of her booth, smiling down at her. It was the businessman from the counter.

"Are you Jacqueline Hamilton from The Inside-View?"

\* \* \* \*

Ray glanced down at his watch. He'd been cooling his heels since he'd got to the garage to chat with Derek. His brother-in-law was very busy. Derek stood out in the parking lot haggling with the scrap salesman over used automotive parts.

Turning back to the garage, he decided to wait in the makeshift waiting room. The scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted his senses as he walked in, shaking off the cold. Ah

yes! He grinned, grabbing a foam cup and filling it to the brim.

A blast of cold air brushed his back as someone entered from the outside. Ray turned and smiled. "Hey, sis!"

Megan was a sight in her hot pink jogging suit, which was in stark contrast to her flaming red hair. It was pulled back with a tie from her face, making her look like a teenager instead of a mature woman.

"Hey yourself." She grinned. "You're just the person I needed to see." She stepped over, brushing a kiss to his cheek, then glanced around the room. "Where's Jac?"

"She's over at the diner checking her email. I thought I'd swing by and check on her car." Ray paused, intently gazing at his sister.

Something in her aura wasn't right. His gut tightened, the smile vanishing from his face.

"Why aren't you at work, Meg?" he asked, gesturing to her jogging suit while she poured herself a cup of coffee. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Ray." She shrugged. "I had an appointment this morning and took the rest of the day off."

"Uh-huh." He nodded, not believing her. "Is that why your aura's doing strange things?"

"Ray, I could never hide things from you." Megan snickered.

"No, you can't." He frowned. "Now, what's going on?" He knew he was sounding firmer than he should. After all, he was her big brother.

Megan took a quick sip of coffee, then set down the cup, clasping her hands in front of her. Her emerald eyes appeared to glow in the florescent lighting of the room. Ray held his breath, waiting.

"Ray, you're going to be an uncle!"

It felt as if a two-by-four had ploughed into his stomach. "I-I'm what?" He plopped the coffee cup onto the counter, its contents splashing over the side.

Megan lowered her hands to her belly. "An uncle," she repeated. "Derek and I sensed it last week, but we had to be sure. I've just come back from the doctor's office. The results are positive."

"Sis!" Happiness overwhelmed him as he swept her up into his arms. "That's wonderful! I'm so happy for you ... for Derek! A baby! I'll be damned!" Tears stung in the corners of his eyes. Releasing his hold on Megan, he quickly swiped a hand over his eyes. "That's great news!"

"I knew you'd take it well." She laughed. "Derek wasn't sure you were ready to be an uncle yet, but I told him you'd be just as excited as we are."

Ray took Megan's hands, holding them tight to his chest. "I only wish Mom and Dad were around to share the good news," he replied in a gentle, yet somber tone.

"Me, too," Megan nodded then smiled again. "I've already called Ritchie on the way over here. He's thrilled too."

"Ritchie? Where is that wolf-hound, anyway?" Ray raised an eyebrow. For twins, he and his brother were nothing alike.

"I don't know." Megan shrugged. "But he said he'd be back in town at the end of the month."

"Oh, really?"

She nodded with a wide grin.

The garage's waiting room door swung open, accompanied by another gust of cold air.

"Damn, it's cold out there," Derek cursed, slamming the door behind him, then stopped dead in his tracks.

Ray met his gaze. The scent of sithech ... alpha male sithech filled the small room. He was feeling so much love for his sister, his wolf-senses were sending out a strong vibration of dominance and protection.

Derek took a cautionary step back. "So, does he know?" the young mechanic asked Megan, yet his gaze didn't waver. Deep down, Ray respected his sister's mate.

"I sure do, Daddy." Ray grinned. The tension in the room evaporated in an instant. He extended a hand to his brother-in-law. They clasped hands in a hardy handshake.
"Congratulations!"

"Thanks." Derek smiled, relief shining in his eyes. The mechanic glanced to his wife. "Excuse me." Ray released his hand, allowing him to cross over to Megan. Derek encircled her in his arms.

Ray smiled, watching the happy couple. Returning to his coffee, he took a big sip, but his mind was racing. In eight or nine months, there would be a baby in the family ... a new sithech in the pack.

The cycle of life's truly amazing. Then another thought crossed his mind.

"Meg, you know you won't be able to change during your pregnancy, right?" he reminded her in a gentle, yet firm tone.

"I know. No going sithech until after the baby's born. It might jeopardize the pregnancy, but you won't have to worry about me." She smiled. "Besides, according to the doctor, being pregnant will help control the full moon fever."

Full moon fever. Ray's thoughts immediately returned back to Jac.

"Uh, Meg, could you stick around until I check with Derek about Jac's car?" He gave his sister a pleading gaze. "I need some, uh, womanly advice."

"Sure, bro." Megan nodded, stepping out of Derek's embrace and laid a gentle hand on Ray's arm. "Anything for you."

\* \* \* \*

Jac's heart was hammering in her chest. She'd been so wrapped up in her own thoughts she hadn't heard the businessman approach.

"Yes, I'm Ms. Hamilton." She nodded.

"My name's Cameron White." The gentleman extended his hand. As Jac took his hand, she felt a familiar warmth up her arm. It had been the same with Megan and Ernie, too. The man had sithech-blood. There was little doubt in her mind. She withdrew her hand.

Cameron's polite smile never wavered from his face. He gestured to the empty seat. "Would you mind if I sit a spell? My legs aren't what they used to be, I'm afraid." His voice was rich and deep with a mesmerizing Southern drawl.

"Sure, but only for a moment." She managed a thin smile. "As you can see, I'm busy."

