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~ Dedication ~

Baby, this one's for you. You've got my attention, respect, and heart. It's our world, let's live it up!

Mae—I owe you hours of one-sided conversations. Don't let me forget.

Chapter One

The smoke swirled and spread above the fire she'd set in the clearing of the Gifford Forest. Dani crouched in the brush, hoping she'd built the woodpile big enough to mask her scent. Estrus would attract the werewolf's attention before she had a chance to put her plan into action, to say nothing of the rank smell of her fear of failure.

She had to stay hidden, or die.

If the stories were true, the man climbing out of the brown truck marked *Snohomish County Parks* was her only hope.

She scraped her teeth over the width of her bottom lip. Her heart rate accelerated and delicious pleasure spread in her most intimate place. She'd never before believed that she'd be so close to a legend. She could almost reach out and touch him.

Ethan Tolene was the werewolf of her dreams. Thirty years older than she, he represented everything she wanted in her life. Stability, protection, companionship...not to mention he was a drool-worthy alpha male with a body that set her insides on fire.

She smiled. *I did it. That's him.*

Ethan planted his feet beside the scattered branches burning on the ground and surveyed

the forested area with a steel gaze. Liquid pooled between her legs and dampened her panties. It was definitely him. Regal power came off him in waves. Once he caught a whiff of her in heat, she bet her plan would work.

Crawling out from behind the scrub brush, she stayed hunkered down, not quite ready to face him. Afraid to blink and lose sight of him, she stared. A rare lone wolf, he ran alone after being banned years ago after a bitter feud with his cousin.

The same cousin who had snatched her brother the night her parents were killed.

Ethan stabbed the shovel into the hard ground and used his weight to dig a scoopful of dirt to extinguish the flames. Dani swallowed. Her thoughts strayed to what he'd look like naked. His button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, stretched across his chest accenting his muscles, his massiveness. He appeared twice her size, a bundle of danger and sex.

Her hormones fought with her good sense. She couldn't deny he was attractive. Even if he weren't crucial to her plans, she'd want him. The wolf buried deep inside her whined. *I know. I know. He's the one. I feel it too.*

Maybe he was a little on the rugged side, but she liked strong, confident men. She sniffed the air, but the earthy musk of the forest overrode any other smells. She sighed. Soon she'd catch his scent.

The age difference between them was an added bonus. What was a thirty year difference to a werewolf who lived longer than mere humans anyways? Besides, once they were mated, they'd stay connected for all time whether on earth or in the afterlife.

Thick brown hair sprinkled with the lightest gray brushed his shoulders. She dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand, resisting the temptation to step over and sweep his bangs off his forehead.

Ethan leaned over to toss another load of dirt on the fire. She ran her gaze down the slope of his back to his hard ass and ended on some serious solid thighs. A mew escaped from the back of her throat and she clamped her lips together. She must be more careful. If he spotted her, he'd kill her on sight, and then she'd never get a chance to tell him the reasons he had to listen to her.

The last time someone from the pack had dared to approach him had not gone well. She shivered despite the warmth of the day. The other weres in Drover gossiped about how Ethan had bitten out the man's throat and snapped his head clean off his body. Just for trying to speak with him.

Out here in the forest, away from the pack, no one was here to defend her. She had only herself.

She wiggled, trying to curb the itch growing deep in her womb.

She didn't want her head staked outside his territory as a warning to other werewolves not to trespass on his land. Her hope lay entirely on Ethan's dubious goodwill.

He raised the shovel and put it over his shoulder before stomping on the dirt. Deprived of oxygen, the flames died. Dani's heartbeat sped.

It's time.

She stood and brushed the dust off her jeans. A quiver of pleasure coursed over her skin. Even her own touch fed the craving deep inside.

Soon she'd have the ability to shift. The she-wolf living inside her soul would come out. Excitement bubbled and the hair at the back of her neck tingled. The sensation of her spirit emerging from sleep, demanding to show itself, grew every moment.

She inhaled a shaky breath. The voice, the presence, the stability she'd lived with all her life would come into existence. Her strength would quadruple. Her hearing would become acute, like a canny forest creature. Her sight would almost match that of an eagle.

She'd longed for the transition, but she'd had no idea it would occur under such dire circumstances. She clenched her hands into fists. Her fantasy had always involved meeting Ethan differently. Their relationship would have time to grow and change.

She wanted to ignore the reasons behind her visit, but her goal kept her creeping forward to

the legendary werewolf. To her, going through her heat cycle now meant only one thing. A tool she could use in her fight to take back her brother, avenge her parents. After she mated with Ethan, she trusted that love would come like it always did to her kind.

And that he'd help her.

A twig snapped under her weight. She froze. Ethan Tolene turned in her direction. She gasped and hurried to cover her mouth. It would be impossible to change her mind now. *I can do this. I can do this...*

Ethan seemed to grow in size. She blinked hard a few times. It wasn't her imagination. The man stood at least six foot four with shoulders the width of the old cedar tree in her backyard. His nostrils flared and he stepped forward.

He'd picked up her scent. Her core constricted.

"M-may I speak with you?" She moved closer. "Please."

He stared at her face, her breast, and below, to the apex of her thighs. The throbbing in her womb grew and spread throughout her lower stomach. A fresh surge of juice trickled down to her already damp panties.

He growled. *Oh God, he can tell what he's doing to me.*

"Please." She stuck her chin up higher. "I'll make it worth your time."

She continued to approach him. She lifted her hand and rubbed her nape to assure her that she still remained in possession of her

head. The fact that she was still alive and talking was a good sign.

“Ethan—”

“How do you know my name?” He swung the shovel off his shoulder and speared it into the ground at her feet, stopping her in her tracks.

She flinched, but stayed back behind the line he’d obviously drawn in the dirt with the tool. She rubbed her lips together and forced herself not to look at any part of his body, except his face. “I—I come from the Drover pack. I need your help.”

His eyes turned yellow. “How is it you are in heat, but no one has claimed you yet?”

“I’ve saved...” Lightheaded, she pursed her lips and blew out a thin stream of air. It was hard to concentrate being this close to him. “I’ve saved myself for you.”

“Leave. Now.” He turned toward the truck and stalked off.

She shook her head wildly. The muscles in her body tensed. He had to listen. He was her only hope.

“Stop! Please.” She ran after him and grabbed his arm.

He whipped around and broke away from her touch, backing away. “Don’t...touch...me. You should count yourself lucky that you are still alive, let alone still a virgin.”

She shivered under the vehemence of his gaze. Desire and fear warred, an alien, confusing situation. She rubbed her stomach. The urge to touch all the spots on her body that were frantic

with new yearnings was too much. Scarcely aware of the line she was crossing, Dani edged forward and planted her palms on his chest. "I need you. I must mate. I need to... My brother... It's time. I've planned...oh God, I need your help."

She was stumbling over her words like a fool, her prepared speech long forgotten. She sucked in a deep breath and hissed. "I must kill Greggoire Calhoun."

* * *

Greggoire Calhoun.

The euphoria of pheromones in the air dissipated. Ethan had refused to speak his cousin's name out loud for years, as though that act would give Greggoire more power.

He masked his shock over hearing this puppy...this beautiful young woman speak a name he'd rather forget, but Ethan's skin crawled and his inner wolf snarled.

What did Greggoire do to this innocent to cause so much hatred?

Ethan approached her. Dainty eyebrows arched and her deep brown eyes widened. He stopped, allowing his gaze to roam over her body, memorizing every curve and valley. Despite the savagery of his reaction to Greggoire's name, his body tuned in to everything about her.

Petite and prettier than any woman he'd ever seen, she'd be stupid to think he'd make a good mate while ostracized from a pack. He locked his gaze on her lips, full and shaded a natural burgundy red. Her mouth opened, and he caught a peek of a pink, wet tongue. His balls drew up in his sac, painful along with his raging hard-on.

He told himself to walk away.

He stayed.

His lust to mate with her drove him even while he damned his inability to abandon a she-wolf in heat. He was stronger than most, but...

Her scent pierced him to his very soul. That hadn't happened before.

An arm's length away from her, he paused. Should he take her, teach her a lesson, or walk away and hope she never came back?

A soft mew slipped out of her mouth, and his wolf pushed him forward. His cock throbbed, straining against the front of his jeans.

He didn't miss the way she fought her body's compulsion. Little bursts of air escaped between her lips as she struggled for control over a force stronger than she could fight. How did she make it this far in such an aroused state?

"Please." She reached out and grabbed his forearm.

His whole body constricted, driving his desire for her higher. He stared down at the slender fingers clutching his skin, her knuckles white with desperation. *Shit.*

“You must leave.” Somehow, Ethan managed to remove her hand.

She refused to back off. “Don’t you care?” Her eyes shone bright as if she had a fever, but he knew differently.

He shrugged.

“Greggoire kidnapped my baby brother. I can’t walk away and let him get away with that. H-he’s all I got. My parents are dead.”

He gritted his teeth, understanding her pain all too well.

She let go and dropped to her knees on the ground. Wrapping her arms around her middle, she moaned. “Please...help me make this stop. You of all people should know what I’m going through, what I’m up against. I’ve waited, saved myself, for you. I’ve heard others in the pack tout your strength and honor my whole life. I-I’ve...I-I’ve dreamed about you, when I was alone. It was your wolf that kept me from doing something desperate.”

Ethan inhaled deeply and let his head fall back. He closed his eyes. Six years alone and a virgin she-wolf shows up out of the blue in front of him. One in heat, no less. *What the hell am I supposed to do?*

“I-I have a message for you.” She scrunched up her nose and moaned. The muscles along her neck rippled. “M-my dad...h-he told me growing up to run to you for help if anything happened to him. He made me promise. He said to tell you...to remember the prophecy. You must right a wrong.”

The words took his breath away, but at the same an incredible calm came over him. He lowered his chin, breaking eye contact with her. It had been a long time since anyone had reminded him of the past. The protective nature of his wolf howled in his head. His grandfather's face flashed in his memory.

He glanced up at the woman, whose eyes softened. He squared his shoulders and peered off into the distance. The admiration in her expression affected him more than he thought possible. Was it time to go back? Was she his mate? Did his grandfather's prediction have to do with him foretelling that a she-wolf would approach him, seek him?

He reached out and brushed a speck of dirt off her cheek with his thumb, realizing that she'd gone through hell to get to him, and on her own. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, the kind he recognized. They'd come from worry. Yet she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen and he wanted to help her. He wanted the fear gone from her face.

"Please..." Her eyes were huge, begging him to agree to mate with her, to help her, to set her life back into some sort of normalcy.

He knew what he wanted to do.

What he had to do.

"Get in the truck." He turned away, picked up his shovel, and chucked it in the back of the truck. Walking around to the driver's side, he stepped inside the cab, buckled up, and started the engine.

And waited.

She jumped in the truck.

“Put your seatbelt on. Keep it on. Do not touch me. Don’t even look at me.”

The flimsy push button on the belt was easy enough to unlatch, but hopefully, the restraint would serve its purpose and she’d stay on her side of the cab. He’d witnessed enough she-wolves going into heat to know that nothing would stop her from trying everything possible to make him claim her.

He wasn’t the werewolf for someone so innocent.

Ethan drove to the logging road and pulled out onto the paving. He had a ten-minute ride to find out exactly what this woman wanted from him, besides to have sex with anyone with a dick between his legs.

Thick brown hair swirled around her head in unruly waves and her pint-sized body appeared to pack some muscle. Her tight jeans and T-shirt tempted him to take what she offered. He’d never denied he lived a lonely life. He shifted into third gear. Damned if he’d go through with her offer, though. The price was too high.

He wanted nothing to do with the pack. They’d sided with Greggoire even though the proof of Ethan’s innocence was right in front of them all. Years ago, the least amount of trouble for everyone had been for him to leave after his banishment. Greggoire had stripped any bond Ethan had felt about the others in the pack.

“Tell me about this brother of yours. Why hasn’t he left Greggoire’s house on his own?” Ethan slowed down where the logging trucks had dug deep potholes. One bad rut could blow out a tire, and he didn’t want to be stuck with her longer than he had to given her condition.

“His name is Jordan. He’ll be two years old next month.”

Ethan slammed on the brakes, pushed the gearshift into park and turned to stare at her. “A baby? You said your parents are dead, right?”

“Yes. By Greggoire’s hand.” She shoved her hands between her thighs and squeezed her legs shut. “Oh please, Ethan. I need to mate with you. I can’t go after that bastard without having my wolf.”

She sounded naïve and so very young. But her curves were not those of a young girl, and she-wolves matured slower than humans. She was more than old enough to know her own mind.

“How old are you?”

She closed her eyes. “T-twenty two. I’ve locked myself in the cabin the last two months. I didn’t know when my heat cycle would happen, but I could feel myself changing.” She opened her eyes and laid a hand on her lower stomach, right above her mound. “Here. Every day, it becomes more and more sensitive. I-I want to have sex. I was afraid I wouldn’t make it here in time...I don’t think I can wait any longer, but I need your answer first. I want you, because with your help, I can take down that bastard.”

“It doesn’t work that way with werewolves.” He stared out the front window. “Life mates come first. To mate with someone you don’t want will tie you to a miserable union.”

“B-but I do want you. I always have. Deep down, I knew you were my mate. I can’t explain...” She reached out and touched his leg. “My fantasies growing up involved you. Don’t you feel it? There’s something between us?”

He felt it in more ways than one. His grandfather had warned, prepared, and forecasted his life. Ethan had ignored it too long.

“Why would Greggoire take your brother?” He started the truck again and continued down the road. “You said he killed your parents, but why hasn’t the pack taken care of him for you?”

“The pack is scared. No one will help or tell me anything. Everything has changed around Drover in the last few years. It’s not the same. Greggoire is not looking out for the others, but for himself.” She rubbed the length of her thighs. “My father challenged him for the leader position last year, and instead of letting my father back down during the fight for the alpha role, Greggoire killed him in front of everyone. Later that day, I found my mother. She had a silver knife embedded into her heart and Greggoire’s scent all over her...and Jordan was gone.” She fisted her hands and hit the top of her legs.

Fuck. Greggoire had become an even worse excuse for a werewolf since Ethan had been banned. “Why do you think Greggoire has your

brother? Do you have any solid proof that he has the boy?"

"No, but others have said they've heard a child crying inside Greggoire's cabin. When I question them further, they clam up and tell me to forget what they said. I've tried gaining entry into his house, but he keeps two women with him. A she-wolf and a human. Someone is always there. I don't stand a chance against them until I too can shift into my wolf. That's why you must mate with me. I need all the strength I can get to fight Greggoire."

He stopped turning his head sideways to watch her and concentrated on the road. It went against a wolf's natural instinct to mate with more than one she-wolf. As for her father, it didn't surprise him that Greggoire would kill for his spot in the pack. If Ethan could have stayed, he would have done the same thing. He owed Greggoire for what he'd done.

Ethan rolled down his window. He had to think, and he couldn't do that with her sweet scent urging him to agree with her. Having a mate wasn't something he believed possible. Without a pack to back him up, he led a dangerous life. A she-wolf wouldn't be happy alone without others.

He was a rogue, an outcast, someone he never dreamed he would become until his life in the pack had fallen apart. Having this woman seek him brought new desire to change his life. He sat up straighter. His grandfather had

planned Ethan's path, but when he'd left the pack, he'd doubted the prophecy.

How had he become so blind? She'd come for him, like the tale had told. Glancing at the woman, he believed he was needed again. That pleased his wolf. He'd have a reason to return to the pack. He'd right the wrongs done to him and to the others. This could be his chance to again rise as alpha and fulfill his responsibilities.

To gain entrance back into Drover, he'd need to mate with her.

It was time.

This woman, strong and fierce in her belief that he was her mate, was the blatant sign he'd wanted for the last six years. She was the seeker, just like his grandfather had predicted many years ago.

Her determination and drive to see justice done impressed the hell out of Ethan. Not to mention she was sexier than any she-wolf he'd had the pleasure to meet. Fuck. He'd gone too long without a woman. Six years too long.

It was finally time to reorganize the Drover pack and continue with what his father, and his father before him, had fought so hard for.

It was time to bring Greggoire down.

"What's your name?" He glanced left and right before turning onto another logging road, this one taking him to the ranger station he called home.

"Dani...Danielle Carson."

"Well, Dani..." He stretched his arm across the span of the bench seat. She slipped her tiny

fingers into the palm of his hand as if they'd known each other forever. His blood pulsed through his veins as he stroked her soft skin with his thumb. "I think it's time to take you home."

"But..."

Ethan held up their hands. Despite the size difference, their hands linked together in a perfect fit. He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. "Don't worry, little one. We'll stop off at my cabin first. You please me very much. Let me be the one who shows you what being a she-wolf entails."

Chapter Two

Set deep in the woods, the lone cabin appeared to blend with the fir and alder trees that flanked the yard. A canvas of earth tones camouflaged the existence of a forest ranger's control center, merging it with the forest. Dani clung to Ethan, refusing to let go of his hand for fear he'd change his mind.

