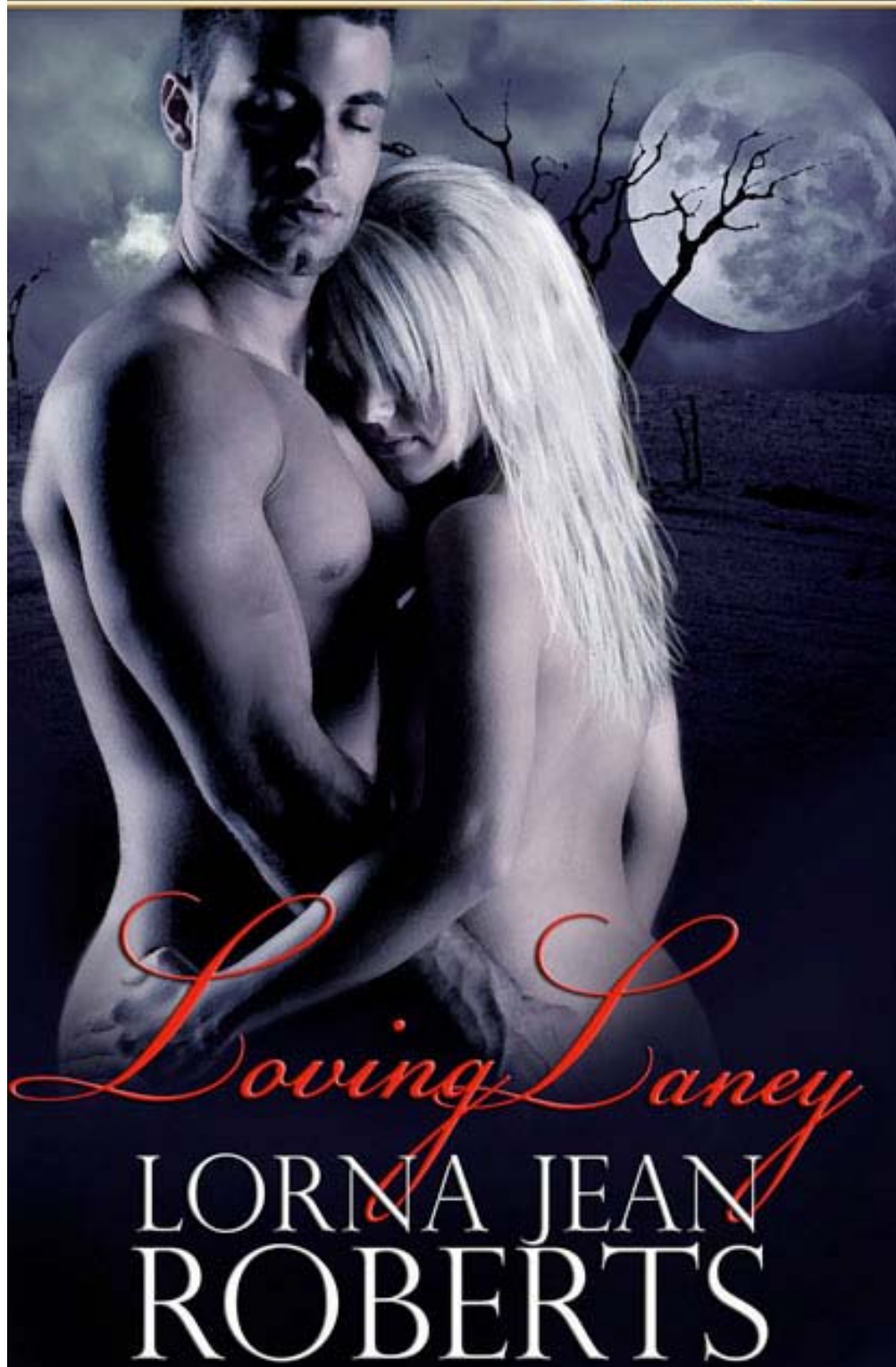


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Loving Laney

Lorna Jean Roberts

The absolute last thing Laney wants or needs is an Alpha werewolf. She fled a life of abuse and neglect at the hands of one, so there's no way she's interested in letting another into her life. Not even a sinfully gorgeous specimen. Uh-uh, not interested, not in this lifetime...

Then she meets Cooper Brady—and the man is delicious. Good sense is overwhelmed by the need to touch him, taste him, and perhaps a night of hot, melt-in-your-mouth sex is just what she needs. It's just a one-night stand after all, no strings attached, no messy goodbyes. Perfect.

Well, it would have been if he wasn't her mate. Mated life has its upsides, like sizzling, addictive, overwhelming sex—*yummm*. But lust can't help her convince Cooper not to wrap her in cotton wool, it can't help her tame or avoid bitchy packmates and it *definitely* can't help her figure out who's trying to scare her with nightmares from her past.

But hey, it sure does help.

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Loving Laney

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LOVING LANEY

Lorna Jean Roberts

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Chapter One

Trouble had just walked into Fat Eddy's, and he was mind-bogglingly gorgeous. It was his scent that first drew her attention. Luscious, rich dark chocolate mixed with the spicy sweet scent of cinnamon and a hint of smoke. It cut through the other, less savory smells in the bar to torture her senses, like tempting someone during a famine with a feast. It took all of her control not to let out a half-starved whimper, not to crawl her way over to him and beg him for a taste...until as he got closer it hit her, the scent of forest, of pack, of wolf, and just like that her arousal disappeared, frozen in her fear. Because the man now sitting two tables down was one of the most arrestingly attractive, stunningly sexy Alpha werewolves she'd ever come across, and Laney knew just how dangerous an Alpha could be.

Of course, it could just be a coincidence that he was here. Perhaps he was just passing through, stopping for a meal. Oh, of all the bars in all the towns... Yeah right. Laney just didn't believe in coincidences like that.

So what the hell was he doing here?

Laney shivered. What if *he* had sent him? Everything around her faded away to a blur as fear consumed her every thought. It was her worst nightmare come to life—that Zachary would send someone for her, find her and drag her back into hell.

"Laney!" The sharp, impatient whisper came from behind her, making her jump and screech with fright. Horrified, she could only watch, frozen, as cutlery went flying through the air, moving in slow motion to crash loudly on the fake wooden floor. Heat scorched her cheeks as every face in the bar turned toward her. Kneeling quickly, both so she could clean up the mess and to hide her embarrassment, Laney hastily gathered up the knives and forks with hands that trembled from a combination of fear and adrenaline.

"Looking for this?" A dark, coldly controlled voice spoke from above her, and without looking up she knew it was *him*. Damn, she hadn't even heard him walk up.

Where were those sharp werewolf senses when she needed them?

Bad wolfie. No cookie.

Her gaze rose up from his scuffed dark brown boots, over the worn blue jeans, skimming quickly past his groin—although hell yes!—and up until she saw the teaspoon he held. Laney nodded quickly, unable to speak past the lump in her throat. Why did the teaspoon have to land by his table? Bad teaspoon! Okay, now she knew she was losing her mind. She was actually starting to scold the cutlery!

"Do you want this back?" Damn it, his voice was amused. Did she have no pride? *Get off your damn knees, Delaney Jean*, she scolded herself.

"I mean, unless you're having fun down there?"

Laney frowned in confusion—fun on her knees? What the hell? Oh God, embarrassment hit her hard, and she just knew her cheeks were turning crimson, could feel the heat of them burning her. Why did she have to be staring right at his package? Not that she was staring, mind you—she'd been thinking and her face just happened to be at groin level. Oh crap! She was still staring.

Scrambling awkwardly, sensing that her face was still aflame, Laney managed to get herself to her feet, albeit a bit ungracefully.

"Th-thank you," she stuttered, reaching her hand out for the spoon only to have it rise way above her head. Which, she admitted to herself, wasn't that high—she was just that short. Her stomach dropped. Great, she'd moved to this town to get away from being bullied by other werewolves. Just showed her that no matter how sexy they were, they all got their jollies picking on her. Did she wear a sign saying "bully me"? Was it written in special ink on her forehead that only other werewolves could see?

Laney's temper pricked. Damned if she was going to let some jerk bully her into leaving her sanctuary.

"Give me the teaspoon," she gritted out, her gaze fixed on his chest.

"Hmm, no, I don't think so, not until you look at me."

Damn! Why did his voice have to be all dark and mysterious? Why couldn't he have sounded like a chipmunk with a cold? Life really was unfair. All the beautiful, strong people got everything, while the poor misfits ended up with the bad skin, the squeaky voices and the clumsiness of a clown.

"Laney!" An annoyed voice whispered behind her again, and she turned to find Ella standing there glaring at her. "You need to get a move on! Jimmy will be here soon and he'll be pissed if he catches you slacking off."

Laney turned back to her table and grabbed the rest of the plates and glasses. Luckily Ella had cleared away most of them while she'd been treasure hunting for dirty teaspoons. She tried her best to ignore the werewolf behind her, but as she turned to move back to the kitchen, he stepped in front of her, barring her path.

"Move out of my way," she ordered, keeping her gaze lowered. There was no mistaking that he was a dominant werewolf, and she knew better than to look him in the eye.

Damn, he still smelled good, though. Awareness tingled low in her stomach as she tried to dodge around him once again. You would think after years of playing this game with the bullies in her pack she'd be a champion. Nuh-uh, she was still a loser. Just stamp a big red *L* on her forehead.

"Don't you want your teaspoon?"

"Keep it," she said swiftly, trying to dodge him once again.

"Well, now, sweet, I don't really want it. What I do want is for you to look me in the eyes, and I'm not going to move 'til you do."

The teasing note was still there, but now there was a hint of steel underneath. Asshole.

"I am looking at you." She was. She was staring straight at his chest, a very broad, muscular chest. Yum.

"My face, sweet." Laney anxiously shuffled her weight from foot to foot. Why was he being so insistent about this? She continued to worry about it for a moment before making up her mind. She really wanted to get past him, and they were in a public place... What was the worst that could happen?

"Fine," she gritted out, glaring up at him. Sharp hazel eyes gazed piercingly into hers, their color so deep and pure she felt mesmerized, trapped. But when she eventually managed to tear her eyes from his, she found herself wishing she'd kept them there, for his face was no less arresting. Layers of dark hair framed a face fallen angels would have wept for, with high cheekbones and a slight stubble that only added to his magnetism.

"Happy now? I'm looking you in the eyes. Can I please get back to work before I get fired?"

He placed the teaspoon on her pile and stepped aside gracefully. Laney walked past him in a huff, careful not to get too close, not to touch him. No matter how much she may have longed too.

"Hey, way to catch Mr. T.D.D.'s attention, Laney." Ella bumped up next to her in the kitchen, dumping an armful of dirty plates beside the stack Laney was currently working her way through. T.D.D. described him perfectly. He was most definitely tall, dark and dangerous.

"Never thought of throwing dirty cutlery at a guy, I'll have to remember that next time."

Laney looked up at her friend in exasperation. Although she could be a snarky bitch at times, Ella was the closest thing Laney had ever had to a best friend, and deep inside she knew that Ella was actually very sensitive. Unfortunately, most people didn't see past the tough exterior.

Ella would never let anyone push her around. She was too sure of herself, too confident in her own skin. Of course, she was also five-eight with gorgeous curves, not five feet in heels with the body of a prepubescent child. Ella liked to change her hair color and style to suit her mood, but even the fact that it was currently black with purple tips and lay in jagged, uneven layers did little to detract from her beauty.

"You want him, you go get him, tiger," Laney said, shuddering slightly. "Quite frankly he scares the shit out of me."

Ella frowned down at her. "Laney, you are one weird chick. Of course, I always knew that. Who else but a crazy person would actually choose to live in this crappy town?" Laney knew that the only thing keeping Ella here was an ailing mother who depended on her.

"But if you're sure?" Ella asked absently, her hands already undoing another of her buttons until there was an almost indecent amount of cleavage showing.

"I'm sure," Laney said firmly. "I don't want him." Maybe if she said it out loud enough times, she would actually come to believe it.

"Well, then, wish me luck," Ella sang as she walked out of the kitchen, leaving Laney to tidy up the rest of the dishes herself. Not that she minded. Most werewolves were extroverts – they liked, even needed the constant presence of others. Not Laney. If she was alone, she was happy. Mostly. Laney shook her head to clear it. She should be focusing on what the hell this guy was doing here, not the pitiful state of her life. He didn't smell like her pack, but that didn't mean he hadn't been hired by them.

Sighing, she rinsed off the last of the dishes. Really, it didn't matter why he was here, he was a male werewolf and they didn't allow their women to live away from a pack. In fact, she didn't know of any other werewolves, male or female, who lived alone. Werewolves generally didn't do well by themselves. But so far she was okay, no secret yearnings to hunt and eat humans. Uhh, yuck!

"Damn man left!"

Laney jumped, looking over as Ella stormed her way back in, a pile of perfectly balanced plates resting in her arms.

"W-what?" Laney asked, quickly moving out of the way. Ella was a steamroller when she was mad – it was move or get flattened.

"I was flirting with him, leaned right over so he could view the girls, when he jumped up and said he had to leave. Hmmm, maybe he's gay."

"Umm, yeah, maybe," Laney said absently. Maybe he was just passing through. Surely if her Alpha had sent him, he'd have tried to grab her and run.

"That's gotta be it," Ella muttered while Laney nodded, feeling a curious mix of disappointment and relief.

* * * * *

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. It was a busy Friday night with the usual locals plus a few strangers who were just passing through, mainly truckers. Being on the main highway was the reason Fat Eddy's did so well. By the end of the evening her feet hurt, she smelled like cigarette smoke and fried food and all she wanted was to get home and have a long, hot shower.

Unfortunately, tonight was not going to be her night if the werewolf leaning against the driver's door of her small, beat-up car was any indication.

Laney paused, cursing silently. Thinking she might still be able to slip away before he spotted her, she took a slow step back.

"Going somewhere, sweet?" he drawled, looking completely relaxed as he leaned lazily against her car, his arms and legs crossed. Laney froze, cursing aloud this time.

"Damn it! Yes, I'm going home. Can you move so I can get in my car?"

"You know, sweet, you might want to be a little nicer considering you're a lone wolf in a town full of rednecks and drunkards."

His voice never rose from a soft drawl, but still Laney looked around nervously for any witnesses. She knew how badly the citizens of Addison would take it if they suddenly discovered she was a werewolf. While werewolves were legal citizens in the United States, there were still a lot of humans who viewed them as little more than animals. Worse, they saw them as abominations.

The biggest anti-werewolf group was a group called HAW, Humans Against Werewolves, who wanted all werewolves eradicated. Like pests. Most of them kept their protests peaceful, but there were a few extremists and their numbers seemed to be growing if the spike in violent episodes against werewolves lately was any indication.

There was a group of HAW supporters in Addison. The whole town knew that they met every Friday night at Frank Hadley's place. From what she'd heard they mainly just met up to do a lot of drinking and talking, but she knew the hatred was there, had seen it in some of their eyes when they'd been in the bar boasting foolishly about what they'd do should a werewolf pack ever move near Addison.

While Laney doubted that anyone in this town had even met a werewolf before, they'd all heard the rumors, seen the movies and built an unfounded hatred and fear.

Laney let out a quiet sigh as she confirmed they were alone. Regret and relief mingled. Regret, because she'd love a witness, would love someone to come along and send him packing. A foolish wish, as she knew no one in this town was strong enough to make him do anything he didn't want to do. Hence the relief, because she didn't want anyone getting hurt trying to defend her. She'd just have to deal with him by herself.

Her chin rose and she crossed her arms.

"What makes you think I'm alone?" she asked. She was, of course, but there was no reason to let him know that.

"Don't bother trying to lie to me, sweet. One, you're no good at it, and two, we both know that no self-respecting male werewolf would let you work in that dump." His lip curled in contempt as he nodded toward Fat Eddy's.

Laney straightened her shoulders. "Perhaps it doesn't look like much to you, but it pays my bills." Barely. "Now move. I'm tired and I want to go home to sleep, not listen to some stranger bitch about where I work and live."

"Bitch? Oh, sweet, how long have you been living with humans? You've forgotten who the bitch is."

He shifted off the car, stretching his arms above his head with a sinuous grace that held her enthralled. The play of well-developed muscles under delicious, deeply tanned skin made her mouth water.

"You know, sweet, you should think about being nicer to me. The only male wolf for miles around..."

Laney adopted a look of what she hoped was disgust, sneering at him to hide her surge of hungry lust. She clenched her thighs together tightly, as though that would stop the gush of moisture suddenly drenching her pussy. Wishful thinking!

Shit. Months of living among the humans and not one of them had come anywhere close to affecting her like this.

"I don't care if you're the only male wolf left on the planet. All I want is for you to move away from my car so I can go home."

He took a step toward her, narrowing his predator's eyes on her face as she gulped but stood her ground. Laney knew better than to let a bully know she was frightened—it would just spur him on.

"I can hear your heartbeat quickening, sweet. Scared?" He closed the space between them until her chest brushed against his ribs. The top of her head didn't even reach his shoulders.

"That's fury, not fear, and stop calling me sweet. I am not sweet."

"Really? Spicy then? Hmmm, I like that." He reached out a hand and brushed her hot cheek with his fingers as Laney fought not to jump away. A tingle of awareness danced over her skin at his light touch, her body flushing with a simmering heat as she wondered what it would feel like to have him touch her in other places.

"If it's not fear making your heart beat faster, then you won't mind if I do this." He leaned down, his full lips covering hers as his tongue sweet-talked its way into her mouth. *Damn, what a kiss!* Every nerve in her body sat up and sang as his tongue caressed hers. He didn't just kiss her mouth, he made love to it, and for the first time Laney understood what a kiss was supposed to feel like. He kissed her as though he had every right to, and she was horrified to find that her wolf agreed with him. She couldn't stop herself as she shivered and rubbed against him, a soft, sensuous body roll that had them both moaning.

But then he moved, his hand coming down so his fingers could play with her nipple, and just like that she snapped out of her lust-filled daze. Laney pushed him back, although she got the feeling he only moved because he wanted to.

"Who are you?" she snarled at him, using anger to hide how deeply he'd affected her.

"Sorry, sweet, the name's Cooper, Cooper Brady." He performed a little bow while Laney thought furiously. She couldn't remember the name but that didn't mean anything. She wasn't exactly clued in to werewolf politics.

"What are you doing here?" she asked suspiciously, trying desperately to control her breathing. *Damn*, that kiss had left her feeling as though she'd run a marathon. Just as well she'd stopped him—she might have passed out if they'd gone any further.

"Where's your pack?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me, sweet." He smiled down at her lazily and Laney had to work hard to concentrate – his smile had the power to turn her mind to mush. It would be so easy just to forget about everything else and lose herself in his kiss, his heat.

"I asked first," she replied petulantly, sexual frustration making her feel decidedly grumpy and childish.

"Well all right, then, sweet, if you insist. I'm on a bit of a trip, just passing through on my way to visit another pack."

"Where are you from?"

"South Carolina. You?"

Laney breathed a sigh of relief. There was no way he could have anything to do with her pack. The only pack she knew of in South Carolina was the Lian pack, and they were well known for their liberal ways. Packs that subscribed to the old ways, like hers, wouldn't have anything to do with them.

"Not going to talk to me, sweet?"

"Don't call me sweet!" she said irritably. Laney didn't care how good it sounded rolling off his tongue... She had a feeling if she let this rogue take a foot, he'd steal a mile.

"Well, you haven't told me your name, so what else am I to call you?"

She frowned up at him. "You know what my name is, don't pretend you didn't hear it in the bar, and remember I know how good your hearing is."

"Ahh yes, Laney. Isn't that what the purple-haired slut called you?"

"Urgh, she is not a slut!"

His eyebrows rose in mock surprise. "Really? Could have fooled me. I felt sure that was her hand reaching for my cock when she 'accidentally' dropped a napkin beside my table."

Laney winced, aware that Ella had used that ploy successfully more than once.

"I'm sure you were mistaken." She tried to sound convincing.

"Tut, tut, tut." He shook his head at her, an expression of mock disappointment on his face. "There you go with the lying again, sweet. You know what they say about liars, don't you?"

Laney frowned. "Their pants go on fire?" she asked hesitantly.

"Only because of the heat of their ass after a good long spanking."

Her jaw dropped. Had she just heard him right? Did he just threaten to spank her?

"Oh yes, sweet, you heard me right. Now give me your keys. I'm going to help you into your car, then I'll follow you to your place."

"I don't think so!" she sputtered, outraged by his high-handedness. Just who the hell did he think he was? Laney glared up at him, unimpressed as he narrowed his eyes down at her.

"There are two ways we can do this, sweetness. The way I just gave you, or I can toss you over my shoulder, throw you into my truck and leave this heap to rot as it deserves."

"There is no way in hell I am letting you come home with me!"

"Haven't you realized by now? You have no choice. I can smell your arousal from here. I felt you respond to my kiss." He took a step toward her, almost stalking her, forcing her to take a step back to avoid touching him.

"You want me. Your body is wet for me. The scent of your arousal calls to me. The only reason I'm not buried balls-deep inside that luscious pussy is because I didn't want to take you in a parking lot. But hey, if you don't care..."

He took another step closer to her and she squealed in fright, jumping back and banging into another car. Laney held out a hand out to stop him.

"Stay right there, you—you arrogant asshole!" she ordered, wincing at the shakiness of her voice.

"Arrogant, I'll give you. But asshole? Only when I don't get my way, but I'm going to get my way, aren't I, little one?" His voice had dropped to a low croon, and she shivered as it shimmied along her skin, warming her blood. Who was she kidding? She wanted him, they both knew it. Why shouldn't she take the opportunity? He had no idea who she was. A one-night stand might be just what she needed to get her sex life back on track. Well, get it started, anyway. It had never been "on track".

She narrowed her eyes at him. "So you're just passing through?"

"Well, I certainly don't intend to live here, sweet." He rocked back on his heels, grinning down at her, his hand outstretched.

Laney puffed out a breath of annoyance, hardly believing his arrogance.

"Fine," she snapped at him. "You can come back with me. But this is a one-off deal, no repeats."

He winked down at her, confidence written into every line of his body. "Never say never, sweet. At least not until you've sampled the goods."

She snorted. "Got a high opinion of yourself, don't you?"

"I'm just a big believer in the truth. Keys?" He made the gimme signal with his fingers.

Laney fished around in her oversized bag for her ring of keys. God damn it! She could never find anything in this sack, particularly with her hands shaking like a nervous teenager on her first date.

"Ah ha!" Finally! She held them up, triumphant to have won the battle of "find the keys" in less than five minutes. Looking up, she saw Cooper frowning down at her, his eyes snapping furiously, his strong jaw stiff with palpable tension. She lowered her gaze immediately.

"What?" She hated that he could so easily reduce her to a scared little pup. All arousal had fled in the face of his obvious anger.

"You do realize that while you stand here, alone, in the dark, fishing around in that knapsack, that anyone could attack you? Why the hell don't you find your keys before you leave the bar?"

She frowned at his scolding tone. "Sorry, Dad. I didn't realize I was going to get a lecture. Have you forgotten that I'm a werewolf? I'm pretty sure I can take care of myself if someone attacks." She caught her breath, barely repressing the urge to slap her hand over her mouth. Had she lost all sense of self-preservation?

"And have you forgotten that there are other, nonhuman things that can attack you? Things that are much stronger and much more dangerous than you." He was crowding over her, except this time it wasn't to turn her on, this time he was trying to intimidate her. And it was working.

Laney felt the urge to take a step back, but the car behind her blocked any movement, effectively trapping her so she had nowhere left to go. She kept her gaze from his, trying to appease his anger. His power beat at her, his anger almost sending her to her knees in supplication. But she refused to give in. He might be more powerful than her, but if she was going to sleep with him, then she'd be damned if she'd cower before him.

She breathed in slow and easy, calming the wolf inside her. It felt the call of the wolf before her, so strong, so potent. Finally the power eased down and she risked a look up to see him peering down at her in interest.

"You done with the dominant shit?" she snipped, even though her insides still quivered, still wanted her to cower.

He snorted. "Anyone ever told you that you've got a lot of attitude for a little wolf?"

"I may be a runt, but that doesn't mean I have to put up with wolves outside my pack bullying me." She jumped in surprise when he suddenly grabbed her hand. Looking up, she found him frowning down at her intently.

"Your packmates bully you?"

"Duh, of course, I'm the runt. You know, the smallest, littlest, most easy to pick on? Surely you have those in your pack."

"In my pack, those that are smaller and weaker are looked after by the more dominant of us, not bullied." His voice was serious, hard. Maybe he thought it was that way, but she would bet those that were smaller and weaker had a different story to tell.

"Whatever." She shrugged. "All this talking is wasting time. I'm heading this way." She pointed to the left. "Try to keep up." Laney made to move past him, but he stepped in her way, blocking her.

"What?" she huffed, frustrated.

"Give me your keys." He held out his hand once again.

"Why?"

"Gosh, you're a suspicious little thing. Give me your keys so I can open your car door for you."

"Again, why?"

"Because my mama raised me with manners." He waited until she reluctantly passed over her keys. Opening the driver's door, he placed a hand on the small of her back and helped her settle into the driver's seat. Before she could stop him, he'd belted her into the seat and laid a warm kiss on her lips.

"Drive carefully. I'll be right behind you." With that, he closed the door and strode over to a sleek navy-blue car parked a few vehicles away. It took a minute for Laney to start up her old bomb. The car was never reliable. It usually took a few tries to get it going, especially when it was cold. Unfortunately, she had neither the money to fix it nor the knowledge to do it herself.

Occasionally, her neighbor Josh helped her with it. He was due back from the city any day, but until then she was stuck with this weird rattle that appeared every time she went over a slight bump. Not to mention the excruciating whine of the fan belt, which she was sure could be heard clear across town. Eventually she coaxed it into movement and drove the five miles to her small apartment. Parking, she moved quickly to her door, not bothering to look around for Cooper.

A large, tanned hand suddenly grabbed hers, pulling it back from the door handle as a strong arm clasped her tightly around the waist, drawing her back against a broad, muscular body. The heat from his front seeped through to her back and she bit back a moan as her clit tingled in reaction. She felt his chin on her shoulder, his face resting beside hers, his sexy stubble rasping against the soft skin of her cheek. Laney searched for the usual panic that came from having someone so close, but it simply wasn't there. Instead, his unique scent seemed to wrap around her, drugging her, making her limbs grow heavy while her insides trembled in anticipation.

"You should have waited for me, sweet," he scolded lightly. His hold was possessive, unbreakable. When he leaned down and licked her neck, her breathing quickened as a damp heat grew between her legs.

Then he broke through the sensual spell by pushing her to the side of the door.

"Wait here."

"Excuse me?" she asked breathlessly, watching as he quickly unlocked and opened the door.

He spoke without looking at her. "Wait here until I check the apartment is safe. This doesn't look like a good area of town."

He looked at her briefly with a frown, and Laney crossed her arms in a huff.

"Paranoia, thy name is Cooper," she muttered to herself as he slipped inside. But she stayed where she was. In truth, it felt kind of good to have someone protecting her. She'd been by herself for so long she'd forgotten what it was like to have someone worry about her safety. And Cooper made her feel safe. There was something in the way he held himself, in the sure way that he touched her, watched her, that let her

know nothing would harm her while he was here. She didn't think anything or anyone would even dare try.

Just as she was wondering what the hell he was doing, he reappeared. Grabbing her around the waist, he dragged her inside. She barely had time to catch her breath before the door was slammed shut and she was in his arms.

His mouth descended on hers, hot and firm, the kiss commanding, dominant, arrogant, everything she knew he was. He didn't ask, didn't hesitate, his mouth plundered hers as if she belonged to him. A thrill of excitement went through her at the feel of him so close—he was hard, male and very, very aroused. Backing her up as he kissed her, he pushed softly on her shoulders so that she landed backward with a thump on the unmade bed.

"Wait. Wait, Cooper," she panted as he started to follow her down.

"Why would I want to do that, sweet?" he murmured as he pulled her t-shirt up. She waited until it passed over her head to speak again.

"I need a shower, I smell like food and smoke."

"I don't care if you smell like a sewer. I need you so bad I'm going to strain something if I don't get inside you in the next five minutes." She glanced down, gulping at the hard erection pushing against his blue jeans.