"Yeah, you must have a deadline eatin' away at you." He chuckled, settling into the seat across from her.

"As a matter of fact I do."

"Well, I'll get straight to the point, Ms. Hamilton. I'm a newsman myself. Been so all my life," he said with a grin. "I've worked for The New York Times and with other big newspapers before I decided to come back home, back to my roots."

"You're a journalist, too. How interesting," Jac mused out loud. "But what's that got to do with me?"

"You conducted an interview with my cousin, Jess White, the other day, didn't you?"

Jac merely nodded, curious where Cameron was leading.

"I've got nothing against those glossy, big-dollar magazines, Miss." The man's smile slipped away. "I would just suggest that you reconsider writing that story about our small town." He leaned forward and lowered his tone. "And about the wolves."

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. Jac scooted back in her seat, attempting to put some distance between them. She suddenly felt claustrophobic in the confines of the booth.

"Well, I'm just doing my-my job," she stammered, despite herself. "Honestly, your cousin didn't give me much to go on. I'm stumped, really."

"Jess has a good heart, Ms. Hamilton. I'm sure he answered your questions the best way he knew how, but there will be trouble if you write that story. Let's just say there are folks around town who won't be happy if it gets

published. And my cousin, Lord bless him, doesn't want any trouble and neither do I."

Folks around town. Jac knew exactly who Cameron meant. The families with sithech-blood—like Ray's. She definitely didn't want to hurt Ray or his family. Despite the fact she was a reporter, they'd trusted her. They'd told her the truth about their existence. In the wrong hands, that kind of information was dangerous ... very dangerous.

Jac nodded. "All right. I'll reconsider my assignment." She tapped a finger on the folder in front of her. "Besides, I don't have any solid facts. No facts, no story. Correct?"

Cameron held her gaze for a long moment then a wide grin spread over his face. "Jess was right about you, Ms. Hamilton. You're one smart lady. Damn smart." Slowly, he rose from the table. "Thank you for listening to me. I'm sure you've done the right thing."

"I hope so." She exhaled a long breath and slid her reading glasses on. "I certainly hope so."

"Oh! If you know of any reporters looking to relocate to a quiet little town, please feel free to give me a call. Our little newspaper could sure use someone with journalism experience." Cameron grinned, his eyes twinkling in the diner light.

Jac blinked, gazing up at the man over her frames. "Do you still work for the local newspaper, sir?"

"No, Ms. Hamilton. I own the newspaper," he replied with a wink. Without another word, he headed for the exit.

She blushed. Great! How embarrassing! She shook her head then returned her attention to the folder. The story was

dead. There were no wolves in Heather Grove or, at least, that's what she planned to tell her editor. But what other kind of subject would be interesting for her article? She drummed her fingers on the table, deep in thought.

A bell chimed, drawing her attention to the door. Ray strolled over to the booth with a big grin on his face. It was a grin which pierced through the heavy fog of her thoughts. Her heart did a somersault in her chest. She loved the way he made her feel. Just the gleam in his eyes when he looked her way made her tremble with desire and longing.

He stopped at a table, chatting with a group of men. From the appearance of the men, Jac figured they were construction workers, part of Ray's crew. An idea dawned on her. A smiled curled over her lips. "Yes, that's it!" she squeaked with delight.

Her fingers flickered over the laptop keyboard while she typed out her idea. Oh boy, what a lifesaver! She was buried in her thoughts when Ray approached the booth.

"Hello, pixie! What are you so happy about?" he asked, sliding into the empty seat across from her.

Jac looked over, meeting his gaze with a big smile. "You've just given me a brilliant idea!"

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### Chapter 10

Ray was surprised Jac had asked to interview him, but he listened intently to her idea about an article on the renovations of older buildings in Heather Grove.

"It'll make a good substitute for the other story, don't you think?" There was a merry twinkle in her eyes.

"So, what changed your mind?" he asked, perplexed. Jac proceeded to tell him about her dilemma, about being unsure about writing her story on the wolves ... and about her conversation with Cameron White.

Ray stiffened at the mention of the man's name. Even though Cameron was twice his age, the man had a way about him which got on Ray's nerves.

"What? Did he threaten you?" His curled his hand into a fist, the sithech-blood pumping hard in his veins.

"Oh no! It's not like that!" she quickly replied. "He just pointed out if the story was published it would cause trouble." Jac laid her hand on top of his curled fingers. Her touch was soothing. "And he's right. I don't want to cause any trouble for your family or you."

Ray's anger lessened a notch. The thought of her not wanting to cause trouble for his pack touched him. "Thanks." He nodded with a sigh of relief. Despite the smile on his face, mixed emotions still swirled in his gut. No one would ever threaten Jac ... not while he was around.

To his disappointment, her touch was short-lived and she returned to typing. Ray sat across the table, staring at her

lovely features. He wanted desperately to kiss her lips, to feel her body against him. Desire stirred in his groin. He wanted to be alone with her again.

He cleared his throat, drawing her attention. "Are you through with your email?"

"Sure." Jac nodded, removing her reading glasses and placed them beside her empty coffee mug. "I was just jotting down a few notes on the renovation story. Why?"

"It's too crowded in here," he hinted, hoping she'd get his point.

She paused a moment, gazing into his eyes. "Too crowded, huh? Why don't we go back to your place?" she suggested with a smile.

"I like the sound of that." He nodded, but all he could think about doing was scooping her up into his arms. He wanted to give her some primal loving like the night before. The full moon fever was already burning in his veins. "Why don't you head out to the truck while I take care of the bill?" He winked, sliding out of the booth.

Jac flashed him a seductive smile and quickly began to gather her things.