Independent and usually secure in her decisions, she wanted to soak up Ethan's confidence. The strength rolling off of him brought her comfort. It wasn't only her feelings that mattered, but Ethan's too. If he decided to mate with her, then she was sure this was the right thing to do.

Her body craved his warmth, his power. Diddling herself to find release would never help the level of hunger in her body now. Deep within the recesses of her soul, her wolf cried out to mate, and not with any werewolf. Only Ethan.

Once inside the cabin, Ethan kicked the door shut and plastered her against the wall before she had a chance to get her bearings. He pressed his erection against her stomach. She clutched his chest, his shirt bunching in her hands, pulling him harder against her.

“You smell so good.” He lifted her off the ground and nuzzled her neck. “Your scent pleases my wolf.”

Pressed against the round logs of the cabin wall, she wrapped her legs around his hips. He thrust his cock against her mound to keep her planted in the perfect position. The added stimulation through her jeans brought sweet torture to her sensitive lower body.

All the struggle, discomfort, and confusion of keeping her inner wolf at bay waiting until the right moment to contact Ethan melted away. A euphoria of acceptance filled her senses. Ethan was hers.

He licked the curve of her neck. She laid her head back against the wood and closed her eyes. Her womb pulsed and her pussy was not only wet, but warm and searching for him, pleading for Ethan to touch her most intimate places.

Dani seized Ethan’s head with her hands. Opening her eyes, she gazed into his. “Fuck me.”

He set his forehead on hers. His breath fanned her face. “Not yet, little one.”

Her legs tightened around him. “Yes! I need this. You need this.”

Without letting her go, he carried her farther into the cabin and sat down on the couch. He situated her legs on one side of him and cradled her upper body in his embrace. But she was tense, waiting for him to take the next step, hoping he’d hurry.

“I’ll take care of you.” He unbuttoned her jeans and pulled the zipper down, then slid his

palm against the flat of her stomach. He skimmed light fingers from hip bone to hip bone. "Your body...Damn. Perfect. So damn perfect for me."

She lifted her hips off his lap. Digging her shoes into the couch cushion, she arched against his touch. The size and strength of his hands, gentle and soothing upon her skin, had her trusting him completely. He wasn't the man everyone believed he'd become, but the werewolf she'd worshipped and dreamed about for years. The one her father trusted and wanted for her. "More. Please, more."

He slid his hand down farther and grazed his middle finger over her swollen clit. The quick explosion of tiny jolts pulsed deep inside of her and spread throughout her body. The scent of her arousal grew thicker. She fell back on his lap, lost in the pleasure flooding her body.

"Take it, Dani. You'll be all right." Ethan slid his finger lower and teased the opening of her pussy. In. Out. In. Out. He stretched, loosened, and relaxed her inner muscles. He swiped his tongue along the length of his bottom lip, then brought his hand back to her clit and rubbed in a circular motion. "You're so wet, so innocent."

The light, gentle pressure warmed her body. "Yes."

Ethan's gaze softened, yet there was no doubting the intense control in the depth of his stare. The color of his irises changed from dark to yellow, his wolf showing itself through his eyes, speaking to her soul, telling her everything

would be all right. To trust, and let him take care of her.

She moaned, but the sound was foreign and came from somewhere hidden inside of her. As if her wolf understood what was happening and wanted to come out and communicate with Ethan's wolf.

He captured her mouth and slipped his tongue between her lips. He growled against her mouth and urged her to open more. Wanting to please him, she teased, sucked, explored, and kissed him back.

She grasped his wrist, holding him in place as she ground her pussy against his fingers, heightening her pleasure. She groaned into his mouth, her wolf growing stronger.

She was close.

He rubbed her nub harder, faster. She pulled away from the kiss and arched her back. The muscles in her lower stomach tightened and somewhere deep within her womb a delightful pressure sent her over the edge filling her with the sweetest release.

Dani collapsed in Ethan's arms. He slipped his hand out of her pants. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, she curled against his chest. His heart drummed alongside her cheek. She couldn't make herself move.

"Rest, little one." Ethan strummed her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "I'll protect you.

Even after her breathing evened and she sighed in her sleep, Dani never gave up her hold on his shirt. Ethan stared down at her face, trying to figure out why his heart seemed to come alive since she found him. Her eyes were shut, but underneath those eyelids, the rapid movement told him she dreamed. His gut tightened. It bothered him that someone so young and alone had spent months worried about Greggoire, her brother, and her life.

In the dim light of the room, he let his head fall to the back of the couch. He closed his eyes. His balls ached. It helped that Dani had orgasmed earlier, but she was still in heat. She'd wake up ready to mate and wouldn't stop until he took her virginity and claimed her as his own.

Life mate.

Once he took her, they'd be linked forever. Her wolf with his wolf. A telepathic communication would exist only between them. Forever. They'd walk side by side through their lives concentrating on each other's happiness before their own. Forever.

I'm scared to death.

Unlike humans who met, fell in love, and made a responsible decision to live together until death takes them apart...or they found someone new and moved on to a happier union, werewolves were different. An attraction from the male started at the onset of the female's heat cycle. The ritual of mating would bind them

forever. Never would he turn to another she-wolf in his lifetime.

But would that be so bad? He found her sexier than hell.

Ethan combed his fingers through her shoulder-length hair. He smiled. He had to wake her up. He wouldn't argue with himself any longer, for he was anxious to go back home. Back in the pack, he'd have the best chances of taking out Greggoire once and for all. And he was tired of being alone.

Damn, there's so much to teach her.

"Dani?" He trailed his thumb over her lips.

She turned her head. With her eyes closed and her mouth slightly open, she tried to locate his touch. He teased the edge of her bottom lip and she latched on, sucking his finger to the first digit. He sucked in a breath and his dick hardened. She used her tongue to caress his skin as she tried to suck more into her mouth.

He stopped touching her and chuckled at the way she whined for him to continue. "How did this happen, little one? All these years, and you are the one who grabbed my attention. You made me believe I have a chance to go back to the pack and mend the wrongs from long ago. And I don't want to let you go." He lifted her up, carried her to the one bed in the cabin and laid her down.

Dani blinked awake and stretched her arms above her head. "Ethan?" She sat up in a rush. "Oh, God, I thought you'd left me."

“Never.” He lay down beside her and pulled her into his embrace. “You’re mine and I want you.” He laid tender kisses along her neck as he worked her pants down. He lowered his head and raised her shirt. Rubbing his face on the bare skin of her stomach, he inhaled.

“Yes, do it.” Dani wiggled out of her shirt and tossed it off the bed. She pulled on his shoulders. Kicking off her jeans, she wrapped her leg around his hip. “Make me complete.”

Ethan moved on top of her and paused, staring into her eyes. “Think about this. Don’t do it for revenge. This will change your whole life. I want you as my mate. Do you want me or do you just want to bring your wolf out? I’ll stop...for you.”

She closed her mouth. She gazed back at him with such intensity that he held his breath, afraid she'd change her mind. He was so close. All he had to do was unzip his jeans and he'd fuck her without a second thought. He'd never take her that way though. He wanted her to accept him, not as a protector or someone to help her avenge her family, but as a man...a wolf.

“Ethan...” The pulse at the base of her throat throbbed. She cupped his cheeks with her hands and held him, smiling tenderly. “I want you. You were an idea, a wish...a dream, but once I saw you, I had no doubts. You are the one for me, and it all makes sense now. Call it fate, love, lust, I don’t care. I just know you’re supposed to be my mate. I’ve always known it.

We'll figure it all out. We've got a lifetime together."

"Thank you, little one. I won't disappoint you." He leaned on one hand, undid his zipper with the other, and tugged his jeans past his hips. He trembled at the release of his cock.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. Her eyes changed to golden. "Take me." She thrust her hips up in the air not quite connecting with his hardness. "Help me..."

He lowered his body, placing his cock at her opening. As he pushed himself all the way inside her pussy, he claimed her mouth and groaned. She stiffened at the shock of having him inside her body, and he held himself still, letting her become accustomed to his size. The walls of her vagina squeezed, pushed, yet caressed the length of him. Afraid of shocking her, he used his tongue to show her what he was going to do.

She picked up on the rhythm he set with his mouth, sucking his tongue and tasting him. He rocked his hips from side to side, stretching her.

Soon, Dani matched his movements, her body accepting his. He shuddered as the reality of finding his mate struck.

Unable to hold back, he pumped his pelvis back and forth in a slow, deliberate pace. She arched her back and broke their kiss. He took longer strokes, gazing at her fluttering eyelids. "That's it, baby. Let it happen."

She bucked against him harder. Braced with his weight off her, he thrust harder, deeper, giving her what she needed.

“Ethan!”

She quivered against him as her orgasm milked his cock. He plunged fully inside of her, held himself still, and emptied his cum deep inside her. He trembled as his climax continued to pleasure his body. He rolled to the side, arms around her, taking her with him.

“*Ah, little one.*” He kissed the top of her head before tucking her against his chest. “*You are mine.*”

She gasped. “*I can hear you.*”

“Yes.” He nodded. “*We’ve connected our wolves.*”

She sighed.

“*Forever.*” Ethan stroked her back. An giddy feeling overcame him and he smiled. “*We’ve made our wolves happy. They have found each other.*”

Dani pushed up onto her elbow. “*Ethan. I’ll be able to shift now.*” She tried to rise from the bed, but Ethan pulled her back down beside him. “*I want to let her come out.*”

“*Slow down, little one. You’ll be able to experience it all, but...*” He reached out and tugged a strand of her hair, bringing her face closer. His gaze slid over her eyes, nose, and down to her mouth. “*We still have your heat cycle to enjoy first.*”

“*I did okay?*”

“*You were perfect.*”

Chapter Three

Dani marched across the clearing, reached down to the ground beside the fir tree, and picked up the knife. Straightening, she blew the bangs off her forehead. She'd practiced for two hours and she still couldn't hit the tree. Every time she threw the weapon it bounced off the trunk as if she had thrown a rock.

Jogging back to the front of the cabin, she gazed down the dirt road and cocked her head. Even with her advanced hearing, she couldn't hear the drone of Ethan's truck coming. He should have returned already. She figured the trip to tell his boss that he'd quit would be a quick one.

She rotated her shoulders to loosen her muscles the way Ethan had shown her. Inhaled through her nose and slowly let the air out her mouth. *Relax. I can do this.*

Turning the knife around, she laid the pointed blade against the side of her longest finger and pinched down with her thumb. She had to relax. Ethan had said it was all in staying calm and keeping your thoughts clear and focused.

She timed her breathing to match her movements. Raising her arm, she brought her

hand up beside her ear, stepped forward, and threw the knife ahead of her in one fluid motion.

Thunk.

Dani squinted, squealed, and ran toward her intended target. Deeply embedded in the rough bark, the knife stuck out exactly how Ethan had told her it would if she threw it right. She'd thrown it straight, solid, and now it was harder than hell to get out.

She leaned her shoulder against the tree and pulled out the knife. A powerful confidence came over her. Ethan had told her that when she learned to protect herself with the weapons he'd provided, she'd be allowed to shift. For some reason, he believed she must be at her most vulnerable state before she could grow strong. Whatever the heck that was supposed to mean.

She didn't understand some of his philosophy. Females had the ability to shift the moment they were mated. It'd been a week already, and every day her wolf showed her she wanted to come out.

She could feel the pressure building inside her, urging her to let her control slip and her wolf take the forefront. She gazed down at the blade. Ethan wanted her to wait until she had the skills to protect herself in case she ever got caught unaware.

Anxious to try again, to find out if she'd finally figured out the technique, she sprinted back to the cabin. Positioning her body, she grasped the knife, rocked from heel to toe and let go.

“Yes!”

After throwing ten more times, she was certain that Ethan would claim she’d mastered the skill when he got home. She wrinkled her nose. “*Ethan? Can you hear me?*”

Dani stuck the knife in the leather sheath Ethan had fashioned for the back of her jeans and strolled down the tire tracks in the direction he’d driven the truck. He didn’t answer her, but telepathic communication only worked if your mate was within close vicinity. *Mate.*

She stopped and smiled before heading to the cabin. She still wasn’t used to suddenly being concerned about another person’s whereabouts, happiness, and satisfaction. She picked up her pace and hurried into the house. She’d surprise him with dinner when he got home. Maybe afterwards, he’d let her shift.

Frowning, she grabbed two store-bought pot pies out of the almost bare freezer and shook her head. This was no way for a man the size of Ethan to eat. When they returned to Drover, she’d feed her mate right. She might not be the best fighter, but she was a damn fine cook.

A low rumble distracted her from putting the pies in the oven. She rushed to the door, flung it open, and jumped the steps into the yard.

Finally.

The county fire ranger truck pulled up in front, the passenger door opened, and Ethan climbed out. He waved to the man inside and turned toward the house carrying a sack. Dani

hooked her thumbs into the front pocket of her jeans and smiled. She'd missed him.

Ethan grabbed her around the waist with his free hand, pulled her close, and leaned down to nuzzle her neck. She laughed. "What do you have?"

He stepped back without letting her go.

"Dinner. Roast beef sandwiches with the works."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you." She snatched the bag out of his grasp. "You have a serious food shortage here. I can't wait to fix you a real home cooked meal. None of those frozen entrees that taste like cardboard with gravy poured over them." She held the bag up to her nose and inhaled deeply. "That smells so good. I can't believe how starved I am."

Ethan chuckled. "How did you do with the knife throwing?"

She lowered the bag and bounced on her toes. "I did it. After you left, I thought I'd never get the hang of it, but once I did it, I stayed consistent and hit the tree exactly the way I was supposed to do every single time."

"Here, give me the food and show me what you can do. Good luck." He kissed her lips and took the bag.

Dani stepped a couple feet away, slipped her knife out of the sheath, and without taking all the premeditated moves from earlier, threw the knife straight into the tree. She turned and grinned. "I'm good, huh?"

Ethan laughed. "You've made great progress this week. You can shoot the pistols, rifles,

throw knives, and next we'll work on your fighting skills." He lost his smile and the lines on his forehead returned.

"What are you thinking? If it's about your plan to teach me how to protect myself, I'm learning. I'll do it. You just said I was doing well. I'll become a skilled fighter."

"This is serious. I don't think you have any idea what we're getting ourselves into." He motioned for her to follow him. "We'll eat out here."

She sat across from him on the picnic table at the side of the cabin and took a sandwich. "Ethan, I know what I have to do. My life would mean nothing if I walked away and left my brother's fate to Greggoire. You've taught me so much already. You have the weapons that will kill him. We can do this. I know we can."

"It takes more than silver bullets and silver-coated blades to kill a werewolf." He bit into the bread, chewed, and swallowed. "Packmates you thought were your friends will come after you....me. It's in our blood to protect the alpha. It pisses me off to think Greggoire is the pack's leader. He's a beta at best." His mouth tightened.

The pain etched in the set of his jaw and the narrowing of his eyes hurt her physically. His unspoken worries left her jittery and stressed, and she'd yet to figure out how she could help him be at peace. Something as soft as feathers brushed against her heart. This was her mate. Her other half.

She pulled a paper napkin out of the sack, wiped her mouth, and decided the time was right to ask Ethan something she'd wondered about for years. "Why were you banned? You were the alpha. Everything I've ever heard about you gave me the impression that you followed the rules. I don't understand."

Ethan popped the rest of the sandwich between his lips and ran his forearm across his mouth. "I had no choice." He stood up and peered off into the distance.

"Tell me. Please."

He rubbed the back of his neck. *"It's an ugly story, little one."*

Dani pulled her legs out from underneath the table, stood, and walked in front of Ethan. She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. "Please."

He ran his hand over her hair. Gentle and loving, he caressed her as if she were the most precious thing in his life. "Long ago, before you were even born, I was the alpha of the pack."

His hand stilled, but his heartbeat raced against her ear. She closed her eyes. Going from alpha to a lone wolf must have nearly killed him.

"Even back then, the pack was divided. Greggoire's family on one side, with my family, the Tolenes, on the other side. It'd always been that way. Bad blood between them went back generations despite us being distant relatives. Each male from the family fought over the alpha position. The Tolenes were always the winners, but Greggoire..." He sighed. "It came time for me

to replace my father as alpha. Dad wanted to retire.”

Dani nodded against Ethan. She’d seen many challenges. A young male would fight for the alpha position, just like her father had with Greggoire. The fight wasn’t supposed to last until death, but until the weaker male submitted to the alpha. She swallowed. Greggoire had not let her father submit, but had killed him outright.

“*Are you okay?*” Ethan pulled back and gazed down at her face.

She laid her head back down. “*Yes. Go on.*”

“The day of the challenge, two she-wolves were murdered.” Ethan’s hands stiffened against her back. “Stabbed through the heart with a silver-plated knife and left where someone would walk up on them.”

“That’s how my mom was killed.” Stepping back, she gripped her hair with angry fists. “Oh, God, Ethan. Greggoire’s been the one doing this to the pack the whole time. Why can’t the others see how evil he is?”