His hands moved, quick and sure, stripping her clothes until she lay naked and panting below him.

"Beautiful," he whispered as he stared down at her intently. His gaze was primal, possessive, filled with heat. So intense, so sensuous that she struggled to catch her breath.

Laney moved her hands to cover her mound and breasts, embarrassed to be laid bare like this.

"Uh-uh, no covering up." He moved to grab her hands, but she saw him coming and quickly rolled, coming to stand on the opposite side of the bed. Laney looked back to find him watching her, his eyes narrowed while one eyebrow rose in query.

"You want to play catch and kiss, sweet?"

She frowned in confusion, momentarily forgetting her fears. "Catch and kiss?"

"Yeah, what children play? The wee girls run while little boys chase them. If they catch them they get to kiss them." Distracted, she didn't see him move until suddenly he was beside her, grabbing her around the waist and kissing her until she forgot everything else. Her hands moved of their own violation, clasping around his neck, drawing him closer as though she meant to inhale him.

"That's better, sweet," he murmured against her lips before he kissed along her jaw and down her sensitive neck. She shivered in reaction, his touch leaving a trail of sensation that heated her blood. Licks of fire raced through her body, a feeling so intense, so hot, that she thought she would self-combust.

"Cooper," she murmured in soft protest.

"Yes, sweet?" His voice was muffled as he leaned down and captured one nipple in his mouth. She watched as he took as much of her breast in his mouth as he could before releasing her slowly. His eyes rolled up to watch her watching him, and a quick grin darted across his face as his mouth moved to her other breast.

God, what had she been going to say? He robbed her of every thought, every breath, every worry. *Worry...*

"Please, Cooper, please stop. I-I..." she stuttered as he softly bit her tender nipple. She found herself arching her back, offering her breasts up for a feast. But instead of partaking he stood straight up, towering over her, his thumbs circling her nipples as he clasped her breasts in his palms.

"You what, sweet?" She looked up into his eyes. They were shimmering with lust as he gazed down at her. She didn't want to tell him, to ruin that look of sultry, silken arousal.

"You want to tell me what's going on, or do I have to cajole it out of you?" He made to move his mouth back to her neck but she stepped backward, bumping into the bed so abruptly that she found herself sitting on her butt.

"It-it's just that I-I..." She hesitated, looking down at her hands before finally just blurting it out. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Chapter Two

Cooper looked down at her sitting there so dejected, her shoulders slumped as though she expected him to reject her. Long, silvery blonde hair covered her face, a thin protection that wouldn't save her. He held out a hand to her.

"Laney," he said firmly, waiting patiently until her head rose. She studied him silently for a moment. Then, just as he was giving up hope, she tentatively reached up and clasped his hand. He pulled her up quickly, giving her no time to change her mind. Sitting on the bed, he drew her onto his lap to hold her securely against his chest. Gently, he tipped her face up to his. "I think we need a little talk, don't you?"

Laney blushed.

"I don't really want to," she murmured, shame creeping into her voice.

"Why would you disappoint me, little one? You're sexy, responsive and I want you so badly that these jeans have become mighty uncomfortable, let me tell you." He shifted restlessly, drawing a small grin from her.

"I'll disappoint you because I don't know what I'm doing."

Shock ran through him and he sat up straighter, thinking furiously. How the hell could someone who looked like every guy's wet dream be a virgin? He grinned slowly, a surge of possessiveness rising inside him. What had started as a quick fuck was quickly turning into something else in his mind.

Well, everyone else's loss was his gain. But he would have to change his game plan. She deserved more than a "wham, bam, thank you, ma'am". He wasn't a gentle man, didn't know how to be gentle. But he would try for her, because there was no way he was walking away from her now.

Dying of embarrassment would surely be merciful.

"Let me go, please," she cried out, near tears. This was so humiliating, to open herself up like this, to leave herself vulnerable. Just look at him, he was so dumbfounded that he couldn't even find the words to reject her.

"Uh-uh, sit still, sweet, you're just stirring things up," he groaned, tightening his hold as she tried to wriggle free.

"Let me go, please just leave. I'm humiliated enough. Please, please leave." The last word broke on a sob and she lowered her gaze, sitting passively, waiting for him to leave her.

So she didn't protest as he rose; she fully expected him to drop her on the bed and race out the door. Instead, he clasped her tightly against him and moved around the bed into the small bathroom.

"W-what are you doing?" she asked as he set her on the small countertop beside the sink before leaning down to turn on the bath faucet.

Rising, he pushed her arm off her breasts.

"You know, you're the shyest wolf I've ever met, sweet."

"My name is Laney! And there's nudity, and then there's nudity." She blushed furiously as he chuckled.

"So there is. You know, I love how you do this." His fingers brushed her warm cheeks.

"What? Blush like a naïve little fool? That's what I am, after all." Her words were slightly bitter. "I can run my own bathwater. Just close the door on the way out, okay?" His being kind to her was only making it harder for her to keep her composure, and she could feel tears threatening.

"You really need to work on your hospitality skills, little one." He leaned down and kissed her hard and fast. "One, you are not a naïve little fool. You're innocent. There is a big difference. Two, I don't know what fools you've been around in the past, but I have no intention of allowing you to run me off. And three, no matter what happens tonight there is no way you could disappoint me." With that, he stood back and started to strip.

"W-what are you doing?" she asked, shocked as he stripped off his shirt to reveal a smooth, supple chest beneath. Damn, why couldn't he have had a flabby gut? Or a third nipple? Then he stripped off his jeans and boxers and she gasped aloud at the erection he revealed. It was thick, pulsing and dear Lord, huge!

"Why, sweet, you do boost a man's ego." He chuckled and her blush deepened as she realized she'd spoken out loud.

"Why are you naked?" she blurted out as he turned to test the water. Apparently satisfied with the temperature, he quickly shut off the taps before turning back to her.

"Because I don't want to get my clothes wet." He lifted her once again in his arms and lowered her into the tub. Laney let out a moan of pure bliss as the warm water hit her tired limbs. Her eyes closed, partly in relaxation, partly so she didn't have to see the naked hunk kneeling beside her.

"What are you doing?" she squealed as he grabbed one of her arms.

"What does it look like, sweet? I'm washing you." He gently bathed first one arm then the other, far more thoroughly than she would ever have bothered to. He moved his hands to her shoulders, making her sit forward so he could wash her back with long, lingering strokes.

"Why?" she asked as he sat her back. He worked his hands down her chest, circling her breasts, moving slowly toward her still-hard nipples.

"You know, you ask a lot of questions. Didn't you say you needed a shower?"

"A shower, yes, not this." She gestured between the two of them as he moved from washing her breasts to her too-thin stomach. God, what did he think of her? She'd been told she was too childlike to turn any man on, her body too skinny and flat. Most

female werewolves were lush, curvaceous and tall. All thoughts fled as he moved his hands to her feet, massaging each one firmly. Shocked, she let out a low, deep moan of sheer bliss.

"Aren't you enjoying it?"

She moaned again as he dug into the arch of her right foot with his thumb.

"That's not the point," she groaned. "The point is why are you doing this?"

"Maybe I want you to get used to my touch, used to being naked in front of me. I won't take you covering yourself up in front of me. I don't care how innocent you are, I want to look at you, touch you, watch you." He moved to her other foot.

"Why would you want to look at me? I have the body of a twelve-year-old." Her words came out sleepy, slurred.

"I don't know where you get your ideas from, sweet, but the first moment I spotted you I wanted you, and I've been hard ever since." He washed her legs, moving slowly up one leg then the other before he placed them on the edge of each side of the tub.

"What are you doing?" She tried to sit up but he pushed her gently back and she was enjoying herself too much to put up much of a protest.

"Relax, little one, let me take care of you."

She gasped slightly, her thighs trying to close in protest as he washed between her legs. But he wouldn't let her deny him. Easily keeping her thighs apart with his wide shoulders, he proceeded to wash her thoroughly, cleaning her folds lightly, gently. Laney found herself relaxing once again. Watching him sleepily, she caught his satisfied smile before he threw away the cloth and drew her up out of the bath.

"Twelve years old, my ass. Damn, you look sexy, sweetheart, all tousled and wet. I swear, I'm salivating from just the sight of you," he groaned, drawing a small grin from her.

"Really? You think I'm sexy?" she asked as he dried her quickly before picking her up and walking into the bedroom. Laying her on her stomach, he poured some scented oil onto his hands. Laney stiffened, all too aware of the faint scars that covered her back.

"Sweet, you've seen my erection, I think it speaks for itself." He massaged the tight muscles of her back while Laney groaned. Obviously the light wasn't bright enough to highlight the thin scars covering her lower back and buttocks. Werewolves had excellent night vision, but it wasn't as sharp when they were in human form.

Warm languor flowed over her as his hands kneaded and rubbed, working their way from her shoulders down to her lower back. She lay, relaxed and dreamy, swimming on a sea of bliss. Cooper moved from her back to her feet once again. Even for a werewolf, being on your feet for hours on end took its toll. The pleasure of having someone rub the ache from her abused feet, her calves and thighs, was breathtaking. Moaning softly, she didn't even think about protesting when he spread her thighs apart, kneeling between them to massage her butt cheeks. Her breathing slowed as she lay

between that state of consciousness and sleep, that dreamy place where anything was possible.

Laney felt his fingers running down the crack of her ass before his thumb rubbed over her tight asshole, massaging the oil in. Jolting in shocked surprise, she tried to rise but her muscles wouldn't cooperate and he easily held her down with a hand on her lower back.

"Shh, sweet, just lie there and feel, don't think, just feel." The hand that had been holding her down now moved between her legs, rubbing oil into her already slick folds.

"Your skin is gleaming, shining. I want your pussy to do the same, sweet. Open up a bit further for me."

"Good girl," he murmured when she obeyed his softly spoken command. His fingers rubbed the oil in as her relaxation turned into arousal, the blood that had thickened and slowed with his massage now raced around her body, seeming to gravitate to the area between her thighs, which throbbed, preening at the attention it was receiving.

She moved restlessly, wanting more, needing more, but unsure what to ask for.

"Tell me how you feel, little one. What do you want?"

"I-I don't know," she cried out, frustration eating at her as the tension between her legs grew. It began deep inside her, spreading its way out. She was empty, aching, wanting. And what she wanted was him.

She whimpering in need, moving her thighs restlessly as he continued to massage her slowly, gently.

"It's not enough," she cried out. "I need more!"

"More what, little one?"

"You, please, Cooper, I need you."

"Oh no, sweet, not yet, you're not ready for me quite yet. But you will be." He slapped her ass gently.

"Roll over." She moved onto her back, her eyes opening slightly, drinking in the sight of him. He was powerfully built and it would have been easy for him to hurt her, break her. She should have been frightened. But he was treating her so tenderly that she couldn't convince herself to turn away. Her wolf snarled slightly at the thought. It thought they'd found someone worthy, he was strong and dominant but not violent. The wolf wanted to keep him.

Laney tensed at the thought, suppressing it, pushing it down. There was no way they could ever keep —

"Oh my God," she screeched as his thumb tapped her clit firmly. One thick, long finger entered her. The muscles of her passage clenched down, her head thrashing back and forth upon the bed as he drove her higher and higher. Hot arousal filled every inch of her body as she reached desperately for something unknown.

"Easy, sweet," he crooned as another finger joined the first. "Let it come naturally. Just relax and let it come."

Relax! Was he mad? She was poised at the brink, ready to overflow, just a little further, just a little bit more...

Then it took her over, pleasure so deep and consuming that she threw her head back, her body arching off the bed as she screamed his name aloud.

Cooper continued to play lightly with her clit, bringing her back down slowly, drawing out her orgasm.

"How are you feeling, little one?" he asked, staring down at her intently. He kept one hand over her mound, massaging her gently.

"Shocked," she replied, aftershocks still causing her to shiver in delight as she grinned up at him. "Amazing, wonderful, splendid! Like I'm on top of the world!" She raised her hands to the sky. "I could get addicted to that."

He chuckled and, leaning down, kissed her until she was breathless.

"Well, we don't want you going too long between fixes, do we?" he asked, beginning to kiss his way down her throat.

"Wait!" She placed a hand on the back of his head.

"Can I...umm, would you mind..."

"Sweet, just spit it out."

"I want to touch you. Would you...can I?" He grinned and rolled onto his back.

"I thought you'd never ask."

She ran a hand over his chest, enjoying the warm, hard feel of him. Licking her lips, Laney used her thumbs to rub his nipples, smiling smugly as he hissed. "Where the hell did you learn to do that, sweet?" he drawled, a jealous glint in his eyes.

"From you," she murmured. He relaxed a little and Laney focused her gaze on the proud shaft quivering on his flat stomach.

"Touch it," he growled.

"What?" she asked, startled into looking up into his face.

"You want to touch it, please touch it."

"But don't you want me to touch you in other places first?" She gestured toward the rest of his body.

"Sweet, I'm a man. One look at you and I'm good to go. Nibbling is all good, but right now I'm begging you to go to the main course." He took her hand and guided it to his hard cock.

"Just like that, sweet." He groaned as she ran her hand up and down his shaft. "Harder, baby, uhhh." She grinned as his hips rose up off the bed. Leaning down, she drew the tip of his cock into her mouth, sucking softly.

"Ahhh, God." His groan was so pained that she quickly sat up in panic.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked, tensing, preparing herself for the blow.

"God, no, sweet, in fact, I'm begging you to do it again."

"Really?" she asked before she eagerly lowered her head again, this time taking more of his warm cock in her mouth, relishing the silken feel of him.

"Suck as you move up, that's it, sweet. Now hold the base firmly with your hands, harder, sweet. That feels so good. Your mouth is killing me, it's hot, silky and it's driving me wild."

Laney sucked her cheeks in as she ran her mouth back up to the tip, swirling her tongue around his head, licking the tiny slit. She heard his breathing quicken, felt him grow impossibly longer.

"Sweet, I'm going to come now, move back." She shook her head, sucking harder, her hands moving up and down the base of his cock until she felt him come. Hot, creamy liquid spurted into her mouth as she drank him down, reveling in his shout of release. Her cream dripped down her thighs, her pussy tingling in wicked delight as she licked him clean.

His hands lightly stroked her hair before pulling her head off him with a pop. Lifting her up, he kissed her gently, his tongue licking at her swollen lips.

"Thank you, sweet," he murmured softly. Rolling her onto her back, he leaned up on one elbow to gaze down at her. "You look so sexy lying here naked that I almost don't know where to begin." He moved a hand down to one breast, playing with the nipple lightly.

"I'm too small," she murmured, a blush covering her face as she used a hand to try to cover her breasts.

"Excuse me?" He raised an eyebrow, gazing down at her.

She gestured toward her body.

"I'm small. I have no curves, no boobs. I really don't see how you find me attractive."

He let out a long, heavy sigh before climbing off the bed. Laney squeezed her eyes shut, burrowing her head in her pillow. Disappointment almost had her in tears. Why did she have to draw attention to her faults? He'd been willing to sleep with her anyway, but now he'd given up on her in disgust. Oh well, at least she'd experienced some mind-blowing sex before she'd ruined it.

"Up you get, sweet." She gasped as he easily picked her up, moving her over to stand in front of the wardrobe. A full-length mirror covered the door and she quickly tried to cover herself in embarrassment. A sharp smack on her ass had her jumping, turning in shock to glare at the grinning man behind her.

"You smacked me!" she accused him.

"You tried to cover up, naughty girl." Cooper shook his head before turning her back around to face the mirror.

"Put your right foot on this chair, baby." While she'd been drowning in disappointment he'd pulled over a chair from the small kitchen table.

"Why?" She looked at it warily.

"Because, Miss Suspicious, it will open you up farther, which it makes it easier for me to touch you." Laney did as he asked, aware that she was now exposed, vulnerable. She immediately blushed a shade of red guaranteed to stop traffic.

"Now the rules are—no covering yourself and no looking away from the mirror." Standing behind her, he was tall enough that he could easily see over her head. Laney watched as he gazed down at her naked body, his look of intense hunger easing her embarrassment.

"Touch your breasts. Play with your nipples, sweet. I want to see you squeeze them, see you bring yourself pleasure." Laney took a sharp breath, but the disappointment she'd felt when she thought he was leaving spurred her on. She wanted to please him, to please herself. So she moved her hands to her breasts, surprised by the zing of sensation. She tweaked her nipples softly, then harder, experimenting with the feel.

"Never touched yourself before, have you, sweet?" There was surprise in Cooper's voice, as well as heat. Laney met his blazing hazel eyes in the mirror. She shook her head.

"Now run your right hand down your stomach, uh-uh, keep your eyes open and watch yourself. Tug lightly at the hair covering your mound." Laney let his low, silken voice swirl through her body, caressing her from the inside out.

"By the way, I love that little landing strip, sweet. Don't ever wax it off, you hear me?" She shook her head, willing to promise him anything in that moment as she pulled lightly on her well-trimmed pubic hair.

"Now slip a finger through your folds. Are you wet, sweet? Did you get wet sucking me off?" She nodded, shivering. With her leg raised, she could easily swirl her fingers up and down her slit.

"Now I want you to raise that finger to my lips, yummmm." Her breathing quickened as she watched him close his eyes, his face clearly showing his pleasure as he sucked her cream from her finger.

"Back down you go, sweet." His hand guided hers, moving her fingers to the top of her folds. She arched her back as her fingers flicked the tight bundle of nerves there.

"Feel that, sweet? Feel your clit. It's full, engorged, erect and waiting to be massaged. I want you to continue flicking it just like that. But don't close your eyes." He slapped her ass as she'd begun to do just that.

"Watch yourself, sweet. How do you look? How do I look at you?"

She looked at herself in the mirror, jolting in shock at the tousled, sexy woman looking back at her. This woman was hot, smoking hot. This woman was made for loving and boy did she want it. With one hand, she reached back and grasped the hard erection pressing into her lower back. She squeezed it, grinning as Cooper groaned.

He shook his head at her, stepping back.

"You do that, sweet, and I'm not going to last. And this time I want to come inside you." Before she could protest, a thick finger began to enter her passage. Slowly it moved, so slowly she found herself sobbing with desperate need.

"Cooper," she cried out in shock. Her finger stopped moving on her clit as she concentrated on the thick digit moving in and out of her sheath.

"Shh, baby. Keep moving that finger of yours, keep watching yourself. I want you to see how beautiful you are when you come."

"But I want you inside me," she wailed, even as she did as he ordered.

"Soon, sweet, soon, for now just watch and feel, watch and feel." Another finger entered her, stretching her tight walls. Her clit felt impossibly sensitive as she swirled her finger around it. His fingers pulsed gently inside her until her womb clenched, her orgasm rushing over her, enveloping her whole body in a hot cocoon of ecstasy.

She watched, watched as she came. And when she saw how beautiful she was in that moment, something hard and cold inside her melted. She would have collapsed had Cooper not caught her with his free arm, and still he continued to pump in and out of her, her muscles clamping down on him hard.

"I can't wait any longer, sweet. My patience is shot to hell." He scooped her up and threw her softly onto the bed before climbing on top of her. His mouth descended to capture hers while his clever fingers returned to her pussy. Unbelievably, her arousal began to grow yet again.

More moisture gushed out of her, lubricating his way as he drove his fingers in and out of her passage. Laney felt him pull back and she whimpered in protest at the loss of his touch. Her limbs felt heavy, drugged, as she tried to reach for him.

Cooper chuckled. He hurriedly climbed off the bed and she watched through heavy-lidded eyes as he picked up his jeans. Reaching into one of the back pockets, he pulled out a small foil packet. The jeans dropped back onto the floor as he tore the packet open and used both hands to fit the condom onto his thick shaft.

Then he moved back to the bed, climbing on top of her. All of a sudden she couldn't breathe. Having him on top of her like this was suffocating, and although he was careful to rest his weight on his elbows, she felt smothered.

A whimper of distress left her lips and he paused, the tip of his cock brushing her entrance.

"What's wrong, sweet?" he murmured, kissing her neck gently, soothingly.

"I can't breathe, having you over me, I-I can't." Just like that he was lying beside her on the bed and she took a deep breath, the panic dissipating to be replaced with a keen regret.

"Maybe this was a bad—" She lost her train of thought as he rolled her onto her side, her back nestled against his front, and raised her leg, moving it backward to rest on top of his, opening her to his touch as his hand once again stoked the flames of her arousal.

"I'm not a gentle man, sweet. I don't know how to be. But I do know how to stop. Anytime you want me to stop, you say the word and I will. Understand?" He waited until she nodded, and then pressed the tip of his cock against her entrance.

Sharp, intense pain stole her breath as he entered her, but just as quickly as it had appeared it began to fade, leaving a dull throbbing in its place. Although she was exquisitely tender, there was no hesitation as he pushed his way inside her. Gentle but relentless, he moved slowly, allowing the walls of her passage to stretch gradually to accommodate his large girth.

"Hold on, sweet," he panted before pulling out then thrusting fully inside her. Laney let out a low moan at the pleasure of his heavy cock filling her, caressing nerve endings that hummed in enthralled delight.

His finger moved back to her clit, strumming it lightly, as if he were aware of how sensitive it was.

"Sweet, you're so tight you're sucking at me, each time I move out you suck me back in. The feel of you is indescribable, it's hot velvet, liquid sunshine and I love it." He moved faster, harder and something inside her unfurled, a deep pressure so odd that for a moment she stiffened.

"Ride through it, sweet, don't think, feel. Feel me inside you, loving you, pleasuring you. I was made for you." His finger moved over her clit, pressing down firmly. Laney arched back into him, thrusting herself on his cock, burying her ass against him.

Then she felt it happen, her passage pulsing, clenching down on his shaft as she wailed through her orgasm. He joined her, yelling her name as he stilled, pulsing inside her until together they collapsed, sweating, panting and well satisfied.

* * * * *

Laney moaned as something moved behind her. She didn't want to move, could stay lying in this position forever. But it wasn't to be as she was turned, rolled onto her back, her legs pulled apart. She came fully awake with a whoosh of shock as a warm cloth was applied to her sensitive lower lips.

"What are you doing?" she screeched, her eyes zeroing in on the man lying beside her, cleaning her folds.

"Soothing you, sweet." He patted the top of her mound lightly with one hand as he washed her gently with the other. "This little pussy had a lot of attention tonight, now it needs a little TLC."

"Umm, I think I can take care of that," she said desperately, reaching down to try to wrestle the cloth away.

"But you won't." He glanced up at her and she gulped at the possessive look in his eyes.

"Look, Cooper," she began uneasily, trying to sit up. Clothes, she needed clothes. One could not conduct a serious conversation naked. She was sure that was a rule, and if it wasn't it damn well should be. Shit! Where were her clothes?

"Lie down, gorgeous, you must be feeling sore. Besides, I want to take care of you." His soft Southern drawl was so damn sexy her pussy tingled in response.

"Look, I can take care of myself. I think...I think it's time you left." She tried to firm her voice, to keep it steady, while inside her wolf howled in disapproval. Was she mad! Reject him? A Greek god who caused her body to scream with rapture one moment, then treated her as if she were precious the next.

An inky eyebrow rose in query as he gazed down at her in amusement.

"I don't think so, sweet," he murmured softly. "Now go back to sleep, you'll need all your strength to pack tomorrow."

"Pack?" She frowned, confused.

"Yes, pack. I take it you'll want to take some of this junk with you."

"Ahh, I'm not going anywhere." Had he lost it? Had she let a loony just fuck her rotten? Hey, wait a minute. "And my stuff is not junk!" she yelled.

"Whatever you say, sweet," he said in that condescendingly dismissive voice that men often get. Damn arrogant asshole. She shot to her feet.

"Get out." She pointed to the door. She wished her hand wasn't shaking as though she were a junkie who needed a fix, but hey, it was the best she could do. Besides, she was starting to feel a little like a junkie. What would one more round with him hurt anyway? She licked her lips, her gaze roving over his bronzed body. She may well have jumped straight back into his arms if his conceited chuckle hadn't hit her ears.

"Sweet, when you try to order a man from your bed, you shouldn't proceed to look at him as if he's all your Christmases come at once."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're a conceited pain in the ass. It doesn't matter how I look at you. I. Want. You. To. Leave. Go!" Okay, now she sounded hysterical. *Deep breaths, Laney, deep breaths.*

Damn man merely sat up, sprawling sumptuously against her headboard, the sheet dropping so—oh hell, yes!—he was completely bare. She gulped, raising her gaze quickly to his face. Well, okay, so it lingered a little. After all, she was a warm-blooded female.

"Get out or I will ring the cops and tell them I have a werewolf in my room, one who won't leave."

"Little one, you're being overdramatic. Why don't you come over here and I'll calm you down."

"Ahhh," she screamed. "Get out! Get out! Get out! Get out!" Laney did the only thing she could think of, she picked up the closest objects at hand and pelted him with them. She could hear the hysteria in her voice, could feel the tears gathering in her eyes, traveling slowly down her face.

"Laney!" A loud banging had her turning to the front door.

"Josh," she breathed.

"Who the hell is that?" Cooper, who had jumped to his feet when she'd decided to put her baseball skills to good use, stalked toward her apartment door.

"Laney! Open this door now, or I'm calling the cops!"

"Leave," she snarled at the naked man, waving her hand at the large window over the kitchen sink. "Leave now or I'll let him call them."

"I'm not afraid of any cops," he stated arrogantly.

"No, but your pack won't like any bad publicity, and Josh has a cousin who works for the *Chicago News*. Believe me when I say they'd love the story I'd spin to them."

He narrowed his eyes at her as he moved over to where his jeans lay on the floor.

"Wait a sec, Josh. I'm just getting dressed."

"I will come back. This isn't over." Anger heated his gaze as he glared at her before he turned and lithely jumped out the window.

"Yes it is," she whispered softly as she plastered a friendly expression on her face and went to the door, hoping it was enough to hide the slashes in her heart.

Chapter Three

Cooper looked up from the computer screen as his lead enforcer entered his study. Ryan Chance was an intimidating man, carrying an aura of strength and command about him like a second skin. Accounts of his deadly ruthlessness had reached Cooper's ears long before he'd met him. It was his sense of loyalty and his ability to think with cold calculation under heated conditions that had made him the ideal choice to lead Cooper's team of enforcers. Cooper also knew that beneath the brutish, cold appearance was a man of honor. Once he gave his word, that was it. There were no half measures with Rye, he was completely in or out. But betray him or his family and he wouldn't rest until he'd gotten his vengeance.

Cooper didn't know what the last Alpha had done to earn Rye's wrath—he had yet to get the full story from his tight-lipped enforcer. But considering Zachary's cruel and sadistic reputation, it could have been any number of things.

During the last two months, Rye and his two younger brothers had been a huge asset to Cooper during his takeover of the Shadowpeak pack. The pack had been in a state of uproar after Cooper had challenged and then killed Zachary, and the Chance brothers had helped him cement his hold over it.

Cooper nodded to him as Rye took the seat opposite him.

"I'm glad you're here. What do you know of Leonard Paterson?"

Rye looked startled. "Leonard Paterson? Why?"

"I just received a call from him. He wanted to introduce himself, suggested that we should meet in person."

Rye frowned. "I wouldn't trust him. He was a good friend of Zachary's, which basically means he's an asshole. Anyone who could be friends with that sick son of a bitch would have to be."

"Hmm, I managed to put him off for the moment by explaining my intention to try to reform the Western States Council. Told him we'd be approaching him in the near future about a meeting."

Rye thought for a moment. "If he was a member of the Council, we could find out more about him, perhaps keep a closer eye on him. All I've heard are a few whispers, rumors of violence. I haven't met many of his pack, just a couple of his enforcers, and they looked cold, hard, ruthless. Leonard comes across like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, and it makes my skin crawl. I never saw him much. He and Zachary liked privacy when they met up, usually at Zachary's house."

"Hmm, see what else you can find out about him, will you?"

"Consider it done."

Cooper nodded. "So did you want to see me about something?"

"Ahh, yes, actually, I wanted to talk to you about my sister."

"Your sister?" Cooper sat back in surprise, raising an eyebrow in query. He had heard very little about Rye's sister, and curiously what he had heard hadn't come from Rye or his brothers. Admittedly he hadn't really given it much thought. He'd been too busy trying to strengthen his hold over the pack. "She lives with another pack, doesn't she? Did you want to go visit her?"