\* \* \* \*

He stepped up to the counter. Mary Lynn crossed the crowded diner, coming around to the register.

"Hey, Ray," Mary Lynn grinned, taking the check. "You're leaving so soon? No usual cup of coffee today?"

"Nope." He shook his head, pulling the money from his wallet.

"I'll see you out at the truck." Jac laid a hand on his arm then headed for the exit. The warmth of her touch lingered, making him smile. She made Ray feel like the luckiest man in the room.

"Since when have you two become a couple, huh?" Mary Lynn asked. Ray's gut coiled as he cut his eyes over to the waitress. It was jealousy ... pure sithech jealousy. He could sense it in her aura, even though the blonde was smiling.

"Ah, come on." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Give me a break." He tossed a couple of bills onto the counter for her tip then turned, heading for the door.

The ride home would give him plenty of time to tell Jac what was on his mind ... and in his heart. His chat with Megan renewed his hopes and eased his doubts. Now, it was up to him. Even though she was human, he'd have to convince Jac that she was his mate.

Ray only hoped Jac felt the same way.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, that's wonderful, Ray! Megan's going to have a baby!" Jac squealed as the truck rumbled down the road.

"Yep. And I'm going to be an uncle."

"How does that make you feel?" Jac glanced over at him. "Old."

She couldn't help but smile at the sour expression on his face. "Aw, it does not." Jac laughed, shaking her head.
"You're excited, I just know it." She sat back in the seat, her mind reeling with the news. Even though she barely knew Megan and Derek, she was happy for them.

A baby. She hadn't thought much about motherhood. She'd spent most of her adult life pursuing her writing career. Children were the last thing on her mind ... until now. Jac stole a glance in Ray's direction. Her heart gave a flutter, then an uneasy feeling coiled in the pit of her belly.

"Uh, Ray? Will the baby be a regular human or sithech? I mean, Megan and Derek have that special wolfblood. The baby will be okay, right?"

"Yeah, more than likely. Megan will have to remain in human-form until the baby's born, but it will be human. The sithech part won't fully develop until the child reaches puberty," Ray explained.

Jac thought about what he'd said then swallowed hard when another question crossed her mind. "Well, what if, say, a human and someone of sithech-blood have a child? What then?"

Ray was quiet. He didn't answer. His silence made her uncomfortable. Pulling into the driveway, he shut off the engine then turned to face her. His eyes shimmered in the fading sunlight.

"Honestly, I don't know. Believe me, I've been giving it lots of thought since we first made love." He reached over and took hold of her hands. His touch soothed away the tension swirling inside her.

Jac drew a deep breath. "Me too," she confessed. "I feel as if I've known you—"

"Forever?" Ray finished her sentence with a smile.

"Uh, yeah." She blinked, stunned. Damn, he's reading my mind again. Jac licked her lips. "I mean, it's all so crazy. I honestly don't know why I even asked a question like that."

"I think you do know, Jac." Ray held her gaze. "If I'm not mistaken, I think we're both feeling the same thing."

"And what might that be?" She cocked her head, attempting to read the expression on his face.

"We are meant to be together." He paused, taking a deep breath and affectionately squeezed her hands. Jac's heart skipped a beat, yet she patiently waited to him to continue. "Despite the fact you're human and I'm sithech, we're mates."

"Mates?" The inside of the truck suddenly became very warm. Her head swam. "You mean like soulmates, right?"

"Yeah, something like that," he confirmed with a nod.

"Those of sithech-blood are often gifted with intuition. Our heightened degree of awareness can help us find our mates ... the ones we want to have a special relationship with—"

"Y-you're saying that you want a relationship with me?" Jac interrupted, stunned by his confession.

"Yes, I sensed it from the moment I met you. Honestly, I thought it was the full moon playing tricks on me. I was wrong." Ray chuckled, his eyes twinkling in the fading sunlight. "What I'm feeling for you, Jac, is the real thing."

Even though she wasn't psychic, she sensed it, too. Their connection was downright spooky, but in a good way. It was certainly very real and very special. True to his alpha wolf nature, Ray was loyal, protective and loving.

He was an ideal mate ... her soulmate.

She drew in a deep breath, opening her heart and instantly sensed the sithech within him. A strange sensation swept over her. Her body responded to the unbridled desire which flared to life in his eyes.

Instinctively, she leaned in, beckoning him for a kiss ... and, without a word, he complied.

\* \* \* \*

Her lips on his sent a ripple of excitement throughout his body. Ray could have kissed her forever. However, she stopped him with a gentle hand to his chest and gestured to the house with a tilt of her chin. She wanted to go inside. Her kiss was like an unspoken promise lingering on his lips. Without delay, he grabbed her laptop bag and quickly ushered her through the door.

Without a word, he gingerly deposited the bag onto the kitchen table and they both made for the living room sofabed. In the warmth and comfort of his home, Ray pulled Jac back into his arms. Back where she belonged.

Her heated kisses awakened the sithech inside him, making his skin burn with full moon fever. Reaching for the hem of her sweater, he peeled it over her head. Every fiber of his being was eager to make love to her once again.

Jac's responsive desire equaled his while she tugged off his shirt and placed hot kisses over the expanse of his chest. Ray moaned, his lust spiking higher as her lips moved lower.

"Good God, you're killing me," he gasped.

She only giggled then traced her mouth over the outline of his cock pressed firm against the denim seam. Playfully, she

pushed him back onto the mattress and whipped off his blue jeans. Jac grinned, happy he preferred not to wear any briefs. His cock greeted her with a stiff salute.