“*It gets worse, little one.*” He leaned against the tree she’d used for target practice. “One of them was my sister, and the other woman was her friend. Greggoire spoke in front of the pack and gave them a story about how I had killed Sharon because I didn’t want Greggoire to become her life mate...he said I wanted her for myself. I supposedly killed my sister because she witnessed the murder.”

She narrowed her eyes. *"Bullshit. You'd never."*

"No. I wouldn't." His gaze softened. "You didn't hesitate to defend my innocence. Maybe you should think about what I've told you, because in the pack's eyes, I'm a killer. I was banned that night and left everything familiar to me. I, the future alpha, did what I swore I'd never do...leave the pack to survive on their own, but I also couldn't go against the rules that were placed there by my ancestors. Without them, chaos would reign, and no one would be safe."

"No one is safe!"

He growled, his wolf snarling with frustrated rage. "And, because of being forced out of the position I was born for, trained for...needed, more of the people I love, you love, have suffered."

"Ethan—"

"No." He pushed himself away from the tree. "I'll never forgive myself for falling into Greggoire's trap."

Dani stood frozen to the spot and gazed after Ethan as he stormed to the cabin. She flinched at the sound of the door slamming behind him.

"There was nothing you could do. No one will blame you once they know the truth."

"I don't know, little one. I don't know..."

Chapter Four

Dani leaned over and braced her hands on her knees. Sweat ran off her hair into her eyes. She gasped for air. "Oh, God, I'm going to die."

Ethan pulled her back up into a standing position and smacked her on the ass. "You're out of shape. Concentrate." He raised his open hands in front of him, his fingers relaxed.

She lifted her chin, raised her fist, and remembered to tuck her thumbs so she wouldn't break them. "Okay. I'm ready."

Ethan punched incredibly fast, and she jabbed the air deflecting his strikes. He refused to hit her and instead tried to tap her body. On her chest, her face, her shoulders, his hands were everywhere, boom, boom, boom, one after another, challenging her.

Her arm and back muscles burned fiercely. They'd trained all day, beginning at sunrise and stopping only for lunch to keep up their strength. Even so, her stomach screamed for food. Her wolf grew bigger and stronger every day, demanding more of her energy.

Ethan's aims were quick, precise. Left, right, down, up, she knocked his hands away. No longer overheated, she gained her second wind and deflected his attacks even faster, forcing Ethan to step up his game. Her reactions came

automatically, no longer within her conscious mind, but she anticipated his every move.

Inside her body, a powerful force rushed to the surface. Ethan threw up his hands and backed up, grinning. She stared him down, her bones quivering. An almost feral growl came from her throat. *“Ethan?”*

“Go ahead, little one. Take off your clothes. Let your wolf come out. This is why I had you wait. You have not only learned the skills required for protecting yourself, but you have taught your wolf to guard you when you are the most vulnerable.”

She scrambled to remove her clothes. The dam she'd built the last week broke. Finally, she could let her wolf come. Her adrenaline spiked, and she swiftly inhaled. She'd finally meet her hidden wolf. Happiness bubbled inside her.

Dani fell to her hands and knees. She arched as bones cracked and transformed her into her canine species. An explosion of sensations released within her core and flowed throughout her body. Fur grew where there was once skin, and her jaw lengthened. She yelled in surprise, but only a yip from her wolf sounded.

She gazed up at Ethan. Her vision so sharp and the colors so vibrant, she stared in wonder. He was beautiful and his smile was only for her.

Her formerly tired muscles tingled with energy. She wanted to run, hunt, and stretch her legs.

The patter of soft quick footsteps came from the edge of the forest to her right, and she

turned her head. She flicked her ears, snapped her jaws, and sniffed. All senses zoned in on the...umm...rabbit. Her stomach growled.

“Ethan, my wolf is starving. I don’t think she liked how hard you worked me today.”

The hair on her side shifted, and she tensed. Ethan had changed while her attention was drawn to the woods and now stood beside her as a wolf. She stepped closer and rolled on the ground biting him under the neck.

Dark gray with silver highlights lined his fur. He was gorgeous. His eyes glowed yellow in a familiar way. She’d witnessed his eyes changing during lovemaking, and it had never failed to turn her on. Ethan was a spectacular man, and it didn’t surprise her a bit that his wolf was even more beautiful. Regal, majestic, and bigger than life, the alpha in him proudly displayed for all to see.

“Are you ready to run, little one?” He nipped her belly.

Dani flopped over and shot to her feet. *“Yes! I can’t wait.”*

“Let’s see if you can catch that rabbit.” Ethan sprinted toward the trees.

She followed close behind, sniffing the air. If she were in her human body, she’d be jumping off the ground and shouting out her happiness at this moment. She was alive, complete, and more content than she’d ever been in her life.

The hunger gnawing on her insides all week grew. She ran ahead of Ethan. The rich bloody scent of the food available in the woods excited

her. She planned to satisfy her out-of-control appetite she'd suffered since going through her heat cycle.

"You're on your own, little one. Go feed." He slowed down and left her to her run. *"I'm proud of you, mate. You are a beautiful wolf."*

* * *

Ethan lay on his back in the grass underneath an old alder tree with his arms folded behind his head, ankles crossed, eyes closed. Dani stalked a straight line toward him, slowed down, and crept closer. Within four feet of him, she saw his hard, flat stomach shaking with laughter.

She shifted and pounced on him. Straddling his waist, she planted both hands on each side of his head. "I almost gotcha."

He cracked his eyelids open and grasped her around the waist. "Did you have a good run?"

"Mmm..." She ducked her head. "Yes, but it would have been nicer if you had come along."

"I'm here now." He thrust his hips. "I was dreaming about you."

She leaned down and gave him a long, slow kiss before nibbling her way along his jaw and over to his ear, where she licked the lobe. "What was I doing in your dream?"

He sucked in his breath. "Almost this exact thing, little one."

He lifted her away from him to search her eyes. Without the slightest hesitation, she smoothed the lines off his forehead. Her lips parted with the excitement he aroused in her. She hadn't had to wait to fall in love with him. The solidity of them coming together filled her with a sense of loving him for a lifetime. No guesses, no doubts...the love they shared magically appeared.

Ethan made a rough sound in his throat, and the ridge of his cock pressed against her bottom. He skimmed his fingers over her ribcage, her breasts, and her sensitive nipples. He cupped her fullness, then stroked the soft undersides. Her pulse jumped into her throat.

Everything about him turned her on. The woodsy scent she'd recognize anywhere, the way he always watched her, and most of all, how he showed her his love with whispered words and soft kisses at the oddest times. She stretched forward, her breasts within an inch of his mouth. His mouth opened, and her pussy grew damp. Her lower lips swelled. She craved the fullness only he brought her.

With his tongue, he flicked her nipple, leaving her gasping. He tasted, caressed, and nuzzled the valley between her curves. She squirmed, shifting closer to his cock, until she was able to rub up and down his length, driving them both wild.

"Take...them...off." She moaned.

Ethan reached down and undid his jeans. Using his feet, he pulled the material past his

hips. She settled back down. Heat radiated off his cock, and her pussy spasmed. She grasped the thick base of his dick and rubbed the head against her clit as she gyrated on top of him. She was already so hot and wet that she knew she wouldn't last long.

Ethan groaned as her body slid over his. With one hand on her hip, he reached to cup her breast. She went crazy. The intense friction and stimulation turned her into some kind of crazed sexual creature. No longer separated from her wolf, she let herself go.

She cried out and convulsed. Her lower muscles, her legs, and her stomach all tightened and relaxed rhythmically into thousands of pulses of pleasure that coursed through her body.

A guttural moan escaped Ethan. He pressed into her wetness hard and deep. Her pussy squeezed over every little twinge of his release. She lowered her upper body to his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her back.

"You are mine, little one."

She closed her eyes and smiled. *"I would not survive without you."*

Chapter Five

The early morning sun broke through the trees, shooting light beams onto the forest floor. Dani slowed down to a walk. She'd spent hours running through the woods in the dark, loving her ability to view a world she hadn't experienced before.

The wildlife around these parts were party animals who stayed safe in their homes during the day, but at night came out to hunt, socialize, and scamper playfully in the deep woodlands. She laughed. It was the perfect social scene for a newly shifted werewolf to try her new abilities to hunt.

With her stomach full and her mind quiet, she loped toward the cabin. Ethan gave her one full night to hone her skills. Shifting from her wolf to her human body at will, she was more confident than ever that she'd soon have her brother back in her arms. *Hang in there, Jordan. I'm coming.*

The grief she'd experienced after the deaths of her parents paled in comparison to the loss of her brother. It'd taken her mother many years to have a second child, as it does when one is a werewolf. Dani had helped her mother bring the pup into the world, taken part in his care, and had loved him the way a parent loves a child.

The birth had taken much out of her mother, and her father had asked her to step up to care for the baby.

She should have had Jordan the night her mother was slain instead of believing her mother was strong enough to take over for one night. If she would have stayed with her mom, and if she'd had her wolf, maybe she could have fought long enough for someone to notice or hear her screams. *Woulda, shoulda, coulda...be damned.*

Jordan was somewhere without a person who loved him the way she did. Was he hungry? Had he learned to walk? Say his first word? Did someone hug him, kiss him, and make his world secure so he had no worries? She picked up her pace. It was past time to get back what was wrongfully taken from her.

She continued to run in her hurry to get back and start on their plan. Without missing a step, she shifted into her human form by the time she reached the edge of the woods where she had piled her clothes. "*Ethan?*"

"*Yes, little one.*"

"*I want to go now.*" She zipped her jeans, checked to find her knife in its sheath, then leaned over to tie her shoelaces.

"*I'm already ahead of you. I've got everything we need packed in your car.*"

She smiled. "*I love you. No matter what happens...*"

"*Come to me, Dani.*"

* * *

Ethan gazed around the small cabin, positive he'd stripped the inside clean. No proof of his stay remained. He'd called this area home for the last six years, and yet, he didn't feel as if he was losing a part of his past, but forging into the future. Drover had always been home to him even when he'd turned his back on everything he loved. His heart remained in the territory he'd once claimed.

He had fallen comfortably into his job as a county forest ranger. He'd hid from his troubles, finding sanctuary within the cabin and the surrounding woods. It had been a good life, satisfying to an extent. Only when Dani had showed up had he realized how lonely he'd been and how wrong he was about staying away.

The pack needed him, and he'd do his best to make things right even if he died trying. Too many years had gone by. From what Dani told him, the safety and close-knit community from his childhood was long gone. The pack was in more danger than ever.

"Ethan!"

He dropped the backpack and hurried to the door. *"Dani, what's wrong?"*

The door swung open, bouncing off the hard wooden wall. Dani stood in the doorway, a giant smile lighting her face. "You'll never believe what I remembered coming back to the house."

He let his head fall back, stared up at the ceiling, and willed his heart to slow down. "Don't ever yell like that. I thought you were in danger." He straightened, inhaled, and grabbed her shoulders, tugging her close. "I can't survive if something were to happen to you."

"I'm sorry." She pulled on his arm. "I didn't mean to scare you, but I remembered something I overheard my father tell Butch Danielson. Do you remember him...he's married to the human who runs the convenience store at Third and Alder?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I know him."

"Dad and Butch were talking outside the house...I must have been around seventeen, eighteen years old." She shook her head. "I'm not positive, but it was years ago—"

"And?" He clasped her upper arms to keep her from pacing. "What did you hear?"

"Dad said that the only way to bring Greggoire down was to get rid of Loren." She scoffed. "I didn't listen to anymore of their talk. At the time, I didn't concern myself with the way the pack was run, but I knew my dad was always unhappy with Greggoire and his family. Do you know who Loren is? Is he important?"

Ethan let Dani go, rubbed his jaw, and frowned. "That doesn't make sense. Are you sure you were that old?"

Her brows drew together in thought. He waited, also remembering. But what she recalled wasn't possible. There was no way she'd heard

right, unless... He counted the years back. *No, it doesn't add up. It was before Dani was born.*

"I was eighteen." She nodded. "I'm positive."

His blood roared in his ears. He shook his head. *"Impossible, little one."*

"It's true. Why would I make something like that up?" She ran her hand along his arm.

He jerked. "Tell me what you were doing that day you overheard your father and Butch Danielson."

"O-kay." She felt his forehead. "You don't look so well. What are you thinking? Do you think I remembered something important?"

"Please, Dani. Tell me what you were doing before you overheard." He clasped her shoulder. "Don't leave anything out."

"I-I had just arrived home from work. I worked at the bowling alley that summer after I graduated high school." She swallowed. "Mom was somewhere else...I don't remember. She was probably over at Butch's house down the street. Mrs. Danielson was her closest friend and lives down the street from our house. They'd visit each other almost every afternoon."

His hand tightened. *My God, if this is true...* "Go on."

"I grabbed an apple to eat out of the kitchen, and went back into the living room and sat down on the couch. The window above where I was sitting was open, because it was a really warm day. Butch's voice rose, and my dad told him to quiet. That's what drew my attention. I was curious to find out what was so secret that my

dad would tell his friend to hush. The next thing he said was they'd need to get rid of Loren if they were going to succeed at bringing Greggoire down." Dani wrinkled her nose. "My dad was easy going, he never got angry, but I could hear the frustration in his voice and it confused me."

"Okay...okay." Ethan let Dani go, turned, and headed out the door.

"What is it? Do you know who Loren is?" She followed him outside and sat on the step.

"Let me figure this out, little one." He paced back and forth. Why would Dani's father mention Loren? Loren was dead. He'd died many years ago... She must have the names mixed up.

"You're making me nervous." She wrapped her arms around her legs and set her chin on her knee. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No." He stopped and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. "I just can't figure out why the name Loren would even come up in your dad's conversation."

"Who is he? Is he someone you remember? There's no one in Drover with that name that I know of, unless it's someone who comes from the pack down in Shiloh. Heck, it might not even be a werewolf, but some guy who my dad knew."

"I know who it is. Loren is...was...Greggoire's twin brother." He paused. "His deceased brother."

Chapter Six

The car sat idle outside of Drover with Dani in the driver's seat. Ethan paced between the vehicle and the road that would lead them into the small rural town. She drummed her fingers against the steering wheel.

Before she'd left to find Ethan, her plans to get her brother back had been only a dream. This time, she and Ethan would wage war against the alpha. That was unheard of within the werewolves. Challenges for the lead position were done in an organized manner. What they planned was premeditated murder.

The passenger door opened and Ethan slid into the seat. "It's time." He reached into the backseat and removed two pistols from where Dani had hidden them under some blankets. "From here on out, you'll wear a pistol in the back waistband of your pants. Make sure you leave your shirt untucked. I'd rather no one know that you are armed. Do you have the knife in your boot?"

Leaning over, she lifted the hem of her jeans. The wooden handle lay visible against her skin, the silver-coated blade nestled between two pairs of socks to keep it off her skin. "I thought the plan was to lay low."

“It is.” He peered out the car window. “My arrival is going to cause Greggoire to see blood. You have to be prepared for him. No telling what he’ll do to save his position in the pack. It’s going to piss him off that you came back with my scent all over you.”

She shuddered. “Ew. I think that’s one thing that won’t faze him. He’s never sniffed around me. In fact, none of the men have ever sought my attention. Maybe I’m unappealing.”

He snorted. “You are the most beautiful woman...she-wolf, I have ever known.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “You’re sweet, but it doesn’t count. You’re my life mate. You didn’t stand a chance of getting away from me. The other guys... She rolled her eyes and shrugged off her concern. “I didn’t get a second look.”

“That had more to do with your dad, little one.” He slid his seatbelt on and motioned for her to go. “He was a respected elder. It is my job to protect you now that your father is gone.”

“My dad would have been a great leader, if...” She sighed and pulled out onto the main road. “Do I drive right to my house?”

“Yeah.” He reached back and grabbed another pistol. Pulling out a handful of silver bullets, he packed the weapon before loading another gun. “Tonight, we’ll prepare. In the morning, the fun will start.”

Less than fifteen minutes later, Ethan rushed Dani into the house and shut the door behind them. She tossed her bag over in the

corner of the living room and plopped down on the couch. "Home, sweet home. Come here. I've missed having you hold me." She patted the cushion.

He stood with his back against the door, the large duffle bag full of weapons hanging off his shoulder. He compressed his lips together, and his eyes shifted to the yellow shade of his wolf. He stared at the room as if any moment someone would jump out and want to fight.

"Ethan?"

"It reeks."

"I was gone for over a week." She pushed herself off the sofa and stepped toward the window. *"I'll open some windows. It'll be aired out in—"*

"Stop." Ethan moved across the room, sniffed, and headed down the hallway. *"Stay in the living room."*

"What's wrong?" Dani rubbed her bare arm.

Moments later, he came back into the room frowning. "I can smell Greggoire all over the house. He's marked your home, you, as belonging to him."