He watched in interest as the normally calm enforcer shifted nervously in his chair. Rye eventually realized what he was doing and stilled, straightening his back. That one gesture, part defiance, part nervousness, reminded Cooper of a certain little blonde firecracker. Damn, he'd been trying to forget that little hellion and the night they'd spent together. Unfortunately, that was as difficult as watching *American Idol* hopefuls squeal out high-pitched notes. *And almost as painful*, he thought wryly, feeling his cock thicken against his jeans.

When Cooper had gone home with her that night he'd fully intended to take her away with him. He didn't like the fact that she was alone, it simply wasn't safe. Then she'd thrown him out and he'd been furious, had stormed off with injured male pride, determined to return later and steal her away.

But once his anger, and his libido, had cooled, he'd realized that he'd be bringing her into a volatile situation, a situation where he couldn't guarantee her safety. She was safer where she was for the moment, even on her own, and all of his time and energy had been needed to establish himself as Alpha of the Shadowpeak pack.

He'd underestimated just how long it would take to stabilize the pack, had been arrogant in his assumption of his ability to assert his dominance and leadership. The pack had required all of his attention, and establishing a new werewolf among them during his takeover would have been dangerous for her, as well as creating a distraction for him at a time when he needed to focus. Still, he could have sent someone back to her, to force her to go back to her own pack.

Yet how did he know that her pack wasn't an unsafe place for her to be? She'd obviously left for a reason. The way she'd spoken of being bullied played in his mind. Plus, he hadn't been sure who to send. He now trusted the Chance brothers, but that trust had taken time to build up, on both sides.

He was being uncharacteristically indecisive about her, and he didn't like it. His hold over the pack was more secure now and his trust in his enforcers had grown. He'd send someone for her, establish her as a member of the pack, then get on with being the Shadowpeak Alpha without guilt and worry weighing on his mind.

"Well, no, well, sort of."

Cooper frowned at the other man's uncustomary indecisiveness.

"You see, Delaney doesn't actually live with another pack."

Cooper frowned at the mysterious answer. "Then where does she live?"

Rye cleared his throat, looking over Cooper's shoulder. "Out in the human world. Over a year ago we helped her escape from here, and she's been living on her own with the humans. Now that *Zachary* is gone," Rye spat out the previous Alpha's name, "it's time for her to return. I don't like her being out there any longer than she has to be."

Cooper sat forward, a sick feeling developing in the pit of his stomach. He had an idea that he knew exactly who their sister was. Intimately.

"Your sister has been alone out there all this time? Why the hell didn't you go with her? You should know how hard it is on a wolf to live outside the pack, let alone a female. And for over a year. You'll be lucky if she's still alive!" Self-recrimination fed his anger. Was it possible that *his* little werewolf was Rye's sister? That she'd been on her own for more than a year?

Rye's face hardened at the criticism. "It wasn't feasible for us to go with her. The best way to ensure her safety was to get her out of here alone."

Cooper narrowed his eyes. "Why wasn't she safe here?" he whispered dangerously. If possible, Rye's face hardened further, a look of pure hatred darkening his eyes.

"Zachary hated her. He bullied her mercilessly. Had she stayed, I believe he would have killed her."

"Living among the humans may have already done that. Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Cooper asked ominously.

Regret flashed through Rye's eyes as he lowered his gaze. "Because I didn't want to call her back into another bad situation, I had to make sure it was safe for her here, I had to make sure that *you* were safe for her."

Cooper nodded. "And now that you're sure, you want permission to call her back home?"

Rye frowned. "That's the thing. I've already tried to contact her and I can't get hold of her."

"So you want permission to retrieve her?"

Rye shook his head. "I can't even do that, I have no idea where she is. I want permission to go looking for her. Marcus and Jay will stay here, but I need to find my sister, even if it's just so I can bring her body home." A tic developed in his cheek, and it was then that Cooper realized that Rye thought his sister dead.

"Why did Zachary hate your sister?"

Rye shook his head, his eyes flashing furiously.

"Who knows? With that fucker, it could have been anything. Because she was smaller than he was? Because she was delicate, pretty, breakable? I don't know. All I know is that he was psychotic and he would have killed her in the end. I couldn't let that happen."

Cooper looked at him suspiciously. If he hadn't been Rye's Alpha, he would never have sensed the lie. Rye knew something about why Zachary hated his little sister. The question was – why was he lying about it?

Cooper decided to let it go for the moment, his mind churning with the growing certainty that he knew exactly where Rye's sister was. "Your sister, does she look like you?"

Rye frowned in confusion. "No, she's a tiny little thing, only five feet and blonde, why?"

"And her name's Laney?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Why? Because I think I know where she is."

* * * * *

Cooper stared at the phone on his desk for the umpteenth time that night. Patience was not his strongest quality, and having to stay behind while he sent Rye to collect Laney was surely trying what little he had. All day his gut had been telling him that he should have been the one to go, that it was his duty to find her, bring her home, to protect her. Which was why he didn't go—because he wanted to so much. Contrary? Idiotic? Maybe.

There was also the fact that her retrieval would probably go easier without him. She was bound to feel betrayed. She might even try to run. But if Rye could convince her to come back before she found out who he was, he had a better chance of keeping her here. And he was determined that here was where she would stay.

Still, a burn of worry flared in his stomach, the feeling that something was wrong just would not disappear. He tapped his fingers on the desk. Rye should have arrived by now. It was ten hours round trip, but he'd left around nine that morning. Why hadn't he called? And why did Cooper care so much?

Every member of Shadowpeak was important, but they totaled over five hundred and he couldn't afford to obsess this much about one little female. But he had been this way since he'd left her that night. Nearly every day he would find himself thinking of her, remembering her sweet smell, her gentle touch, the way her coffee-with-cream eyes darkened when she was mad. Or scared. He now understood some of that fear, the wariness.

Cooper told himself he would feel this way about any female werewolf he'd left alone and unprotected. That it was just guilt, and as soon as he knew she was safe he'd stop thinking about her. He only wished he knew that she was safe.

The ringing of his phone was a welcome interruption.

"Brady here."

"It's Rye. I need help." Cooper tensed at the desperation in his enforcer's voice.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Laney, she's sick. I mean really, really sick. I can't get her to respond to me. She's freezing and in some sort of deep sleep. I've tried to warm her up, to rouse her and her wolf, but nothing is working. I don't know what to do, but I daren't move her."

"I'm on my way," Cooper said tersely, already on the move. "I'll grab your brothers and we'll take the chopper. Just keep her alive until we get there."

"God, I hope I can."

* * * * *

Cooper felt queasy as they landed the chopper on the school field in Addison, Nebraska. If it wasn't for the fact that he'd flown in a helicopter dozens of times, he would have told himself it was airsickness. Instead he had to face up to the fact that it was fear.

He hadn't told Rye the whole truth about how he'd met Laney, merely explaining that he'd stopped here in Addison a few months ago and remembered a werewolf working as a waitress at the diner. He'd left it up to Rye to find her apartment.

Cooper led the way there now, letting the brothers assume Rye had told him where to go... Even in human form they were all fast runners, and they quickly raced to the block of apartments where Cooper had left Laney more than three months ago.

He cursed that decision yet again as they ran up the decrepit stairway to her tiny, run-down apartment. Not bothering to knock, he suddenly found himself pushed aside before he could turn the door handle. Marcus stood in front of him while Jay pulled him back.

Turning, he snarled at Jay, yanking his arm free. He didn't care that he was supposed to let his enforcers go first. That was his woman dying in there. No one was going to slow him down. He pushed Marcus away before storming his way inside.

Cooper strode over quickly to where he thought Laney must be lying on the bed. It was difficult to tell considering the mound of blankets strewn over the small mattress.

"I asked her neighbors for blankets," Rye explained with a pained look on his face. "Told them Laney wasn't well, but she's still cold to the touch. What the hell do we do?"

Cooper had no time to spare for Rye's questions. His attention was totally focused on Laney. Pulling back the covers revealed her shivering, pale form. He would have thought she was sleeping if it wasn't for the fact that she hadn't even stirred at the noise they'd made. She was thin, really thin, and there was a blue tinge to her lips. Cooper cursed long and loud.

"I need to bring her wolf." He reached down and snatched her, blankets and all, into his arms before striding out of the room.

"Will she be okay?" Jay asked, racing to keep pace as they ran toward the chopper.

"Just hurry," Cooper snarled, putting on a burst of speed. She would be all right. She had to be, because he refused to let her be anything else.

* * * * *

Consciousness dragged at her, pulling and prodding, urging her to surface when she would have been happier just swimming along sleepily. But unfortunately, someone was intent on ruining her sleep-in. Sunlight hit her in the face and she quickly raised an arm to cover her eyes.

"Urgh, cls drphs, plh."

"Speak in English, sweet. I've never been good with different languages, and that one has me completely stumped. What is that? Greek? Latin?"

"It's grumpy!" Laney burst out before her brain caught up with her mouth. There was a man in her room. God, no! It couldn't be. What the hell was *he* doing in her room?

Cautiously, she opened an eye while moving her arm down slightly. Though her vision was blurred, she could easily make out the wide shoulders, the dark hair. She could even see the sardonic grin, although that may have been her imagination. Laney quickly whipped the blankets up over her head, praying it was a dream, praying he'd disappear. She certainly had no intention of coming out from under the sheets until he did.

A dark chuckle hit her ears and she cringed as a tingle of awareness danced down her spine.

"Now, sweet, is that any way to greet your lover?" he crooned before the blankets were ripped from her hands and torn from the bed to be flung across the room. Laney was left panting, shocked and strangely aroused. And shit! She squealed as she realized she was as naked as the day she was born.

One arm covered her breasts as she tried to squirm her way into a seated position. Unfortunately, doing so one-handed when she was weak as a babe wasn't easy, and she ended up falling back onto the bed in a frustrated heap.

"Here, let me help you, little one." That quickly she was sitting up. He'd easily lifted her until she was resting back against the cool headboard.

"What are you do – Hey!" she interrupted herself as he pulled her arm away from her breasts.

"That's better. A bit skinnier than before, sweet. We'll need to fatten you up." He stared down at her, his face impassive as though he was inspecting a side of beef, but Laney saw the flash of arousal in his eyes. Embarrassingly, her nipples tightened in reaction, and he definitely noticed if his "cat ate the canary" grin was anything to go by.

"Where the hell am I? What the hell are you doing here? And why the bloody hell am I naked?"

He just sat beside her, shaking his head.

"Now, sweet, it's not very nice to swear at someone who saved your life."

"S-saved my life?" she sputtered indignantly. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Are you on drugs?" She peered up at him, crossing her arms back over her breasts.

"Little one, I've seen it all before, no need to hide. In fact, I insist that you don't." His hands easily uncrossed her arms, setting them down firmly on either side of her while he leaned his face in until their gazes were locked upon each other, their mouths scant inches apart. If she moved just a little, she could kiss him, just a little...

Suddenly he moved back out of her reach and her head fell forward. Laney blushed, aware that he knew she'd been about to kiss him. She quickly turned her mortification into anger.

"What are you doing here, Cooper?" she snarled. "It was a one-night stand. Don't you get the concept? As in a once-only, non-repeatable, no-do-overs night of sex."

His eyes narrowed dangerously, hazel bleeding into amber that sparkled and snapped. Gasping, she cringed as he suddenly stood, her hands automatically covering her head to shield herself against the blow she was sure was going to follow.

"Laney?" he asked, surprise coloring his voice.

Laney was shaking, nausea swirling in her stomach, waiting for a blow to descend, when she suddenly realized that he was just standing there. Immediately she dropped her arms, mortification once again coursing through her veins, making her squirm in discomfiture.

"You thought I would hit you? Laney?" he prompted when she didn't answer. "You want to explain that to me?" She refused to look at him, keeping her eyes downcast.

"Laney, look at me." She shook her head.

"Look at me, please."

It was the please that did it. She raised her eyes to his, aware of the confusion and fury warring inside him. His face may have been calm and impassive, but his eyes were gleaming amber. The wolf was close to the surface.

"Laney, what the hell did I ever do to make you think I would hit you?" His voice was low and even, as though he was speaking to a frightened child or animal. Laney imagined that was how she looked, pale and frightened, a coward. Her chin rose at the thought.

"You're bigger than me, you're dominant to me and you like your own way. You've brought me here, wherever here may be, in effect you've kidnapped me. So why wouldn't I think that you would hit me?"

He sat on the bed next to her, his large, jeans-covered thigh touching hers, sending a quiver of awareness arrowing straight to her pussy. Her breathing became shallow as she tried to hide her reaction to him, aware that he could smell her arousal. Desire was present between them. Raw and uncut, it glistened like a diamond with flashes of fire and sharp slashes of near pain.

He tilted her chin up gently until her eyes met his. "Let's get this clear between us right now. I will never hit you in anger, do you hear me? Not at any time will I use my fists against you. I will not punch you or kick you or slap you. Sure, there will be times

in the bedroom when things might get a little rough, and I can definitely tell you that my hand will be meeting your ass in the near future, but I will not hit you, baby, ever." She saw the sincerity in his eyes, her gut telling her she could trust him even as her head said fool, fool, fool.

She nodded, almost smiling at his sigh of relief.

"Tell me who hit you." The command came naturally to him. A man used to being obeyed, an Alpha to his core, and Laney knew better than to trust an Alpha.

"Why?" She looked at him in complete bewilderment. Why did he even care?

"Because I want to know, I *need* to know. Tell me." His voice was darkly cold and she shivered slightly.

"Where am I?" she asked instead. "Why am I here? Why are you here?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're avoiding my questions, Delaney. It was Zachary, wasn't it? Rye said he hated you, but I didn't realize..." His voice trailed off into a low, deathly growl.

She glared back at him. "You're avoiding mine, Cooper," she countered, before what he said registered in her brain.

Laney took a look around her, but she didn't recognize this room. She took a deep sniff. There it was. How could she have missed it? The smell of her pack. But there was no way she was going back to the pack, no way was she letting him hand her back to Zachary.

Moving as quickly as she could, she slammed her fist into the side of his nose, catching him unawares as she began to fight for her life.

Cooper watched in amazement as his frightened mate morphed into a crazy person. Fighting, pinching, scratching, she fought like a maniac as he deflected the worst of her blows. Of course he could have easily subdued her, but he didn't want to risk hurting her. However, as her head slammed into the headboard, he realized that she was hurting herself anyway. Grabbing hold of both her hands in one of his, he held them high above her head. Then, forcing her to lie back, he laid one of his legs over her thighs.

"Stop it, Laney," he said sternly as she continued to fight pointlessly. Giving her a slight shake to calm her down, he felt nauseated when he saw her eyes darken in fear. Her skin paled, making her eyes appear like large, brown bruises on her face. Even her lips lost all their luscious color.

"Just stop it. I won't have you hurting yourself," he ordered, watching as her eyes darkened then narrowed.

"But it's all right for you to hurt me," she accused, stilling, fear and betrayal filling her face and tearing at his insides. The need to comfort her, to take away her pain, her fears, overwhelmed him. He almost let go of her, the need was so great. But the need to

protect her overrode all else, and to protect her he needed to find out what threatened her.

"I will never hurt you," he vowed.

"You will if you hand me over to *him*. You might as well kill me now." She arched her neck, as though offering herself as a sacrifice to him. But he felt the fear coursing through her. She was terrified.

He leaned down, smelling the spike in her fear before he bit softly on her neck.

"Listen to me, sweet, and listen well. I would give my life to protect you. No one will ever hurt you while I draw breath."

She looked up at him in shock, tremors shaking her body. He could see her pulse beating frantically in her neck.

"Why?" she asked so quietly he could barely hear her.

"Why what, sweet?"

"Why do you care about me?"

"Because you are mine, and no one hurts what belongs to me."

"I don't belong to you." She glared up at him and he had to hide a smile, pleased to see color appearing in her cheeks.

"We'll see, little one, we'll see. Now if I let you up are you going to behave, or am I going to have to give you that spanking I promised?" Fascinated, he watched with no small amount of arousal as she blushed furiously.

"Why, sweet, does that turn you on?" he crooned. Leaning down he licked across her lips, teasing them, swirling around them until they were glistening. "Does it make you wet to imagine going over my knee? To think of my hand turning your ass a pretty, blushing pink? Just imagine. You won't know when the next slap will come. Will it be hard? Will it be soft and caressing? Will it send a sharp jolt of pleasure straight to your pussy, or will it cause your insides to quiver?" He watched as she shivered, grinning when he smelled her arousal swell.

"Don't worry, sweet, it's coming. With the way you misbehave, it's a sure bet."

He watched as she narrowed her eyes at him, trying to force her arousal into anger.

"You're a pervert, you know that, don't you? If you think I'm going to let you do that to me, you can just think again." She turned her face from him, as if that would enable her to ignore him. Leaning down, he clasped a nipple between his teeth and pulled gently, causing her to gasp in shock. She turned to watch as he lapped at the abused nipple gently then repeated the action with her other nipple.

Capturing her mouth with his, he took command, reeling her in like a spider weaving a trap for a fly. Once he felt her give in he let her go, staring down into her beautiful brown eyes. He nodded in satisfaction at the blush that now covered her cheeks, chasing away the milky paleness.

“Sweet, I think you’ll let me do anything I want.” Anger and heat shimmered in her eyes as she cursed him long and loud, curses so colorful even he’d never heard some of them before. When she stopped to draw breath, he used a hand to cover her mouth.

“Now, sweet, is that any way to speak to your new Alpha?”

Chapter Four

Laney lay on the bed in a state of total confusion. Her hands were tied above her with a silken rope that was attached to the headboard. Oh, it wasn't really enough to hold her if she'd wanted to break free. But she felt surprisingly weak, even for her. And she had a feeling that even if she escaped the bedroom, she wouldn't get very far.

What the hell did Cooper mean that he was her Alpha? Sure, he now smelled like her pack, the scent intermingled with his own unique scent. But she'd assumed he was someone Zachary had hired to bring her home, a mercenary paid to return her to her owner.

And yet why would he lie? Damn him. As soon as he'd made that statement he'd tied her up and told her to stay while he made them some breakfast. Told her to stay just like a dog, and that was exactly what she was doing.

"Good little runt, woof-woof," she muttered to herself.

"What was that, sweet?" She looked up as Cooper walked back in. That was if you could call what he did walking. It was more a dance, a graceful play of muscle under skin that had her mouth watering.

Of course she told herself that she was salivating over the tray of food he carried. She couldn't remember the last time she ate. Her stomach growled loudly and she looked away in embarrassment. She expected him to chuckle in amusement, instead he laid the tray on the bedside table and, sitting beside her, turned her face to meet his.

"When was the last time you ate, sweet?" he asked, frowning darkly as she shrugged.

"Delaney," he growled, dragging out the syllables in her name in warning.

"Honestly, Cooper, I really don't know."

"Not good enough, sweet, not nearly good enough." He leaned up and untied her arms, pulling her into a seated position before placing the heaped tray across her lap.

Laney grabbed a piece of toast, ashamed by the shakiness of her hand. It really had been a long time since she'd eaten. She could barely feel her wolf, it was sluggish, tired. Trying to still the shaking, she ate her food slowly, aware from previous experience that eating too fast would just make her sick.

"You've done this before." Accusation colored his voice.

"Done what?"

"Gone too long without eating. Don't you know how dangerous that is, Laney? You need to eat regularly or both you and your wolf will suffer. Hell, you were already underweight. You can't afford to miss meals."

"What makes you think I did it on purpose?" She felt angry, cornered, scolded like a child. But she regretted the outburst as his expression darkened.

"You're saying something prevented you from eating?"

She sighed. "More like someone," she muttered. "You're really the new Alpha of the Shadowpeak pack?" she asked.

He nodded.

"How?"

"How do you think? I killed the old Alpha." He spoke matter-of-factly, forking up some fluffy scrambled eggs to feed her. She ignored the food, her mouth open as her breathing stopped. Like a child who'd believed in the bogeyman under the bed for so long, she couldn't quite bring herself believe he was gone.

"Laney? Laney, breathe, baby." She heard his voice, but it was as if he were speaking from a long way away. Where she was it was dark and still and no nightmares could intrude.

"Damn it, Laney!" She came back with a shock, looking up in surprise at the man shaking her, his face filled with worry. Worry? For her?

"Zachary is dead?" she asked quietly. *The witch is dead, the wicked witch is dead.* Although in this case, the wicked witch was a man.

"Yes, he's dead, and I am Alpha now. *Your Alpha.*" She looked up at him, shocked as he took her hands between his. What the hell was he doing? Oh, he was trying to warm her. She shivered suddenly as she realized how cold she was. Too bad he couldn't do the same for the chill inside her.

"How?"

He shrugged. "I challenged him and I won. I would have let him away with his life, but he kept coming at me until I had to kill him."

"He's really, really dead?"

"Really, really." He smiled slightly as he fed her some eggs. But she waved away the next forkful.

"I'm full, thanks." He frowned, but dropped the fork without argument.

"My brothers?" she asked fearfully. They'd been Zachary's enforcers, had he killed them too?

"Are fine, here drink this." He held up a glass of milk but she shook her head.

"No thanks. My brothers are truly all right? Are they here? Where exactly am I?"

"Yes, your brothers are fine. I believe they're meeting with my other enforcers at the moment. This is my place. I moved into this cabin while my new house is being built."

She frowned. "You didn't move into the Alpha's house?"

"I believe it's better to start over, a clean slate. I didn't want my mate being uncomfortable in her new house."

It was a jab to her stomach. "You have a mate?" Only sheer determination enabled her to keep a hurt cry from escaping. She could imagine his mate, strong, sleek and beautiful – she'd be everything Laney was not.

"Yes, I do," he answered calmly.

"Won't she be angry about you being here with me?" She blushed, covering her breasts again as memories of their earlier kiss raced through her brain. Frowning, she wondered what game he was playing. No mated werewolf would ever kiss her like he just had. Werewolves as a whole were a touchy-feely lot, but they knew what a precious gift a mate was, and cheating on one's mate was basically unheard of. If they touched another, it would always be purely platonic.

"No, I don't believe she'll be angry at all." A jolt hit her as he stared down at her intently.

"W-wait, y-you don't think I'm your m-mate do you?" she asked incredulously. It was ridiculous. His mate? What was he thinking? Men like Cooper simply weren't interested in women like Laney. A misfit, she was always on the edge of the crowd looking in. She'd tried to entice men, tried to flirt, to make herself more attractive to the opposite sex with makeup and revealing clothes. Eventually she'd realized that it didn't matter what she did, there was just something about her that repulsed others, men and women. Women didn't want to be her friend and that was all men wanted to be.

When Cooper had shown he was interested in her, had followed her home and fucked her brains out, she'd felt sexually attractive for the first time in her life. She'd felt wanted, hot, desirable. And then he'd left her. Logically, she knew that she'd forced him to go, forced him to leave. But the wolf didn't like logic. The wolf had pined for him, for his touch, his scent, his possession. The wolf didn't understand why he didn't come back for them, and if Laney was truthful, the woman was more than a little upset by that too. She'd lost interest in everything around her as she'd waited for his return. She'd been unable to eat, to sleep. If she was his mate, then why did he leave her?

"Who used to starve you? Hit you?" he snapped at her.

"W-what?" How could he talk about that now?

"You answer my questions, I'll answer yours."

"Well, that seems rather childish." Laney folded her arms over her chest, hissing in frustration. But he merely continued to stare at her, his face stubborn, his stance inflexible. "Fine, I'll tell you, like someone hasn't told you anyway."

"They haven't," he said seriously.

"My brothers?"

He shook his head.

"I only found out that you were living out in the human world three days ago. Everyone thought that you'd moved to another pack and your brothers never said differently. When they weren't able to get hold of you, Rye became worried. I managed to figure out that their sister was the same little wolf I'd spent the night with three

months ago. I sent Rye to get you, except when he got there, you were so weak you were dying."

"D-dying? I-I don't remember any of this."

He nodded. "You were unconscious when he got there. We took you in the chopper out to the forest and I forced your wolf on you. Do you remember running with me? Hunting for prey?" She shook her head even as memories surfaced of racing through the dark forest, the clean sent of dew and prey tantalizing her, a large, dark wolf racing beside her, protecting her, chasing out prey for her to chase, to eat.

"I never hunt. I'm too weak."

"You are not weak!" She jolted in shock as he grabbed her shoulders, shaking her. "I will not allow such foolish talk."

Laney looked up at him in amazement before a snort of laughter escaped her. Whoops, probably not a good idea to laugh at your Alpha when he's trying to be all serious, but honestly!

"Oh, come on, Cooper. Look at me. I'm tiny. I'm the runt of the litter. All my life I've been weaker, slower and smaller than everyone else."

"Have you? Or was that just the way Zachary wanted you to be? I know Zachary used to abuse you, Delaney, so you might as well tell me about it. Talk to me, Laney." His command hit her, Alpha to packmate, dominant to submissive, only this time her own power rose up, meeting his, knocking it back. She stopped, shocked, waiting for his retaliation.

Instead, he just grinned at her. "And you call yourself weak."

She relaxed slightly, amazed by the pride in his voice, his eyes.

His face hardened again. "Talk to me."

She licked her lips nervously. "All right, it was Zachary. H-he used to like to punish me, it didn't really matter what I did. I remember once I was really hungry when I got home from school and I went to the fridge. I had just made myself a sandwich when he entered the room. He went ballistic, throwing my sandwich across the room and screaming at me that I had no right to eat, that I hadn't asked his permission. Th-that I was just a little scab. Then he grabbed me by my hair and dragged me down to the b-basement." She looked down at her hands, shaking in her lap. One of his large, dark hands covered hers, warming her, lending her the strength to continue.

"He had this special punishment container built down there. It was made of steel with strips of silver on the lid. Not enough to kill me, just keep me weak. It was small. I could barely lie flat in it. It...it felt like...like being in a coffin."

"He put you in it?" She kept her gaze down, aware of the tightly controlled anger in his voice, hoping that her submissive stance would help calm him.

"Yes."

"How long?" When she didn't answer, his hand firmly tilted her face up so she was looking into his gentle, unwavering gaze. "How long, sweet?"

She shrugged. "A few hours, sometimes a whole day. Once, three days."

"Three days?" he asked incredulously. "How old were you?"

"I think that time I was eight." She jumped in fright as he abruptly stood and paced. Fury swirled around him, so intense it was almost tangible, and Laney held her breath, waiting for him to explode. But his voice was surprisingly calm when he spoke.

"You lived with him?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

"R-Rye didn't tell you?" Fear hit her hard.

"No, but you're going to tell me, aren't you?" he whispered softly, coming to sit beside her again. But his soft voice didn't fool her. His jaw was tensed, the muscles in his neck straining as he tried to keep his anger under control.

"Delaney? Tell me." This time it was a command. Laney sighed, tired of living with the ever-present fear and worry.

"I lived with him because he was my father. It was my father who locked me in that box at least once a month for as long as I can remember. It was my father who starved me for days as a punishment, who hit me, ridiculed me, who forced me to run because..." She paused and took a shuddering breath. "B-because I...because we thought he would kill me."

Laney closed her eyes against the old memories, the old pain. She barely felt Cooper pulling her into his arms to rock her tightly against his firm chest.

Cooper looked down at his mate shivering in his arms, her fear so ripe he could practically taste it. Anger rode him like a tidal wave until he couldn't tell where her shivers of fear met his shudders of rage. His wolf snarled, a vicious sound of fury and rage. That someone had hurt their mate was bad enough. That it was her father, someone charged with her protection and care, sent them over the edge of rage into blinding, white-hot fury.

Cooper now regretted that he'd killed Zachary so quickly. He should have tortured him slowly over years as he'd done his daughter, his precious, beautiful little girl. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he fought for control, fought to keep a leash on his fury. The last thing she needed was for him to lose it, and what she needed came first for him. He could release his own pain and fury later.

"He should have protected you, cherished you."

"He was ashamed of me—not only was I a female, but I was weak and small, an outcast. Imagine being the Alpha and having the weakest member of your pack as your daughter."

"You listen to me, Delaney. I will love all of my children, no matter how weak, strong, tall, short, fat or thin. Do you hear me? None of our children will ever be anything but loved and protected."