"Oh my," she cooed, sliding onto the mattress beside him, topless. Her nipples were tight buds, revealing her own excitement. Before he could fondle her breasts, Jac reached over and encircled his cock. Her touch seemed to have an enlivening effect on every part of his being. Jac brushed a stray hair from her face and then lowered her head, taking his cock into her mouth.

Ray groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. Depriving himself of sight, the pleasurable sensation of her mouth upon his shaft made his insides quiver. If she keeps this up, I'll explode! He drew a ragged breath, struggling for control. Oh damn! Ten ... nine ... eight...

The countdown in his head seemed to be working until her tongue teased his cockhead, then flicked over the sweet spot just below his crown. "Ah, yesss!" he hissed. The imaginary numbers burst like soap bubbles. She had him wrapped around her tongue.

The moon fever rushed through his veins, centering on his groin. "Oh, baby, that feels good," he gasped while the pressure inside him simmered. Gripping a sheet with a hand, Ray clutched it and attempted to keep from coming too soon.

"Enough," he gasped. "Baby, please stop." Jac glanced up at him with a knowing smile. Her eyes gleamed in the dim light of the house. Ray reached down and pulled her up to him, capturing her mouth in a full kiss.

His tongue darted into her yielding mouth. A low moan escaped from her throat while he peeled her out of her clothes. The feeling of her soft skin now brushing against his naked body was driving him insane. The familiar scent of her womanly musk greeted his nose. The scent of his mate. She was wet and ready for him. Ray pulled his lips from hers and gazed up into her bedazzled expression.

"Condom?" he whispered, arching an eyebrow.

Reluctantly, Jac slid off the mattress and padded over to her laptop bag. Her hands trembled when she unzipped the side flap. Every part of her body hummed with excitement. Never in her life had she felt this way about any man ... wolf ... whatever he was. It didn't matter. All that mattered were the strong, heady sensations he stirred in her, both body and soul.

Rummaging through the pocket, she finally found the foil packet. "Got it." She grinned, holding it up triumphantly between her fingers and climbed back onto the mattress.

"Allow me." She giggled like an imp, ripping the packet open and then slid the rubber into place. Ray's cock bobbed. It was thick, hard and ready for her. Jac's sex was moist and slick with her own juices. She was ready, too and rolled on top of him, straddling his chest.

"Jac, this is a dream come true." Ray smiled up at her.

"Yours or mine?" she asked then gave a low groan of pleasure as his heated palms cupped her breasts. She arched her back, leaning into his sweat caresses. His touch was like magic, primal and hot, yet tender and loving at the same time.

Somewhere, muffled in the scattered clothing, Jac's cell phone rang. He stopped in mid-motion. "Let's ignore it," she whispered, not wanting to break the mood. "Please, Ray, don't stop."

Ray gave a raw chuckle and nodded. Jac leaned over, tantalizing him with her breasts. He covered the fleshy mounds with kisses, then deftly took a peaked nipple between his lips and suckled. Jac's entire body trembled with escalating desire. Splaying a hand over his chest to steady herself, she encircled his cock with the other one. Her hips lifted, then she slid onto his shaft in one swift move.

"Oh God," he moaned, releasing her nipple and cupped the back of her neck. He drew her to him, kissing her as she rode his cock.

He filled her completely. Jac relished the sensation, moving her hips to the erotic rhythms which pulsed inside her. Her sex gripped Ray's cock, seeking undiluted pleasure from their conjoined bodies. His hands slid down her body, then held onto her hips. Ray thrust upwards, matching her increasing tempo.

"Oh, Ray! God, yes!" she gasped while they moved together. She clung to him, riding his cock until white-hot sparks of passion flared inside her. Jac let out a wordless cry. Her climax imploded and rocked her world.

Jac's orgasm rippled through his cock, squeezing his shaft tight within her velvety-softness. The feeling was exquisite. The moon fever flowed through his body, hot and unyielding. Sweat beaded his brow. He stroked inside her, her sex still

squeezing around his hardened length with the aftershocks of her climax.

For a split second, everything around him blurred. Ray gave a low, animalistic growl. The sithech-blood boiled in his veins like liquid fire then peaked. He gave into his climax with a hard shudder of release and then closed his eyes.

"Oh God, I'm sooo wiped out," he groaned, opening his eyes.

Jac raised her head from his chest. "Same here, wolfman." She winked. "Tell me, is it always this intense during a full moon?"

Ray chuckled, shaking his head. "I honestly don't know. It's never affected me quite like this. And it's all because of you."

"Me?" She giggled, rolling off him onto her side and propping herself up on her elbow. "I'm innocent. I was just doing my job, minding my own business when, just a few days ago, I met you. Crazy, huh?"

"So, you're saying being my mate's crazy?" He raised an eyebrow. He was half-kidding and half-serious. Ray sat up, reaching over to flick on a lamp beside the sofa. He then glanced over to study the expression on her face.

Jac licked her lips in a nervous gesture. "I honestly don't know, Ray. I mean, I'm certainly feeling things for you, too."

"But you're not sure, are you?" he asked, softly. He leaned close, brushing the stray hairs away from her face with a tender touch. "It's okay. I understand. The last few days have been quite strange for you."

"Strange? That's an understatement." She laughed, easing the tenseness between them. "I feel at times like I've fallen into The Twilight Zone, but—"

Ray's cell phone rang, cutting her off.

"Damn it," Ray cursed under his breath and slid off the mattress. Quickly disposing of the condom in a nearby waste basket, he reached for his jeans and unclipped the phone. He glanced down at the lit-up screen. Good timing, bro.

"It's Bruce," he informed her, then flipped open the phone.
"Hey, what's up?"