A shiver traveled up her back. "He's never set foot in here. Not when my father was alive and definitely not afterwards either. Are you saying he came in here when I was gone? I can't smell anything different." She turned to open the hutch near the kitchen and removed her grandmother's porcelain cookie jar. Reaching inside, she sagged in relief. "Oh, thank you, God.

The savings bonds from my parents are still here.”

“He wasn’t after your money.” Ethan took the container and put it back on the shelf. He gathered her hand in his, led her to the couch and sat beside her. He pulled her close. “You’re not safe here, little one. I want you away from Drover. Let me take care of Greggoire, get your brother back, and win my place back within the pack. You mean too much to me to put you in danger.”

“You want me to go away?” Heaviness settled around her heart. They’d fallen in love, mated, became closer than any human ever could...and he wanted to send her away? She stared at her hands clasped together in her lap. “Just leave it all up to you? I would never give up finding Jordan. I don’t plan on giving up even with your help. No.”

“Dani—”

“Don’t Dani me, Ethan Tolene.” She turned and seized the front of his shirt. “Do you know how hard I worked at keeping myself hidden in this house while my body craved to mate? It drove me insane, but there were two reasons why I succeeded. One...If I could save myself for you, I knew it would be the answer to finding my brother. Two...Somehow, I knew you were my mate without even meeting you. I love you, but I won’t give up bringing my brother home where he belongs. I owe my parents, I owe Jordan and without him, I’d never be content.”

“I can bring him back to you.”

“I can’t let you do it alone. Most days it feels as if someone is pulling my heart out of my chest. I miss the way his warm head used to lay against my chest when I rocked him to sleep. Sometimes, I swear I can smell the sweet, moist scent of him and I panic. He’s out there, Ethan, and he’s all alone. He needs me as much as a child needs his mother. I...need...him. Don’t ask me to give up this fight.”

Ethan ran both hands through his hair. “I didn’t stand a chance, did I?”

“No.” She kissed his lips. “How about we slip outside and go for a run? You need to relax a little before all hell breaks loose tomorrow.”

“Too dangerous.” He pulled her onto his lap and nuzzled her neck. “I have something else that’ll help.”

She smiled. He caressed the base of her throat with his tongue. She squirmed against him. Her lower stomach quivered, and juice rushed to the surface of her pussy. “Mmm. I think I really like your other idea. We’ve worked too hard the last few days. I need you.”

“I don’t even know where your bed is, little one.” He cupped her sex. His gaze softened. “You’re all warm.”

“Bed. Down the hall. Right door.” Tugging his hair, she pulled his mouth off her throat. “Please. I need...” She whined and clung to his shoulders.

Ethan marched down the hall with Dani in his arms. Kicking the door open, he set her on her feet and took off his shirt. She turned on the

lamp beside the bed, squinting as the light filled the room. Having her wolf's vision made her forget such ordinary things, like that she could see in the dark as well as the daylight.

"Let's keep the light off, little one. The fewer who learn that you've returned to Drover with a mate, the better it'll be." Ethan stepped out of his jeans. He stripped out of his clothes and stood in front of her in all his splendor.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She lowered her gaze to his chest, following the narrow path of hair down to his flat stomach to his cock. She reached out. "Can I taste you? Like you did to me the other night. Please." She dropped to her knees.

A simple nod answered her question. She wet her lips. Leaning forward, she gently licked the slit at the end of his engorged cock. His hips twitched, and he growled. Encouraged, she sucked more length into her mouth.

Ethan's hardness covered in smooth, baby-soft skin glided in and out over her moist lips. She swallowed, tightening her hold, and he sank his hands into her hair. She marveled at how big, tough, and strong he was; yet, the very part of him that brought her so much pleasure was a mix of power and gentleness.

The sweet musky scent associated with his wolf filled her nostrils. She shivered. A rush of intense pleasure flooded her lower stomach. Her panties became damp. She'd have to get used to that...no matter what Ethan did, she seemed to exist in a constant level of hyper-awareness.

Reaching up, she cupped his sac and flicked her fingers over the soft skin. His balls drew up tight. He thrust into her mouth before catching himself and pulling back. She opened her jaw wider and his cock slipped farther inside. It threatened to gag her, but she forced herself to relax. Ethan would never hurt her, and the more she was able to take in her mouth, the more satisfaction he'd receive.

"That feels so good." He stroked her hair. "Your tight little mouth loving me, stroking me..."

She slid her hands onto his hips. He clenched his ass. She squeezed his tight backside and sank her mouth down on him more until the tip of his cock tickled her throat. Not letting up on the suction she'd created, she pulled her head back until she had only the bulbous head of his dick in her mouth.

"Oh, Jesus." Ethan arched his back and came up on his toes.

Dani plunged forward, back, forward, swallowing on the upstroke to keep pressure on him.

"If you don't want my cum sprayed down your throat..." He reached out and held onto the high post at the corner of the bed, legs shaking. "You better...let me go."

She groaned, feeling vibrations flutter over the rock-hard surface of his cock, but refusing to pull away. Pleasure pulsed through her cunt. She pressed her nails into the skin of his ass. Over and over, she stroked him with her mouth.

He came with his hands tangled in her hair. She swallowed the hot, salty cum. She cleaned him as she withdrew, enjoying the way his body twitched with the slightest of touches. Every twinge, grunt, and groan she produced from him fueled her craving.

“Come, little one. Off with your pants.” Helping her up, he framed her face with his big, strong hands, his gaze soft and warm. “It’s my turn to show you what you just did for me. I want to drive you wild.”

The rest of her clothes fell to the floor. “I did okay then? You enjoyed it?” She scooted back to the middle of the bed and opened her legs.

He settled on the edge of the bed and parted her folds with his tongue. She sighed, liquid heat pooling in her lower stomach.

“It was amazing,” he murmured against her clit. He slid his hands under her butt and lifted her higher, using his tongue to circle the sensitive bud. He nibbled on her clit. “You’re so beautiful, so wet and ready. I could live off your cream.”

She plopped back on the bed and her back arched. She fisted the bedspread at her sides. “Oh...my...God.”

He lavished her pussy without leaving her clit ignored for too long. Her pussy spasmed and her breath came fast. *Oh. Oh. Oh.*

“Yes. *This is what you do to me.*” He brushed his little finger over her anus. “*One day, I want to have this part of you too. I want to see my cock*

deep in your little hole as you come, squeezing me."

He thrust his tongue into her pussy, stretching, stroking every delicious spot. She bucked against his face. "Ethan!"

The building tension in her core rose to a fevered pitch. Unable to take anymore, she reached out, every muscle tense and ready to explode. He spread her lower lips with his fingers and attached his mouth to her nub while letting his chin press against her slit. He rolled her clit between his lips. Her body grew hotter and her muscles spasmed at the same time a wave of release exploded through her middle, spreading into her limbs. She collapsed on the bed and let her body ride out the powerful orgasm.

Ethan crawled up beside her and gathered her in his embrace. She nuzzled his chest. His heart raced. She closed her eyes and smiled. *"I love you, mate. I knew life mates had a special bond, but I never imagined ever feeling this way about another."*

"I love you too, little one." He kissed the top of her head. *"Sleep. Tomorrow we'll need all our strength."*

She sighed. They'd never be completely content until Ethan won back his alpha position and Jordan was home. *"Promise me that everything will be okay. We'll win against Greggoire."*

"I promise." He pulled her tighter against his body. *"I'll do whatever it takes."*

Chapter Seven

The next morning, a crowd of men had gathered in front of Dani's home, forming a straight line on the quiet street the length of the one-story ranch house. The hair on Ethan's body stood up, but he kept control over his wolf. He wanted nothing more than to shift and meet the Drover pack on his own terms, but it figured that Greggoire was watching the pack's movements and had known the moment they'd arrived back in Drover.

Ethan guessed that Greggoire wanted to keep the appearance of control, and to force them to reveal their plans prematurely. At some point, Ethan would have to show them all that he was still the alpha he was raised to be and bring order to the mess they'd created. He glanced over at Dani. Inside his wolf growled. It was inbred in him to take charge, but the timing wasn't right. He had to think of his mate's needs first.

He turned away from the window and led her farther back in the house away from the danger. He stroked her skin, letting his confidence calm her nerves. The tension he sensed outside could quickly grow out of control, and he didn't want her caught in the middle.

The delicate bones in her wrist rolled beneath his touch, and he strummed his thumb along the pulsing vein running up the inside of her arm. "Keep your wolf controlled unless the pack gives you no other choice but to shift. Every one of them standing outside will sense fear, and if you shift, they'll take it as a threat."

"I know." She stretched up and kissed him. "I'll handle myself. Let's get this over with."

Ethan surveyed her body, checking that every weapon was hidden. The bulge on her stomach and the ridge on her calf under her jeans were apparent to him. He knew her body like it was his own, but he gambled on the others not noticing the arsenal she carried. He gave her a firm kiss and softened it with a sigh. "Remember everything I have taught you." Today, he meant to introduce the pack to the idea that their former alpha had come back, but he wasn't stupid. It would not be easy.

Conversations came to an abrupt stop the second the door clicked behind them. Heads turned in their direction, and the musky odor wafting off everyone slammed into Ethan as if someone had taken a baseball bat to his midsection. He stepped out of the house with Dani holding his hand but trailing a step behind him. If someone flew at him, he wanted his body between the attacker and the woman he loved.

He stopped at the edge of the grassy area where the pavement of Copper Road began. No werewolf would step onto another's property without permission. Now that he'd become

Dani's mate, it was his right to defend their private territory. That included the land around the house. Years ago, their lands were acres, often miles wide, but slowly over time, the area had shrunk to private residences. The forest surrounding them was free for all.

The men parted, and Greggoire stepped to the front. Dani squeezed Ethan's fingers. He stilled. Not a muscle twitched, and he kept his breathing regulated. He locked his gaze on the man who'd destroyed his life many years ago and continued to torment him. The closer Greggoire came, Ethan's thirst for blood grew stronger.

He pacified his wolf. *Soon.*

A head shorter than Ethan and more paunchy than before, Greggoire's upper lip twitched revealing his sharp canine teeth. Ethan slipped his hand away from Dani's. If Greggoire wanted to jump into a challenge for position, Ethan wouldn't deny his wolf the pleasure of kicking his enemy's ass.

"What brings you back to Drover, Tolene?" Greggoire swung his gaze to Dani and cocked his brow. "Besides the obvious. What's it been, eight...nine years since you were banned from the pack? Your position isn't secured just because you fucked one of ours."

Ethan widened his stance. He caught several other members shaking their heads in his peripheral vision. He hooked his thumbs in his front pockets. "Six years. I came back with my

mate, and would like to ask for permission back into Drover.”

Wanting to appear as unthreatening as possible, he turned and gazed down at Dani. She stood smiling at him as if he hung the moon.

“Damn, you’re beautiful.” He smiled at her. He turned his attention back to Greggoire knowing with Dani’s support, he could pull off this ruse. *“I’ve missed the support of those of our kind.”*

Greggoire’s brows came down and he narrowed his eyes. *“Surely you haven’t forgotten the terms over the years. You’ll have to challenge for position. And the pack is stronger than you remember.”* He scrunched his mouth as if he tasted something bitter, sniffed, and spat on the ground at Ethan’s feet.

“Don’t let him rile you, Ethan. He wants you to break the rules and attack him right now, so he has an excuse to get rid of you.”

“I know, little one.” He nodded. “The rules are fair. I’ll take the challenge to win my way back into Drover. Thank you, Greggoire. “Pretending to inhale a big breath of relief, he stuck his arm out in front of him and offered to shake hands.

The alpha male backed up, pivoted, and left without any sign he was willing to make amends. Others followed. Ethan stared at the current alpha’s back until Greggoire rounded the corner of the street heading toward his home. *Bastard.*

Dani stepped closer to Ethan. She brushed against him. The power radiating off the contact brought him comfort. She set her hand on the

small of his back. Their wolves, together, would be a force more powerful than Greggoire knew.

"Look at them." She leaned against him. *"All these people visited my home, brought me gifts through the years, and saw to my comfort after my parents were killed. Now no one can even look me in the eye."*

"They are only acting the way they know how, Dani. Their leader's discourse sets them all on edge." He found her hand and clasped it tight within his. *"Come. Let's go back inside until they decide that I will not cause trouble for their alpha."*

* * *

Three hours after going to bed and making love to Ethan, Dani lay awake waiting for the moment his breathing slowed, a sign that he'd fallen into a deeper sleep. He'd worked himself into a bundle of nerves and tension. She'd hoped that bringing him relief, if not emotionally but sexually, would be enough to give her some time alone.

She slid off the bed and tiptoed out of the bedroom. Making sure not to make any noise, she crossed the hall and entered the other bedroom.

Jordan's room.

Her throat muscles constricted and she forced herself to swallow. Her baby brother's

white crib sat against the wall. The mobile hung unmoving from the ceiling. She reached into the crib, and removed the blue baby blanket. For months, she'd wondered if her more enhanced senses after mating and releasing her wolf would help her find Jordan. Tonight she'd find out.

She carried the last material Jordan had touched to the living room. A year ago, she'd swaddled Jordan in the soft blue fabric. Then she'd found it on the ground not far from her mom's murdered body later that night.

Holding the fleece up to her nose, Dani inhaled deeply. *There.*

The sweet, powdery innocence of her brother hid underneath the staleness of the old, unwashed blanket. She blinked back the tears. *Oh, Jordy. You probably have no idea how much I miss you and wish you were here.*

She set the blanket aside, went to the front door and cracked it open. She'd waited months to mate, months for her wolf to emerge along with her heightened sense of smell so she could search for Jordan. She was positive she'd find him, because who knew him better than she did? She'd cared for him, holding him constantly while her mother recovered her strength. Jordan was part of her, and she'd be able to pick up his scent more easily than even Ethan.

She set her ear into the crack, discovering that no strangers were outside waiting to ambush her. She glanced at the hallway, hesitant to leave the house. Ethan would come unglued if he woke up and found her missing.

She steeled her emotions. The waiting to search was killing her. She understood Ethan's need for timing, but she was certain she'd succeed. She'd find her brother, then support Ethan as he worked his way back into the pack.

In a couple seconds, she'd shifted and nosed the door open enough for her slim wolf's body to slip outside without a sound. Surprised to hear a whine come from her own throat, she loped along the street. No matter how much she fought her conflicting desire to rush back and remain safe with Ethan, she had to continue her search for her brother. She was the one person left in his life who'd die to protect him.

A rustle behind her sent her darting toward a stand of trees bordering the forest. The community in Drover was small and rural, something less than a town. Farms were long gone, and in their place were the werewolves who kept things quiet, lest they draw attention to themselves.

She hunkered down on the ground and stared out into the night. The fur on her back rippled. She wasn't surprised to encounter another wolf on her outing. This was werewolf territory, and she couldn't be too safe now that Ethan was back. She curled her upper lip showing her teeth. The weapons he'd taught her to use lay useless beside the bed back home. *Dammit.*

The big silver wolf rounded the corner and slowed down to a walk. *"You are in so much trouble, little one."*

Dani whined and rolled over on her back. *"I have to find him, Ethan."*

He loomed over her. She refused to meet his gaze and stayed on her back. She fought her wolf to stand up, but she'd trained her animal to live by its natural instincts. Submitting to her mate was rule one, and never broken.

Ethan's wolf lowered his head and nipped her under the chin. *"Stand up."*

Bowing her back, she flipped to her feet and hung her head. She licked the back of his front leg. *"I'm sorry."*

He pushed against her until she was almost completely tucked under his body. *"You have to trust me. I can't have you running off to fight this battle by yourself. The pack learned about my arrival today. Do you not think every single one of them wants me...you, to mess up? We have a plan, and you agreed to follow my orders."*

She'd broken her word, and that burden sat heavy on her shoulders. She folded her legs underneath her, lay on the ground, and put her head on her front paws. *"I'm sorry."*

"Stop saying that!" Ethan's wolf plopped down beside her. *"What were you planning on doing? Barging into Gregoire's house and attacking him yourself? Without me?"*

"No." She leaned her head over onto his outstretched paws. *"I wanted to see if I could smell my brother."* She sighed. *"I thought...with my wolf, I could tell if Jordy was inside the house. Once I found out where he was being kept, I'd come back home and tell you."*

For several minutes underneath the cover of the trees, they lay side by side, each of them keeping their thoughts to themselves. Almost afraid to breathe in case she made Ethan angrier, she paused and waited. How could she explain her emotions?

In a matter of weeks, she'd gone from an unmated she-wolf to having the love of her life. But still, the twin responsibilities of rescuing her brother and avenging her parents fell on her shoulders despite having a mate, someone who could help.

The long muscle running along her back twitched. The fear of failing her roles as sister, mate, and wolf, frightened her.

"I will go with you to Greggoire's house, little one." Ethan's wolf stood up, and he glanced over his shoulder. *"Afterward, you must wait until the challenge is over. Finding your brother will be much easier if I am the alpha."*

"But what if something happens before the challenge...or during. My dad—"

"Do you trust me?"