She pushed away from him, or at least she tried to push away from him. He held her easily in his arms, waiting patiently until she gave up and rested against him once again.

"We are not having any children."

He leaned down and kissed her, a soft kiss, one that cajoled and cherished. Waiting patiently until she opened her lips, he slipped his way inside to soothe her hurt.

He'd meant it as comfort, but as he continued to kiss her, his arousal rose, reminding him of how good it felt to be inside her, loving her. One hand slipped down to a small breast as he directed his fingers toward a perfect red nipple. He teased, plucking and rubbing in turns until she shifted restlessly on his lap, her ass rubbing sensually over his hard cock.

Cooper drew in a sharp breath as she mimicked his actions, one small hand moving to his chest, rubbing against him, swirling her thumb around his nipple as she whimpered softly. Cooper lifted his lips from hers, gazing down at her dazed face.

"Hush, sweet. Just relax for me. Relax and let me pleasure you."

He moved her until she rested between his spread legs, her back to his chest as he sat against the headboard. He laid her smooth, creamy legs over his before spreading them slowly.

Using both hands now, he cupped her small breasts, rubbing and flicking the nipples simultaneously as she cried aloud.

"It's too much," she cried.

He chuckled. "No, it's not, you can take it, sweet, ride through the sensitivity." She moved restlessly.

"No!" she cried out, trying to turn around and reach him.

"Uh-uh." He slapped her exposed butt cheek before pulling her back to her original position.

"Stay still, sweet." His hands went back to the small red berries, once again plucking the highly sensitive nubs. He bit down gently on her neck, sharp little nips that were a show of possession, letting her know exactly who she belonged to.

"But I want to touch you," she sobbed, thrashing her head back and forth on his chest.

"Tough, I want to touch you, and if you touch me it will all be over. I'll be inside you so fast the world will spin."

"I want it to spin. I want you inside me."

"And I will be, after I touch you." One hand crept down her stomach as he drew her feet up toward her ass, raising her legs, opening her up farther. His thumb hit her clit, tapping it softly as she cried aloud. Then he thrust two fingers inside her, easily entering her, her pussy so moist and warm his fingers slid inside her like a warm knife through butter.

"Please, Cooper, please, I need...I need..."

"What do you need, sweet?" he asked softly as she whimpered, shaking her head. "Tell me what you need. I can do this as long as I need to, until you tell me."

"Y-you pain in the ass!"

He chuckled as she growled.

"I can be a pain in your ass," he murmured, pulling his hand back from her open pussy to massage the top of her mound while nibbling at her neck.

"No!" she squealed, trying to grab his hand, to force it back to her slick lips. "Please," she begged.

"Please what, sweet?" he asked between nibbles.

"Please make me come, I need to come so badly," she cried out.

Jealousy suddenly rose up like a black wave inside him, mixing with his arousal until he was practically drowning. "Has there been anyone else?"

"W-what?" she asked, and he could hear the arousal in her voice, clouding her ability to think.

"Has anyone else touched this pussy since me? Have they licked up your sweet juices, plucked these sweet berries?" His hands moved back to her nipples in demonstration. "Have they fucked you, taken your mouth, your pussy, your ass?"

"No," she screamed out.

"Why not?"

"What?" she screeched, obviously at the end of her endurance.

"Why has no one else touched this delectable body?" His hands moved up and down her body, slowly, sensuously. "They wanted to, every man in that bar wanted to fuck you. Why haven't they?" Soft, creamy, perfect, and she was his. All his.

"You're delusional." Disbelief had her shaking her head. "No one wanted to fuck me."

"Oh yes they did." He twisted her nipples, making her scream. "So would you have let them fuck you, Laney?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't want them to."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want anyone but you."

Satisfaction filled him, rode through his body like a pleasurable drug until he felt as if he were king of the world. No feeling had ever rivaled this, not even becoming Alpha.

"Why didn't you want anyone but me?" he asked, determined to get it all.

"Fuck you, Cooper. Damn it!"

He chuckled.

"Don't you mean, 'fuck me, Cooper'? Why didn't you want anyone but me touching you, Laney?"

"Because I'm yours! Happy now?"

"Oh yes."

He quickly flipped her until she knelt on the bed, her knees on either side of his head as he lay on his back. Her pussy was in perfect alignment with his hungry mouth.

"Cooper?" He heard her need for assurance, could hear the worry, the embarrassment in her voice

"Just hold on to the headboard, baby. Let me do all the work." He reached up and pulled the outer lips of her pussy open, revealing the glistening lips inside. A drop of dew fell onto his lips and he licked it up, humming in pleasure.

"You're beautiful, so pink and wet. I want to savor this, savor the way you look, your smell, your taste."

She made a small sound of protest, attempting to thrust her hips backward, out of his reach. But he clasped her around the hips, easily holding her in place.

"Laney?" he asked.

"N-nothing."

"Not nothing, tell me. I won't accept secrets between us."

"It's not a secret," she said, and he smiled at the exasperation in her voice.

"It's just, well, no one's ever, and what if you don't like it, what if I can't—"

He interrupted her nervous chatter the best way he knew how, by pulling her down to his mouth and licking the glistening cream from her pussy. He slid his tongue up and down her slit. Exploring her folds thoroughly, he chased every drop of dew she produced. Her taste was sweet, her cream thick and luscious.

Avoiding her clit for the moment, his tongue circled her opening before flicking across it. Lapping at her gently, he pushed just the tip of his tongue inside her, reveling in her cries of ecstasy.

Holding her still when she began to thrust her hips back and forth, he slowly drove his tongue inside her. Using just one hand to hold her, he circled her clit with his thumb while he slid his tongue in and out of her passage.

Cooper felt her thighs quiver, her breath quicken, and knew she was close. Letting go of her with his right hand, he wet a finger in her juices before moving it to her back passage. Feeling her stiffen, he thought she would protest, but she remained silent and he slid his finger into the tight, warm passage of her ass, being careful to move slowly so as not to frighten her.

He used the thumb of his left hand to flick at the underside of her clit, slid his tongue like a tiny cock in and out of her pussy in time with the finger in her ass. Impossibly, she seemed to moisten further, her sweet taste and earthy smell surrounding him, drawing him into her web as he marveled at how responsive she was.

Wanting to push her, to see how adventurous she was willing to be, he pulled his tongue from her passage at the same time as he withdrew the finger from her ass.

Ignoring her wails of protest with a chuckle, he pushed her hips forward until his tongue could reach her back passage. His hands held her butt cheeks apart as he rimmed her back hole, licking at it delicately, teasingly, as she gasped in shock.

"No, Cooper, you can't." But it wasn't fear or disgust he heard in her voice, rather a deep pleasure tinged with embarrassment. He tightened his hold on her ass as he pushed his tongue into her back passage. Sweet heaven, she was simply to die for. Certain now that she wouldn't try to move away, he returned one hand to her clit, flicking it firmly until she screamed her release.

Laney was shocked by the depth of her orgasm. It overwhelmed her, drawing her into a vortex where she was robbed of all her senses and all that was left was complete and total pleasure.

Coming back to earth, she found herself lying on her back upon the bed, her breath coming in sharp pants, her skin so sensitized that it hurt to move. The mattress suddenly dipped and she opened her eyes to find Cooper kneeling naked between her legs. Dear Lord, she didn't even remember him stripping. He looked magnificent kneeling there, bronzed skin glistening in the sunlight, his body long and lean, without an inch of fat to mar the perfection. It was enough to make her drool.

Her gaze traveled over his broad shoulders, down his long chest to where his cock stood at attention, full and throbbing, a tiny drop of precum at its slit.

"Jesus," she whispered. "Cooper, you've killed me, I can't move. But I want..." She licked her lips. She remembered the taste of him, craved it with a sinful intensity.

"What do you want, sweet? Tell me." He grabbed his thick cock and started massaging it, making her whimper.

"You. I want you. Please, Cooper, now."

"Hmm, let me think..."

"Cooper," she wailed as he grinned down at her, looking totally unrepentant.

"On your hands and knees, baby," he ordered, and she moved quickly to obey him, her body shaking in anticipation.

"Do you trust me, Laney?"

All of a sudden she stiffened. Trust him? Was he crazy?

"T-trust you?" She looked over her shoulder at him.

"Yes, do you trust me?"

She took a deep breath before trying to turn and face him, but he moved between her legs, holding her still with one arm around her waist.

"Laney?"

"What?" she asked, too busy trying to escape him to take heed of the cold fury in his voice.

"Who the fuck whipped you?"

Laney stilled, air leaving her lungs in a huge whoosh at the enraged question.

"Who do you think?" She was proud of the steadiness of her voice. Show no fear. It should be her motto. The bed moved as he climbed off and Laney jumped as she heard something hit the wall heavily. Just like that the thick arousal in the room dissipated to be replaced by a harsh, pulsing fury. A man's fury that someone had hurt *his* woman, put their hands on *his* mate, dared to harm what was *his*.

"I want to resurrect that bastard so I can kill him all over again, slowly, and very, very painfully."

"Coop." Laney climbed off the bed and, keeping her gaze on the floor, her stance submissive, approached him hesitantly. It took all her courage not to run from the enraged man who was pacing angrily up and down the room, his hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically.

"How could he? How could he do that to you? His own daughter?"

Laney stood there, unable to touch him yet unable to walk away.

"Cooper, please. It's over, Zachary's dead and I..." she trailed off.

"You what?" He looked over at her. His eyes had bled to golden amber, his hold on the wolf slipping in the face of his intense emotions. His gaze was lethal, holding a fury so pure and overwhelming that she found herself crouching on her hands and knees in fright, cowering before she could stop herself.

"I think I better leave." She made to move when he grabbed her arm.

Caught like a rabbit stuck in headlights, she froze, hoping if she remained still, the predator wouldn't notice her, harm her.

"Laney," he groaned, drawing her up into his arms, rocking her gently. The fury was still there, but Laney could tell he had it under control, that he'd locked it down for her.

"Sweet, I get angry, I yell, I throw things and I can't stop that, not even for you."

She wriggled, trying to get free, her own anger growing as his dissipated. "I didn't ask you to," she said irritably.

"No, you didn't. But I don't want you running scared from me every time I get mad. However, I understand that actions speak louder than words, so I'll just have to show you that no matter how mad I get, I will never hurt you." She watched him draw in a large breath, the rest of his rage slowly drifting from his eyes. She knew it was still there, in the background, but for the moment all that filled his face was pure, sexy arousal.

"Now back on your hands and knees, wench."

"What?"

"Back on your hands and knees. I don't believe I told you that you could move from the bed."

"B-but moments ago you were punching the wall, and now you...you—"

"Now I want you to get back on your hands and knees. Your mind may not trust me, Laney, but I think your body does. It knows I want to give you nothing but pleasure."

He took a step toward her, and she had the feeling that he was holding himself back, keeping himself under tight control. His voice was surprisingly gentle when he spoke, holding a teasing note. "Hands and knees, or do I have to give you that spanking I've been promising you?"

Laney took a deep breath, taking stock of her feelings. Surprisingly, her body and her wolf agreed with him. They did trust him, even if her mind and heart had misgivings.

She moved slowly onto her hands and knees.

"Good girl," Cooper murmured, placing a couple of pillows under her stomach before pressing her shoulders down until her chest rested on the bed, her ass in the air.

His hands massaged her butt cheeks before he moved away and she heard a squirting noise. Then he returned and pressed a well-lubricated finger through the tight entrance of her ass.

"Easy, baby, you feel so tight and I don't want to hurt you. Just relax for me." His finger moved gently in and out until she relaxed, then he added a second finger, stretching her, lubricating her. His strength was enormous. She knew those bare hands could easily break her bones, yet this strong, dangerous man was treating her as if she were fragile, delicate, precious.

"How you doing, sweet? Talk to me, tell me how you feel."

Inexplicably, she blushed. No less than ten minutes ago she'd come with his tongue licking her asshole, and now she was blushing at having to speak of her pleasure.

"How did it feel when I was licking your ass?"

Laney forced herself to answer truthfully. "Good, naughty, but so damn good. Please, Coop, I need more." She wiggled her hips.

"Anything you ask for, sweet." His fingers withdrew, only to be replaced with something large and cool.

"Relax, sweet, let it in. Push out as I push it in. Easy, baby," he murmured as she thrashed her head, incoherent cries falling from her lips.

"It's too much," she cried, suddenly frightened by the overload on her senses.

"No, it's not," he replied ruthlessly. "This will feel so good, I want you overflowing with pleasure, with sensation, and since I'll never allow another man to touch you, this is the closest we can get."

She shuddered at the dark promise, relaxing so he could push the rest of the plug inside her.

"Good girl, you can breathe now." She let out a startled breath, unaware she'd been holding it as the large plug was pushed inside her. Moving experimentally, she was fascinated by the full feeling. It burned, but that pain was changing into something wonderfully, darkly erotic. A sharp slap on her ass had her jolting, and she turned to look over her shoulder in shock, her protest dying at the sight of Cooper massaging his full cock, smearing the silky drop of precum over its head. She whimpered as he grinned at her.

"Eager, baby?"

"Oh God, Cooper, you have no idea. Now will you stop mucking around and just fuck me?"

"You had but to ask, sweet."

Her snort of disbelief turned into a groan of satisfaction as he pressed his cock into her tight passage. She was even tighter because of the plug in her ass, and the feel of him having to fight to gain every inch was damn near indescribable. If she hadn't been so wet it would have hurt, but she was ready, primed. She arched back into him, pressing more of him inside her, delighting in the full cock rubbing against her sensitive nerve endings.

Laney whimpered as he thrust in and out, his cock brushing over that special spot inside her, tormenting her.

Her legs spread wider of their own accord, her ass clenching down on the plug inside her.

"Cooper," she wailed.

"Shh, baby, don't fight it, let it take you." His scent was driving her wild. It had become sharper, sexier and fiercely intense. Laney could feel his scent claiming her as his touch did, marking her, possessing her. She was his, and he was leaving neither of them in any doubt about that fact.

He remained on his knees behind her, but one hand moved to play with her clit. That was enough to send her soaring, to make her burn up in flames, and she cried her joy aloud. Her orgasm went on and on, drawn out by his continued thrusting until he came inside her, his hot semen shooting into her hungry womb.

It was then that it happened—her soul moved, shifted, reached up to join with his. Colors swirled, glittering like jewels all around them, twirling fast as though she were trapped on an out-of-control merry-go-round. Finally, she was thrown off and, landing hard, slipped off into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

"I didn't think it was true. I thought you were wrong." Laney felt puzzled, confused by what had just happened. "Why did you leave me if we're mates?" She hated the hurt tone in her voice, hated that she was so open to him, so vulnerable. But it was something she needed to know. She might have pushed him away, but why hadn't

he fought harder for her? Old insecurities reared up, throwing her back into the past. Zachary taunting her, hitting her, locking her in the basement without food or water or light, she was weak and stupid, weak, stupid and undesirable.

"Hey, hey, hey." Cooper gently turned her face up to look at him. "What on earth are you thinking about?" His voice, a silken drawl, weaved its way around her heart, soothing her nerves, her old wounds, even as his body clasped her close. She felt protected, cherished.

"I would have come back, sweetness, had I known. The pack was unstable, volatile, but I would have left it. For my mate."

His words had her frowning once again. "Why didn't you know? Why didn't it happen before?" She looked up from where she lay against his chest, her fingers playing softly in the dark hair surrounding his nipples. She could still feel the plug in her ass, stretching her, preparing her for his penetration.

Perhaps that should have worried her, but it didn't. She was his mate, his true mate, something so rare that she'd never dreamed she would find hers. To hurt her would be to hurt himself. Finding her true mate was a magical thing. He would complete the other half of her soul. Together they were stronger than they were apart. If she was honest, that was what worried her the most. That he was now tied to someone so weak. What if she dragged him down to her level?

He tapped her head. "Earth to sweet, pick up please, it's your mate calling."

"Are you always going to be such a smart-ass?" she asked, exasperated.

"Are you always going to be such a space cadet?" he replied. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"I said, even though you rudely ignored me, that I used a condom last time and that is why we never bonded. I didn't realize you were my mate. I think subconsciously I knew because I couldn't stop thinking of you, but there was so much going on here that I pushed aside my instincts."

"Oh."

"Oh? Is that all you have to say about the most perfect night of your life?"

Laney pushed herself up onto one elbow so she could stare down at him.

"Was that what this was? Huh, and I didn't even know. Can we repeat it so I can commit it to memory?"

He flipped her onto her back, hovering over her, his weight resting on his hands.

"As many times as you want, sweet," he crooned, a wicked glint in his eyes as he showed her just how memorable he could be.

Over and over and over again.

Chapter Five

Cooper heard them enter the house. He could have gotten up, could have left the room before they got there. But he didn't want to. He wanted to lie here, holding his mate. Their bonding was complete. Nothing could come between them now, not even her brothers.

But he did move the blankets up to cover her completely before they bounded their way into the bedroom, the door slamming open loud enough to wake even Laney from her deep sleep.

Poor sweet, she obviously hadn't been sleeping well, having no one to watch her back. Well, that would all change now. He was going to insist that she take care of herself. Of course, first he had to survive the beating her brothers were obviously intent on inflicting.

Laney sat up with a gasp but Cooper pushed her back down behind him so his body covered hers.

"What's happen— Oh my God," she gasped as she saw the three obviously furious male werewolves enter the room. She must have remembered her nakedness, because he heard her gasp again before the sheet was pulled around to cover her, which bared more of Cooper's body. Not that he cared—like most werewolves he was unconcerned about his nudity.

Cooper figured that she didn't want to incite their rage further. He, on the other hand, didn't care. He'd been itching for this fight since she'd told him she was Zachary's daughter. It was bad enough imagining her being abused when he'd at least thought she had a home, a haven where she could hide. To learn that she hadn't even had that made him wonder where her brothers had been during all this, and why the hell they had let her leave by herself. They should have gone with her, protected her, watched over her.

"We trusted you with her," Marcus, the middle brother and the most hotheaded, took a step toward the bed, his fists clenched in rage.

"That's our sister you're fucking, Brady!"

"Jay!" Cooper heard Laney gasp, obviously shocked by her normally easygoing brother's rage. She tried to sit up, but Cooper just pushed her back before rising to draw on his pants, more for her peace of mind than any sense of modesty.

"Let's take this outside, shall we?" he drawled. His gaze locked on Rye's, who had yet to say anything.

"Take what outside? Nobody's taking anything anywhere. Rye! What are you doing barging in here?" Laney tried to get out of bed, but the sheet she was clasping as though it were a lifeline simply wouldn't move with her.

"Stay there, Laney. I'll be back soon." Leaning down to kiss her, he ignored the low growls from the furious men behind him.

"Cooper! Don't be stupid, stay here. You three get out of here so I can dress, then I'll explain everything. But get out!"

"Explain everything? Like how the Alpha took advantage of you while you were fragile and recuperating? Get dressed, Laney, and then wait inside. We'll be back to get you shortly." Cooper noticed that Rye didn't once look at his sister while speaking to her, his eyes watched Cooper's every movement. Cooper moved slowly, not wanting the fight to start in front of Laney. He gestured toward the door.

"After you." As the three brothers filed out, Cooper turned back at the doorway to point a finger at Laney.

"Stay there, sweet," he ordered. "I mean it." Turning, he left before she could reply, no doubt in his mind that she would obey him.

"Stay there, Laney. Wait inside, Laney. Good Laney, have a treat, woof-woof, what do they think I am? Their bloody pet Chihuahua?" Laney raced around the room trying to find some clothes to wear, muttering to herself. She finally gave up on finding her own clothes, instead dressing in one of Cooper's t-shirts, which fell nearly to her knees. She slipped on some boxers so she felt halfway decent before sprinting out of the house. Ignoring the sharp stones under her feet, she raced around to the back of the house where a small crowd had gathered, the sound of flesh meeting flesh making her flinch. She'd never liked violence or confrontation, but there was no way she was going to wait inside like a child while her brothers beat on her mate.

Laney easily slipped her slight frame through the crowd to catch Cooper landing a sharp uppercut to Jay's jaw. She flinched as she watched her brother take a few steps back, shaking his head as though he were seeing stars.

But it didn't matter, because Marcus was there to take his place, landing his own uppercut to Cooper's jaw, which he tried to follow with a left hand jab. However, Cooper saw it coming and blocked it. Hitting back, he landed a hard gut punch that had Marcus bending over in pain. Cooper was holding his own, but it was three against one and Rye hadn't even entered the fight yet.

Just then she saw Rye step forward, coming in from the right while Jay came at Cooper from the other side. There was no way Cooper could fight them all.

"Stop it!" she yelled, jumping forward just as Marcus stood and lunged forward. He'd obviously been intending to tackle Cooper, but instead he ended up slamming into Laney. Marcus managed to turn, taking the brunt of the impact as they landed on the ground in a heap. But she still had the wind knocked out of her. As she lay there,

trying to regain her breath, hands clasped her around the waist and pulled her up against a hard chest.

"Delaney! Are you all right? Sweetheart, talk to me." She was clasped tightly in Cooper's arms, her face buried in his chest.

"Umm cmt brmth!"

"What?" His grasp eased up and she pulled back her head, gasping.

"I can't breathe!"

"Shit!" Cursing harshly, he pulled her up against his chest, his hold more gentle this time as he rocked her softly.

"Is she hurt?"

"Honey, are you okay?"

"Baby girl, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to tackle you."

Laney turned in Cooper's arms to glare at her brothers.

"You! All of you!" She included Cooper in her glare. "You're acting like juveniles, fighting in the backyard. You should all be ashamed of yourselves."

She pushed at Cooper's chest, trying to wiggle from his arms.

"Stay still," he growled.

"Let me go!"

"No!" Cooper glared menacingly at the crowd who immediately backed away from his furious gaze, their heads lowering in submission.

"Let's take this inside." He walked toward the cabin, still holding her against his chest like a small child.

"Stop squirming or I'll throw you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes." She froze at his murmured words, the anger behind them firing her own.

"Don't you dare get mad at me, Cooper Brady! You're the one acting like an imbecile. What were you thinking, fighting all of my brothers at the same time? You could have been hurt."

"Really?" he replied sarcastically. "I was actually planning on hurting them."

"But there are three of them." She didn't care that the three in question had followed them into the living room. They stood, glowering at her with a mix of concern and disappointment. Cooper set her down on the couch before he stood with his hands on his hips, glaring down at her.

"I told you to wait inside, Laney," he growled down at her while her brothers nodded, backing him up.

So what? Now they were all best friends? Ganging up on her? Anger filled her, causing her to shake as she attempted to push herself to her feet. However, Cooper had other plans, his hands landing on her shoulders to push her back down onto the couch.

"You want to explain why you disobeyed me, Laney?" He bit the words out, making her wince at the controlled anger behind each word.

"Disobeyed you?" she yelled, surprising herself, her anger temporarily overcoming her fear of confrontation. "You four were going to kill each other, someone had to intervene."

"You do not step into the middle of a fight, Laney. It's a damn good way to get yourself hurt. The reason I told you to wait inside was because I *knew* you would try a stupid stunt like this. You were given an order for your own safety. It's only because Marcus has such good reflexes that you weren't seriously hurt!" Again her brothers nodded in agreement.

"I don't have to do what you tell me," she muttered, desperately fighting down the need to run and hide.

"I am your Alpha and your mate. You will obey me!" His voice thundered down at her and Laney felt herself pale in reaction, letting her face go blank as she prepared herself for the feel of his fist. As soon as he hit her she'd have to leave, even though it would fair break her heart to do so. "And don't you dare give me that face. I am not going to hit you. We're mates, Laney. Is my intent to hit you? Is it, Laney? Do I want to hit you?"

"Yes!" she burst out, watching as surprise filled his face. "You want to spank me—I can see it in your eyes. I can hear it in your thoughts." She could. The mate bond might be weak, but this thought was coming through loud and clear. He would love nothing more than to drag her across his knee and turn her butt a blistering red.

"Oh, sweet, it's only a matter of time." He grinned down at her, but it wasn't a cheerful grin. Laney couldn't understand his anger. She wasn't even hurt.

"I didn't even get hurt. A few bruises hardly matter," she muttered to herself, unaware she was speaking aloud. She'd spent her childhood being hit, bullied and punished. Frankly, this didn't even rate.

"What do you mean, she's your mate?" Rye asked suspiciously.

"Can't you smell that we're mated?" Cooper didn't bother to look back at his lead enforcer. "And a few bruises matter, sweet. To me they matter a lot."

Rye took a deep sniff before a grin came over his face. Marcus and Jay did the same, similar grins crossing their faces.

"Well, why didn't you just say so?" Marcus asked.

"Because," Cooper turned to them, "I wanted to get my hands on the three of you, and you provided the perfect opportunity. Where the hell were you three when she was being tortured by your father?" He spat the last word out as if it tasted nasty on his tongue. "Where were you while he was locking her in a box, starving her, whipping her?"

Laney let out a shocked gasp and he turned back to her.

"Cooper!" she protested.

"I have the right to ask this, Laney," he said, his voice gentling slightly, but his face held deadly determination as he turned to the three stricken men.

"Whipped?" Jay whispered.

"You didn't know?" Cooper asked, disbelief filling his voice as he stared at them. But they didn't bother looking at him. Their gazes were all locked on their stricken little sister.

"Oh, Cooper," Laney whispered, dejection filling her.

"Laney?" Marcus asked, coming to sit beside her.

"How could you not know?" Cooper asked as he came to sit on her other side, his fingers gently wiping away the tears on her cheeks. She hadn't even been aware of them trickling down her face.

Rye and Jay sat on the two armchairs, pulling them closer to the couch so the four men were all within touching distance of her.

"We didn't live with Zachary when Laney was growing up," Rye began. Laney watched as Cooper frowned in confusion.

"Zachary wasn't our father. We all have the same mother. When our father died our mother was devastated, she never wanted another mate. But when Zachary started sniffing around... Well, I don't know what he did to convince her." Rye just shook his head. Laney knew that he didn't really want to know what her father had done to get their mother to move in with him. "But he moved us all into his house."

"Anyway, Zachary started to show his true colors after the first few months. We'd come home from school to find Mom had a new bruise, or she was walking funny or couldn't breathe properly. We were too little to truly understand, and surprisingly he never hurt us."

He looked around at his brothers. "But then Mom got pregnant and things became really good. He treated her like a princess and we were spoiled rotten, until Laney was born and he went completely off the rails."

"Why?"

"Because I was a girl, a runt, and he wanted a boy – a big, strong male werewolf."

Rye continued. "Our mother tried to protect her from his rage, often sending us off to our Aunt's with Laney when it got really bad. Lord, the beatings she must have taken." Rye turned to Laney as she made a small hurt sound. He clasped her face in his large hands, coming off his chair to kneel in front of her.

"Honey, it wasn't your fault. Whatever happened to our mother was his fault, not yours. You were a baby, a beautiful, precious little girl who deserved love and affection. Zachary was psychotic. You know that." Laney watched through a blur of tears as he leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. Then she was drawn onto Cooper's lap to be rocked once more in his arms.

"What happened?" he asked, dreading the answer. He looked down at the precious bundle in his arms. How could anyone hate a baby, their own baby?

Rye continued. "When Laney was three and I was thirteen, we came home to find our mother gone. Zachary said she'd run off, but we all knew he'd killed her. However, he was Alpha and no one was strong enough to challenge him, not without risking their lives. So he packed the three of us off to live with our aunt."

"Leaving Laney alone with the bastard."

Rye nodded and Cooper watched as tears filled his eyes.

"Leaving our precious little sister with that sadistic, psychotic bastard."

Laney sat up at that. "Hey, it wasn't your fault, Rye. You guys were just kids."

"We were your older brothers, we should have protected you. God, Laney, I knew things were bad, but he whipped you? He put you in a box?" Rye's voice broke and Laney launched herself from Cooper's arms into her brother's.

"Please don't," she begged. "It wasn't your fault, it wasn't. You guys did your best. You protected me from everyone else. If what happened to Mom wasn't my fault, then what happened to me can't be yours."

"There were other people hurting you?" Cooper roared, jumping to his feet. The four of them looked up at him, their gazes following him as he paced, his body stiff as his angry growls vibrated throughout the room.

"Who?" he barked out.