He contained his emotions, yet paced the floor with brisk strides as he listened to Bruce. He was elated with the news that Ernie had uncovered a clue to Jac's attacker. "Great! I'll meet you at the diner in a few." Snapping the phone shut, he turned to face Jac. Her aura once again gave off a nervous hue.

"Ernie might have found a clue to the identity of your sithech-attacker," he informed her as he grabbed up his clothes and began to hastily put them on. "I'm heading over to the diner and meeting up with the rest of the pack."

"Good." She slid off the mattress, reaching for her jeans. "I'm coming, too."

He recalled how she'd appeared at the urgent care center ... teary-eyed and trembling. There was no way he would subject her to any more danger. Already dressed in his jeans and shirt, he reached out and took her hand. "No, Jac, you can't go with me."

"Why not?" She stubbornly raised her chin and held his gaze. "I want to go with you."

"It could be dangerous, Jac." He sensed the frustration welling up inside her. With a heavy sigh, he wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her close. "Please, pixie, try to understand. Tracking down a rogue wolf is a very serious business."

"Let me just come with you," she pleaded. "I promise I won't get in the way."

Ray's gut tightened. He squared his jaw and firmly shook his head. "No, you can't go."

"Aw, Ray!" Her dark eyes flickered with irritation.

He leaned in, giving her a tender kiss on the lips. "Jac, I just want to keep you safe. If anything were to happen to you..." His voice trailed off. He didn't want to dwell on the negative.

Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Listen, I was beginning to doubt I had a mate. I thought I was destined to be just a pack guardian ... until I met you. Whether or not you accept it, you are my mate. I love you with all my heart, Jacqueline. Please stay here for your safety and my sanity, okay?"

The determination in her eyes melted away. "All right, I'll stay." She slowly nodded. Her eyes looked moist, as if she wanted to cry, but she didn't. "But promise me you'll call as soon as you find out anything."

"I will, pixie." Ray sighed, hugging her to his chest. "I promise."

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### Chapter 11

A good, hot shower was just what she needed. After Ray left, she bolted the doors and headed toward the bathroom. She turned the knob until the hot water steamed up the tiny room. Stepping into the stall, she let the pelting droplets wash away her uneasiness.

I still can't believe he won't let me go with him. She let out a frustrated sigh and reached for the bar of soap. Yet, his confession had surprised her. I love you with all my heart. She'd wanted to cry, but had refrained. Jac knew Ray had feelings for her, but his blatant confession touched her.

Until now, all she'd cared about was her writing career. Sure, she'd dreamed of a man who would love and cherish her, but she hadn't expected to find him ... much less, the fact that he could change into a wolf.

Jac lathered up then rinsed the soap from her body. Through the door, she heard her cell phone ring. "Damn it," she cursed, recalling the ignored phone call during their lovemaking. Shutting off the water, she exited the shower, wrapping up in a plush towel. By the time she reached her phone, it had stopped.

Depressing the button for her message box, she had two missed calls. Both were from Frank Collins, her editor. "Oh, great!" she huffed, as she replayed his messages. They were short and simple.

Got your email. Give me a call ASAP.

Scrolling through her phone directory, she pressed the preprogrammed number and headed to the kitchen to make some tea. Yeah, a strong cup of chamomile will help take the edge off my conversation with Frank. She smiled.

He answered on the first ring. She hadn't even said 'hello' when he riddled her with questions. "Jac, what the hell's going on? You haven't called. I've been worried sick. What's going on? Talk to me."

"Calm down, Frank. I'm all right. Really," she reassured him. "There was just a slight change of plans, that's all."

"Well, I got your email. Are you still researching the story?"

"Uh, Frank, I hate to tell you this, but there's no story."
"What do you mean there's no story?"

Oh boy! Jac drew a deep breath to steady her nerves. She had to tell him ... without losing her job in the process. "There's not a shred of evidence that crazy werewolves are running amok in a small town." She gave a nervous laugh as she pulled the mug of hot water from the microwave and put her teabag in to steep.

"My contact said—"

"Your contact's a nutcase. I've done some research and this town's normal ... perfectly normal." Jac crossed her fingers. With any luck, her editor would decide to drop the wolf story.

"Great!" Frank sighed into her ear. "That's just freakin' great!" She could hear the frustration in his voice. "So, what are we supposed to do now?"

"Actually, I did come across something that would make a nice human interest story." She smiled into the phone. Jac proceeded to tell her editor about the small town renovation story. "You know, a small town that's getting a facelift, so to speak. I've already spoken to one of the contractors. He's willing to be interviewed. That is, if you're interested in the story. What do you say?"

There was a long pause over the receiver. She took a sip of her hot tea and waited, hoping her idea would work.

"Oh, okay. But I'm not happy this werewolf story didn't pan out," he grumbled. "My contact was adamant about strange goings-on in Heather Grove."

"It's like I said before, your contact's a nutcase. I've found no evidence whatsoever, so it's a good idea to drop it." Jac hated lying to her editor, but she knew it was all for the best. Besides, she owed the sithech-pack her loyalty since they'd disclosed their existence to her.

"Fine," he mumbled. "Have your story to me in a few days and I'll send a photographer down next week for pictures of the renovations to accompany your story."

"That's great. Thanks so much, Frank." After saying their goodbyes, Jac depressed the off button. Placing her cell phone back into her bag, she picked up the mug and took a big sip.

Jac exhaled a sigh of relief. "That's one less thing to worry about." She felt a sense of satisfaction, knowing Ray and the pack would be pleased. A chilly draft brushed down her spine. Dressed in nothing but a towel, she shivered. Crossing the

room, she decided to find her suitcase and change into warmer clothes.