She closed her jaw. *"Yes, but—"*

Ethan's voice chuckled in her head. *"I never took you for a worrywart."*

"I'm not!" Her wolf growled deep inside of her, but she put a stop to it in favor of arguing the point. *"Maybe a little. I just want those I love to be safe and for life to get back to normal. It seems like this hell has gone on forever."*

"I know." Ethan's wolf sprang from the trees to the street in front of them. *"We're more alike than you know."*

* * *

Greggoire's rambling two-story house sat back from the street in a secluded area where his back yard melted into the forest. With no close neighbors and tucked into a stand of trees, the property provided many ways to creep unseen toward the house. That was the only advantage on their side, because Greggoire no doubt had his property booby-trapped.

Trip wires, traps, and if Dani was right, the alpha even had guards protecting the house twenty-four/seven judging from the nasty odor along the perimeter. She followed Ethan, confident in his ability to notice the out-of-place items and not step in an area where they'd find themselves in trouble. It wouldn't look good at all to be caught red-handed scoping out Greggoire's house.

"Stay with me." Ethan approached the back of the house. *"If anything happens, run like hell deeper into the forest. Don't run straight back home. He'll expect that, and be able to catch you. Follow my scent. My markings will get you safely away."*

"Okay."

She lifted her snout and sniffed the air. The moisture settling over the hills in the area at night masked the normal scents she should have picked up. She put her nose to the ground and lumbered along the footpath in the grass. Someone obviously walked around the house on a daily basis, because the short grass was worn away. All she could sense was the dusty dirt path and the strong ammonia odor of male werewolves.

Bile came up in her throat, threatening to choke her. She wanted to run, get out of here, leave the stench far behind. *"It reeks."*

Ethan stopped, turned his massive head, and let his tongue fall out the corner of his mouth. *"Anything?"*

"No." She leaned against his side letting the familiar comfort of his fur settle her down. *"Nothing. I-I thought maybe I'd be able to sense Jordan out in the yard. He's old enough to walk and run."* Blinking, she studied the area. *"What if they never let him out to play?"*

"Dani, they might not even have him here. Have you thought of that?" He turned and nudged her to go back the way they'd come. *"Greggoire could have given him to someone else, or even—"*

"No!" She nipped his back leg. *"Don't say that. He's here. I'd know if he was dead. He's not. We just have to find him."*

"We will, little one." Ethan broke into a run the moment they stepped back out on the county road. *"Let's go home."*

The fast run back to the house took all her attention. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, and she sucked the cool, fresh air into her lungs. The muscles along her legs and back stretched with her effort to outrun her troubles and keep up with her mate. *Hang on, Jordan. I'm doing everything I can to find you. Soon, I'll have you back home.*

Chapter Eight

Two weeks later, Dani had found that the agonizing time she'd wasted waiting to go into heat was nothing compared to waiting for the pack to pick a night for the challenge. She kept herself busy with housework, but that palled. One could clean only so much. Nevertheless, she finished wiping off the countertop around the kitchen sink, then attacked the stovetop.

Passing the time was even harder on Ethan. Most days, she was lucky to get two sentences out of him. Stuck in his own thoughts, he'd paced restlessly back and forth through the house. At night, his body twitched and rolled over the bed as if he fought Greggoire in his dreams. It didn't help that they'd both stayed in the house most of the time. They'd agreed that the safest way for their plan to work was to stay on the pack's good side, which meant avoiding contact, which meant being stuck in the house.

Last night, she'd convinced him to shift and let their wolves out to play. After a few attempts at egging him into frolicking on the living room floor, she gave up and lay down beside him. At least their wolves received a good rest.

Banging attracted her attention. It sounded as though it was coming from the garage. WTF?

Still holding the damp rag, she went to open the garage door and saw Ethan with a fist buried in the wall. Dents in the sheetrock and gray shards on the floor gave mute testimony to his rage.

Dropping the rag, she hurried over. "No! Stop it, Ethan!" She grabbed his arm and held on. The force of his strength lifted her feet off the floor.

He froze. Sweat covered his body and he struggled to breathe. His gaze was fierce and pained. The tangy aroma of his blood filled her nostrils, turning her stomach.

Clicking her tongue, she grabbed his hand. "What are you doing? You can't hurt yourself. You're dripping blood all over." She stretched to take his shirt, which was hanging off the handlebars of her old bike. Wincing, she wrapped it around his injury. "Oh, Ethan. I wish I could take it all away. That I could make all our problems be over. It hurts me to see you so frustrated."

She kissed his bundled-up fist. "Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't matter." He flung his hair back from his sweaty face. "It'll heal."

"I know, but that doesn't answer my question about why you're pounding a hole in the wall." She glanced up at him while holding the material against his bare knuckles to staunch the blood. "What if the council comes today and says the challenge will start?"

"I'm ready."

Dani unwrapped the corner of the shirt. His wounds were already healing. "Talk to me. I know this is driving you crazy. I feel like I'm two short steps away from going insane myself, but you're the one who said this is the only way it'll work. We've got to bide our time, be careful, and after you win your position back within the pack, we can go after Jordan."

He shook his arm out of her grasp and leaned against the wall. "That's what I thought, but...Fuck! I hate waiting."

"But?"

"Something else is going on. Why hasn't Greggoire come back? And not one pack member has come over to check on you. That's not pack mentality."

"You're right. I don't even see any of them running around here at dusk. I used to see them all the time."

He closed his mouth, inhaled through his nose, held it, and blew out the air in a puff. "I can't figure it out. I feel like I've got an idea, but it just floats away, and I can't solve it."

She narrowed her eyes. "Huh."

He lowered his gaze to his hand, flexed it. "Did you notice the other day when we went into town how the store owner rushed into the back room when we got up to the cash register?"

"No, but—"

"You mentioned when I first met you that your dad's friend Butch was mated to a woman that worked at the store, right?"

“Yeah, that’s Mrs. Danielson. She’s the one who tallied our groceries. Why?” She threw the shirt toward the garbage can in the corner of the garage.

“When you were putting the groceries in the car, I went back inside to grab a newspaper. I thought I’d get caught up on what was happening around Drover. Hell, if nothing else, it would give me something to do besides drive myself stupid in this house while we wait.” He swept back his hair. “Anyway, the owner had Mrs. Danielson pinned against the counter and seemed to be threatening her. When he saw me come in, he turned away and scurried toward the back of the store.”

“Why would he do that?” She frowned.

“When I gave her the money for the paper, Mrs. Danielson mouthed the word *Loren*. She was definitely trying to tell me something, but why? She wasn’t part of the community when I ran the pack. What the hell does the name of someone dead and buried mean anyway? That’s twice Greggoire’s brother’s name has been mentioned.” He pushed off the wall. “Shit! Somehow, we’re missing a huge chunk out of the puzzle. If I could only figure it out...”

He mimicked the pacing he’d done night after night. He remained tense, his body coiled ready to fight. The muscles along his shoulders rippled with each step. Dani chewed on her lip. She wanted to help, but she was too young to remember a time when Greggoire even had a

twin. She didn't recall any of his relatives within the pack.

"Let's go over there."

Ethan stopped, turned, and frowned.

"Where?"

"The store. My mom and Mrs. Danielson were friends. I'm sure she'll talk to me. Maybe that way we'll get to the bottom of why Greggoire's brother's name keeps popping up." She brushed at a bloodstain on her hand. "I'll also ask her why the store owner is bullying her. Mrs. Danielson is such a sweet lady. I can't imagine someone being mean to her. Butch would kick some ass if his wife was being threatened."

"Damn. I don't want to start questioning anyone without securing my position in the pack first." He tilted his head and groaned. "Oh, the hell with it. Let's do it."

She pulled him into her embrace. "I love you."

"I love you too." He slipped his hands lower and squeezed her butt. "More and more every day. I swear when this is over, I'm going to spoil you rotten and show you how life can and will be between us."

Dani drove, parking her car on the side of the building away from the glass front door. The convenience store was no bigger than her house, and if four people were shopping at the same time it was crowded.

Two other cars were parked in the front. Mrs. Danielson's car and another she didn't recognize

were parked next to Dani's. She shut off the engine. "Why don't you stay in the car, and I'll go in by myself. I think I'll have a better chance at getting Mrs. Danielson to talk than you would. You're a little intimidating." She patted his leg.

He snorted.

"You are!" She laughed. "Not many men are as big as lumberjacks. Not even the loggers in the area."

He grunted and turned to gaze out the window. "Just hurry. If you're not out of there in five minutes, I'm coming in."

"I'll be okay. I've stopped in this store for one reason or another every week since I was old enough to ride over on my bicycle as a kid." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Don't worry so much."

"I can't help it. You're everything to me."

She smiled. "I know. I'll be careful."

She got out of the car, and despite her confidence, approached with caution. The front doors swung open and she jumped out of the way. Shelley, her high school friend, and her mate Brad rushed out of the doors, laughing.

The bubbly blonde seemed on top of the world with her new mate. Dani would never have guessed that the girl who was on the cheerleading team with her would mate with the boy who preferred to hang out with the party crowd. Dani smiled. "Hi, Shelley."

Their laughter died. Shelley glanced back and forth between Brad and Dani. "Hey,

Danielle. You're back. I'd heard you've been traveling."

Dani raised her brows. "I guess you can call it that. I found my mate and spent a couple weeks away."

"That's great." Shelley nodded at Brad, who slunk back inside the store without saying a word. "Brad and I just celebrated our six months together." She stepped closer and pulled the collar of her T-shirt down a few inches. "He gave me this."

A delicate gold chain with a teardrop pendant hung around her slim neck. Dani laid her hand on her friend's arm. "It's beautiful. Congratulations."

"It's supposed to symbolize a raindrop. The first time Brad kissed me was during a downpour. Isn't that romantic? I didn't dare tell him it's a teardrop." Shelley laughed. "So tell me. Who's your mate? Is it someone I know?"

Dani grinned. "Maybe. Do you remember the stories about Ethan Tolene?"

Her friend's mouth fell open. "As in the old alpha that was banned for those awful murders my parents still talk about?"

"What's taking so long, little one?"

Dani shook her head. "It isn't Ethan who's guilty, Shelley." She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. *"Hang on, Ethan. I ran into one of my old friends from cheerleading. I'm still outside the store."*

"*You were a cheerleader?*" Ethan sounded interested, but Dani shut him out in favor of talking with Shelley.

"Did he come back here...with you?" Shelley crossed her arms and gazed around the parking lot. "Do you think that was wise? You've just lost your parents. Maybe you need some time to heal."

"I know perfectly well what I am doing. He's my mate." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Just wait. You'll soon learn what really happened years ago."

"Dani, what have you got yourself in the middle of?" Shelley suddenly dropped her gaze. "Never mind. I should go. Brad's probably waiting for me." She scurried over to a beefed-up truck.

Dani swung around and stared after Brad, who strode across the parking lot from the back of the store and climbed in the truck. She frowned. Despite Shelley's concern over her safety, her friend's sudden shift of mood seemed odd.

"*Dani! What's happening?*"

"*Sorry.*" She turned her attention away from the truck, which was burning rubber out of the parking lot, and headed toward the doors. "*I'm going in now, babe.*"

Dani grabbed a bottle of soda out of the cooler beside the checkout counter and smiled up at the cashier. "How are you today, Mrs. Danielson?"

The slim, gray-haired woman glanced behind her before scanning the soda. "I-I'm fine. Thanks for asking, Dani." But Mrs. Danielson refused to raise her eyes and her hands trembled.

Dani leaned against the counter. "Are you okay? You look upset."

Mrs. Danielson took pulled a small brown paper bag and slipped the bottle inside. She glanced behind her again and lowered her voice. "Dani, don't come back here. It's not safe. I cared about your mom, and I don't—"

"Mrs. Danielson!"

"Yes, Mr. Lehman." Mrs. Danielson turned around, her hands fisted at her sides.

"It's time for your break."

"But—"

"Now." Mr. Lehman glared at Dani with angry eyes, but spoke to his employee. "Do not go outside. You can take your break in the back room."

Mrs. Danielson nodded and shuffled out of the room. Dani reached for the bag, but Mr. Lehman caught her wrist in a painful grip. She moaned as his claws dug into her skin. She jerked her gaze up and came face to face with a half-shifted werewolf.

Sharp pain shot from her wrist up her arm. She reached behind her back for the .38 Special loaded with silver bullets.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Mr. Lehman snarled. His teeth elongated, his eyes narrowed and took on an unearthly menace of a

rabid animal, and yet, his body remained human.

Dani gasped and recoiled in disgust. Bile bubbled in her throat. She'd never witnessed any of the werewolves she knew in mid-transformation who were able to halt the shift between human and wolf. The result was terrifying and evil.

"W-what do you want?" She tamped down her own desire to shift. Something was very wrong here. There was no way Mr. Lehman should be able to get the upper hand on her, but his speed and strength overpowered hers.

"We're gonna have a little talk, you and I." Mr. Lehman pulled her around the counter toward the backroom. "You shouldn't have brought Tolene back."

"Oh God, Ethan. Help me."

Chapter Nine

Rounding the front of the car, Ethan sailed through the air and landed flat on his stomach. A powerful force knocked the breath out of him. He shifted to his wolf and flung the sudden, heavy weight off his back.

He lowered his head and growled at the man who'd tackled him. The man shifted, bared his teeth, and lunged at him again. Worried about Dani, Ethan grabbed the wolf's throat in his jaw, flipped him over, and clamped down. Ethan wished like hell he would have had time to remove his clothes before shifting. He couldn't run with the extra length of his pants puddled around his back feet.

The animal flailed his legs in the air looking for traction, but Ethan had him in a death grip faster than the wolf could react.

"Ethan! He's got my—"

"Dani!" His blood boiled inside his veins hearing her scream of pain.

He savagely bit through the fur, tore out the wolf's throat, and spat. The animal twitched, but lay still, his eyes were unfocused.

Ethan hadn't killed the werewolf—not given how fast he'd heal—but he wouldn't be charging Ethan from behind too soon.

"Hold on, Dani." He leaped over the curb and shifted in midair before landing on his bare feet. There was no time to put his tennis shoes back on. *"I'm coming in."*

Pushing through the front door of the store, he scanned the inside for any hidden dangers. The area was clear. He vaulted over the cashier's counter, ran toward the back door, and using all his weight, threw his shoulder into the closed-off area.

The door slammed open.

Dani sat in a chair in the middle of the room, her hands tied behind her back, an old shirt stuffed in her mouth. Blood trickled down her face.

He howled. He'd kill the bastard who harmed his mate. *"Are you okay, little one?"*

"I-I think so. God, Ethan, it happened so fast, I couldn't even fight. He was stronger than he should have been. J-Just untie me, please."

Ethan ran to her and kneeled. He tugged away the gag and wiped her forehead with it.

The bastard had carved the word *Kill* into her forehead. Rage contorted his face into a grimace. *"Where is he?"*

"Gone." She motioned toward the backdoor.

"Dammit. You're hurt." He threw the rope down and rubbed his fingers over the red welts on her wrists. *"Your hands will heal."*

And so would the message left behind for him to read. Guilt and fury boiled inside of him. He should have protected her better.

But he'd made sure Dani knew the risk involved with him coming back to Drover before setting foot back in town. He'd trained her, warned her, and still it wasn't enough. He clenched his teeth together.

He had no doubt the damage done to Dani was a warning to him. He held her hands in her lap. She'd heal quickly, never discovering the brutality one of her pack had dealt, never knowing how dangerous the situation had turned. Someone was going to die, and he'd do whatever he had to do to make sure it wasn't Dani who paid.

"Ethan..." Dani pulled her hands away and reached up to touch her forehead. Blood covered her fingers. *"It's not healing. It feels like my head's burning up."*

"I'm gonna kill the son of a bitch who did this, but we need to get you home." He pulled her up and gathered her to his side. *"I've got some ointment that'll help."*

"What is it? Why won't it stop?"

"It'll be okay. The cuts aren't deep, but he must have used a silver-coated knife to—"

"What?" She clutched his shirt. *"Am I scarred?"*

"No, little one." Opening the back door, he peered to the left and right. *"It's safe. Let's get you home."*

A sense of viewing a dream world different than reality settled over Ethan, but his senses were finely tuned to the slightest observations. The air seemed stagnant, as if the world had stopped

spinning on its axis. This wasn't really happening. He wasn't sitting in the car with his mate in pain, blood trickling down the side of her face.

"Are you okay, little one?"

Dani turned her head. *"Why would Mr. Lehman do this to me?"*

"Because of me." Ethan's gaze traveled to her forehead. *"He hurt you to scare me away from Drover."*

She groaned. He imagined that the pain radiating over her forehead was torment.

"You don't know that. H-he seemed angry at me. He kept telling me I'd betrayed the pack and my parents would be ashamed of me. Oh God, Ethan. He hated me. It was nothing like I'd ever seen before. He..." She waved her hand in the air. *"He wasn't normal."*

"Hold that thought, baby." He pulled into the driveway, shut off the car, and opened the door. Racing around to the other side, he picked up Dani and whisked her into the house. He set her on the couch. "I'll be right back."