Laney shrugged. "Just a few of Zachary's friends, some of the dominants who liked to pick on me because I'm so small, because the Alpha hated me, just because they were sadistic bastards."

"Names, Laney."

Rye answered him. "You've already killed some of them, or they left. Mainly it was Francis and Samson, but also Suzanne, James and Kane."

"Kane and Francis are still here," Cooper growled.

Rye nodded.

"Get rid of them," he ordered.

"Cooper," Laney began to protest.

"Don't!" He leaned over her as she lay still in Rye's arms. "Do not even try to protect them. They either leave or they die, you hear me?" She nodded, relieved that she wouldn't have to see the worst of her tormentors again. Rye stood and placed her back on the sofa. Marcus and Jay rose with him.

"Did they hurt you? Like Zachary did?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. They might have slapped me from time to time – Suzanne was fond of doing that. She was around a lot, not his girlfriend exactly, more like a fuck buddy. I could hear them sometimes. I think she actually liked it when Zachary hurt her." She shuddered. "The rest of them mainly just watched him hurt me. They enjoyed telling me how ugly I was, how stupid." She shrugged, glancing away, uncomfortable with this topic and not wanting to meet her brothers' or Cooper's gazes.

"They won't hurt you ever again." It was Rye who spoke as he crouched back down in front of her. Her gaze met his and she was shocked speechless by the tears she saw in his eyes.

"Nobody will ever hurt you that way again," Cooper vowed, and when she glanced up at him she saw the fury, the dark promise in his eyes.

"What about Leonard Paterson?" Cooper asked suddenly. Laney frowned, wondering why he wanted to talk about the Alpha of the Silverton pack.

"What about him?" she asked.

"Rye said he used to visit Zachary often. Did he ever hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, not really, he watched me a lot, though. There was always something about him I didn't like, something creepy." She shuddered, memories of those predatory eyes watching her, almost stalking her. "He scared me more than anyone else."

Cooper narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

She looked up at him. "Because he was so sweet, he'd bring me presents, talk nicely to me, and all the time his eyes were cold, hard, mean." She began to tremble.

"It's okay, baby," Cooper said soothingly as Rye sat up on the sofa beside her, hugging her close, rocking her. When her trembling eased, Rye let her go and stood once more. "One more thing." Cooper turned to them. "I want you to explain to me why the hell it wasn't 'feasible' for you to go with her when she left. The four of you together would have had a much better chance of surviving than Laney on her own—hell, she almost died!" Laney flinched at the accusation in his voice.

Rye looked down at her before his gaze rose to meet his Alpha's. "It was the price we paid. He wouldn't go after her if we signed on as his enforcers for five years. We weren't to go to her, contact her or help her. We managed to keep our contact with her a secret, but we couldn't leave. It was the best solution we could think of, and it was only supposed to be for a short time. It took us longer than we thought to find someone suitable and get a message through to your brother."

"What message?" Laney asked, puzzled.

Rye looked at his brothers and they nodded back.

"Cooper's brother is the Alpha of the Lian pack. We sent a message telling him that we sought a new Alpha for our pack, one who would bring the beliefs and rules of the Lian pack with them."

Laney frowned. "But why? If you wanted Zachary gone, why not challenge him yourself, why bring in an outsider?"

Rye sighed. "Because we couldn't break our word, and we wanted someone who would be fair, someone who would break us from the old ways that Zachary was so fond of. Everyone knows how the Lian pack is run, and we knew that the Alpha had a number of strong brothers."

Cooper nodded. "My brother gave me their message and I decided it was time to break off. I'd always known that I couldn't stay with the pack without causing problems for Alexander, my brother."

"But why didn't you wait until the five years were up?" Laney asked Rye.

"It was too dangerous to wait that long, honey. We didn't know how safe you were by yourself. Plus, who knew how long Zachary would stick to his word and not go after you."

Laney looked down at her lap, unsure what to say.

"We'll go throw out the trash now, with your permission, Alpha?"

Cooper shook his head. "Not Alpha, brother." He held out his hand and the four of them bumped fists.

"Bye, squirt." Jay ruffled her hair while Rye and Marcus kissed each cheek.

"Love you, baby girl."

"Rye?" The three men stopped, turning toward her.

"Thank you, all of you, for everything."

* * * * *

Laney watched Cooper pace around the living room, energy pulsing off him in waves. Her wolf prowled restlessly within her and she suddenly felt the need to run, to hunt. Cooper turned to her, his eyes gleaming amber. Darkness had fallen like a thick curtain, but the moon was bright and it called to both of them. He held out a hand to her.

"Run with me? I need to burn off some energy."

It was all the prompting she needed, and she stripped before letting the change overtake her. Racing outside, Laney felt him chasing her, heard the slight rustle behind her. He'd given her a head start, but she was as small in wolf form as she was in human and he'd easily caught up.

A thrill of excitement rushed through her. She'd always been considered too weak, too small, to hunt with the pack. But when her brothers had managed to sneak her out she'd loved the thrill of the hunt, the chase. Now she also saw the thrill in being chased. They were pack creatures, designed to run, to hunt and kill together. Not alone, as she'd done for so long.

When in wolf form, they became more primal, their human side remaining but pushed to the background as the animal took over. Their thinking became more simple, to hunt, to eat, to play and to procreate. Everything was sharper, clearer, scents were more intense, noise more pure, feelings more primitive.

Cooper was parallel to her now, although she couldn't see him. She veered off to her right, thinking to prolong the fun, but he crashed into her side, sending them tumbling together until she landed on her tummy with him lying on top of her. A slight

nip to her ear and then he jumped up, leaping in front of her, yapping excitedly. A wolfy grin crossed her lips as she yapped back before bouncing onto her feet and racing off after him.

This time they kept pace together until he disappeared into the bush. Then suddenly a rabbit darted out in front of her, with him following close behind. Both of them chased after the small prey. It was a game, pure fun, and she let out a happy yip as adrenaline surged through her. She felt so alive.

Eventually, she grew tired and sank to the ground in a heap. A snuffling in her ear had her barking softly in reply, then a warm body curled up against her, surrounding and protecting her as she fell asleep.

Cooper changed back to human form, watching the slight, fair wolf sleeping beside him. She was as beautiful in wolf form as human, with long, thick hair only slightly paler than her human hair. But as much as he'd love to lie here sleeping beside her, it wasn't safe to stay outside unguarded for any length of time.

Not that he worried about his own safety, but he had a mate now and he could never risk her. Until his place as Alpha was completely secure, and all of his enemies weeded out, he would have to ensure she was well protected. He knew she was strong, much stronger than she gave herself credit for. But no matter how much power she held, nothing was going to give her the brawn and stature of some of the larger wolves that he knew were itching to overthrow him.

Changing back into wolf form, he nudged at her, a canine grin escaping at her snort of irritation as she turned away from him and continued to snore softly. He nudged again, harder this time, and she turned to snarl at him softly. He snarled back and, grabbing the skin at the ruff of her neck, pulled her up onto her feet, ignoring her growls of protest. Nipping her back legs, he pushed her forward, giving her an occasional soft nudge when she slowed, grinning as she snarled back at him.

Just when he thought he was going to have to prod her all the way home she took off, a yip of delight echoing back at him as he let out a surprised woof. He snuffled, allowing her a few minutes before giving chase.

He darted off to the side, coming out ahead of her. But she must have anticipated the move, because she was already racing off in another direction. She managed to elude him cleverly, but he picked up her scent again easily and charged off, adrenaline pumping through him.

As he arrived at a clearing, he saw her standing in the moonlight, naked, in human form, her body so still and pale it could have been cut from marble. Changing quickly, he came up to stand beside her, careful to let her see him coming.

Cooper stood staring at the building before him. It was an impressive house, easily the largest on the estate, and although it had been abandoned a few months ago it showed no signs of wear or tear. Even the weeds seemed afraid to grow around this house, as though fearing the wrath of the previous owner.

"Do you want to go inside?" he asked Laney gently, aware of the fine tremor in her hands, her pale face, that had nothing to do with fatigue and everything to do with fear.

"No," she answered back, gulping. "Not yet, maybe not ever."

"If you ever do, I want your promise that you will wait for me to go with you."

She didn't reply.

"Laney." He forced her face to him, aware of the intensity in his gaze. This was important, and he was determined to have her obedience in this. "Don't go in there by yourself, okay?"

She stared up at him, her face so still it was unreadable.

"You think I'm a coward."

Cooper shook her slight shoulders fiercely. Her apathetic attitude alarmed him and he needed to snap her out of it.

"I do not think you are a coward, damn it! You were traumatized in that house, Laney. Few would want to face those memories again. But I think that eventually you will, and I don't want you alone while you do so." He shook her softly.

"Yeah, okay," she replied irritably, taking a step back as she shook off his touch. "You know, I like my head where it is, thank you very much. I'm not one of those dogs you put in the back window of a car."

"What?" he asked in confusion, following her as she turned to walk back through the forest. His gaze constantly scanned their surroundings, although it couldn't help but linger every now and then on her pert backside, which glowed in the moonlight.

"You know...those dogs with the bobbing heads." She moved her head up and down in demonstration. "I think they have spring necks."

He frowned. "Yeah, I've seen them. I don't understand it, though. I mean, why the hell would someone want a dog with a spring neck in the back window of their car?"

She shrugged. "Humans," was all she said, as if that explained it.

Shaking his head once again, he moved up to walk beside her.

"Tell me something about yourself."

"Like what, sweet?"

Laney shrugged. "I don't know, I feel like you know everything about me but I know nothing about you. Tell me...tell me about your family. You have a brother, Alexander?"

"Actually, I have four brothers." He leaned over and grabbed her hand, ignoring the way she stiffened and tried to pull back.

"Three younger and one older," he said cheerfully as they moved closer to his cabin.

"What are they like? Do any of them look like you?"

"Oh, all of them look a bit like me I guess. My oldest brother, Alexander, is Alpha. He's very serious, takes his responsibilities to heart and always has. Our father was

Alpha before him. When he retired, Alex won the right to be Alpha, not that there was much competition. The twins are next after me, Connor and Cade. They stick together. You rarely see one of them without the other. They're Alex's enforcers. Then there is Georgie, only he hates being called that. Insists his name is George. He's a computer geek, pretty good one too. He's also the only one of us who had a mate, until now. Jessie, his mate, works with him."

"You miss them."

"Of course, they're my family."

"Why did you leave then?"

He sighed. "Because both Alexander and I are strong personalities, born leaders our Mom would say. I like to be in charge, to get my own way. If I had stayed I may have tried to take the pack from him simply because it's my instinct to lead, not to follow. I can take advice, but in the end I need to be the one in control. I didn't want to fight my brother, so when I had the chance to lead my own pack I took it. It felt like the right thing to do."

"What about your parents?" she asked as they walked up the steps to the cabin.

"Ahh, well, as soon as Dad retired, he and Mom took off on a long overdue holiday to visit some friends. I think they wanted to give Alexander the chance to draw the pack under his leadership without Dad being in the way. They should be home soon. We'll have to invite them to visit." He smiled down at her as they walked through the house, his face growing serious when he saw her distressed expression.

"Hey!" He reached out and, grabbing hold of her arm, dragged her into their bedroom to sit beside him on the bed. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing, why would anything be wrong? Everything is just fine with me, isn't it fine with you?" she babbled nervously as she stood and grabbed some clothes out of the wardrobe.

"Everything's fine, huh?"

"Yep," she nodded, grinning widely. "All right if I have the first shower?"

"Not a problem." He waited until she turned away. "Oh, sweet?"

She turned back, still smiling.

"It's not that I mind you borrowing my clothes, but do you really want to sleep in three pairs of my pants?"

Laney looked down at her hands, embarrassment rushing through her as Cooper stood and gently took the pants from her hands. He moved to his drawers and pulled out a large black t-shirt, but as she reached out to grab it he refused to let it go, waiting until she looked up at him.

"Now how about you tell me why the idea of my parents coming here terrifies you?" he asked gently. His wide hands landed on her shoulders in a gesture meant to be comforting, meant to relax and soften her. Instead, the gentle massage of his thumbs

on her tight muscles made her pulse quicken in awareness, her womb clench and tighten.

She avoided meeting his gaze, looking over his shoulder. She noticed a cobweb in the corner of the room and made a mental note to get rid of it. She detested spiders.

"It's not that it terrifies me—" she began. How did you explain what a fuckup you were to someone so strong, so confident and normal?

"You are not a fuckup," he growled at her.

Damn, that mate bond kicked in at the worst times.

"Want to explain it to me, baby?" It may have been phrased as a request but she knew it for the order it was.

"It's just that I don't really know how to be part of a normal family. I don't know how to talk to parents. What if they don't like me? What if they think I'm too fucked up for you? I mean, what do I even say to them? God, I'm such a moron! Why are you even with me?"

"Sweet, don't you know that these are normal worries? Everyone worries about meeting the in-laws, about making a good impression. You would be weird if you didn't worry about it."

"Really?"

"Really, but you don't have to worry. I promise that they will love you. Now get in the shower before I decide to join you." He waggled his eyebrows at her suggestively before landing a slap to her bottom to get her moving. She squealed, frowning at him as she rubbed the sting from the abused cheek.

"You are such a pain in the ass."

"Sweet, don't give me ideas."

Chapter Six

Laney climbed into her car with a sigh. She was knackered. Job-hunting was exhausting at the best of times, but when she was desperate it was even worse. She was fast running out of money, and although she had a roof over her head and food to eat, she didn't want to become complacent.

One thing she refused to do was ask Cooper for money—he was her partner, not her sugar daddy. She snorted as the image of Cooper dressed in a glittery coat, a cigar hanging from his mouth and bling around his neck drifted through her mind.

It was hard to believe that it had been a mere ten days since she'd awoken in Cooper's bed. He'd become such a huge part of her life that she dreaded to think what would happen to her when he came to his senses and realized she wasn't good for him. When she was with him, she felt safe, secure and protected for the first time in her life.

The newlywed period had yet to fade, for either of them. He couldn't walk into the room without her eyes being drawn to his large, muscular frame. She couldn't brush past him without wanting to touch that warm, silken skin, without wanting to kiss his firm lips. His touch had become like a drug to her, she craved it, lived for it. Laney shivered, her body trembling with a brush of arousal from just the memory of him caressing her, stroking her.

She pulled away from the curb, looking anxiously at her gas gauge. Lord, she hoped she had enough to get home. How humiliating it would be to have to ring Cooper or one of her brothers to come and collect her.

Still, at least she had her car. Without it she'd be stuck at the estate pretty much 24/7. Her brothers had brought it back with them after they'd cleaned out her flat. Cooper had refused to let her return with them.

"Come on, come on," she urged quietly as the car struggled to make its way up the steep hill. "It's all downhill from here on, you can make it. Keep on truckin', keep on truckin'. Yes!" She let out a celebratory fist pump as the car made it over the crest of the hill. As she hit the first corner on the downhill slope she put her foot on the brake.

"Shit!" she swore, pumping again.

"Goddamit!" The brakes were gone.

"Oh hell, oh hell." Laney could feel herself panicking as she tried to remember what to do. Rye had been a thorough driving instructor. She knew he'd gone over how to handle failing brakes. She slipped down into a lower gear and kept her foot pumping on the brake as she raced toward the next corner. There was a little pressure there, enough to slow her down to take the corner safely.

Thank God I'm used to driving like a speed demon, she thought as the adrenaline rushed through her. Praying no one else appeared on the road, Laney turned the car from one side of the road to the other, managing to reduce her speed slightly as she gradually pulled on the handbrake. This slowed the small car some more, but it still didn't stop. Using all her strength, she pulled it onto the shoulder of the road so she was driving on gravel.

The car slowed enough to take the rest of the corners safely until she finally reached the bottom of the hill. Shaking, she pulled over and came to a stop. Her breath sawed in and out of her lungs as she sat limply, the adrenaline drop leaving her as weak as a babe.

A bang on her window had her sitting up with a scream as she stared out at the man by her door. Cain, one of Cooper's enforcers, peered down at her. The huge, dark-skinned man was someone she didn't know very well. He'd joined the pack after she'd left.

Laney rolled down her window, needing two hands because she was shaking so much. Her heart beat so fast in her chest she was sure he could hear it. At least the mate bond hadn't decided to kick in—it remained shaky, coming and going irregularly. Laney wasn't entirely sure why the bond was so weak, and didn't know anyone else she could ask about it, but she had a fairly good idea. She figured that it was weak because she was weak. Part of her was terrified that as frail as it was it could be broken, and she wasn't sure she could survive that.

"You okay, Laney?" Cain asked in his deep, resonant voice. "I was behind you, looked as if you were having some trouble." He nodded to the black truck that was parked behind her. Hell, she hadn't even noticed him behind her. She brushed the hair off her face, wishing she could control her shaking.

"M-my brakes went. I was t-trying to slow m-myself down." He frowned down at her before stepping back to take a look at her car.

"It-it's true." She thought he looked doubtful.

"Oh, I'm sure it is. No one would drive that erratically unless something was wrong or they were drunk." She thought she almost saw a small smile cross his lips, but that was impossible. The very stern-looking enforcer never smiled, well, not that she'd seen anyway.

"When was the last time you had the brakes checked?" he asked. Laney undid her seat belt, attempting a smile of thanks when he held the door open for her.

"Umm, my neighbor Josh used to take care of it. Maybe I should get them checked out, though." Just how the hell would she pay for that?

He just nodded. "Grab your stuff."

"W-what?" She looked up at him, and it was a long way up that she had to look. He had to be at least six feet five.

"Grab your stuff and I'll give you a ride. I was on my way to your place anyway."

"Oh right, thanks. Will my car be all right here?"

He looked at her, his lips definitely twitching. "I don't think anyone will want to steal it, kiddo."

"Huh." She looked at her car, noticing the patches of rust, the front bender that was held together with duct tape, and the wire coat hanger she used for an antenna. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

She was surprised as he held open the passenger door of his black truck for her. Somehow she just hadn't expected such old-fashioned manners from him.

"You said you were heading to Cooper's place?" She couldn't quite call it home yet.

He didn't bother to look at her as he pulled out. "Yep."

"How come?"

"The Alpha called a meeting."

"What about?"

He shrugged in reply.

"You don't really like to talk, do you?"

He did grin then, turning to look at her. "Nope."

"Why not?"

"Maybe I have nothing to say."

Laney snorted. "You live on the east end of the estate, don't you? There's not many pack members down that end is there?"

"Nope, it's nice and quiet."

She blushed red, moving her hands nervously, rubbing against the tops of her thighs.

"Sorry, I talk a lot when I'm upset. Very annoying habit, especially when you like quiet. Sorry, I'll try to shut up now." She managed to sit quietly for about thirty seconds, but it was too much, the silence brought back the full body tremors as her mind replayed her near miss.

"Are you sure my car will be okay? Maybe I should have stayed with it while you went and got someone to tow it."

He sent an incredulous look her way. "Leave the Alpha's mate alone when it's getting dark, while I go get someone to tow a heap of junk?"

"It's not that bad," she muttered.

"Kiddo, its one piece of rust away from falling apart."

"You know, I don't think I'm that much younger than you. So you really can't call me kiddo."

He just grunted.

"Why'd you move here? I mean, Zachary didn't have the best reputation, no one with any sense of decency usually wanted to move into our pack."

"Who says I have any decency?" he growled softly as he parked the truck in front of Cooper's house. She undid her belt and reached across to open the door, surprised when he grabbed her arm.

"Wait until I come around and get you." Laney sat waiting until he walked around and opened her door. She took his offered hand, letting him help her down from the cab. She didn't care what he said, there was definitely a decent man under all that gruffness.

Laney walked inside, Cain walking closely behind her. She may only have known Cain for a short time, but she knew he took his job as an enforcer seriously. He was extremely cautious, and she was certain not much passed him by. Even now she knew his eyes would be roaming, watching for a threat, and felt safer because of it. Stepping into the living room, she came to an abrupt stop as a room full of people stopped talking to stare at her.

"Hey, sweet." Cooper rose to his feet and leaned down to kiss her softly. "You know everyone here, right?"

She looked around, nodding at those in the room. It was filled with Cooper's enforcers. Her brothers were there, along with Justin, a tall, thin, blond man who was a couple of years younger than she was. Justin sat next to Jesse, an attractive man with sad green eyes. Beside Rye sat a tall, curvy redhead, Dusty, one of only two female enforcers. Tina, the other female enforcer, was currently visiting her cousin out of state. Beside her sat the last enforcer, Josiah, a sweet-talking, dark-haired man with dusky skin. She'd always thought he had Indian blood, but had never had the guts to ask him.

"Laney, where'd you leave your car?" Cooper looked over at her, frowning slightly as he walked back into the room. She hadn't even noticed him leave. He handed Cain a beer.

"How did you know I didn't drive up in my car?" she asked, puzzled.

Cooper stared at her, his face impassive, but she saw the wicked glint in his eye.

"Well, sweet, besides the fact that it's hard to miss its rather unique presence in my driveway, it makes a rather distinctive, loud noise."

"That fan belt's worse than nails on a blackboard," Marcus interjected as she watched Jay hide his smile.

"It has character."

"Oh, it has character, all right," Jay agreed. "I haven't quite seen anything else like it. That wasn't already sitting in a junkyard, that is."

Laney glared at her brothers, wishing they were alone so she could give them what for, but she still didn't feel comfortable around the rest of the pack yet, especially the most dangerous, strongest members, all of whom were currently watching their byplay with a range of emotions from humor to disgust.

"Laney, where is your car?" Whoops, not a good idea to ignore the Alpha, even when he was your true mate.

"Oh, umm, I had some car trouble so Cain gave me a ride. Can someone tow my car? It's only a few miles away."

Cooper frowned. "Sure, I'll go grab it after our meeting. What's wrong with it?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Uh-hmm," Cain cleared his throat.

"I-I'll tell you later, once everyone is gone." She thought Cooper was going to push it when he stood and folded his arms.

"What's this meeting about?" she asked hastily.

"Its enforcer business," Dusty spoke up, a nasty tone to her voice. Laney stood stock-still for a moment before shaking herself.

"Of course, I'll just go and do some washing." She made to move away but Cooper grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"Actually, as my mate, Laney has as much right to be here as anyone." He spoke firmly, his gaze falling on each one as he dragged her along to sit beside him.

"Cooper," she whispered urgently.

"Sit, sweet. You want a drink?"

Laney shook her head. She sat uncomfortably beside him for the next hour. Distaste seeped from every pore in Dusty's body, and Laney's discomfort grew with every second that she spent in the other woman's presence. Searching her memory, she tried in vain to think of a reason for the other woman's hatred. But she pushed that aside as she focused on the conversation around her, which had turned to Cooper's plan to reform the Western States Council. It was an ambitious plan. The Council had fallen apart years ago and no one had ever had the guts to try to reinstate it.

"You sure you want to do this?" asked Dusty, her voice skeptical. "I mean, going and speaking to each of them is just the first step. Then they've got to agree to a meeting, a meeting that we'll have to provide all the security, entertainment and accommodation for, not to mention try and keep a tap on all those egos."

Cooper shrugged. "It's the only way we're going to get anywhere. We can't remain segregated, cut off from humans for the rest of our lives, and expect to prosper. And if we want humans to accept and trust us, then we need to work together, not fight among ourselves."

The others broke into a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of Cooper's plan before he brought them to silence with a raised hand.

"So," Cooper spoke again. "We're all agreed. Rye will tackle half of the Alphas and I'll meet with the rest. Two of you will go with Rye, two with me, and the rest of you will stay and protect the pack. Justin, you'll be in charge here."

Justin nodded.

"Good, then I think that's all." He looked over at Rye, who nodded. Laney waited until everyone had left except Cain and her brothers, before turning to Cooper.

"You move quickly." Part of her had hoped it would take him to longer to organize everything. That she would have longer to get used to the idea of being here without him.

He grinned at her. "Shocked, sweet? Did you think I was just going to sit around on my sexy behind ordering everyone around?"

"Well, no." That was all Zachary had ever done, though. Well, that and torture, abuse and make the lives of those around him utterly miserable. Cooper looked at her, his face displaying concern.

"Are you sure you'll be okay here by yourself?" He looked down at her worriedly as she tried to hide her sudden surge of fear at being alone with the pack, no Cooper, none of her brothers to hide behind. Cooper had asked her to go with him but she'd declined, the thought of traveling around to different packs, dealing with all those Alphas—it was more than she could deal with right now. But had she made the right decision? Suddenly she wasn't so sure.

If the mere thought of being alone was terrifying, could she survive the reality? So far she'd kept her interaction with the rest of the pack to a minimum. But if Cooper brought the other Alphas here, they had to present a united pack.

To do that she had to overcome her fears. So she would stay, she would conquer her fears of her own pack first. Maybe then she'd be strong enough to deal with a bunch of strange Alphas. "Uh-hmm." Cain pulled their attention and she looked up to find him leaning against the doorway. "I'll go tow Laney's car back here. But you'll want to get it looked at."

Cooper frowned. "What happened, sweet?" His hand came up to massage the nape of her neck and she leaned into him, unaware of how tense she'd been.

"My brakes failed coming down Horse Hill."

"What?" he barked. His reaction surprised her and she pulled away before she could stop herself. But he ignored her instinctual flinch and pulled her back toward him.

"Your brakes failed coming down the hill? How far down were you when they went?"

"Umm, at the top."

Cooper's eyes narrowed dangerously and she felt his concern beating at her.

"She did a good job of slowing it down, weaving across the road, even driving through the gravel to slow herself down."

Laney stared up at Cain, surprised by his defense of her. He winked at her and she bit back a smile.

"You could have been killed," Cooper snapped, although she sensed his anger level had dropped slightly.

"But I didn't, I'm fine, Coop. My car probably just needs some brake fluid."

"Take it to the junkyard," Cooper ordered Cain.

"What? Cooper, no! You can't do that. It's the only car I have."

"I'll buy you a new one." He dismissed her protest, rising to walk Cain to the front door.

"I can't just buy a new one. I need one now, besides I can't afford a new car."

Cooper turned around to glare at her. "I said I will buy you a new one. In the meantime you can use mine. Thanks, Cain, I owe you."

"No thanks needed. Just glad I was there." He nodded briefly to Laney before he walked out, followed closely by her brothers.

"Cooper, you had no right to do that." She nearly stomped her foot in frustration as he turned his back on her, ignoring her protest. Damn, he made her so mad sometimes!

"Cooper!"

He turned to her swiftly, so swiftly that she took a step back in alarm before she could stop herself.

"What were you doing in town today, Laney?"

"I told you, I was doing some shopping."

"So where are all your bags?"

Damn, he had her there. "I didn't find anything I liked." Pretty pathetic, but it was all she could think of.

Cooper took a step toward her. "I don't like being lied to, Laney. In fact, I believe I once told you what happens to liars." Laney bit her lip nervously as she took a hasty step back from the force of his predatory glare.

"So, I'll ask you again. What were you doing in town today?" She just shook her head, her breath quickening as he reached for her, dragging her toward him for a heady kiss. Her head spun, her senses reeling as he kissed her, holding her tightly against him. Conquering her mouth with his tongue, he pressed his hard body tightly against hers as she struggled to keep up with him. She felt sluggish, drugged, as he pulled away, stripping her quickly until she was completely naked.

"Cooper." She tried to put up a protest as he turned her toward the back of the sofa, pushing on her shoulders until she dropped over the back. Her feet left the ground as her hands landed on the soft cushions. A long shiver raced through her body as his hands tracked their way up her thighs, pulling her legs apart, opening her up to his touch.

Laney glanced up over her shoulder to find him watching her intently, his gaze heavy-lidded, masculine, arrogant. There was no doubt of who was in charge right at that moment, and her traitorous body obeyed him without question, weakening to his touch, arousal an out-of-control fire that she knew only his possession could extinguish.

Cooper stroked his fingers between her legs, softly massaging her swollen lips. Breathless, her hips twisted urgently as one thick finger thrust into her damp sheath.

"What were you doing in town, sweet?"

She was panting, arousal riding her so hard that she could barely think let alone speak. All she could do was shake her head, crying out when a hand landed sharply on her left buttock.

"Ow," she yelped, surprised by how hard he'd hit her. Another spank landed on her right buttock before he firmly massaged the stinging cheeks.