Still, she wished Ray would call. She was curious about what Ernie had found out about her attacker. However, Ray'd been right. Despite her momentary stubbornness, she was really glad he'd squelched her protests to go with him. And besides, I have to work on the new story.

\* \* \* \*

The atmosphere was crackling with sithech-energy as Ray stepped into Jewel's Family Diner. The members of his pack had gathered at their usual table in the back. Their anxiety was radiating off their auras in a rainbow of brilliant colors as they talked among themselves.

Crossing the diner, he set his sights on Bruce, who was still dressed in his police uniform and stood at the head of the table. His longtime friend glanced over and smiled. The smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Glad you're here, Ray," he said with a curt nod, then stepped back, offering Ray a seat at the head of the table.

There was no single alpha leader in the local sithech pack. Ray immediately sensed their conversation was about him and his kin. His stomach clutched with nerves. He drew a sharp breath and focused on control.

"So, what's up?" Ray swept a gaze over the faces gathered around the table, then stopped at Bruce, seated at his elbow. "Where's Ernie?" He raised an eyebrow.

"He's not here yet. Megan's bringing him over," Bruce eyed him wearily. "We won't know anything until they get here."

"Which should be soon," Derek interjected from the other side of the table. "Meg just called from the car. They're on the way."

Ray sighed, spearing a hand through his hair. "Well, I guess we'll have to wait," he grumbled.

"Hey, sugar." A voice came from behind him. Ray turned in his seat and flashed a smile at Jasmine, an older African-American waitress he'd known for a long time. "What can I get you tonight?"

"Coffee, black." He winked. He waited until she took a few more orders for beverages around the table then headed back toward the kitchen before he spoke again. "Does anyone have a clue about what Ernie's found out?"

"Nothing," Bruce grumbled. "But he sounded like it was something important when he called me earlier."

Derek nodded. "He and Megan have been busy the past few days. You'd think they were working on a big jigsaw puzzle." He grinned.

"Megan's helping?" Ray inquired, angling his head toward his brother-in-law.

"Yeah." Derek shrugged. "She insisted." However, Ray could sense he wasn't pleased that Megan was helping Ernie track down the rogue sithech—especially since she was pregnant.

"My sister's got a strong will." He chuckled. "You should've known better when you married her."

"No shit." Derek laughed, rolling his eyes.

The members of the pack council were predominately male—several alphas, including himself, a few betas and even

less thetas. Megan was the exception to the rule. She was a McShaw and their family had long held positions within the tight-knit group.

Since his brother had an incurable case of wanderlust, Megan had volunteered to take an active role in the council. If Ritchie ever came back to town to stay and assume his role in the pack, they would request she step down.

Like that's gonna happen any time soon. Ray shook his head. Jasmine returned to the table with a tray full of beverages.

"Here you are, sugar." She placed the hot cup of coffee in front of him.

"Where's Mary Lynn tonight?" Bruce asked, taking a sip of his cola. "I thought she was working a double today."

"I dunno." Jasmine shook her head. "That girl's been in a weird mood. She took the night off. I guess the moon's gotten under her skin lately."

An eerie sensation rippled down Ray's spine. "What was that?" He blinked, gazing up into the older woman's perplexed face. He reached for the cell phone at his hip. "Excuse me," he mumbled and stood. "I'll be back," he called over his shoulder, heading toward the door in brisk, long strides.

The silvery glow of the moon filled the parking lot. Ray stepped outside and flipped open his phone. He depressed a number, holding his breath until Ernie answered.

"Hey, Ern, I just got a strange premonition. Please tell me I'm wrong," he rambled into the thin receiver as soon as his friend answered.

"Whoa, man, hang on," Ernie replied. "We're almost there."

Impatience shot through Ray. "Damn it," he growled. "I need answers. Now."

\* \* \* \*

Jac gave a heavy sigh and sat up straight, stretching her back. She'd been hunched over the laptop a little too long, squinting at the screen, but she had finished the notes for the renovation story.

Setting the computer on the coffee table, she rose from the sofa and headed to the kitchen for another cup of hot tea. "Damn it. What a fine time to misplace my glasses!" she muttered, searching through her bag for an aspirin to relieve the headache brought on by eyestrain. With no luck, she sighed with frustration. A strange sensation prickled over her skin. She felt empty, alone.

Jac was getting antsy waiting on Ray to call. He'd been gone over an hour and her patience had worn thin. "Okay, enough of this," she chided herself, filling her mug with water and placing it in the microwave. As she pressed the timer, there was a soft rap on the back door.

Her heart leapt into her throat. She padded over to the door and glanced through the blinds. A lone figure stood on the porch, backlit by the moon.

"Jac?" A woman's voice came from the other side of the door. "It's Mary Lynn. I've got your glasses," she said, holding up something in her hand.

Her reading glasses gleamed in the silvery light. "Oh, thank goodness." Jac breathed a sigh of relief, unlatching the bolts and swung the door open. "Hi, come on in."

Mary Lynn stepped out of the cold night air. "You were in such a hurry to leave, you left them at the diner this afternoon." She handed Jac the spectacles with a smile.

"Uh, yeah." Jac blushed, recalling her and Ray's haste to get back to the house. "Thanks for bringing them over."

Mary Lynn's eyes darted around the room. "So, he's not here, huh? I'm surprised he left you alone."

"He'll be back soon," Jac replied quickly, suddenly uneasy as she noticed the blonde was wrapped in a trench coat that covered her down to her feet. "I'm really busy, so if you'll—"

The home phone rang, cutting her off. Excusing herself, Jac reached over and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Jac, listen to me." It was Ray. "I'm on my way. Don't let Mary Lynn into the house. Do you understand? The full moon's affecting her. She's not quite herself."