In the zippered pouch of his duffle bag, he found the ointment his father always swore would work against injuries resulting from silver. He stood clutching the bottle, kicked the bag carrying his personal belongings back into the corner of the room and hoped that it would do the trick. The store owner obviously knew what he was doing when he cut his message over Dani's forehead. The poison wasn't enough

to kill, but Ethan guessed the pain was worse than she was admitting.

Ethan returned to the living room and sat on the coffee table facing Dani. "Dammit, I forgot a bandage."

She pointed toward the kitchen. "There are clean rags in the second drawer underneath the sink."

Disgusted at himself for taking so long and making her suffer further, he set the bottle on the table and opened a drawer. Grabbing a few hand towels, he turned.

He could hear Dani leaving the room. "Dani?"

He followed her scent into the bathroom and found her staring into the mirror. His chest tightened. He'd wanted to protect her from seeing her face. "Little one—"

"Tell me the truth." She shifted her gaze to his reflection, blinked hard to dispel the tears clouding her vision, and whispered, "Is this a message for me or you?"

The red, raw carving still wept tears of blood. He studied her in the mirror, not daring to break eye contact. Keeping her in the dark wasn't doing her any favors anymore. Against his better judgment, the game had turned from play to personal.

Ethan turned her away from the mirror, tipped her face up, and opened the bottle, spilling some medicine onto a clean towel. He was surprised to find his hand shaking. "The hate between Greggoire and I goes back before

you were born, little one. In fact, it goes back to my father's days when he battled his cousin, Greggoire's father, for the alpha position. It has always been this way."

She winced at the sting from the medicine, but let him continue dabbing the cuts. "This isn't about the challenge, though. The fight for position was never meant to go to the death. I never remember any of the men fighting among the pack this way. I need to tell someone. Mrs. Danielson isn't safe working for that psycho. Butch has a right to know what is happening to her. Maybe she's too scared to say anything."

"Dani, you mentioned that the owner of the store wasn't normal. What did you mean?" He folded the cloth and cleaned the rest of her face.

She closed her eyes, and he felt her shudder go through him. He set down the supplies to wrap his arms around her. "It's important, little one."

She snuggled against him. "I've watched men and women shift into their wolves my whole life. This guy shifted halfway. He had hands, but his nails turned to claws. His wolf showed up, but yet he kept his human body. It's not normal. You know that, I know that...werewolves can't mutate that way. We're either human or wolf. It was like this guy picked the strengths of his wolf, and yet kept his ability to remain upright on two legs."

"It's possible to reverse during shifting—"

“That’s not what I’m saying. He stayed that way the whole time I was with him. I’m talking minutes, not seconds.”

Ethan crossed his arms and leaned his hip against the bathroom counter. There were advantages of turning into a wolf. Speed. Enhanced hearing, smelling, and sight. The ability to heal. The force of strength alone would help anyone in a battle against an enemy. But he couldn’t ignore the benefits of having limbs and the ability to communicate as a human. *To merge the two using the strengths together can only happen when...*

He straightened up. “Fuck.”

“What?”

If he guessed right it was even more important to find Dani’s brother now, before it was too late. He dashed to the bedroom. Maybe he was wrong.

“Ethan?” Dani, who’d followed, grabbed his arm. “Talk to me.”

“Give me a second.” He dug through his duffle and took out an old journal, then sat on the edge of the bed. Flipping the pages with thumb and finger, he scanned the words...*There*. He read through the page. A heavy ball of dread settled in the pit of his stomach. *Christ*.

He closed the book and stared at the journal, a legacy from his father. Every secret, anecdote, and genetic marker of the pack was written down and saved by the alpha. Ethan just happened to keep it when he was banned from the pack. Gregoire wasn’t the right werewolf to

trust with the responsibility of keeping pack history.

"Please, Ethan. You're scaring me." Dani sat down beside him and leaned her cheek on his shoulder.

"Plans have changed, little one." He tapped the journal against his thigh. *"We don't have time to wait for the challenge to find your brother. We must find Jordan...now."*

"What's going on? What did you learn?"

He opened the book, passed it to Dani, and pointed at the page. "There have been werewolves in the past who've discovered that drinking the blood of another werewolf will heighten their powers. It mutates them into a fierce being, far stronger than the typical werewolf."

"I don't understand—" The journal slipped off her lap, and she grabbed Ethan's arm. "Mr. Lehman?"

He nodded. "Yes. That would explain how he could half-shift and get the upper hand on you at the store. The more werewolf blood they consume, the stronger they grow."

"What does this have to do with my brother?" She stood up and paced the room.

"He's young and growing. Too little to fight or question what they are doing to him." He shook his head. "The longer they have him, the more dangerous they will become. Their bodies will crave more blood until..."

She bent over at the waist, and gagged. Dry heaves racked her body. Ethan moved over

gathered her in his arms. “Shh...we'll find him.
Somehow, some way. I'll save your brother.”

Chapter Ten

Peeking out from behind a bush, Dani was thankful for the greenery hiding her naked state. Ethan slipped his hand around her upper arm and pulled her back out of the view from the road.

“What?”

“I don’t want anyone to see you. It’s still too early in the day to shift out in the open. We’re going to have to work on your patience, little one.” He softened his words with a kiss. “I swear when this is all over with I’m not letting you out of the house for a week.”

She leaned against his bare chest and the front of her thighs rubbed against his much warmer body. She mewed. He was rock hard, and she was ready. She circled the base of his cock with her fingers and stroked him.

She’d give anything to have her normal life back to enjoy these moments with her mate. His embrace gave her the strength to go on. Imagining her little brother having his blood drained from his body and stolen by others to give them superpowers was monstrous, sickening. Thank God, Ethan had the strength to carry some of her anger and took care of her.

If she’d found out what he suspected before her heat cycle, she would have gone crazy.

He growled. He rolled his head from one shoulder to the next as if her caress relieved his tension. She straddled his thigh and pressed her pussy against his bulging muscles.

"This morning's romp wasn't enough for you?" He stroked her sides, skimming the outer slope of her breasts with his thumbs.

Her nipples peaked and she squeezed his cock. "It never is, but I don't have to tell you that I'm addicted to you."

Ethan kissed her, stopped, sniffed the air, and pulled away from Dani. "Stay hidden." In one step, he'd shifted into his wolf and crawled under the evergreen bush.

A chilly breeze blew over her body. She shivered. She didn't know whether to shift into her wolf or put her hidden clothes back on.

Ethan had wanted to wait until darkness came to shift and proceed to Greggoire's house, but if he sensed danger, maybe it was better if she was prepared. But buck-naked and hiding at the edge of the forest didn't exactly make her a tower of strength to an enemy.

The leaves wiggled, and Ethan's large gray wolf slunk back into their little hiding spot.

"Shift, little one. It's time."

One second she was standing, and the next she was rubbing the top of her head underneath Ethan's neck. Her body vibrated with power, her senses alert for danger. *"What happened?"*

"Greggoire and a couple of his goons ran down the street. If we hurry, we can search for

your brother without having to fight them." He led the way out of the brush.

She didn't question his choice of running out in the open in the daylight hours. They had no time to waste.

Chasing Ethan, she surged forward. She gripped the asphalt with her paws, letting the adrenaline coursing through her body give her the extra boost of energy she needed. If they succeeded, she'd have Jordy home where he belonged tonight.

"Be alert. If your brother is in the house, he's not alone." Ethan slowed down. *"Whatever happens, I don't want you shifting. You're stronger in your wolf. Let her use the strength and smarts she's there for and you'll be fine. Just don't try to control her. Her instincts will keep you safe, little one."*

Dani stopped beside Ethan on the east side of Greggoire's house near the garage. *"I understand."*

"Ready?"

She stretched her neck out and licked the side of his face. *"Be careful."*

Head low to the ground, Dani crept behind Ethan to the back of the house. Shaded with tall cedar trees, the yard sat sheltered and hidden. She sniffed the air in all directions. He stopped, and she lay on the ground. Tense and ready to run, she waited to follow his lead. This first step scared her to death.

A large glass slider separated the outside patio from the house. From fifteen feet away,

Ethan charged forward to leap straight toward and through the glass door. The sprinkling of shattered glass falling on the concrete patio below seemed to echo in the quiet.

Inside, a scream cut off in mid-pitch. She flicked her ears straight up in the air. The desire to follow was almost too much to fight. *“Are you okay?”*

“Yeah. Come in. There were women in the room who fled to somewhere else in the house. It might be better if they see a she-wolf instead of me.”

She loped forward and jumped through the jagged space in the broken door. *“See, I told you others find you scary and—”* Stopping, she lifted her nose, sniffed the air, and growled. *“Ethan! He’s here. Jordan’s in the house. I can smell him.”*

She ran past him down the hall to follow the most beautiful scent in the world. A mix of sweet baby and everything good filled her nostrils. She could almost sense her brother lying in her arms sleeping with his little lips puckered in a dream, the way he used to do when he was safe and content at home.

The heady scent grew stronger near the stairs. She leaped up the steps with no effort. Growling, she stood on the landing. The fur lifted along her back, and her skin was super-sensitive; even the breeze from Ethan pushing past her ruffled her. She was ready. She’d fight to the death to get her brother back. He belonged to her. Only her.

“Stand back, little one. Let me go through the door first.”

The muscles along her hind legs tensed. She willed her wolf to let Ethan take control of the situation. He jumped against the door and fell onto his side before scrambling back on all four paws. He growled and bared his teeth.

“I’m going to shift. Cover me until I shift back.”

“Okay. Hurry.”

If she blinked, she would have missed how Ethan’s body lengthened and morphed back into his human form. She dared anyone to mess with him, even stark naked. Not many men, human nor werewolf, were as strong or big.

Long lean muscles without an ounce of fat. His stomach solid, his chest wide, and his shoulders even wider. Needing contact with her mate, she whined and stepped over to rub her head against his leg.

“Stay here. Unless they plan to jump out of the second story window, the only way out for them is through this door.” He grasped the door handle, but it didn’t budge. “I’m going to try and break it down.”

Ethan stepped back along the landing’s railing, charged toward the door, and hit the wood with his shoulder. The door cracked near the hinges on the left side, but remained closed. He rammed it again. This time the door broke away at the bottom. He slammed against the side of the door, and the lock finally gave way.

Switching places with Ethan, Dani slipped into the darkened room. Two women huddled together in the corner beside a mirrored dresser. With no chance of the women escaping, Dani studied the room without taking her gaze off the obvious threat. The unmade bed reeked of sex, and the faint smell of a soiled diaper in the wastebasket by the door got her blood pumping.

The toys, blanket, and empty bottle proved her brother lived here recently. She growled.

The taller woman straightened, sidling between Dani and the bed as if protecting the younger one, who continued to shy away.

Dani curled her lips and bared her teeth, stalking slowly toward them. The braver woman shifted into wolf form and held her ground despite being smaller than Dani. The other groaned and slid to her knees crying. The putrid scent of fear wafted off her.

Dani hid her surprise over finding a human in Greggoire's house. She stared at the she-wolf without breaking eye contact. The urge to grab them both and shake the answers she sought flooded any other thought. She dared not glance away in search of Jordan. The she-wolf would take her inability to stand her ground as a sign of weakness, and attack.

A slight pressure brushed across her. Out of the corner of her vision, she saw Ethan's wolf approach and stand off to her right, a step in front of her. She relaxed her fighting stance. Thankful to have him with her, she gave control

of the situation over to him and turned her head in search of a familiar small boy.

Jordan could be anywhere, in the closet, under the bed, or in the chest underneath the window. *"Dammit. I can't find him in my wolf. I've got to shift."*

"Go ahead. It doesn't look like the she-wolf is going to attack, and the other woman is scared to death."

Dani stepped toward the closet and shifted. Flinging back the bi-folding doors, she pushed aside the clothes to search the back of the two-foot-deep area. She bent over and peered into the dark corners. Nothing. No little legs or chubby arms half hidden behind the shoe boxes and purses.

She wanted to scream. Whirling around, she focused on the woman, who stood with her back against the wall. "Where is he?" Dani snarled.

The woman shook her head.

"Answer me! I know he's here." She lunged toward the woman. If she had to shake the truth out of her she would.

The she-wolf shifted and blocked her from coming any closer to the frightened woman. "Greggoire is gone. He went into town with some of his men. You won't find him here."

"I'm not looking for him." Dani fisted her hands at her side. "I want to know what you've done with my brother. I know you've had him here. I can smell him all over the house."

The woman started to shake her head again, but Dani lifted her chin and got in the she-wolf's

face. "Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. I can smell him all over you, you bitch. Tell me where Jordan is now."

The she-wolf glanced over at the other woman, who said nothing. There seemed to be a silent communication between the two of them until the human gave a sharp nod. Dani clenched her teeth together. She didn't have time to stand around begging for answers. Jordan's life depended on her finding him.

The she-wolf kept her gaze on Dani. "The boy is no longer here. We don't know anything more."

"You must! He was here. I can smell him." A tremor shook her body and her voice. "Please, you must leave. We can't tell you anymore. Greggoire is going to be angry when he comes home and finds his house torn up and smelling like the both of you." She glanced at Ethan who remained standing on guard in his wolf. "You don't stand a chance going up against the alpha."

Ethan growled and flicked his tail before stilling his body.

"You can tell Greggoire that I won't give up. I've come for my brother, and I will do whatever it takes to get him back." Dani turned and headed out of the room. She paused in the doorway and gazed back over her shoulder. "Oh, and you can tell Greggoire that if he's harmed one hair on my baby brother's head, he'll wish he was dead."

She marched down the stair following the path she came into the house. Her mind reeled from being so close, but leaving empty-handed. Her vision blurred, and she reached out to stop herself from stumbling. She couldn't breathe. The air wouldn't come.

"Shift dammit!" Ethan pushed against the back of her knee.

No conscious effort was needed to turn into her wolf. She leapt through the broken door and sucked in the fresh air. Panting, she stood, her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. Bile tickled the back of her throat and she gagged, coughed, and vomited phlegm.

She glanced over at Ethan. "I-I was s-so sure he was there..."

"We'll find him." He licked the side of her face. "I promise. We'll find him."

Ethan by her side, Dani returned to the spot at the edge of the forest where they'd left their bundle of clothes. Hidden in the brush, she fumbled to get dressed. Night had fallen, and even though she could still see and hear if anyone came close, the sudden chill of her human form coupled with the failure of their plan had her knees shaking.

Never before had she felt so weak. The adrenaline of going to battle to find her brother no longer pulsed through her veins, and instead, a dark gloom settled on her shoulders. Drover was a small town. It shouldn't be this easy to hide a child, even one as young as Jordy.

Ethan stepped over and hugged Dani. He rubbed her back briskly, bringing warmth to the surface. "Do you think you can handle one more visit?"

"To Greggoire's house again?" She leaned back and gazed up at his face. "I thought you agreed the women wouldn't help us."

"No, I have another plan." He stepped back. "We go to the lady's house who works at the store...Mrs. Danielson. The store closes at six, right?"

Dani nodded.

"She should be home then. Maybe away from Lehman she'll give us some answers." He leaned down and kissed her lips. "She did try to warn both of us. If we can figure out what scares her, maybe we can find out who the person is responsible for frightening her into silence, and that will lead us to the person holding Jordan."

Stretching up on her tiptoes, she flung her arms around his shoulders and gave him an earth-shattering kiss. That was just the motivation she needed to regain her energy back. Sucking his lips, she pulled back with a smack. "You're brilliant. Let's go."

Mrs. Danielson lived a few houses away from her family home. Dani jogged to keep up with Ethan's bigger steps. She envied the humans in Drover. They had the services of the town's emergency system at their disposal.

Werewolves kept their problems within the pack. It was grounds for banishment if any let their secret out, much less report on one of their

kind. She couldn't go to the elders or the alpha, because she suspected they all knew what Greggoire had done and were scared shitless to go against him.

"She lives in the white house with the blue Ford truck parked out front." Dani pointed ahead to the left. "Do you want me to go by myself again to talk with her?"

"No. The occasion for being nice is over." He glanced up into the night sky.

That scared Dani. The thought of losing Jordan would mean everything in her life was over. Her parents' deaths would go unpunished. Her mating with Ethan would be for naught. On top of all that, she and Ethan wouldn't be able to stay in Drover with their pack, not with all the bad blood between Greggoire and her. She'd dug herself into her own grave, and the only way to save herself was if she succeeded.

The blare from the evening news playing on the television inside the house muffled her first knock. Dani turned to Ethan, raised her brows, and knocked louder. *Come on, answer the door.*

The door swung open, and Butch Danielson filled the doorway. He scowled. His whiskered jaw and big bushy eyebrows made his normal happy-go-lucky expression appear more sinister and dark. "Danielle. Go away, girl."