"You deserve this, Laney. In fact, it's been a long time coming." His hand rained down smack after smack on her bare buttocks, stopping every so often to massage her gently. At first there was only pain, a sharp, stinging fury of sensation. But the burn soon turned into something else, and each sting sent arrows of arousal straight to her clit. Two fingers now plunged in and out of her slick channel while his right hand continued to smack her. Arching back, Laney cried out as his thumb teased her clit.

One last hard smack and she came, screaming aloud, her passage pulsing endlessly. Coming back to earth, she lay over the sofa, exhausted, sated, so relaxed she felt boneless. If she ever moved again it would be too soon.

The rasp of a zipper set her body on high alert and impossibly she found herself stirring in interest. Then Cooper's hard cock was at her entrance, and she groaned as he entered her with one long, smooth stroke.

"Cooper," she moaned.

"Shh, sweet, just relax and feel."

Relax? Was he mad?

The pleasure rushing through her veins was so intense she felt overwhelmed. "It's too much," she cried out as his thumb returned to her engorged clit, stroking it, massaging it gently as he thrust in and out of her needy passage.

"Work through it, sweet. Don't think, just feel, just enjoy."

Arousal stirred deep within her as Cooper drove his cock over her sweet spot again and again. Moaning, she clenched her muscles on his shaft, but just as she was about to explode he pulled out.

"Cooper!" she yelled in protest, but he just chuckled before slowly driving his shaft back into her sheath. Slowly, torturously, this continued on, he pulled out just as she was about to come, then inch by agonizing inch slowly pushed his way back in. It was driving her insane!

"Cooper, you're driving me nuts," she cried out as she wiggled her way backward, pushing him in farther.

"Sweet, stay still, I'm trying to be good here." His voice sounded tight, strained.

"Don't be good, just fuck me! God, Cooper, just fuck me. Please, please!"

She screamed aloud as he entered her fully, finally thrusting harder, faster. In and out he pumped, rubbing his thumb over her clit until she came again, screaming as she felt his essence shoot up inside her.

Laney lay like a wet rag over the sofa. She barely moved as Cooper dragged her up into his arms and carried her to the bathroom. Running the water, he stepped inside the

shower, holding her against his chest as he washed her quickly. She was too sated to feel embarrassed as he washed her folds, the crack of her ass.

Watching as he washed himself, Laney admired the symphony of muscles as they played beneath his smooth, tanned skin. He was sleek, well-defined, and if she'd had any energy left she'd have jumped him then and there. Before she could gather up the energy needed for more play though, he lifted her back into his arms and stepped out of the shower.

When he grabbed a towel, she stood still and relished the feeling of being cherished as he dried her off. Once again he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom where he dropped her lightly onto the bed, sitting down beside her.

She dragged her arms up, opening them wide.

"Come to bed, Coop, hold me."

"No."

Laney's eyes widened as she stared at him in shock, her arms dropping to rest on the bed. The pain of his rejection was swift and searing, cutting deep into her heart.

"What were you doing in town, Laney?" She rolled over, away from him, but he simply pulled her back around to face him.

"No, Laney, no hiding and no running away. Tell me." She stared up into his determined face, aware he wasn't going to give up until she answered him. She sighed, glaring up at him.

"You are such a pain in the ass." She grimaced. "Literally. You know, you won't always get your way, Cooper."

"But I will tonight, won't I, Laney?"

"I was job-hunting, okay? I was trying to find a job in town."

Cooper frowned. "Why, for God's sake? You've barely begun to settle in, why would you want a job?"

She looked at him in disbelief. "Umm, because I need the money?" She spoke slowly, as if *he* was a little slow.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Laney, I realize this is something we haven't talked about, but there's no need for you to work. I have enough money to easily support us both."

Laney just stared straight up at the ceiling before sighing and turning to look at him.

"But that's your money, Coop. I need to have my own money."

"Actually, it's our money, and why do you think you need your own money?" She grimaced, aware that he wasn't going to like her answer.

"Because you think this isn't going to last, that's it, isn't it, Laney? You think that when this relationship falls apart you'll need money to get away. When the hell are you

going to realize that this is forever, Laney? We're true mates. For heaven's sake, this isn't going to end, and you aren't ever going to leave me. Nor would I ever leave you."

"You say that now." Tears entered her eyes. "But you don't know what will happen in the future. What if you get sick of me? What if something happens to you? Or to our mate bond? You just don't know, Cooper!"

His hands grasped her cheeks firmly. "I know that I will never get sick of you, and I am going to do my damn best to make sure nothing ever happens to me. But if it ever did, Laney, you will be well taken care of, do you understand me? If I die, you get everything I have."

She gaped up at him. "I don't want things. I want you!" Tears ran down her face as he growled softly, leaning down to kiss her gently.

"This is forever, woman. We are forever. And the sooner you learn that, the better. A mate bond does not just break, sweet. It's there forever. Your body knows that it is mine. Your wolf knows that it is mine. You belong to me just as I belong to you. You cannot deny that."

Laney frowned. "I know that, but the bond seems so weak. I mean, sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not."

Cooper frowned as Laney held her breath, waiting for his condemnation, his blame.

"Is that what's worrying you, sweet? There are no set rules for a mating, little one. For some mates it takes longer for the bond to settle and strengthen. We just need to be patient. It will happen."

"So it's not my fault?" she asked in a soft whisper.

"Is that what you think?" He looked at her incredulously before he ran his hand over her hair tenderly. "Sweet, I'm so sorry you were worried about this, had I known I would have spoken with you about it earlier. Of course it's not your fault, it's no one's fault. The bond will strengthen with time, this I promise. I don't want you worrying about this anymore, okay?"

She nodded her agreement, although insecurity still had her doubting the truth of his words.

"Good." Leaning down he kissed her on the forehead. "I will transfer some funds to your account, okay? Then you will have your own money. But I'm also going to get you a card for my account and you *will* use it."

He looked down at her sternly. "I want you to promise me that when you need something, no, scrap that, when you *want* something you will use that card to buy it."

"But —"

"Promise me, Laney. I am not taking no for an answer on this." She stared up into the stubborn set of his jaw, sighing loudly.

"Oh, all right," she said grudgingly as he grinned widely.

"That's a good girl," he praised her. "Now what can I do to reward you, hmm?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess you'll think of something."

"Really?" His gaze roamed her naked body. Five minutes ago she'd thought herself too exhausted to feel anything, but the sizzling promise in his voice had her skin tingling in anticipation. He moved his hand to cup her breast, squeezing slightly.

"Maybe something like this?" he asked, using his thumb to flick her nipple.

"Maybe," she replied.

"Or this?" Dropping his mouth to her nipple, he sucked hard and she groaned, arching up.

"Perhaps," she panted.

"Or maybe this." Suddenly he was kneeling between her spread legs. Pushing her knees toward her chest, he plunged his tongue into her passage. At the same time he flicked her clit with his thumb, his movement firm and sure.

"Yes," she screamed, soaring toward her reward, stars bursting behind her eyelids as she reached heaven. Floating back down to earth, she cried out again as he moved his tongue to her clit, lapping at it firmly, sending her off into a tailspin of pleasure. Her orgasm hit her hard, had her jolting in shock.

But once more he gave her no chance to recover before his delicious assault began all over again. And then again.

It was a reward she wouldn't soon forget.

Chapter Seven

Laney walked tiredly through Cooper's house, her feet dragging as exhaustion pulled her down. She'd spent the afternoon with Jesse's waspish mate and her equally bitchy friends. What had she been thinking when she'd agreed to afternoon tea at Samantha's house? Had she actually thought that they might have grown up a little? Become less bitchy?

No such luck. She'd spent the afternoon ignoring barely disguised barbed insults. There was nothing more tiring, she'd discovered, than having to be polite to a bunch of nasty-minded, prejudiced cows.

Samantha had even found a prodigy. Jayda, one of the younger girls, had spent most of the afternoon glaring at Laney, a sneer on her face. Laney knew she would have to do something about such obvious disrespect. But not today, she was exhausted, she was grumpy and she was missing Cooper something fierce. Climbing out of her clothes, she decided to forgo dinner in favor of sleep and quickly yanked back the sheets.

Screaming aloud, she jumped back, slamming heavily into the wall behind her. She slid slowly down the wall, terror stealing her ability to think, to move. She was paralyzed, lost in her memories, watching in horror as spiders, hundreds of creepy, hideous spiders crawled over her bed.

The past came slamming back, locking her inside that coffin while spiders were poured down the air hole until they crawled over her, tiny little legs creeping over her imprisoned body for hour after terrifying hour.

Her screams were hideous, continuing on and on until she was hoarse. But she couldn't stop, couldn't find her way free.

"Laney! Laney, damn it!"

She didn't feel the arms surrounding her, lifting her, carrying her away. Her mind was back in that dark coffin with tiny feet creeping over her skin, tangling in her hair, burrowing up her nose, in her ears. She was powerless to stop them, her arms trapped by the tight box.

All she could do was scream.

"Laney, come on, kid, snap out of it." The words didn't penetrate her horror. She was lost.

"Bloody hell! Right, then. Honey, if you're not going to snap out of it yourself, then you leave me no choice but to call Cooper."

Cooper, Cooper, the name echoed in her head. There was a reason not to involve Cooper. "No," she croaked out, wondering why her voice was so hoarse. "Don't, please." She looked up pleadingly into Cain's dark eyes. "I-I'm all right."

"He needs to know about this, Laney," Cain objected, but he replaced the phone on its holder and moved back to crouch in front of her. Laney licked her lips nervously, looking around in surprise to find that she was no longer in the bedroom. Cain must have carried her into the living room and placed her on the sofa while she'd been reliving the old nightmare.

"He needs to have his mind on convincing the other Alphas to join the new council, not on me."

Cain frowned. "I'm guessing that you don't know how all those spiders got in your bed?"

Laney shuddered, working hard to keep her mind from drifting back into the nightmare. "No. No, I don't."

"They weren't poisonous, so they weren't put there to harm you, not physically anyway."

"No, not physically," she whispered, trying to clear her voice. He immediately rose and brought her a glass of water. She smiled her thanks before swallowing it down in a few desperate gulps.

"W-what are you doing here?"

"I came over to ask you why someone would tamper with the brakes of your car."

The glass fell from her nerveless fingers, landing with a crash as she gaped up at him.

"What are you talking about?"

He sat on the coffee table in front of her, drawing in a deep breath. "Someone tampered with those brakes, kiddo. The brake line was slit, causing it to leak fluid. Any guesses who would do that?"

Laney shook her head. "N-no, why would anyone want to h-hurt me?"

"What about that?" He nodded toward the bedroom. Again, she shook her head.

"No. I just don't understand." She shivered. Someone had tried to hurt her, to deliberately terrify her. Looking up, she met the serious gaze of the werewolf in front of her.

His appearance would frighten most people—he completely dwarfed her, with hands the size of her head and wide, thick muscle covering his arms and chest. A thin, jagged scar ran from the top of his right ear to end nearly at his mouth, pulling at his wide mouth, giving it a slightly crooked appearance. Laney gulped, wondering how he'd gotten that scar. Just how much did anyone know about this man? Was it a coincidence that he'd been so close when her brakes had failed? Had he really just arrived? Or had he already been here releasing the spiders?

A dark chuckle sounded. "Kiddo, do yourself a favor and never play poker."

"What do you mean?" She shifted back into the sofa, surreptitiously looking around for a weapon.

"I mean your thoughts are written all over your face. I've got no reason to hurt you. I didn't even know spiders would terrify you like that." His eyebrow rose in silent query but she shook her head. She didn't want to share her nightmare, not with him, not with anyone. Laney relaxed slightly. If he wanted to hurt her, then he could have done so at any moment since he'd entered the house.

"What say I get rid of the spiders so you can go to bed?"

Laney shuddered. "I-I think I'll sleep in the spare room. At least until Cooper gets home."

Cain stared at her. "He needs to know about this, Laney."

She nodded. "I'll tell him when he gets back."

"See that you do. Because I know he won't be happy if he has to hear it from me."

Now that was an understatement if ever she'd heard one.

* * * * *

Laney raced for the ringing phone, a towel wrapped around her precariously. She cursed softly as she dripped all over the floor. She would have let the machine pick it up, but it was close to the time that Cooper usually rang so she decided to race for it.

Laney grasped the handle of the phone, aware her heart was racing, not from her short sprint, but from the idea that Cooper might be on the other end. Honestly, she was like a lovesick teenager. It was sickening, even to her. But did that mean was she going to stop? Hell no!

"Hello," she said breathlessly, hoping to hear Coop's sexy drawl in reply. That man made talking on the phone a very, very hot experience. She'd never understood how phone sex actually worked until now.

The sound of deep breathing came through the receiver. Disappointment hit her hard, followed closely by anger. She'd sprinted through the house sopping wet for a damn breather!

"Hello?" Disappointment sharpened her tone, but she held on in case it was just a bad connection.

"Hello, mouse."

Laney swallowed sharply as her stomach revolted, shooting bile into her mouth.

"W-who is this?"

"Is that anyway to speak to your Daddy? I'm coming home for you, mouse."

Laney barely stopped her gasp of shock. It took her a moment to push past the instinctual paralyzing fear and unfreeze her vocal chords.

"My father is dead. I don't know why you think this is funny but don't call here again." Laney hung up the phone sharply, terror streaking through her veins, causing relentless shivers to run across her skin. She sank slowly to the floor, her hands covering her ears as the phone immediately began to ring again.

She stared up at it in fear, much as one might stare at a childhood nightmare come to life. She sat, staring as she clasped her bent legs close to her chest and rocked herself in terror.

* * * * *

"That's weird." Cooper frowned. He folded his cell phone.

"Hmm?" Marcus murmured, his attention on the laptop sitting on his knee. A sudden jolt had him grabbing at the computer and growling good naturedly at Josiah, who was driving the Hummer limo they were traveling in.

"Laney's not answering the house phone."

Marcus looked up at the note of concern in Cooper's voice. "You think something's wrong?"

"She's probably out shopping or something." This came from Josiah.

"Maybe, but she knows I call about this time." Cooper wasn't convinced.

"Can't expect her to sit around waiting for your call," Josiah offered.

"We'll be home shortly, anyway." Marcus tried to reassure him.

"Yeah, I suppose. I just have this feeling."

* * * * *

God, what a coward she was, sitting here, afraid to move, afraid to even leave the house. What did she really think was going to happen? Did she honestly believe that the ghost of her father was haunting her? That a ghost had managed to pick up the phone, dial her number and threaten her? One little phone call was all it had taken and here she was, ready to hide under the covers and shiver and shake until Cooper came home to rescue her.

Which was the last thing he needed. Cooper needed a mate who was strong, who was fearless and capable, not a little sniveling runt who ran to him with all her problems, who was scared of her own shadow. She could see his ideal mate now – tall, confident, fearless and independent.

"Well, you can't have him," she yelled aloud at the imaginary woman, jumping to her feet. The towel slipped to the floor unnoticed as she clenched her fists. "He's mine!" Ridiculously she felt better now, having chased away her imaginary competition.

But if she couldn't give him up to someone more worthy, then she was going to have to become that fearless warrior woman.

Even if it meant having to face her fears head-on.

Ten minutes later, Laney stood in front of the house she lived in as a child. All her old fears came back in a rush, physically rocking her on her feet with their intensity. She moved one step forward, forcing herself to approach the two-story timber house while every cell in her body screamed in protest.

In order to walk inside that house, to face her demons, she was going to have to contain her terror. As a child she'd learned how to suppress her fear, to push it into that box deep inside. Laney fed her fear into that box, feeling it quiver like a washing machine on spin.

She could see the child she had once been, too thin, wide-eyed with long, scruffy blonde hair. The child was afraid, so afraid that Laney longed to hold her, to comfort her, to tell her everything would be all right. But she couldn't. She didn't even believe that herself.

While the little child inside her sat and rocked, afraid and alone, Laney opened the door and stepped inside. Her breath left her in a rush as nothing happened. No one attacked her or yelled at her, there were no ghostly appearances.

Nothing.

Moving slowly through the house, Laney ran her hand over objects, touching things lightly, flinching at the memories each room held. She held that child inside tightly, not allowing her free. If she did, well, she wasn't quite sure how to recapture her.

Laney kept her breathing shallow and quiet, a habit so ingrained she didn't even realize she was doing it. It also helped to keep her nausea under control as she approached the door to the basement. It was a large door made of steel and easily a foot thick.

Trembling, she clasped the door handle while the child whimpered, covering her head. Pushing the door open, she jumped slightly at the creaking noise before shakily reaching for the light switch. It took two tries before she managed to turn it on. Part of her had been hoping the power had been cut off so she would have an excuse not to enter. But now she was compelled to take a step forward. She'd come so far but it still wasn't enough. She had to do this. For Cooper.

Laney took two careful steps, both hands clasped tightly around the rail. She paused a quarter of the way down, leaning heavily on the rail as her legs trembled. She tried to take a breath but found it escaped her, her airways closing in as spots danced in front of her eyes. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. She had to get back upstairs, get outside.

Turning, all she saw was a dark blur before she was pushed heavily, her body hurtling down the stairs into inky darkness.

* * * * *

Laney awoke slowly, disoriented, with the sharp, bitter taste of blood on her tongue. Panicked, she sat up quickly and let out a low moan of pain, her hands clasping her head as it throbbed in protest. Something wet brushed her hand and she drew it back to see blood coating her palm.

God, what had happened? She ached all over, even her damn elbows hurt. Careful to move her head slowly, she stared around her. *Oh no.* She shook violently, causing her aches to intensify. The basement, she was in the basement. She'd fallen down the steps.

A whimper escaped her lips and she tried to rise. The need to flee sent adrenaline pumping through her veins, enabling her to ignore her aches and bruises for the time being. But she couldn't quite manage to get to her feet. Instead she crawled her way to the stairs and, using the rail, dragged herself up until she was standing. For some reason one of her ankles wouldn't work properly and she had to hop up the stairs, using the rail for balance.

By the time she reached the top she was sweating, both with exhaustion and panic. The panic overrode all else, the sheer need to escape driving her forward. Tears of frustration and confusion coursed down her cheeks as the door refused to budge. She pushed and pulled, banging, yelling, screaming aloud for help until she was hoarse.

It was hopeless, though. The door wouldn't budge and no one would hear her from down here. Falling to the small landing, her back against the door, Laney curled up into a ball and rocked, weeping hysterically.

She was trapped down here with her nightmares, and this time no one could help her escape.

* * * * *

Cooper walked through the house. Laney's scent lingered in each room, reassuring him that she'd been here recently. But he found no clue as to her whereabouts now.

"She's not answering her cell phone." Marcus' voice was tense as he strode into the room.

"I'm worried," Cooper admitted. "My car is here, which means she's on the estate. But I still have a bad feeling." He reached for her through their mate bond but it was silent. "Where the hell is Justin?"

Both men looked over as Justin raced through the door. As third-in-command, he'd been in charge of the pack while Cooper and the other enforcers had been away.

"Sorry, I was across the other side of the estate. What's going on? Why are you home early?" Tall and thin, he lacked some of the muscle of the other wolves but made up for it in sheer cunning and speed.

"Have you seen Laney?" Cooper asked, having to look up slightly into the younger man's eyes.

Justin shook his head. "Nope, haven't seen her all day. Wait while I check in with those on patrol." While he checked in, Marcus and Cooper waited impatiently.

"Is there anyone she would visit?" Cooper asked.

"In the pack? No. Zachary never let her have relationships with others, and any time she managed to form a friendship he found some way to ruin it." Marcus' voice

was bitter, angry, and rage surged through Cooper once again at the pain of his mate's childhood.

"Rex said he saw her earlier today, but no one's seen her since. Think something's happened?" Justin looked over at them in concern.

"Maybe, maybe I'm just overreacting. But I'll feel better if we find her."

"So let's track her," Marcus said. Cooper nodded, reaching to pull off his shirt for the shift.

"Let me," Marcus started to strip. "You'll want to save your strength for when we find Laney." Cooper agreed, he'd want plenty of energy to either yell at her for worrying him or to deal with whatever had caused her disappear. Changing between wolf and human form was tiring. Most of the pack would have to spend a good amount of time in wolf form before changing back, and even though both Cooper and Marcus were strong enough to switch easily between the two forms, it still sapped at their strength to do so.

Twenty minutes later, Cooper stood in front of Zachary's house, Marcus standing beside him in wolf form. He gazed up at Cooper in question, but Cooper just shook his head, motioning for Marcus to stay put as he walked toward the house.

"Laney?" he called out, entering the hall. Even before he'd learned what had been done to her here, this house had repulsed him. It stank of fear, horror and cruelty, and that had been one of the main reasons he'd refused to live in it. That, and it was a horrid monstrosity of a house, far too "lord of the manor" for him. He'd only been in the house twice before and both times he'd never moved beyond the living room.

"Laney? You in here, sweet?" He took a deep sniff. In human form his ability to use scent to track wasn't as well developed, but she'd been here recently enough for him to follow her path.

Wandering through the house, he followed the path she'd taken while urgency rode at him, telling him to find her now. Finally, he came to the huge steel door that obviously led to the basement.

Furious that she'd come here by herself after promising him she wouldn't, he took a deep breath to calm himself. He didn't know what sort of state he would find her in, but the last thing she probably needed was him riding her ass. Or spanking it.

He went to twist the handle then realized the deadbolt at the top of the door had been pulled across. Frowning, Cooper stood back for a moment. He was certain that her scent led through this door, yet the deadbolt was locked on the outside, which could only mean one thing.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, suddenly terrified. Throwing back the bolt, he quickly opened the door and raced down the stairs, yelling her name.

"Laney, damn it, where are you?" He frantically scanned the dark basement. Its single light bulb barely lit the center of the room, leaving the outer areas in dark shadow.

"Laney?" He searched around, unable to see her, but her scent was ripe in the room. Tinged with fear and terror, her scent drove him crazy, causing his protective instincts to go into overdrive.

A soft whimper caught his ears and he turned toward the sound. It came again, low and scared. Dropping to his knees, he peered under the bed that stood against one wall. Two familiar brown eyes stared back at him.

He sat back on his heels in relief. She was okay, she was okay. Sure, she was terrified, so afraid that she was hiding in wolf form. But she was alive, anything else he could deal with. Quickly pulling out his cell, he rang Jay and directed him to come wait outside with Marcus, adding to their protection while he figured how the hell to get Laney out from her hiding place.

"Sweet, you sure did scare me. What are you doing down here by yourself, baby? I've gotta say that I'm mad at you, really mad that you would come here by yourself. You want to come out and explain that to me?" He paused, taking a breath, but she didn't move.

"I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. I'm thinking you must have a good explanation for disobeying me, but the longer you take to tell me, the more upset I'm going to get." Cooper heard her stir, but she still didn't come out. He could easily drag her out but he didn't want to use force, too much force had been used on her in her short life.

He dropped his voice to a low croon. "I can't imagine what you've gone through, what happened in this room, and I'm never going to be able to unless you talk to me. You need to talk to me, Laney. You're not alone anymore. I can help. I want to help, but I can only do that if you talk to me, little one. I don't know what you're thinking. Do you think I can't take it? That I can't deal with what happened to you?"

"Do you not trust me with your secrets? I just don't know. I don't know what I can do to help you if you won't let me in." He sighed, the silence of the room speaking for itself, and then he rose, moving toward a large metal hook that was securely attached to the wall.

"He used to chain me to that." A soft voice spoke behind him and he turned to find her sitting naked on the ground beside the bed, her knees drawn to her chest, her eyes locked on the hook.

"And then what, baby?" He spoke quietly, gently.

She shrugged. "Sometimes he'd just leave me there, standing, waiting with my arms aching, the need to go to the bathroom tormenting me, my stomach rumbling with hunger."

"And other times?"

"Other times he'd chain me there and beat me with a cane, or his belt, or his hand. His hand was the worst. It was more personal when he hit me, slapped me." Her voice was surprisingly calm, scarily so, as though she was reciting something that happened to someone else.

"And this?" He moved to a small, coffinlike container that rested against the wall to his right. He didn't touch it, but he could see the silver joining, and could only imagine the pain one would suffer inside it. He turned to see her shivering, trembling from what looked to be a combination of shock and sheer, blinding terror.

"That's the container I was telling you about. I used to be so afraid I'd run out of air. Sometimes he'd move it, pretend he was going to take me away in it, b-bury me alive." Her voice started to crack, a lone tear traveling down her cheek.

"And the bed?" She looked up at him in surprise and he knew he had to tighten the lid on his rage.

"I know he didn't rape you, but..."

She shook her head.

"No, he never did anything to me sexually, he wasn't ever interested in me like that—this was his playroom. He'd bring women down here and play with them. He used to have whips set out on that wall." He looked over to where she nodded at the bare wall to his left. He could see small hooks where they must have hung.

"I don't know where they went." She looked around as though they would suddenly reappear to torment and hurt her.

"It doesn't matter, baby, this place can't hurt you anymore. Not if you don't let it."

"I was so terrified, so scared that I would come down here and he'd be here, waiting for me. I got partway down the stairs and I just couldn't move any farther, I was so afraid. But then I must have tripped, or I don't know, it felt as if something pushed me and I fell. D-do you think *he* pushed me?" She looked up at him, tears rolling down her pale face.

"Zachary is dead, sweet. I promise you, he's dead, and he cannot hurt you anymore." He walked toward her and, pulling her up, sat on the bed with her clasped tightly in his arms.

"You can't let him win, baby. You have every right to hate this place, to be afraid, but you don't have to do it alone. You don't have to deal with this all alone." Placing his fingers under her chin, he tilted her face up.

"Will you let me help, sweet? Together, we can fight him. Together, we can beat anything." He watched her eyes, saw the fear, the indecision. Then she nodded her agreement and he smiled at her, leaning down to kiss her lightly.

"Good girl." He pushed the hair away from her face, rocking her slowly as she shook and cried. It seemed as though the emotional overload of the last few hours had finally hit her and she slowly collapsed, safe in his arms.

Cooper just held her until the storm of tears passed. If he could, he would take her pain and make it his own. But he couldn't. All he could do was be here for her, help her through this as best he could. He set her gently on the bed, smiling softly at her as she immediately reached for him.

"I just thought you might like to put on your clothes, sweet. I mean, I like you this way, don't get me wrong, but your brothers are outside and I don't want them thinking we kept them waiting while we were having a little party for two." He deliberately kept his voice light, teasing, as he dressed her. A frown creased his brow as he took note of the bruises on her body, running his hand over them lightly.

"You got these when you fell down the steps?"

She nodded, trying to cover herself quickly.

"Looks as if you fell pretty hard, sweet." His frown intensified, thinking of the bolt across the door. But when he saw her shiver he pushed his thoughts aside for the moment, relaxing his face once again into an expression of calm.

"I-I couldn't get back out, the door wouldn't open. I fell apart and the wolf took over. It was safer, she wasn't so scared. She's not a coward like me."

Shame colored her voice, and he made sure his voice was very firm when he spoke.

"A coward is someone who is too afraid to face their fears. You, my sweet, have far too much courage for my liking. I'd prefer it if you were a bit more afraid. At least then you'd stay where I put you," he said wryly before pulling her up onto her feet.

"Stay where you put— Ahhh!" A squeal of pain interrupted her rampage as she placed weight on her left ankle.

"What? What is it?" Cooper grabbed her, holding her steady as she swayed.

"My ankle," she said between pants of pain. "I hurt my ankle when I fell."

Cooper lifted her by the waist, setting her back on the bed before he grabbed her foot.

"Shit! How did I miss this?"

"What?"

"It looks like a sprain, it's swollen. We'll fix it up when we get home. Come on, sweet, let's get you home." He swung her up in his arms gently so as not to bump her bruises further.

Chapter Eight

Laney let out a sigh of relief as Cooper laid her down on the couch in his living room. She now knew what the expression “roller coaster of emotions” meant. She’d just ridden the double dipper twice and had a nauseated stomach as proof. Leaning back, she closed her eyes, letting herself fall into that pleasantly dreamy place between consciousness and unconsciousness. When her leg was raised and something cold applied, she simply lay there, too tired even to open her eyes.

“Don’t go to sleep, sweet.” Cooper shook her softly and she grumbled impatiently. “I want Mace to check you before you sleep, Laney. You could have a concussion.”