Jac glanced over at the blonde standing in kitchen. Mary Lynn was staring at her with a feral grin. A lump of tension knotted in her throat. "Ray? I-I..."

Before she could blink, the woman reached over and ripped the phone cord from the wall with startling strength. Jac gasped with alarm, her grip tightening around the lone receiver while wall plaster crumbled, scattering onto the kitchen tile.

"You're not getting away from me this time." Mary Lynn's eyes flashed with malice. She tugged at her belt letting the trench coat fall to the floor. She was naked.

"What the—" Jac blinked, stunned by the crazy woman's actions. Pressing herself against the wall, her heart raced in her chest.

"I've been after Ray for years ... years!" Mary Lynn raised her voice, shrieking like a banshee. "How dare you come to town and take him from me! He's my mate! Mine!"

Heated anger filled the room. "Mine!" she repeated and then growled, emotions rolling off her in violent waves.

Nausea overwhelmed Jac as she detected movement beneath the woman's skin. Fur rapidly replaced flesh. Mary Lynn morphed, her shape changing into a big, tawny-colored wolf.

Jac gasped, realizing it was the same wolf that had attacked her in the alley on Main Street. Her blood ran cold.

The she-wolf wasted no time in taking advantage of her shock. It took a flying leap at her with fangs bared. Jac screamed. Wielding the phone receiver in her hand, she swung with all her might, landing a swift blow against the side of the creature's head. Knocked off-balance, the she-wolf fell sideways, momentarily stunned as it stumbled onto the tile.

Run, Jac! Run!

Ray's alarmed voice echoed in her head. Without hesitation, she scrambled for the door, swinging it open. She dashed down the porch stairs as the cold night air chilled her. But she didn't stop. Mary Lynn would soon be on her heels.

The gravity of the situation hit her hard. She had to escape the she-wolf's fury ... or she would be dead. Ray'd never considered himself psychically gifted, yet beneath the full moon, his sithech-senses were sharp and keen. He knew Jac was in danger. Cursing the slowness of his truck, he punched the accelerator. The truck barreled down the road.

The moon's silvery beams lit the road ahead. He was almost there. Ray's skin itched as the sithech-blood coursed through his veins. Despite her flirting, he'd never thought of Mary Lynn as a threat. Now, to find out she was Jac's attacker was just too much.

Ray sharply turned the wheel. The truck rolled up the gravel driveway. He silently prayed he wasn't too late. Hang on, Jac. I'm coming, he conveyed.

Hurry! His heart clutched in his chest. "Oh God," he exhaled a sharp breath. He heard her in his head. The connection between them was strong. Ray gritted his teeth. His vision blurred with red-hot anger and desperation. He slammed on the brakes, halting the truck with a sharp jerk.

He pushed open the door and ran toward the back of the house. The back door swung on its hinges. An uneasy feeling coiled in the pit of his stomach. Ray raced into the kitchen.

"Jac?" he called out. "Jac!" The house was earily silent. The telephone cord had been ripped from the wall, the kitchen chairs were asunder, but no sign of Jac or Mary Lynn. He ran back outside, sniffing the air for clues. Near the woods came the strong scent of a she-wolf and the familiar scent of his mate.

"Damn!" he cursed, undressing as he ran. His skin was sensitive, the sithech inside him rippling outward while black fur spread over his physique. By the time he reached the edge the glade, his human shape had morphed into wolf form. Racing on four legs through the thick mass of bare trees and evergreens, he caught her scent. It was laced with fear.

Jac, I'm here! he conveyed as he tore through the darkened glade. His sithech-senses were on high-alert, his night vision sharp and keen. He leapt over a fallen log, following their scents deeper and deeper into the moonlit grove.

Just ahead he detected the sound of scuffling and the low, vicious growl of an angry sithech.

Adrenaline coursed through Jac's veins. The she-wolf had been clever, cornering her near a thicket of thorny bushes. Jac glanced around, picking up the closest thing to a weapon she could lay her hands on. The tree limb was heavy, and she brandished it in front of her, attempting to keep the she-wolf at bay.

"Back off, bitch," she hissed, swinging the branch at the stalking wolf.

The creature's eyes glistened with malice, a growl rumbling in the back of its throat. Its fangs were bared and its fur bristled as it paced. The she-wolf was attempting to wear her down. If she gave into her weariness now, the wolf would attack.

Hang in there. If she could only hold out until Ray got there. But then what? Jac pushed the question from her mind, keeping a watchful gaze on the wild, rogue sithech.

The she-wolf darted to and fro, preparing to strike. "I said, back off!" Jac shouted, shoving the hefty branch between her and the snarling beast.

Jac! She heard Ray in her head. He was getting closer. However, the she-wolf's focus was solely on her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jac saw movement in the bushes.

A large, black wolf raced from the foliage. "Ray!" she called out, relief washed over her, her attention wavering a split second. The she-wolf dodged the branch and sprang.

She screamed when the she-wolf pounced. The large black wolf snarled and jumped, too. Ray, in full sithech-form, knocked the she-wolf clear while Jac scrambled back, close to the thicket for safety.

Jac's mind was reeling as she watched the two wolves clash together in a vicious fight of fur and fangs.

Once more, there was rustling in the bushes from the direction Ray'd come. A group of shadowy figures emerged, running toward them. "There they are!" A voice came from one of the crowd. Jac blinked with surprise. Megan, Ernie and Bruce raced toward them.