She stepped back. "But, Mr. Daniel—"

"Go on with you now." He moved outside, and closed the door behind him. His voice dropped to a whisper. "It's not safe for you anymore. I'm having my own problems keeping

my wife safe, I can't be looking after you too. Trust me, if your father was here, he'd tell you to leave."

The noise filtering past the door to outside suddenly shut off and silence enveloped the three of them. She grabbed Ethan's hand and tugged. She couldn't just up and leave. Jordan was still out there somewhere.

"Butch, we'd like to talk with you. It'll only take a few seconds." Ethan motioned toward the house. "Can you meet us away from here? Let's say, behind the gas station where old man Johnson used to live?"

The lines around Butch's mouth deepened and he seemed to study Ethan. "I wish you wouldn't have come back. But give me an hour." He turned and went back into the house.

The door shut firmly, and Dani let go of Ethan. "You knew him before." It wasn't a question. It only made sense that he knew the older members of the pack. At one time, before Greggoire ruined his reputation, Ethan was their alpha. He was a legend to everyone who came after, so why would they believe Greggoire over Ethan?

Chapter Eleven

Old man Johnson's place had been abandoned for more years than Ethan could remember. The foundation no longer supported the three-bedroom cottage, and instead the whole structure leaned prominently to the left. Ethan tilted his head. It seemed like yesterday that he sat with Mr. Johnson on the porch and learned the ways of his kind. *You're a legend, son*, he had said.

Dani stepped closer and rubbed his lower back. "What's wrong?"

He frowned, but remained silent.

"Come on, I know something's bothering you." She lifted her chin and gazed at his face.

"Just remembering the past." He bent over at the waist, picked up a baseball-sized piece of concrete. Clenching his hand, he studied the smaller chunks as they broke apart and peppered the ground. "There was a time when I believed everything our ancestors passed down, but times have changed. I'm not sure I recognize anything going on any longer. I mourn for what could have been."

She crossed her arms and shivered against the nighttime cold. "You can get it back. Everyone has always known that success of the pack depended on you. I grew up hearing about

the great Ethan Tolene... You'll fight and bring out the truth. I have no doubt that once you've earned the alpha position the people will see how wrong they've been to trust in Greggoire."

The raw loyalty coming from his mate pushed aside any doubts, and her belief in him helped him draw from the strength inside his heart. He pulled her into his embrace, pressing her against his chest. "You heal me, little one. Thank you."

Dani slipped her arms around his waist. "I knew you were the one for me since...forever. I think every little girl's fantasy mate was you. The stories I heard formed the image of a perfect wolf, the perfect mate, the perfect man. Reality is so much better. You really are perfect. I can't wait until this is over. Despite the way I forced myself onto you and the reasons why I chose you for my mate, I do love you. I hope you don't—"

"Shh..." He laid his thumb on her mouth and traced the plump curve of her bottom lip. His balls tightened. He'd like nothing more than to jump right into her. Yet, he knew giving her less than half a man wasn't fair to either one of them. He needed to gain his position back. Then he'd spend the rest of his life showing her how much he loved her. "Soon, little one. We'll have our lives back, and spend every day enjoying each other."

He leaned over and claimed her mouth with a low growl. With Dani, he felt so connected, solid; he almost believed his own words.

She slipped her hands underneath his shirt. The warmth of her hands branded his skin and fueled the heat only she could bring from his core. Hell, even his wolf sat up and begged whenever she paid him the slightest amount of attention.

He could do this. He'd take down Greggoire and release the hold he had on the pack. Ethan owed them that much.

"Mmm...I can't wait for this night to be over. I'll have you and Jordan home, and—"

"*Quiet.*" He covered her mouth with his hand.

Far from the main road through town, the rumble of a car engine wouldn't reach his ears, but he had heard something. He let go of Dani and stepped away from the house, straining to detect any noise. He glanced back at her; she too struggled to listen to the night.

"*Something's wrong.*" He returned to her side without taking his gaze off the road in front of them. "*It's too quiet.*"

She slipped her finger into the back pocket of his jeans. "*It's late. People are probably settled down in their homes for the rest of the night.*"

"No." He reached behind him and grabbed her hand. "*Let's go.*"

"*What about Butch? He should be here any minute.*"

He pulled her along the deserted back street and jogged west toward their house. "*We'll have to do this without his help.*"

* * *

This couldn't be happening. Everywhere they turned their plan fell into a million different pieces. Dani pulled her hand from Ethan's clutch so she could run faster to keep up with his longer strides. *"Will we ever find the door to this invisible wall surrounding us? My dad always took care of everything. I never even thought of how the running of the pack was handled. Until now."*

"Don't worry. You're not alone anymore, little one."

"I know." She wondered if her dad had known how desperate the Drover pack had become before he died. If what Ethan believed was really happening, how many members of the pack were involved? Were they even worth saving? She pushed the thought out of her mind. If Ethan was right, her little brother's life was being wasted by them all.

She slowed down and fell behind Ethan, letting him lead her through the shadows of Main Street. Although Ethan was the only one in possession of the journal, somehow Greggoire must have figured out on his own that drinking the blood of another werewolf would boost his powers. His strength, hearing, speed, and stamina would exceed those of the werewolves who had followed the rules and stuck to eating the animals of the forest.

"Ethan?"

He slowed down and let her catch up.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think they won't become desperate enough, and Jordy will be safe for a little longer?" She stopped along the sidewalk. Her breath came in gasps, not from running, but from fear.

"There is no way for me to even guess. I wish I would have remembered this was possible before showing myself to Greggoire." His usually bright eyes were dull and troubled. *"I'm afraid I might have pushed Greggoire to go a step further with his plan by coming back here and threatening his position with the pack. He'll want to grow as strong as he can before the competition. He's always been weaker than me, but now I have no idea what kind of shape he is in."*

"He could kill Jordan so he's able to beat you." She simply had to state that aloud to believe it. It wasn't normal for either werewolf or human to endanger a baby with no sense of guilt and disgust. It made her physically sick to even think it was possible. She wanted to kill Greggoire, but that was different. He needed to pay, and she'd not feel an ounce of damn guilt about doing the job herself.

Rounding the corner at Main and Alder, Ethan lifted his arm and blocked her way. She stopped and followed his line of vision farther down the row of houses. A dark shadow lay in the driveway to their house. *"Oh my God. Is that...what I think it is?"*

“Looks like Greggoire left us a warning.”

Chapter Twelve

The mysterious package took form the closer they came to the house. Dani gasped. A headless body of a male werewolf sprawled on his stomach lay in her driveway in a broken heap. Ethan grabbed the back of the man's trousers and rolled the body over. Dani covered her mouth with both hands. Bile rose in her throat, and she struggled to swallow it down.

"*Who is it?*" She turned away from the gruesome scene in front of her.

Ethan stepped back and wrapped his arm around Dani. "*It's Butch.*"

She buried her head in Ethan's chest and squeezed her eyes shut. Another death. How many more would there be until it stopped? She groaned. Her vision filled with unshed tears. "Oh, God, someone needs to tell Mrs. Danielson."

Ethan's body stiffened. He yanked Dani behind him. "Is this your sick joke, Greggoire?"

Dani peered around her mate's broad back. Mr. Lehman, Stan Jenson who owned the Motel 6, and Keith Pegrow, a guy she'd gone to school with, flanked the alpha's sides. None of them even took notice of her but kept their gazes trained on Ethan.

“Butch was no longer useful to me.”
Greggoire stepped closer and glared at Dani.
“Where’s my boy?”

“Your—?” She jumped forward, but Ethan grabbed her around the waist and hauled her back. She stabbed her finger at the alpha.
“Jordan’s *my* brother.”

Greggoire’s lips curled into an ugly smirk. He walked beside Butch’s lifeless body and nudged the body with the toe of his shoe before squatting by the corpse. He brushed off the front of Butch’s shirt and heaved a sigh. “Maybe I didn’t make myself clear. I would hate for something to happen to the young boy like it did for poor Butch here. He and I have become close. Almost like father and son, you could say.”

She strained to get loose, digging her fingers into Ethan’s arm. She wanted to gouge her nails in the son-of-a-bitch’s eyes and wipe the smug look off his face. “He’s not anything to you. Give him back to me. He’s my family. You’ve taken everyone I love. Please...just let me have Jordy.”

The muscles in her legs gave out. Her knees buckled and she sagged against Ethan. He tightened his hold to keep her standing. Then Greggoire’s words came back to her and stole her breath. *He doesn’t know where Jordy is either.*

Greggoire stood and approached her. He stopped three feet away and stared over her shoulder at Ethan. “You’ve got two hours. The

challenge will be in the clearing by Shalin Creek. I'm sure you remember where I'm talking about."

"I'll be there."

Lowering his gaze, Greggoire narrowed his eyes at Dani. "If I find out you have my boy, you'll pay. After tonight, you won't have your mate to protect you. Think about wha—"

She spat in his face. "You'll never beat Ethan. He's a legend among werewolves."

Greggoire swiped his forearm across his face and threw back his head, laughing. "Oh, Danielle, you are going to be so much fun to break. Enjoy her while you can...cousin."

He walked away. Two of the men who had come with Greggoire picked up Butch's headless body and lugged it away with them.

Dani turned around and faced Ethan. "Did you hear? He doesn't have Jordy. He has no idea where he is."

"I heard." Ethan grabbed her hand and led her into the house. "I've got to get ready."

"Ethan! This means that my brother is still alive. If Greggoire doesn't know where he is, and he thinks I have him, he hasn't been able to use his blood. You'll have no problem kicking his ass and getting the alpha position back." She closed the front door and followed Ethan into the bedroom. "Once the challenge is over, we can figure out where Jordan is."

"Should we wait?"

She ran her hands through her hair. "Gah, we're no closer to finding him than we were before. I have no idea where he would be or with

whom. I just hope wherever he is, he's safer than he was with that bastard."

Ethan threw his duffle bag on the bed and moved over to the closet. Dani paced the length of the room. If someone took Jordan and Greggoire didn't know who did, that would mean...

"Does Greggoire have any enemies besides us? Anyone you remember fighting for the alpha position or someone he's screwed over in the past?"

"I can think about that."

She sat on the edge of the bed. "Maybe someone took Jordy to hurt Greggoire, or maybe someone saw what Greggoire was doing to gain his higher strength and wanted to...I need to go ask the members of the pack. Someone has got to know something. Greggoire is too stupid to keep what he does to himself."

A click of a magazine shoved into a pistol drew her attention. She frowned. While she'd been thinking aloud, he'd set out an arsenal of weapons on the other side of the bed. "What are you doing? You can't use these things in a challenge. The pack won't allow it, never mind Greggoire. It'll just give him a reason to kill you if he thinks you are going against the rules. I thought you were saving everything for when we save Jordy."

Ethan ignored her and went to the closet, took out a sweatshirt and tossed it to her. She caught it. "Why won't you answer me?"

“Busy.” He kneeled, pulled a small wooden box toward him, and lifted the lid. He took something out and pocketed it before pushing the box back into place.

“Ethan, stop for a minute.” She stood up and blocked his path. “Talk to me. Do you think Jordan is safer away from Greggoire?”

“I don’t have time to discuss this, little one.” He stepped around her.

She grabbed his arm. “Dammit, Ethan, just stop. What the hell is going on? Our main concern is Jordan. That was the deal, remember? We have no idea where he is now that Greggoire lost him too.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but we’re life mates now.” He rubbed his forehead. “The challenge will be the first hurdle.”

“No! Ethan—”

He sighed and closed his eyes for a second before cupping her face in his hands. “Listen. You heard Greggoire’s threat. He’s already planning to take you away from me. He’s fighting to the death. The same way he fought your father. Just like we predicted, the old rules don’t apply anymore. You’ve got to be prepared if I don’t make it out of this alive.” He kissed her temple and held her to his chest.

She pushed away from him. “Don’t say that! Shut the hell up. I don’t want to hear you talking this way. I will *not* lose another person that I love.”

She walked out of the room. Losing him wasn’t part of the plan. It wasn’t supposed to be

this difficult. They'd come back, find Jordy, and deal with Ethan reentering the pack the right way, the way it had been done in the past. At no time had she considered that one of them might die.

Now she didn't know if Jordy was in danger or where he even was. And Ethan...

He was a part of her. If she lost him, she'd die. Bit by slow bit, she'd fade away without her mate. She was sure of it.

"Little one?"

She paused in her mad escape to the kitchen. She pressed her lips together. The truth of the matter hurt too much to even think about. No way was she going to talk about what could happen. It all seemed much more dangerous than she realized.

"Now is not the time to be stubborn, Dani. We don't have much time. Dig deep and talk to your wolf. She knows what must be done. Face it, deal with it, and then we're going to go out there, end this rampage of Greggoire's and get your brother back." She sensed him heaving a sigh. *"I promised you from the first day I met you that I'd help you. I love you, and I want to make sure you are up to what will come. You have to trust me."*

She returned to the bedroom and, standing in the doorway, her breath hitched in her chest. Ethan stood with his back toward her, strong, determined, confident, and what did she do? She refused to face the truth because she was scared. That wasn't the kind of person she was. She needed to stand up beside him and let him

see that she believed in him. He'd come out on top tonight and be the alpha. It was destined.

She stepped into the room and gazed down at the weapons gleaming against the burgundy comforter. No longer alone, she needed to concentrate on getting her mate through tonight, because without him, she'd not complete what had to be done. "What do I need to do?"

Chapter Thirteen

Dani walked beside Ethan's big silver wolf. She curled her fingers into the thick fur at the back of his neck. She wanted with all her heart to avoid the challenge. Greggoire always fought dirty, to the death, and who knew what would happen? It was no longer a fair game for her kind.

"I'll be all right, little one." Ethan turned his head and gazed over his back. *"I love you. I'd never do anything to break us apart, and that includes losing tonight."*

She nodded and compressed her lips into a thin line. *"We'll be fine. You'll win. We'll find Jordy. Drover will go back to normal. I have to believe that."*

The pack, in human form, stepped back to make way for Ethan and Dani. She held on to him until they'd broken through the crowd, then remained beside him. The air thick with tension; she wasn't ready to separate from Ethan and leave him alone yet. She struggled to breathe. She finally gave up and let her wolf take control.

"Okay, little one, step back. Remember what I told you." Ethan looked up at her.

Dani dropped to her knees and threw her arms around the wolf. She kissed the side of his furry neck. *"I love you. Don't leave me too."*

"I won't. I love you too much not to win." He stepped forward and pushed her away. "Go now."

Holding her head high, she managed to find the will to keep walking. She refused to cry or show any doubts. If Ethan could stroll into the challenge without showing any fear, so could she. Inside her body, her wolf caressed her soul. Her wolf was the one creature who knew the real anguish and apprehension she was going through...and understood.

Ethan's wolf stood motionless, staring across the open space nestled between the river and the forest. He straightened his ears. Warmth came from her core. Looking at Ethan was like catching a glimpse of God. The legend, the prime alpha, the pack's savior had returned.

Someone touched the small of her back. She whipped around and let herself relax at the sight of her friend. "Hi, Shelley."

"You hanging in there?" Shelley crossed her arms and looked at Ethan.

Dani licked her lips. "Yeah."

"This won't end up like the last challenge...with your dad." Shelley turned and gave her an understanding smile. "He'll be all right regardless if he wins or loses."

"He'll win."

"I'm just saying..." Shelley reached over and gave Dani's shoulders a pat. "I'm going to go stand with Brad, but if you'd like to come with me, you're more than welcome."

Dani gazed over to her left. Stan Jenson and Keith Pegrow stood beside Brad talking. Her wolf growled and she covered it with a cough.

"Thanks, Shelley, but I'll stay right here."

"Okay. I'll talk to you afterwards."

All quiet conversations stopped. On the opposite side of the clearing, the cluster of werewolves parted. A large tan wolf led Greggoire's woman—Dani refused to call her Greggoire's life mate since he claimed two females—toward the edge of the grass. Her heart quickened. Greggoire had arrived, but where was the other woman? Had Greggoire found Jordan? Was the human woman at his home caring for Dani's baby brother?

Glancing around the circle, she spotted no one with a small child. She raised her hand to rub the base of her neck, stopped, and lowered her arm. Everyone's eyes were either on Ethan or her, and she damn well wouldn't give them any sign that showed her not one-hundred-percent confident that Ethan would walk away the winner.

The alpha and the challenger slowly walked toward the middle. There was no whistle, no bell, and no giant red flag that waved in the air signaling the start of the fight. It came down to the wolves. She stared at Ethan and sent all her energy to him. Unable to speak with him or distract him in anyway, she hoped that her obedience and support would empower him.

The two animals circled each other, stopped, and picked up their path around an invisible

barrier that neither one of them were willing to break until the moment was right. Ethan kept his head lower than his shoulders, and never broke his gaze from the tan wolf.

Greggoire trotted toward Dani's side of the field. Muscles rippled along Ethan's back and he lunged between Dani and Greggoire. Her breath caught in her throat. Her nerves threatened to snap.