“I’m fine,” she mumbled sleepily, and she was now, because Cooper was here, and she knew he would never let anyone get close enough to hurt her. “Don’t need no doctor prodding at me.” She snuggled down deeper only to have him pull her back up. Opening her eyes, Laney glared up at him grumpily, but the glare she received in return trumped hers, telling her he wasn’t giving in on this.

“I didn’t ask if you wanted him prodding at you, sweet. He *will* prod at you, and you *will* do as he says. Understood?” His voice was calm but she could hear the steel underneath. Laney sighed in exaggerated impatience.

“Fine. But it’s up to you to keep me awake.”

“Oh, I’ll keep you awake all right.” He folded his arms, staring down at her sternly.

“You want to explain to me just what you were doing, going to that house by yourself when I expressly forbid you to do so?”

Gone was the concerned lover, the soul mate who’d made her promise to let him fight her battles with her. Here in front of her was the protector, the enraged warrior who’d feared for his mate’s life.

“Forbid me? You forbade me to go? Who the hell gave you the right to forbid me to do anything?” Her arms folded as well.

“Umm, guys, you want us to leave?” Jay and Marcus stood in the doorway. Jay looked concerned while Marcus had a faint smirk upon his face. Cooper waved them out and they turned and left the room quickly.

“I am your mate and your Alpha. You will do as I say, Delaney.”

Suddenly all the fear, the terror she’d experienced morphed into a blinding, unreasonable rage. “I don’t care if you’re king of the fucking world! I’ll do what I want.”

“You will not!” he roared, making her sit back in shock. “And don’t bother to look at me like that. You damn well know I’m not going to hit you. How dare you put yourself in that situation, Laney? No one knew where you were. If I hadn’t come home

early, you'd still be there. Would you like that, Laney? To still be sitting there terrified and alone?"

"No." Her voice was a mere whisper of sound. She was stunned by his harsh words.

Cooper blew out a breath, running his hands through his hair. "I'm not saying these things to be cruel, little one." He dropped his voice a few decibels, but it remained firm and stern. "But I want, no, I need you to be safe, Laney. You are everything to me. If anything happened to you my life would be null and void. I cannot stand by and let someone or something hurt you, even if that someone is you."

Laney's anger deflated as he sat beside her, gently wiping away her tears.

"When I give you an order, Laney, it's not a power trip, or because I want to exert my control over you, it's because I want to keep you safe. I want you well and happy, and I need you to promise that you won't disobey me again."

"I'm used to taking care of myself," she said stubbornly.

"But it's not just you anymore, sweet. There are two of us now."

"So does that mean I get to boss you around?" She raised her chin as he quirked a grin down at her.

"Don't be getting any ideas, sweet. There can only be one pilot in this relationship. You can take over once in a while but I'm in charge." She crinkled her nose at him.

"You are such an arrogant wolf."

"And you love me for it."

* * * * *

The doctor had come and gone, and Laney found herself lying peacefully on the sofa, her foot resting on a pillow, a blanket laid over her body. As Cooper walked out with the doctor, Marcus and Jay walked in.

"Hey," she said softly.

"Hey yourself, squirt." Jay walked over and kissed her gently on the forehead while Marcus sat on the sofa across from her, his face stern.

"Sorry if I worried you." She directed her comment to Marcus.

He sighed, rubbing his hand over his shaved head. "Why would you go there by yourself, baby girl? Any one of us would have gone with you."

"I did it for Cooper."

"For me?" came the incredulous query and she looked over to find Cooper leaning against the doorframe, a deep frown on his face as he stared down at her sternly.

"Why the hell would you go there for me?" he growled.

She flinched slightly. "I was so sick of feeling like a coward, scared of that place, scared of my memories, scared of my own shadows. I want to be strong, unafraid, a proper mate to you. And after I got the phone call I decided to —"

"Wait." Cooper held up a hand. "Back up. What phone call?"

Laney relayed the phone call she'd received before she'd taken a trip into memory hell.

"So someone claiming to be your father rings here, but instead of ringing me or your brothers or even Justin, you decide to wander off by yourself to an abandoned house where you ended up falling down the stairs and being locked in the basement, the place where your father tortured you for years."

"She was pushed."

Cooper nodded while Laney glanced at Marcus in shock.

"Pushed? But who would push me?" She shivered slightly. Cooper stalked toward her. He gently lifted her before sitting with her on his lap, his hand rubbing soothing circles on her back.

"I don't know, sweet, but I intend to find out."

"Did you recognize the voice, squirt? Did you sense anything before you fell?"

Laney thought fiercely before shaking her head. "I don't think so. I thought I'd fallen. And the voice on the phone, well, it sounded like Zachary. But that's impossible, right?" She looked up at Cooper for reassurance.

"He's dead, sweet," he comforted her, rocking her gently. "But someone definitely wants you to think otherwise."

"I want a tap on the phone. Get Cain over to Zachary's place and see if he can find evidence that anyone was there. I didn't smell anyone, but I was focused on finding Laney. Laney will need to have a bodyguard. When she's not with me I want someone we can trust with her."

"Hey!" she protested.

"Be quiet, Laney. I'm too mad to placate you at the moment, so you'll just have to put up and shut up." Her mouth snapped shut, but she glared at him silently.

"There's one more thing." Marcus spoke up as he stood, hands resting on hips as he glared down at her. "Delaney Jean, I'm gonna tell you this once, and I never want to have to tell you again. You are not weak, nor are you a coward. You may be small, but you've never been powerless. One of the reasons Zachary hated you was because you were so strong. *He* could see it, *we* could see it, the whole damn *pack* could see it—so how you missed it I don't know. You may have been the runt, but Zachary and certain members of the pack were worried that one day you'd come fully into your power and overpower them all."

"But I'm female and small," she protested, looking up at Marcus in shock.

Marcus shook his head, making the earrings in his right ear glint as they reflected off the light. "Doesn't matter. Sure you're small, but you've got an aura of power, and it's only going to get stronger. Female werewolves come into their power later. You're just starting to come into yours. Laney, we would never have sent you away by yourself if you weren't strong. I know of few werewolves who could have survived as long as

you did alone. You're one of the strongest wolves I know. You're the only one who can't see it." He kissed her cheek and then left, Jay close on his heels as Laney stared after them in shock.

"Time you were in bed." Cooper stood with her held tightly in his arms and carried her down to the bedroom.

"Marcus never lies," she said quietly as she let Cooper strip her and place her under the covers. "So that means he believes I'm strong, he doesn't think I'm weak, a coward."

"No one thinks that but you, sweet. Now go to sleep."

"I don't want a bodyguard," she murmured mutinously. How the hell did he expect her to sleep? She wasn't tired at all.

"And I don't want you getting hurt again. I'm Alpha. I win."

"Huh, pulling the Alpha card. That won't work all the time, you know," she replied sleepily, her eyelids closing.

"Well, it does this time." He tucked her in gently, his actions in direct contrast to the cold fury she heard in his voice.

"Did you check for spiders?" she asked tiredly.

"Spiders?" he queried softly, waiting for her to fall asleep.

"Spiders in the bed, someone put spiders in my bed." She fell asleep, completely missing the growing look of fury on her mate's face.

If she'd seen it, she may not have slept quite so deeply.

* * * * *

The smell of frying bacon greeted her as she left the bathroom, a growling stomach prompting her to move quickly into the bright kitchen. She was amazed that it was already midday. But then again she hadn't been sleeping much lately, and yesterday had taken a lot out of her.

"Morning," she said, smiling brightly to hide her worry about the reception she might get from her mate. Cooper turned from the stove, his gaze roaming over her quickly.

"You shouldn't be standing on that ankle," he said gruffly, crossing his arms.

"It's okay, hardly swollen, see?" She walked forward a few steps, her limp barely visible. *Yay for fast healing!*

It must have been enough to convince him, because he nodded, indicating she should take a seat at the counter.

Laney sat down slowly, chewing her lower lip. "You're mad at me."

"You've been keeping secrets from me, Laney." His voice was more wolf than man, a growl of masculine temper. "That stops now. You're going to sit down, you're going to eat some food and you're going to tell me what the hell else I need to know. Got it?"

Laney sat without argument and spent the next thirty minutes telling her mate everything that had happened over the last few days. When she'd finished she kept her face averted, pretending she didn't notice the muscle tic he'd developed by his mouth.

"Anything else?" he asked, his voice very calm and controlled. It was worse than if he'd yelled.

"No, that's all. What a week, huh?" she replied in a falsely cheerful voice before standing and taking the dirty dishes to the sink, careful to keep her gaze from his.

"That's all? Someone torments you with spiders, leaves crank calls, pushes you down a flight of stairs and locks you in the basement where you were tortured as a child, and all you can say is 'what a week'?"

Cooper ended his tirade on a roar. As Laney watched him warily, he paced the kitchen before coming to a stop in front of her.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me any of this, Laney? I am your mate. I have the right to know when your life is in danger."

"Well, 'in danger' might be a stretch." She jumped slightly as his hands flew above his head, relaxing again as he lowered them once more.

"A stretch', she tells me calmly as if *I'm* overreacting! She's pushed down a flight of stairs, and *I'm* overreacting!"

"Umm, who are you talking to?" she asked, frowning.

"The Universe, God, anyone who will listen, because you sure as hell don't. Oh no, not my mate, she goes on her merry way, doing whatever the hell she likes, not even thinking about the consequences of her actions!"

A blank mask came over her face as he continued to shout. She stood silently, not moving a muscle as he paced up and down the kitchen yelling his displeasure.

"And you know what the worst thing is? Do you, Laney?"

She shook her head.

"With all that has happened, the worse thing is that even now you're scared of me! I thought by now I would have had your trust. I thought you'd know that I would never hurt you. That I would rather die than lay a hand on you."

"I-I do know that," Laney protested. "I wouldn't be with you if I thought you would hurt me."

"Then what's with the blank look, the pale face? What's with the invisible act?"

"Invisible act?"

"Yeah, I start yelling and you pretend you're not here. You freeze up, like the smallest motion or comment from you is going to end in me hitting you."

"W-what do you w-want me to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. Yell back. Tell me to stop being such a bossy asshole. Something! Anything!"

"But I thought you wanted me to listen to you." His words hurt. Could she never do anything right?

"That's just it. You aren't listening to me, sweet. You can't open up to me, and until you can, I just don't see how this can work."

His words were silver swords slashing deep into her heart, creating wounds she wasn't sure could be healed. As he turned and strode quickly out of the room, the indescribable agony threw her into a well of deep despair. A long, silent scream echoed through her body as she spiraled down into a never-ending vortex of pain. He was sick of her. It had happened like she'd thought. He'd gotten sick of her, and now he would try to get rid of her.

Just like her father.

Just like her brothers.

The anger caught her by surprise. It cut clean through the despair, a ferocious flame of fury so intense she was surprised her skin didn't blister and scorch. How dare he give up on her? He'd promised to stick by her no matter what. And she was going to hold him to that promise.

Laney gathered her righteous anger up like an eighteenth-century woman gathering up her skirt, and she stormed into Cooper's study.

Slamming open the door, she ignored his shocked look as she marched up to stick her face into his. Well, as much as she could when she was more than a foot shorter than he was.

"You promised," she accused, so mad she could barely spit out the words.

"I promised what?" He stared down at her, a look of confusion on his face.

"You promised that you wouldn't get tired of me. You promised to never leave me."

He sighed, running a hand through his thick, dark hair. "Laney —"

"Don't Laney me, mister!" she said, pointing a finger in his chest. "See, I knew this would happen. I knew that you'd get sick of me. Just like everyone else. Except you promised that you wouldn't and I'm going to hold you to that! So what if I don't yell back? So what if I hide behind a mask? You're my mate and you're stuck with me!"

"Laney."

"Yeah?" she replied grumpily.

"You're yelling."

"So?"

"So, sweet, you just yelled at me."

She frowned. "I've yelled at you before."

"Yes, but before you've always feared my retaliation, this time you're not afraid, you're not freezing up. You're fighting for me, for us, without being afraid of how I

would react!" He swept her up into his arms with a grin as she realized that she'd just well and truly lost her temper without once worrying about him hurting her.

A slow smile blossomed across her face. "So I did. Well?" She wrestled her way out of his hold and stood back, her hands on her hips.

"Well what?" he asked.

"Aren't you going to apologize for going back on your word?"

"Sweet, I never went back on my word. I could never get sick of you." He leaned down for a kiss, looking shocked as she stepped back.

"You skunk! You did that on purpose."

She glared up at him, her suspicions confirmed by his smug grin. She frowned. "You know that this doesn't suddenly solve everything. I mean, I didn't freeze or flinch this time but next time I might. It's not that I don't trust you, or that I think you'll hit me. I wouldn't stay with you if I really believed that. It's instinctual. I...I can't help it." She worried at her lower lip as she stared up at him. He smiled slightly, running his hand over her abused lip before cupping her cheek with his palm.

"I know, sweet, I'm demanding and impatient, aren't I? It's not really the flinching that bothers me." He grinned at her raised eyebrows. "Well, all right, it bothers me, but the thing that concerns me most is that you don't trust me enough to let me protect you. That you won't follow what I say when it counts and that you'll end up hurt or worse. That makes me afraid, and I don't like being afraid."

Tears filled her eyes as she realized just how much he loved her, because she knew that there was very little her strong mate feared.

"I trust you. I really do. I will try to do what you ask of me, to open up, to let you protect me." She patted his cheek. "But as someone once told me, actions mean more than words, so how about I show you how much I trust you?" She took a deep breath.

"I know that you've been holding back from me, holding in a part of who you are because you didn't want to scare me. Don't think I can't tell that you're holding back in the bedroom, Cooper."

"The bedroom?"

Her chin rose bravely. "That's right, in the bedroom. You're holding back and I want it to stop."

"Oh, you do, do you?" he murmured softly, reaching down to clasp her waist, lifting her off the floor so her feet dangled in the air, her face now even with his.

"Yes, I do." She spoke firmly, something inside her calming with the knowledge of her trust in him. "I love you, Cooper, and I trust you. You would never hurt me physically. Please."

He set her down on her feet before moving to lock the door.

"Strip." The order was short, sharp, and she jolted in shock.

"W-what?" she asked hesitantly, but he just folded his arms, looking at her sternly.

"Strip. Now."

This time she moved hastily to obey him, stripping off her t-shirt and trousers but leaving on her bra and panties.

"All of it," he barked out, heat from his eyes blasting her.

"Here?" She looked around in trepidation.

"Sweet, there's one thing you need to learn. You don't want me to hold back? Good. But that means that in the bedroom I'm in charge. Now strip."

She didn't waste time pointing out the obvious—that they weren't in the bedroom. She wasn't that literal. Instead she hastily stripped off her bra and panties, feeling a tingling in her pussy, his harsh commands heating her blood, building the anticipation.

But as he moved around her in a large circle without a word, she started to wonder if there was something wrong.

"Coop?" she asked hesitantly.

"You know, you are so beautiful. I'm shocked each time I realize you're mine, all mine." He moved to sit in the large padded seat behind his desk.

"Come here." As soon as she was in reach of those long, supple arms he had her clasped around the waist, swinging her until she sat on the desk in front of him.

"Spread your legs," he commanded softly, and she did, feeling her cheeks blush as he stared at her naked folds.

"Such a pretty, pretty pussy. So plump and moist. I bet you're already wet for me, aren't you, baby? Did my commands turn you on?" He rubbed his hands up and down her thighs and she leaned back with a sigh. A sharp slap to her pussy had her sitting back up, her eyes wide open in shock.

"I asked you a question." His voice held a dark warning and she shivered in reaction but kept her mouth closed.

"Are you wet for me, Laney?"

"Can't you tell?" she sassied him, taking a chance and pushing him.

Slowly, he leaned back against his chair, his finger tapping against his chin.

"Are you being deliberately defiant, Laney?" His deep voice was thoughtful, strong, and a soft shiver danced over her skin. Not fear, but desire.

"So what if I am?" she challenged.

"Well, you might want to rethink that, sweet, seeing as how you're already owed some punishment. Adding to it may not be your wisest move."

She swallowed the slight tingle of fear at the word punishment—either she trusted him or she didn't. Laney forced herself to relax, widening her eyes innocently as she leaned forward to play with his nipples through his t-shirt. But then he grabbed her hands, stopping her.

"What punishment? What did I do?" she asked as she fought unsuccessfully to release her hands.

"What did you do? What did you do?" His voice rose until he was yelling.

"You didn't tell me someone was tormenting you. You didn't allow me to protect you. Then you went off by yourself, allowing someone to hurt you!"

"I'm sorry, Cooper," she said softly. But he shook his head, almost remorseful.

"Sorry doesn't cut it, sweet. I'm mad at you, really mad, and you've just given me the green light to ensure that you never put yourself at risk so foolishly again. But I need you to be sure, Laney, really sure that you do trust me. Do you trust me, Laney?" He looked at her, his eyes so serious that she smiled softly.

Didn't he know? "With my life."

"Then come here." He patted his lap lightly. She jumped off the desk and went to sit on his lap, but he shook his head. Laney frowned at him, puzzled.

"On your stomach."

"Why?" She peered down at him suspiciously.

"I thought you trusted me."

"I do."

"Then do as I tell you." His voice was firm, unbending.

She lay down on his lap, feeling his jeans dig into her stomach. Her hands came down to rest on the ground, steadying her.

"Cooper." She began to voice her second thoughts when his hand caressed her ass softly, gently, his thumb moving in to rub lightly at the rosette of her ass. He moved his fingers to rub lightly on her folds, swirling in the rich liquid he found there. She opened her legs, allowing him greater access to her pussy.

Just as her orgasm began to build, Cooper pulled his hand away and a sharp slap landed on her right buttock.

"Hey!" she screamed out, trying to rise, but a hand against her lower back held her down, his other hand massaging the abused cheek.

"Shh, sweet."

Again and again slaps rained down on her ass and, although they stung, the hurt quickly morphed into a blinding pleasure. Every few slaps he stopped to massage her bottom, drawing out the pleasure until she felt herself leaning in to each spank, anticipating where it would fall.

"You like this, don't you, sweet? I can feel you dripping onto my leg. Tell me, tell me how it feels."

She whimpered as two fingers entered her pussy, pumping in and out gently.

"Please, Cooper," she begged, too far gone to care. Here in his arms there were no inhibitions, there were no boundaries, no sense of right or wrong. There was just him.

"Tell me." His words were stern and enforced with another heavy spank before his fingers returned to her pussy, thrusting into her sharply.

"It feels so good, the pain and pleasure, they mix together into the most incredible, heady feeling."

"Do you need to come?" he asked, a third finger entering her tight pussy.

"Y-yes please, let me come, Cooper."

"No." He pulled his hand back out to rain spank after spank on her bottom while she begged him to let her come.

"Promise me that you will never keep anything from me again."

"W-what?" she cried out.

"Promise me that you will never keep anything from me again. Promise me that you will never put yourself in danger again. Promise me, Laney, and I will let you come."

"That's not fair," she cried out, so lost in her pleasure that she couldn't think, could barely breathe for want of him.

"No, what's not fair is that you kept this from me. What's not fair is that you didn't trust me to protect you, to look out for you. I want your promise, or you don't come."

"I can make myself come!" But she didn't want to. She wanted him.

He chuckled darkly. "Oh, I don't think so, sweet, you only come when I give you permission."

"Says who?" she demanded, crying out as his fingers in her pussy twisted, sending pulses of pleasure through her.

"Says me. I'm in charge. You disobey, you get punished."

"Maybe I like your punishments," she cried out, almost sobbing with her need.

"Oh, sweet, if you think this is all there is, you've got another think coming. I can do this all day, take you up and then leave you hanging. Your skin will be so sensitive, your clit so full and pulsing that you'll do anything to come, but I won't let you. Is that what you want, sweet?"

"No," she wailed. "You are such a bastard!" she sobbed as his thumb lightly flicked her clit, not enough to make her come, but enough to torture her erotically.

"Okay, okay, I promise."

"What do you promise? I want to hear the words."

Dear Lord, he was asking her to think? "I promise never to keep anything from you," she screamed.

"And?"

"And to never put myself in danger."

"Good girl." His fingers left her pussy and then he flipped her up and over until she sat on the edge of the desk. He chuckled softly as she winced. Laney then found herself on her back, her legs split wide. She scrambled for something to hold on to, to cling to as the maelstrom of furious pleasure threatened to tear her apart.

A cry escaped as his mouth descended on her clit while two fingers entered her passage again. They pumped quickly while his tongue played with her clit. Sucking, licking, swirling, he brought her to orgasm until all she could see were swirling shades of color and light, until she swore her heart stopped.

Laney descended to hear someone wailing aloud, only to realize that someone was her. Embarrassed, she slammed her hand over her mouth, blushing when she heard Cooper chuckle.

"Ass," she muttered.

"Hmmm, yours is rather delightfully red, my sweet," he crooned.

"Oh, shut up and strip," she ordered. Sitting up, she quickly leaned on one hip to take her weight off her stinging butt.

He just raised one eyebrow at her. "Oh no, do you need a little reminder, sweet?"

"A reminder of what?" she asked, wondering why the hell he wanted to talk when they could be doing other things.

"A reminder of who is in charge." Reaching over, he tweaked a nipple sharply and she drew in a deep breath before narrowing her eyes at him.

"In the bedroom," she clarified suspiciously as he grinned, shrugging unrepentantly.

"I'm a forceful man, you know that, sweet. I've been waiting for your trust and now that I have it I no longer have to hold back, do I?" He stood up and dragged her mouth up for a kiss, a kiss so hard, so compelling that she forgot about her sore butt, sitting back down on it sharply before hissing in pain. He chuckled, lifting her off the desk to stand in front of him.

"Strip me, sweet," he ordered softly, and she moved quickly to obey.

"You know, just because I might like orders in the bedroom, doesn't mean I'm going to take them all the time."

"Might' sweet?" He laughed softly as she crinkled her nose at him. She bared his wide chest, taking her time to bite each nipple softly, reveling in the sharp hiss of pain-pleasure he made.

Impatient, she yanked on his jeans and boxers, pulling them off before she grabbed his cock, moving her hands up and down the warm, thick shaft with a hungry sensuality. She whimpered a protest as he grabbed her hands, pulling them away.

"Too fast, I'd say." His voice was strangled as he moved to sit back on his chair.

"Come here." He crooked a finger at her but she shook her head.

"No." His eyes darkened at her small defiance and a growl escaped him. She bit her lip to hide a grin. Poor baby, he really didn't like being told no. Especially when his cock was hard and throbbing, as she knew it was.

"Delaney." Each syllable was drawn out on a deep growl, but she just shook her head again.

"Not until you understand that I won't be following your orders blindly outside of the bedroom."

"I am your Alpha." His voice was dark, commanding, and she almost dropped to her knees in supplication. But he was her mate first, and she was strong—stronger than she'd ever realized.

"Yes, but you are my mate as well. I won't be a blind little follower, Cooper, I just won't."

His eyes narrowed on her dangerously, and she almost caved in the face of his intense will. She knew he wasn't used to defiance, just as she knew he wasn't going to simply let this go, not when it came to his protection of her.

"It is my job to protect you. You will do as I say when it comes to your safety."

She had to move carefully, he was so protective, so dominant, and she didn't want to spend the rest of their lives fighting him on everything.

"It's *our* job to protect *both* of us." She held up a hand before he could protest. "I don't want you to not protect me, Cooper. I love that you look after me so well, you make me feel so safe. But I won't follow you blindly, Coop. I reserve the right to argue, to discuss, to hear your reasons. I don't want to be weak, Cooper."

"You're not weak," he growled. His hands were clasped tightly around the arms of the chair, *probably to stop himself from throttling me*, she thought with a grin.

"You think this is funny?"

"No, Coop. Well, just a little. After all, you're the one who's been telling me how strong I am, and now that I've begun to believe you, you're growling about it." She smiled at him as he snorted.

"In other words, I've created this monster so now I have to live with it?"

"Hey, who you calling a monster?" Her hands went to her hips. Another growl rumbled through his chest, but she figured that this one had more to do with arousal than temper.

"Come here and suck my cock, woman, before I explode."

Grinning, Laney knelt on the floor between his outstretched legs, watching his throbbing cock hungrily. She used one hand to grasp the base firmly while she moved her other hand to cup his balls lightly. Using her tongue, she licked the small drop of creamy precum that decorated the tip. Inserting her tongue into the small slit, she delicately licked, delighting in his moan of approval. Sucking just the head of his cock into her mouth, she heard him groan in reaction.

"Stop playing around, sweet, and suck me." He lightly tapped her cheek and she pulled back to look up at him.

"But I like playing," she pouted.

"Play later. I want you to suck me off. Now." He used his hands to direct her mouth back to the tip of his cock.

"Open up and take me, sweet." One hand clasped her chin while the other guided his cock into her open mouth. In and out he pumped gently, softly, before she took over, sucking him in deep. She slowly slid her mouth over him, gliding down the thick shaft, taking as much of him inside her as she could.

"That's it, sweet," he groaned as she took his cock deep and then swallowed. "Do that again, oh hell, that feels good." She sucked him in harder, faster, reveling in the sound of his panting, his groans as he started to lose control.

"Look at me, sweet, open your eyes and look at what you do to me." She raised her eyes, humming in enjoyment as she saw the look of intense rapture on his face. Suddenly he thrust forward, his back arching as he threw his head back. A deep, throaty roar left his mouth as his cum pulsed its way down her throat, warm and thick.

When he was spent, she took great satisfaction from licking him clean while he ran his hand through her hair.

"Damn, sweet, you trying to kill me here?"

Laney just smiled, running her hands up his thighs, then up his hard stomach to play lightly with the hair on his chest.

"At least you'll die happy."

"I love you," he said quietly, his gaze warm and soft.

"Do you now?" She grinned as he arched an eyebrow. "I'll remind you of that when we have a disagreement."

"I don't need reminding," he replied arrogantly. "No matter what, you will remember that I love you. No disagreement will ever change that. No matter how much I yell or get angry, I will never hurt you or stop loving you. Understood?"

"Jeez, you really are a bossy ass." She looked up at him in mock anger. "But luckily I love you, so I'll forgive you. Always."

Chapter Nine

"I don't need a babysitter, Cooper!" Oh, how soon he was testing the limits of her patience with his bossiness. If she'd known giving him her trust was going to turn him into even more of an overprotective, overbearing bully, she might have withheld it.

Yeah, right, who was she kidding? She couldn't have held it back, no matter how much of a jerk he became.

"Tough, you're getting one." He didn't even bother to look at her as he laid down the law, his gaze remaining on his laptop.

"I'm only going to be on the estate. I'll be among our pack the whole time. How the hell can I get anything done with two great hulking beefcakes following me around?"

"Hey!" Devon, the younger of the two werewolves objected, while Josiah just rolled his eyes.

"It was someone from Shadowpeak who pushed you down those stairs and tried to hurt you, Laney."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Not for sure, no, but I'm not taking the risk. You go nowhere alone until we catch them. You don't like it? Stay at home."

She had to fight not to stomp her foot in frustration.

"You are overreacting." She spoke as calmly as she could, surprised when his head shot up, sparks of amber shooting from them. Before, she would have cowered in the face of his displeasure, but she'd made huge leaps in confidence in the last few days. Even their mate bond had strengthened. It wasn't as strong as it could be, but it seemed to strengthen every day.

"No, overreacting would be locking you in your room. I am very close, Laney, very close. Do not push me." His voice held pure steel, and their bond snapped and sparkled with his anger. While the other two wolves looked down at their feet, their stances submissive in the face of their Alpha's fury, Laney leaned in to speak to him quietly.

"What happened to listening to me, to letting me have a voice?"

"I've let you have a voice, but I don't understand your objection. Someone hurt you, Laney, and they will try again. Would you rather I spent the whole time worrying about you out there, by yourself, vulnerable? Is having guards really such a hassle for you? Is it such a steep price to pay for my peace of mind?"

Well, when he put it like that.

"Okay," she sighed before leaning down to kiss him. "But don't think you're getting your way all the time."

"I wouldn't dare."

* * * * *

Days went by without incident, and Laney started to think that they'd all overreacted about what had happened in the basement. She was certainly getting tired of having two bodyguards following her around every time she left the house.