"Are you okay?" Bruce asked, kneeling down beside her.

"I-I think so." She made a frantic gesture to the two fighting wolves. "B-but someone do something. They're going to kill each other!"

"Not if I can help it," Megan cocked the gun in her hand and headed toward the wolves.

"Don't worry, Jac. It's a tranquilizer gun," Ernie explained, draping a jacket around Jac's shoulders. "It should put Mary Lynn out like a light."

The full moon fever raced through Ray's veins. The alpha sithech wanted blood ... the she-wolf's blood, but his human side held him at bay. If he purposely harmed her, the pack would question his actions. And, being a pack guardian, they would hold him accountable for the consequences.

The she-wolf was still rabid and fighting hard. The moon fever had her under its grip, and in a bad way. Yet, he'd managed to wear her down. From the other side of the clearing, he sensed Megan's approach.

Step back, bro, she mentally conveyed. I need a clear shot.

Ray eased back, hoping Megan's aim was on the mark. If not, the she-wolf might turn on her and he wasn't about to let that happen. He certainly would kill the bitch if she attacked his sister—consequences be damned.

Shots rang out. The she-wolf staggered back. She was hit. Two small darts marked her tawny fur. Combined with weariness, the potent tranquilizers took effect. The wolf wobbled on all fours then sank to the ground. However, it wasn't until the she-wolf closed her eyes that he exhaled a sigh of relief.

He turned to where Jac and the others stood. She leapt to her feet and ran toward him. "Oh, Ray, thank goodness

you're okay." The genuine concern in her voice made his heart soar.

Smiling, she dropped to her knees beside him. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you ... not to my mate."

Moonlight glimmered in her dark eyes as she threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his fur. "I love you too, Ray," she confessed in a soft whisper.

Jac was accepting him as her mate. Ray was overcome with emotion. He was one damn lucky sithech.

In an expression of pure joy, he tilted back his head and howled at the moon.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a long and stressful night, but it was hardly over. Returning to the house, Ray'd hopped in the shower, while Jac fixed a pot of coffee for several pack members who'd come to help transport Mary Lynn to safety.

Jac grinned as Ray strolled into the room in nothing but a towel.

"Do you need a hand with that?" Ray inclined his head to the thermos and cups beside the coffeemaker.

"No, I've got it." She winked. "But you'd better get some clothes on." Jac wagged a finger at him and smirked.

"All right, but I'll meet you down there," he called over his shoulder as she grabbed the thermos and cups, heading out the door. She made her way to the shady glade, recalling the nightmare from the night before. Yet, she'd survived ... thanks to Ray and Megan.

Dawn was breaking over the horizon. Jac was relieved, happy to see daylight again.

She stopped just short of the commotion while Derek and several pack members unloaded a metal cage from the back of a pickup. Jac cringed, a twinge of sympathy rippled through her.

"Is Mary Lynn going to be all right?" Jac asked, handing Megan the thermos and cups.

"Yes, she'll be fine." Megan gave her a reassuring smile.

"Bruce and the boys will make sure she recovers and then the pack will decide how to handle her transgressions."

"I can't believe she was trying to kill me ... and all because of Ray." Jac frowned, shaking her head as she recalled the deadly she-wolf chasing her through the woods.

"It's okay, Jac. Everything's fine now." Ray came up behind her, placing his warm hands on her shoulders. Calming her with his touch, he continued, "The moon fever affects each of us sithech differently. The moon acts as a mirror, magnifying our reactions. Mary Lynn must've lost control and her jealousy was intensified tenfold for her to attack you."

"Well said, bro." Megan grinned, raising a cup in mocksalute. "For a moment there, I didn't know if you could control your emotions either."

"Believe me, it was difficult." Ray gave a weary sigh.

In unison, the three looked back to Mary Lynn, still in sithech-form, unconscious on the ground. Bruce was kneeling beside her. He stroked her fur, whispering to her in a low, soothing tone.

"He likes her, doesn't he?" Jac asked, her throat knotting with emotion.

"They went out on a date the other night," Megan replied in a low tone. "Yeah, he likes her, but my intuition tells me he's upset with himself for not suspecting she was the rogue."

"Ah man, it's not his fault." Ray shook his head. "Hell, if it wasn't for you and Ernie, we all would have been in the dark."

"Maybe you can take Bruce out for a beer later on." Jac smiled up at Ray, patting his hand. "I'm sure he could use a good friend about now."

"That's one of the things I love about you, Jac. You have a good heart," he whispered into her ear, making her feel all warm and fuzzy from head to toe.

Megan had slipped away, giving them privacy. Jac turned in his arms, inhaling his familiar scent, the scent of wolf and man. "And my heart belongs to you, my mate." She smiled into his handsome face.

"But, what about your career at The Inside-View?" he asked, pressing his forehead to hers. "You'll be leaving town soon and—"

"No, I want to be here with you," she confessed. "I've thought about moving to Heather Grove." Jac glanced up and smiled with amusement at Ray's stunned expression.

"Cameron White is looking for a reporter over at the Gazette.

I could take a job there or I could start writing my great American novel. What do you think?"

"That's my pixie!" He chuckled. "You know, a woman with confidence is a real turn-on."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah." His breathless tone stirred something deep inside her. The dawn's early light twinkled in his eyes while he leaned close, capturing her lips in a sweet, sensual kiss. Jac's senses reeled, her heart filling with love ... love for her sithech mate.

Without a doubt, both of their lives were changing ... and it was all for the better.

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### **About the Author**

Sabrina Luna is a bestselling author of erotica & paranormal romance. She lives on the border of the Carolinas and enjoys writing fun, entertaining stories.

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