It was bloody exhausting, organizing the meeting with the other Alphas. It fell on her to arrange the social side of it while Cooper and his enforcers handled the security. While most of the pack had come to acknowledge her as the Alpha's mate, there were still those who saw her as Zachary's little punching bag.

Jayda, in particular, was hard to deal with. Laney could really do without the snide comments about her cowardice. The bitchiness and the arguing had made her long day even longer, and now all she wanted was a blistering hot shower and to crawl into bed with her sexy mate so he could hold her tight.

But it wasn't to be. As she entered the house, she could hear the low murmur of voices from the study and knew at least one of Cooper's enforcers was inside. Moving to the door, she knocked lightly before entering to find them all there.

"Rye!" she cried out, moving toward him. He stood up and clasped her tight.

"Did you find Suzanne then?" She knew he'd been searching for that bitch while visiting the other packs.

"Oh yeah," he replied, nodding. "I found her all right."

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking over at Cooper in query.

"Nothing, sweet. You look exhausted, why don't you go rest?"

Oh no, he didn't! No way did he just condescendingly tell her not to worry her pretty little head and go on to bed. She narrowed her eyes, aware of everyone staring at her before she moved to the door. Turning around, she gave everyone a nod.

"Good night," she said, proud of her composure.

Justin let out a low whistle as Cooper watched Laney leave the room, her shoulders so stiff they could have been carved from stone.

"Boy, do you have balls of steel." He turned to Cooper, who merely stared back at him, his face stony.

"This is our job, our worry, not Laney's. You let me take care of my mate. You take care of this bitch."

"I just can't believe that Suzanne would shack up with Leonard," Dusty said, frowning.

"Why? Suzanne was tight with Zachary, they were two peas in a pod—it makes sense that she's jumped into the bed of his only ally among the other packs," Cain spoke quietly.

"We need to watch him closely. He's slime," said Dusty, her voice bitter. "He and Zachary were of the same school, the only way to rule was through violence."

"Do you think he wants this pack?" Cooper directed his question at Rye.

Rye nodded. "Yeah, I do. He tries to hide his true nature, but his eyes show his ruthlessness. He wants power, and if he's anything like Zachary, he won't challenge you straight up. He'll search for a weakness and pounce on it."

The sound of Marcus' radio prevented Cooper from questioning him further.

"Yeah?"

"Uhh, boss, is someone supposed to be with Laney right now?" Devon's voice crackled over the radio.

"What do you mean? She's in the house with us."

"You sure about that? Because I'm pretty sure I just saw a small, fair wolf creep out of the house and take off into the forest."

"Shit," Marcus swore while Cooper jumped to his feet and raced through the house calling Laney's name.

"Devon, follow her. Don't lose sight of her, you hear me?" Marcus yelled as he ran through the house after Cooper. He watched as Cooper tore off his clothes.

"Jay, Jesse, go with Cooper." The two of them changed quickly and followed an already fully changed Cooper.

Cooper raced through the forest, ferocious anger smashing against terror-filled concern. Low, deathly growls filled the woods as he ran. That their mate had run off, taken off without them, without any sort of protection, enraged both the man and the wolf. The thought of their enemy finding her, taking her from them...

A howl of fury erupted from him, Jay and Jesse howling back in reply. He quickly picked up her scent, his longer legs gaining on her easily. Coming to a slamming stop in a clearing, he was surprised to find she had Devon cornered against a tree, her teeth pulled back in a snarl.

The force of her power was pushing the much larger wolf back, causing him to bow down to her. She was dominant to him, the mate of his Alpha, and although he was nearly twice her size she was easily overpowering him.

Cooper let out a snarl, drawing her attention to him as he moved his head sharply, indicating to Devon to leave. He didn't bother to check that he did so. His attention remained on Laney, on the hair of her neck that was raised in ire, her amber wolf eyes that were sending sparks of pure rage in his direction.

He let out a low growl, leaping toward her. Too late, she seemed to realize his intentions, but by the time she tried to move he was there, his teeth buried in the ruff of her neck, giving her a sharp, if painless, shake of disapproval. He let go, growling softly when she snarled at him, prodding her firmly with his nose to turn her toward the house. A short, sharp bite to her flank got her moving when she would have stubbornly stayed put.

This process continued throughout their trip home—she would try to run off or stop and he would corral her back into line. By the time they made it home both of them were exhausted, irritated and ready for a fight. They padded into the kitchen and changed.

“Go to the bedroom, I’ll be there soon,” Cooper growled at her. She folded her arms in front of her, glaring at him, her eyes an inferno of fury. If he hadn’t been so furious at her, he would have appreciated how beautiful she looked in that moment. Naked, steaming and gorgeous.

“Get into our room or else your brothers will walk in here at any moment to find me spanking their little sister’s bare ass, and you know what? I’m pretty sure they’ll cheer me on!”

“Asshole,” she hissed at him, before turning to walk into their bedroom.

Laney quickly locked the door before pushing the large dresser in front of it.

Let’s just see him get through that, she thought, grinning darkly. She didn’t care how childish it was. It made her feel better. That would teach him to treat her like a child. Humming to herself, she moved into the en suite bathroom to have a long, hot shower. She deserved it.

Laney was still humming to herself as she walked out of the bathroom. She was still mad as hell but at least she was clean. She came to a stop, shocked as she noticed Cooper lying on the bed, naked and relaxed. He sat up slowly, grinning, although she saw the grin didn’t quite reach his eyes. They were a cold, hard hazel.

“You didn’t really think a little lock and a dresser would keep me out, sweet, now did you?” His voice was dangerous, cold, and she nearly shivered in reaction. But what did they say? The best defense was a good offense?

“You treated me like a child, you shut me out!”

“So that gave you the right to put yourself in danger?” he roared, jumping to his feet as she took a step backward in reaction. “That gave you the right to run off without protection? You might as well have sent out a memo to Leonard—here I am, come and get me!”

Laney frowned, stepping back as he stalked toward her, banging into the dresser behind her. “What are you talking about? Why would Leonard come after me?”

“Because Rye discovered that Suzanne has hooked up with him, and my enforcers believe that he wants the Shadowpeak pack, that he’ll do anything to get it, including striking at my weaknesses.”

Laney felt the stab of hurt deep within her, a cut so deep and harsh she gasped in pain and shock. A growl escaped Cooper before he reached out and grabbed her, shaking her lightly. “I didn’t mean it like that, Laney.”

“Then how did you mean it? You obviously think I’m too weak to deal with any sort of serious issue. No, all I’m good for is organizing food and decorations. How the

hell do you expect me to take the proper precautions if you don't tell me what's going on?" She turned her hurt into anger and it felt good, it felt productive, strong.

"You are my weakness. But not because you're weak, because you are the most important person in my world, and if anything ever happened to you, then I don't think I could go on living."

She looked up into his eyes, tears blurring her vision. "You mean that?"

"Do I ever say anything I don't mean?"

She shook her head. "You have to talk to me, Cooper. You can't keep me in the dark in an attempt to keep me safe. It doesn't work that way." She looked up at him, gearing up for a fight, but he doused the flames of her fire by nodding.

"You're right, sweet. I should have told you about the threat." He moved back to sit on the bed. She followed him, sitting beside him.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I want to protect you, I want you to have a life without worry, without stress. I just want you to be happy and safe and mine."

"Cooper, you great fool, I am all of those things. It doesn't matter how many people threaten us or try to hurt us. As long as I'm with you I am safe and happy and yours."

Cooper lifted her, arranging her so that her legs straddled his lap. His hard cock rubbed against her folds, stirring her arousal.

"So, what are we going to do about your punishment then?" he asked, reaching up to lightly pinch her nipples. Laney jolted, his touch like an electric shock that fired all her nerve endings until they sizzled.

She opened her eyes in surprise. "Punishment? What for?"

His eyebrow rose. "For breaking your promise and running off without protection. You disobeyed me. That comes with a very hefty price."

"Why you arrogant—ahhh." Her tirade ended on a long groan as he swallowed it with his mouth. He ate at her lips and tongue until she was senseless, a lump of clay he could mold whichever way he wanted.

Abruptly she found herself on her feet, swaying with the speed at which he'd moved.

"Get onto your hands and knees on the bed," he ordered. Laney obeyed him slowly, her breath coming in short pants.

"Spread your legs, sweet," he crooned from behind her as she felt his hands rub her ass cheeks. She moved her legs apart, clenching her butt cheeks for the spank she thought was coming. But he didn't spank her. Instead one hand split her cheeks apart and she tensed as she felt a nozzle being inserted into her ass.

"Relax, sweet," he murmured, rubbing her bottom soothingly. "It's just a little lubricant, you know how this feels." Cool liquid dripped into her ass before the nozzle was removed and one of his fingers entered her back passage slowly.

"Push back, good girl, do you like that?" She nodded, moaning. Like? Like didn't come close to describing how she felt about it. It was dark, hot and arousing.

It made her burn.

"More," she cried. "Please, I need more, Cooper."

"Certainly, my sweet." He pushed two fingers into her ass, stretching her, making her whimper.

"That feels so good."

"Just think how it will feel when my cock gets in there, sweet. So tight, so warm, so mine." She moaned at his words.

"Lie forward, sweet, just lean your chest on the bed. There you go, now relax." Two fingers from his other hand entered her moist pussy, pumping in and out in unison with the fingers in her ass. It felt incredible, the dual sensation of thick fingers pushing through the tight muscle of her ass in time with the fingers driving into the warm, wet passage of her pussy. But it wasn't enough to make her come, she wanted more.

"More," she sobbed. "More, please, Cooper, I need you."

"Shh, sweet, just wait. I'll take care of you. Once I've driven you insane, as insane as you drove me when you broke your promise." He pulled his fingers away from her pussy, and she heard something buzzing before a cool object was pushed slowly inside her sheath.

"Just a vibrator, sweet. When I enter your ass I want you full, bursting." She remained still, waiting until the vibrator was fully launched inside her, jumping as something buzzed against her clit. She let out a long, low moan as he chuckled.

"Like that, do you, sweet? It has a clit tickler attached. But you can't come yet. Wait until I give you permission." Laney bit her lip—how the hell was she supposed to stop herself from coming? She was already so close and that clit tickler was going to send her over.

Just as she thought it, she found herself reaching that peak and flowing over it in a huge rush, her muscles pulsing around the vibrator, her limbs shaking in relief.

"Bad girl, very bad girl." A sharp spank landed first on her right cheek then her left. But then she felt his hands parting her ass cheeks before he pushed the head of his cock slowly into her tight asshole.

"Oh hell, you feel so good. I'm so hungry for you, too hungry to punish you right now. Later, remind me to later. Now relax and push out, that's my girl. You feel so good, Laney, so hot and tight that I've got to stop myself from coming straight away."

He moved slowly out again and her orgasm started to rise once more. It was amazing, slightly painful, but it was like the spankings, what began as pain soon turned into pleasure, a pleasure so intense she wasn't sure she could survive it.

"Cooper," she called out, lost, drowning in her arousal, in the feelings coursing through her body. She needed an anchor so she called out to the one person she knew would always answer her.

"I'm here, sweet, and I have never felt anything more incredible. Just relax and let it build, sweet. I'll catch you, I will always catch you."

Laney let herself go, let herself get lost in the feelings—Cooper pumping in and out of her ass, the vibrator filling her pussy, tickling her clit. She lost herself in the sensations, gave herself over to orgasm, let it spiral out of control. She felt Cooper lose himself as well, felt him come in her ass, his essence flood her as her muscles pumped down on his cock.

It was in that moment of incredible bliss that the mate bond came to complete strength and sent their pleasure so high that they both screamed, their bodies lost in a rainbow of sizzling sensation and joy.

* * * * *

The next morning, Laney awoke to an empty bed. Opening her eyes, she noticed Cooper sitting beside the bed fully dressed.

"Hey." She smiled at him, stretching, feeling the pull of muscles in her ass. She ached, but it was a pleasant ache.

"How are you feeling?" he asked and she looked over at him, surprised by the concern in his voice.

"I feel great." A look of relief crossed his face and she realized he'd been worried that he'd hurt her.

"Cooper, what we did, it was incredible, and I so can't wait until we do it again."

He gave her an arrogant grin, and that quickly her self-confident mate was back.

"Good." He leaned over and kissed her. "I can't wait to do it again either. But I think we'll wait a while, give you a chance to recuperate."

"Really?" she pouted.

"Yes." He tapped her nose softly. "But since we've established that you're feeling well?" He peered down at her in query. She nodded. "Well, then, we have your punishment to address."

She frowned at him. "What for? Wasn't that what this morning was?" He'd woken her in the early hours of the morning with his tongue lapping at her folds. Over and over he'd driven her to the peak of orgasm before drawing back just as she was about to come. She'd been a mindless, oversensitized wreck before he'd finally taken mercy on her and let her find her release.

"That was for disobeying me. You're still owed a punishment for coming last night without permission."

"What?" She gaped at him. "Cooper, I couldn't help that," she squealed.

He shook his head in mock disappointment. "Doesn't matter, you were told not to come without my permission. Now lie back down, legs apart and knees up."

"Cooper—"

"That was an order, young lady." She moved into the vulnerable position, watching suspiciously as he pulled a box out from under the bed.

"Do you know what these are?" He held up two small balls connected by a thread. She shook her head. His hand moved down to her mound, parting her lips.

"They're called Ben Wa balls. They sit inside your channel and when you move they rub against each other. They're designed to turn you on, to create pleasure. But," he placed one ball inside her, then the other before closing her legs, "you are not allowed to come without my permission. The balls stay inside you all day, but you do not come, and believe me, I will know if you do." She moved, feeling the sensation of the small balls moving inside her.

He stood.

"But, how am I meant to stop myself from coming? This will kill me!"

"Ahh, but you'll die happy, sweet." He left the room quickly before the pillow she threw hit him on the head.

"Asshole," she muttered, but the irritation in her voice was belied by the smile on her face.

Chapter Ten

Laney stood beside her mate, greeting the visiting Alphas. They'd begun arriving that afternoon and most were staying for the weekend to discuss forming a new council. Unlike Zachary, Cooper was determined to foster good relationships with the other packs in the western states and create an alliance that would work. Laney supported his decision, but it would have been a hell of a lot easier to have this meeting in another pack's territory. Let them worry about security and safety. However, this was Cooper's baby, and it was up to the Shadowpeak pack to make sure everyone remained safe and behaved themselves.

Tomorrow, Cooper would lead the talks about how the new council would work. The Western States Council had disintegrated through distrust and infighting. She knew that the council the Lian pack was part of was strong, and she trusted Cooper to ensure that part ran smoothly.

But before then she had to get everyone through dinner and the welcoming ceremony, which was no mean feat, especially with her own wolves fighting against her. Just then she noticed Jayda flirting with a wolf from another pack across the room, the tray of food she was supposed to be circulating sitting forgotten on the table beside her.

"You gonna let her get away with disrespecting you like that?" Laney turned her head slightly, looking up at Dusty, who had moved to stand beside her when Cooper had walked away to talk with the Alpha of the Arcan pack.

"She'll pick it up in a moment." Laney attempted to excuse the other wolf, knowing it was a false hope.

"This ain't no high-society tea, Laney. You've got to earn their respect or else they'll constantly walk all over you." Strangely, Dusty's voice wasn't derogatory or condescending.

"Are you trying to give me advice?" Laney asked, amazed.

The redhead shrugged.

"I thought you'd want me to fail. You hate me."

Dusty turned to her, her gaze serious as she looked down at the smaller woman. "I don't hate you, Laney. I thought I did because I hated him, and you were a part of him. I didn't realize that he'd made your life hell as well, that you are nothing like he was. I guess in a way that I was jealous."

"Jealous?" Laney realized that her jaw had dropped in shock and quickly slammed it shut.

"Because you were strong enough to get away, while I was too much of a coward."

Laney pondered that for a moment. She'd been jealous of Dusty's strength, her confidence. To find out that all this time the other woman had felt the same toward her shocked her.

"I'm sorry for whatever he did to you."

Dusty gazed down at her, her gaze ferocious. "Don't ever apologize for him. Just don't."

Laney cleared her throat, deciding to change the subject. "I thought you were patrolling outside tonight."

Dusty sneered. "Cain 'insisted' on taking over. Damn man's entirely too bossy for his own good." With that she turned on her heel and walked away, and Laney was left staring at the bitch flirting across the room, not caring that everyone could see her clear disregard of her Alpha's mate.

Gathering her courage, she moved over to stand behind the disobedient wolf.

"Jayda." She spoke firmly, aware of all the eyes following her, her own pack's and others'.

"What?" the female wolf responded sullenly, not even bothering to turn around.

"You are supposed to be circulating with that food, not flirting."

"If you're so concerned about feeding everyone, why don't you do it?"

There were gasps of shock around them at the disrespectful reply. For all that they were reasonably civilized, they were still part wolf, and you did not disrespect your dominants like that. Particularly the Alpha's mate.

Laney grabbed the taller woman's wrist, twisting it sharply until she cried in shock. Laney felt her wolf rise, felt the power that was all hers spill from her onto the weaker wolf, driving her to her knees as she cried out in protest. Laney let go of her wrist and Jayda bent over, laying her forehead on the ground, her body shaking in reaction.

"I'm sorry, I apologize, I apologize." Laney just nodded, aware that she couldn't weaken her stance by comforting the distraught wolf.

"Get yourself together and then start circulating the food."

"Yes, my Alpha." Jayda leaned up and kissed the hand that Laney held out to her. Laney then moved through the crowd, instinctively searching out Cooper. He smiled as he saw her coming and, leaning down, kissed her gently.

"Really Laney, I didn't know you had it in you, I am impressed." That deep, husky voice—she'd know it anywhere, knew it well in her nightmares. Laney had been so caught up in getting to Cooper she'd failed to notice the other woman. Cooper's hand crept around Laney's waist, lending her his strength, and she smiled in reaction.

"Suzanne, I'm sure there are many things you don't know about me." She turned to look at the tall brunette leaning on the arm of a broad, bald man.

"Leonard, how good of you to come." Proud of the steadiness of her voice, she nodded regally, keeping a pleasant mask upon her face. How she hated Suzanne. The

older woman had reveled in tormenting her when she'd been younger. She'd helped to make her life a living hell and Laney would not forget.

"Laney, I must say you've grown even more beautiful since I saw you last." Leonard looked down at her knowingly and Laney had to hold her terror inside. The hand at her waist tightened and she glanced up at Cooper, a slight smile on her face.

Bile rose in her throat as she forced herself to look at the sick bastard standing in front of her. He'd always creeped her out, using any sort of excuse to touch her or have her touch him. Each touch had made her feel physically ill, as if it were a stain on her very soul.

Cooper hadn't wanted to invite them but he'd seen the wisdom of Rye's advice—best to keep your friends close and your enemies even closer. But one wrong move toward her and Laney knew that Cooper would retaliate with deadly ruthlessness.

"How kind of you to say so, and would you believe it's all natural?" She looked straight at Suzanne as she said that, watching as the older woman's eyes narrowed in fury.

"Well, Jeremy wants a poker game, it's traditional after all. Men only, you understand, don't you ladies? Cooper?" Leonard looked at Cooper expectantly. Laney could tell Cooper didn't want to leave her with the viper, but Leonard was right, it was a tradition, one Cooper couldn't get out of. "After all, I'm sure your mate will be just fine by herself, won't you, Laney?"

"Have fun." Laney leaned up to kiss Cooper lightly, surprised when he deepened the kiss. She blushed slightly as he winked at her before turning to stroll confidently behind Leonard to the smaller room off the hall.

"Well, haven't you done well, my dear? I would never have guessed."

"Well, I couldn't stay that scared little child you liked to torment forever, could I now?"

"Oh now, Laney, you're not holding a grudge are you? An intelligent girl like you should realize that our packs would be much better off as allies than enemies. You wouldn't let a little unpleasantness come between us, would you?"

"A little unpleasantness?" Laney asked, shocked. But the viper just waved her fury away.

"Please, Laney, you're not going to be so childish, are you? I thought better of you than that." Suzanne narrowed her eyes, a look of superior amusement on her face.

Laney swallowed her retort, pasting a smile on her face. "Of course not, all is forgiven," *Lord, she prayed, please don't strike me down for that horrendous lie.*

"Good, because I need to go to your father's house, my dear. I left something there, and I really don't want to go by myself. Will you come with me?"

"Why don't you take Leonard?" Laney asked, shocked by the other woman's brazenness.

But Suzanne just aimed that superior look at her again, making Laney grind her teeth in frustration. "Because, my dear, it's a delicate matter and I'd rather keep it between us women. There's not a problem, is there? Oh." A look of false sympathy crossed her cold features. "You're not afraid of that place are you? It's just a house, after all. It can't hurt you."

Laney straightened her shoulders. "Of course not, but..." She looked around for her brothers.

"Really, Laney, are you still such a coward? I never thought an Alpha as strong as Cooper would have such a weak coward for a mate."

Laney ground her teeth at the words—how easily this woman threw her insecurities in her face.

"Oh, bring Justin with you if you're so worried. He'll protect you from me, won't you, Justin?"

Relief flooded her as she turned to find Justin standing in the doorway behind them, obviously protecting her. The doors led straight out onto the garden. He was protecting her back from attack.

"Shall we go, then?" Suzanne gestured with an arm and Laney moved outside, Justin walking behind her.

None of them saw the dark eyes watching them from the forest.

* * * * *

"Well, here we are. Get your stuff and then get out, will you?"

Suzanne started to smile at her. "Why, my dear, that's not very polite. Wouldn't you like to reminisce about old times?"

Laney gave her the glare that question deserved. "I don't think so, just hurry up, will you?"

"Well, of course. Justin."

Laney turned to Justin, unaware of the danger until he grabbed her harshly, painfully drawing her hands up high behind her back. Laney sucked in a sharp breath, determined not to cry out even though it felt as if her shoulders might pop from their sockets.

"J-Justin? What are you doing?"

"Shut up, you stupid bitch." Suzanne came up and hit her in the face, punching her so hard the room spun. "Did you really think Justin was loyal to you? That he would follow your orders?"

"W-what?" she croaked out.

"Oh, you really are stupid, aren't you? Justin has been spying on your pitiful mate and your stupid brothers this whole time, and none of you even suspected."

"Why?" She faced Suzanne, but her question was directed at the man behind her.

"Because your mate killed my father."

"What?" She attempted to turn around to face him, but this time Suzanne punched her in the stomach.

"Didn't you know? Zachary was my father too, only he loved me. He hated you, but me, he was going to make Alpha until your stupid mate interfered." Justin's voice had changed, darkened, sending chills down her spine.

"But I thought your father was Malcolm."

Suzanne snorted. "That dolt, he couldn't even have children. No, darling Zachary decided he wanted a son so he fucked as many women in the pack as he could. Finally, Justin's mother got pregnant with his son. He was so proud the day he found out she was having his baby."

Laney looked at her in shock. "He raped all those women?"

Suzanne looked at her as if she were stupid. "Of course."

"So why didn't you give him a son if he wanted one so much?" Laney asked, feeling sick.

"Me? Have children? I don't think so. No, I was willing to let Zachary have his fun as long as I didn't have to give birth to a vile creature. Of course, he let Malcolm and Sandra raise Justin until he was old enough to understand. So much easier than having to raise one himself like he did with you." She looked at Laney as if she were little better than dog shit on her shoe.

"He didn't raise me, he tortured me! Justin, listen to me. He was a monster. He was not a good person, let alone a good father."

"Shut up!" Justin growled at her, pulling her arms up until the pain was so great she thought she would pass out. She knew Cooper was on his way, could feel his fear and his fury down their link.

"Take her down to the basement. It's time to have a little fun." Suzanne grinned, her face filled with evil glee. Laney's fear almost paralyzed her, but her faith in Cooper, the knowledge that he would come for her, allowed her to push past the crippling terror.

"We won't have much time," Justin warned, forcing Laney to move toward the basement door.

Suzanne shrugged. "You said they didn't have a proper mate bond, I doubt Cooper will know anything is going on." Laney tried to fight, to kick back at the man she'd trusted. But the viper merely held a taser up to her arm, sending shocks of electricity coursing through her, the voltage so high it would have killed a normal human.

Laney screamed in pain, so shocked she barely heard the window at the end of the hallway smash in as a huge dark wolf jumped through.

"Justin!" Suzanne screamed as the wolf launched himself at her, silencing her quickly when his large teeth ripped out her throat. Laney used the distraction to throw

herself forward out of Justin's arms. She turned, kicking her leg out in a high arc, the power of her wolf hitting him.

But he was strong. They both came from the same sire and he was far larger than she. He dodged backward, avoiding her kick before launching himself forward to land an uppercut to her jaw. As she fell backward, her head crunched against the wall before she slid bonelessly to the floor.

Laney watched him come toward her, saw her death in his eyes. Then she knew nothing at all.

* * * * *

Laney sat curled up in the armchair beside the fire. An untouched cup of hot chocolate sat on the table beside her. She didn't bother to look up as Cooper walked into the room and knelt in front of her.

"Sweet?" His hands clasped her cheeks, tipping her face up, his thumb gently wiping away the tears that slowly trickled down her face.

"I don't know why I'm crying. I didn't even know him, plus he tried to kill me." She looked at him in confusion while he gently pushed the hair back from her face, wincing at the large bruise darkening one cheek.

His eyes flared in anger. "I never should have left you alone with that bitch."

Laney shook her head. "It's not your fault. You couldn't have known that Justin was a traitor. That he was in cahoots with Suzanne. I didn't even know that he was my brother!"

"Listen to me, baby, what happened to him wasn't your fault. Zachary brainwashed him, but he obviously had something dark inside him from the start. He wasn't like you, so good and pure—no one could ever taint you. He signed his own death warrant when he turned his back on the pack. You have no blame in this."

She nodded. "Neither do you. You couldn't have prevented this, Cooper."

He didn't answer her, but she knew he blamed himself for not protecting her. She sighed. It was going to take him a while to get over this.

It looked as if she'd have to put up with bodyguards for a while longer yet.

"Is Cain okay?" she asked. He'd been out patrolling when he'd seen her leave with Suzanne and Justin. Suspicious, he had decided to follow them. Thank God he had. As Laney passed out, Cain had banged his body into Justin, shoving him away from her.

Cooper had entered the house to find Laney passed out on the floor, Suzanne dead, and was just in time to watch Cain rip Justin's throat in two.

"Yeah, hardly even a scratch. I tried to reward him but he said it was his job. He wouldn't take more than my thanks."

Laney nodded, determined to thank him herself, but later. Right now, all she wanted was to be held by her mate. To feel safe.

"Justin wanted the pack," she murmured as Cooper picked her up and sat back in the chair with her in his lap. "He must have been the one to push me down the stairs, to lock me in the basement." She frowned, puzzled. "What I don't understand is why he didn't just kill me then."

Cooper shrugged, but his face was thoughtful. "Maybe he got interrupted. We arrived back at about the same time as he must have pushed you down the stairs."

"Maybe," Laney said, slightly doubtful, "or maybe he was just going to hold me until Suzanne could get there so she could 'play'." She shuddered. "There was something really wrong with her. She looked so excited at the idea of torturing me. I'm sure this was all her idea, the phone calls, the spiders...just another form of torture for her to delight in."

"It doesn't matter now, sweet, she can't hurt you anymore and neither can Justin. Leonard denied all knowledge of her plan to kill you and therefore weaken me so Justin could take the pack. "

"Did you believe him?" She felt him shrug.

"No, but I couldn't call him a liar without proof. Tomorrow we'll have the council meeting, and then they'll all go home. Thank God!"

She chuckled lightly.

"It was your idea to have them here."

"Yeah, well, remind me next time that having all these Alphas here is a real pain in the ass!"

"Hmm, that so?" She turned to face him, her knees bent and tucked in on either side of his hips. "I know one Alpha who can be a major pain in my ass!"

"Do you now?" he murmured back at her, brushing her cheek with his finger. "Well, maybe I should kiss it and make it better."

Laney laughed happily as he proceeded to do just that.

About the Author

Lorna Jean lives in beautiful New Zealand with her partner. Reading has always been her favorite pastime, and when she's not reading stories filled with passion and romance she finds herself dreaming up new ones. When she's not in front of the computer screen or curled up with a book, she can usually be found drinking coffee, or shopping, or watching re-runs of *Kath and Kim* on DVD.

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