Ethan growled and surged forward only to stop before making contact. She fisted her hands at her sides. This was too much to take.

Greggoire changed directions. Ethan lunged, this time toppling the tan wolf. She gasped and covered her face before quickly removing her hands. Not knowing was worse than hiding away from the action in the circle.

Jaws snapped shut with a spine-tingling *clink*. Lips curled back, the white canine teeth gleaming in the moonlight. Blood flew in the air as both wolves fought to get the upper hand. Her stomach seized. She swallowed the bile crawling up the back of her throat choking her. She'd never realized how much her mother must have suffered watching her dad fight Greggoire. Then she'd had to face life without her mate.

Ethan rolled with Greggoire on his back, broke away, and flipped to his feet. He snarled, saliva dripping from his mouth. She gazed over his wolf form. He had a bloody spot near his shoulder and another one near the paw on his back left leg. *He'll heal.*

He'd barely recovered his breath before Greggoire attacked again. Ethan turned, grabbed Greggoire's neck in his mouth and flipped over onto his back. He strained, trying to break through the wolf's spinal cord with his teeth. He blew out his mouth to keep from drowning in an odd, bitter taste. Proof that Greggoire used Jordan to build up his strength as a werewolf lay on Ethan's tongue. The normal flavor of blood was absent, replaced with a vile mixture of sickness.

Whipping his body upright, he kept his clutch on Greggoire's throat and forced the tan wolf to the ground, holding him in a death grip. One strong snap and he'd sever the head of the alpha. In years past, it was at this point that the challenge was called. He'd be declared the winner...and the Drover pack's new alpha.

"Come on...unless you're scared."

The voice momentarily stunned Ethan. Only mates were able to throw their thoughts to each other.

"As you can tell, things are different now. You no longer qualify as an alpha." Greggoire squirmed, but Ethan held on. *"The pack needs someone strong enough. My abilities make life easier for everyone."*

"Give it up, Greggoire." He bit down harder.

Greggoire struggled to break the hold.
"Never."

"You leave me one choice, cousin." Ethan slid his hind legs back, giving him enough stability to kill.

Greggoire laughed in Ethan's head. *"You were always too soft, Prince."*

Ethan's jaw opened and he recoiled. He stared at the tan wolf struggling to his feet. This didn't make any sense. Greggoire wouldn't have known how Loren used to torment him whenever he was alone by calling him Prince, because the twins rarely had anything to do with each other because of Loren's insane jealousy. The hair rose on his back. He bared his teeth and growled.

"I see you've figured it out." The tan wolf stepped sideways. *"You always were slow. What would grandfather say to you now, Prince?"*

Ethan lowered his head, shocked. *"What kind of game are you and Greggoire playing with the pack, Loren?"*

"Greggoire?" Loren snarled. *"He was weak and in my way, so I got rid of him, just like I will get rid of you and everyone else that threatens the new movement."*

Not letting Loren back away from him, Ethan shifted his stance and blocked him from Dani's view. *"Where's the boy? Is he still alive?"*

Loren stared him down. *"You'll never get the boy."*

The slightest twitch on Loren's shoulder gave him away. Before the tan wolf could leap, Ethan lunged and caught Loren underneath the jaw. Ethan landed hard, never losing his grip. Growling, he scooted around trying to protect

his vulnerable underbelly from Loren's claws. Shifting his mouth to the back of Loren's neck, he used all his strength.

An artillery of crunches splintered the air as Loren's spine disconnected at the neck. Ethan shook his head, ensuring the kill, then getting loose of the vile werewolf. He stepped backward, his heart racing.

He'd killed the alpha.

The headless wolf lay on the grass, no longer a threat. Ethan inhaled deeply as he stayed rooted to the spot to witness the dead werewolf slowly transform back into his human form. It was the way of his kind to shift in death to protect the existence of the werewolves should humans find a body.

Dani threw her arms around his neck. *"You did it, Ethan. I knew you could."* She ran her hands over the wounds scoring his back, his sides, his legs.

Mr. Lehman stood above Loren's body frowning. The others in the pack shuffled away from Ethan, confusion and pain showing on their faces.

"Tell the others I will be back. I'm going to shift and get dressed first."

"Do you want me to come? You're hurt."

He rubbed against her leg. *"I will be fine. I've been through worse."* He walked through the crowd without gazing at one member of the pack.

Chapter Fourteen

The grave silence of the pack was exactly the opposite of how Dani felt inside. She wanted to shout at all the werewolves that her life mate was the new alpha, and they didn't need to be afraid. Instead, she stood and stared at the remains of the man who'd killed her parents, stolen her brother and had planned to kill her mate.

Every promise she'd wished upon him was paid in full. She swallowed. Now she had to find her brother.

The pack murmured. Dani lifted her chin and turned to see Ethan. In the deep recesses of her soul, her wolf whined. *"I love you."*

Striding forward with his shoulders back, his hair swept away from his face, Ethan reentered the circle and stood beside the slain werewolf. "As my father, his father before him, and all the other long line of Tolenes that have carried the Drover pack over many, many years, I ask you to listen to what I have to say."

To show support, Dani joined Ethan at his side.

Ethan squatted beside Loren's body and rolled the headless form over. "Do you all see the mark on his lower back?"

A green tattoo in the shape of an X lay over his right butt cheek. Dani chewed on the inside of her cheek. She had no idea what Ethan meant by showing everyone a marking obviously done by an amateur.

“Ethan? I believe I have something I could say that will help.” Mrs. Danielson went to Dani and caressed her cheek with a sad smile. “I am so, so, so very sorry.”

Moisture flooded her vision. “Mrs. Danielson, I—”

The older woman shook her head and looked at the crowd. “I knew Loren’s secret. So did Lehman, Stan, Keith, Brad, John, Colby, his mate Jen, and my husband Butch. Every one of us kept quiet because we feared for our lives. Butch tried to reach out for help.” She nodded at Dani. “He told your parents when he first suspected it. That’s why Loren killed them both. We couldn’t tell anyone, or he would have killed us.”

Questions filled the air. “Who’s Loren?”

“What’s the tattoo mean?”

“What about those that did his dirty work?”

Ethan stood beside Dani and raised his hand in the air. “I’ll answer all the questions the best I can. Loren was Greggoire’s twin brother. About twenty-six years ago, Loren supposedly fell off a cliff. No one knows for sure how it happened, but it was deemed an accident. The body was taken care of by the immediate family.”

He pointed to the decapitated werewolf on the ground. “This is Loren, not Greggoire. Loren

admitted to me during the fight that he'd killed his twin. I can just imagine that he did it to take over a new life. Loren was never well liked, always going for more power, more control."

Dani jolted. He rubbed her arm. "We were cousins, so I knew that my grandfather had marked both twins at birth. Loren had an X, Greggoire had an O. Checkers had been my grandfather's favorite game, and he wanted to have a way of telling the two brothers apart."

"Was it all for Loren to gain the alpha position?" Dani shivered.

"Yes, little one. I notice the men who Mrs. Danielson named have disappeared from our gathering. Do not worry. I will see that those who knew of the crime and participated in Loren's schemes are punished for what they have done. Those that are innocent will have their chance at making things right."

The crowd muttered. Ethan cleared his throat, an implied demand for silence. "Loren, because of winning the alpha position, received a history book containing the past experiments, successes, failures of the Drover Pack. I have the same book in my possession. More than a hundred years ago, some of our kind experimented on drinking the blood of a known alpha, usually taken from a descendent of an alpha. They believe it made them twice as strong, their gifts more enhanced...and it does."

Dani hugged her waist. It was one thing to hear this from Ethan, but to hear it in front of

the whole pack, the desperation to find her brother accelerated.

“It also makes a werewolf lose touch with reality. They start killing and feeding indiscriminately, and their need for control grows until it ultimately destroys them. It annihilated Loren, as you can see.” He gazed at Dani. “I now need to ask for your help. A very important member of our pack is missing. Jordan Carson was stolen by Loren after his parents were killed. He’s missing. Does anyone know the whereabouts of my mate’s brother?”

Heads shook negatively. Dani wiped tears from her cheek. “Please. It’s okay to speak up. Ethan will protect you. You’ll not be charged with any crime against the pack. I just want my brother back, safe and sound.” She turned to face the pack. “It’s imperative that I find him. One of the things past werewolves have done when they’ve tried feasting on the blood of others is...The blood drinker grows hungrier after each transfusion and ultimately ends up eating the child. P-please!”

Mrs. Danielson stepped forward. “I’ll go from house to house and ask if anyone knows about your baby brother. It’s the least I can do. We must all help Dani. We owe her for bringing back the one person who can salvage what is left of the Drover Pack.”

The crowd drew closer, circling their new alpha. Dani slipped her arm around Ethan while he shook hands with each packmate. She sensed a heated blush covering her face as pride

overflowed inside of her. She gazed at her mate, smiling. The legend had returned to his rightful place leading the pack.

* * *

The soft cotton fabric of her shirt brushed her face as Ethan removed the last of her clothes. She smiled. "You're crazy."

"Hmm..." He lifted her up onto the counter, leaned over, and blew across her nipple. "Insane for you, little one."

She spread her legs. Ethan latched on to her breast. She closed her eyes and held onto his shoulders. They'd had a long day and having him all to herself was the best way to end it.

The rhythmic pulling on her nipple and the quietness of the house relaxed her. A euphoria of contentment came from Ethan's attention. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "That feels wonderful."

With one last nibble, Ethan let go of her breast and straightened. "I don't know if we have time for everything I want to do to you. Morning's going to come so damn early."

She scooted to the edge of the counter and looped her arms around Ethan's neck. "I'm not *that* tired. There's one other thing I'd like to taste..." She cupped the front of his jeans. "And explore."

She squealed as he lifted her off the counter, but she found herself standing on the floor, naked, staring into an empty room. She blew the bangs off her forehead. Damn, that man could move fast. Where had he gone? She hurried to the living room, huffed in frustration and headed into the bedroom. "Ethan?"

The curtains were closed and the lights off, but that didn't stop her from flipping the light on and laughing. "Oh my God, where did you find that? You can't be serious."

He thrust a plastic bag at her. "Too bad. This is all I've been thinking about since you let on that you were a cheerleader." He unbuttoned his jeans, stepped out of his pants, and threw them on the chair.

"Shame on you. You were supposed to take care of pack business." She burst out in laughter at his expression.

He leaped onto the bed, lay on his side, and propped his head on his hand. "I did. The men involved are gone. They'll not be welcomed back. The search party is organized, and tonight, we have approximately ten hours before we head out there again to search for your brother."

The plastic bag crinkled in her clutch. "It might not even fit."

"It'll fit."

She wrinkled her nose. "I haven't worn this in years. I don't know if I can."

"Put it on and give me a show, baby."

"I'll probably make a fool of myself...or break a bone." She raised her brows and stepped toward the bathroom.

"You're a werewolf, you'll heal."

Dani stuck her tongue out at Ethan.

"Smartass. I knew I shouldn't have let you know." She laughed.

"Yes. You should have."

"I'm not talking to you." She removed the cheerleader skirt from the bag and held the tiny thing up in the air. "I'll never fit."

"You will."

She rolled her eyes. "Ethan, stop listening. A woman has a right to talk to herself." Holding still, she waited for him to speak again. When he didn't, she dropped her arms and stepped into the skirt. Reaching behind her, she zipped it up and smiled. Still a perfect fit.

The reflection in the mirror pleased her. The navy and white vest hugged her breasts tighter than she remembered, but she also appeared more womanly than she had in twelfth grade. *Who knew back then that I'd be mated with the alpha, and not just any leader, the legendary Ethan Tolene.*

Raising her arms, she twisted at the waist and stretched. Thinking of her old routines, she hesitated. Was she still limber enough?

Chapter Fifteen

A soft wolf whistle came from the bed.
“Sweet.”

Though she didn’t embarrass easily, Dani giggled. Warmth traveled up her neck and settled on her face. She covered her cheeks with her hands. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

Ethan jumped up off the bed, grabbing her so fast that she couldn’t change her mind and run back into the bathroom. With a sigh, she slipped her hands around his hips, cupped his ass, and pulled him tight against her. His cock pressed into her belly and every negative thought about trying this trick for him fled her mind. After all, it was such a little thing, and no one besides Ethan would witness her humiliation if she fell flat.

“You think I can talk you into wearing this every day while you clean around the house?” He lifted her skirt and lightly spanked her ass.

“Mm...” She squirmed against him, snorted, and leaned her head back. “No. Maybe if you’re really nice I’ll do this on your birthday. Or the second Monday in July.”

Ethan raised his brows. “What happens that day?”

“It’ll be our anniversary.” She shook her head. “Look at you, Ethan Tolene. What’s it

been, a whole six weeks and you've already forgotten the day we met?"

He chuckled. "Well, yeah, I've been a little busy."

She stopped smiling. "I know. I hope with all my heart that we find Jordy soon. I can't thank—"

"Shh...for tonight, I want you to relax. Tomorrow, we'll go back to searching."

Dani nodded. Caught in the hard truth that they'd searched and questioned almost every resident in Drover—werewolf and human—she tried not to let the hopelessness of the situation drag her down. She sighed. *"I'm so glad I have you."*

"Forever, little one. We are one. Neither one of us will ever be alone again."

He slid his hand along her body, stroking the skin at the lower part of her back where her vest didn't quite reach her skirt. She remained still, falling into a haze of passion, her worries disappearing, warmth filling her soul.

She arched into his touch. He slowly traced the line of material at her waist. A sweet combination of shivers and burning heat came from her womb. She moaned. "You're driving me crazy."

He turned her around so her back faced his chest. He groaned. "I'm afraid the sight of you will have me shooting my cum without pleasing you first."

She sighed. Her heart was already aroused. His words, his attention, his love were the only

foreplay required. Sometimes she thought his facial expression when excited would send her off into a full-blown orgasm.

Not wanting to wait, she stepped away from him, widened her legs, arched backward, and peered over her shoulder to the floor. "I'm gonna try a backbend. Wish me luck."

"You don't need any, Dani. You succeed at anything you try."

She raised her arms above her head, arched her neck back, and let herself fall backward to the ground. With her feet and hands planted firmly on the carpet, her body bowed in a backbend, her stomach in the air. "Oh, God, I did it."

Ethan flipped up her skirt. "Fuck...that you did. You are so beautiful, all soft, smooth skin shining up at me. Your pussy lips are all juicy and ripe, ready for my mouth." He fingered her slit.

Her limbs quivered and she arched her back more, spreading her feet wider to allow Ethan to view all of her. Her pulse thrummed in her head as gravity changed the flow of blood.

Wide shoulders brushed the inside of her thighs as Ethan kneeled between her legs. He swept his tongue from clit to pussy. Her muscles weakened and her hips lowered. She pushed her stomach up farther, determined to give him all the time he needed to enjoy this special gift.

Her wolf whined in happiness. Strength returned in her limbs and she found herself forgetting her precarious position and centering

all her attention on the soft strokes of Ethan's tongue. She moaned. How was it possible to feel so many different sensations and become aroused when she was practically standing upside down?

He clasped the back of her thighs. Her heels came off the floor. Her weight shifted, lightened. Standing, he swooped her up and the room spun.

"I'm not done yet, little one." He carried her to the small step stool she used to get to the top of the closet and set her on it. Guiding her hands to the wall, he ran his hands down her legs, widening her stance. He stepped up and pressed himself against her back. "I want to take you here, standing up, your body trembling with need." He trailed his cock between her butt cheeks. "I want to have your warm pussy surrounding, squeezing, my cock."

"Yes." She clenched her teeth and hissed.

He gripped her hips and nestled his hardness between her thighs. She arched, pushing her pussy toward his cock. The friction of him sliding his cock back and forth along her slit drove her crazy. He trailed his mouth along her shoulder. His uneven breathing reassured her he was tormenting himself too.

She was going to come without him inside her if he didn't hurry. "Ethan...please."

His engorged cock pressed against her cunt. She writhed against him. She could do nothing but let him control how much, how hard, and how fast he moved.

“You’re mine,” he whispered hoarsely. “Say it.”

“Yours.” Her body tightened.

“Say you’re mine.” He plunged balls deep.

She bucked against him. “I’m yours, E-Ethan.” She whimpered and bit down on her lip. Her pussy spasmed. She wanted to more. Her body roared, wanting release.

Ethan growled. “Say it!”

“Yours! Oh, God. I’m go—”

“Say it again!” He thrust deep inside of her.

“I’m yours,” she screamed as her body convulsed and sweet release flooded her insides.

He thrust deep inside of her, held himself still and shot cum deep into her channel. He stroked his hands up and down her sides, resting his head on the back of hers. “You’re mine, little one. All mine.”

She leaned against the wall, her hair damp and her heart overflowing. “Yes...I’m yours. Only yours.”

Chapter Sixteen

The school bell rang. Dani stood at the fence. She wasn't watching the children exit the building but studying the parents lined up outside waiting to pick up their kids. She'd exhausted all her searches through Drover but had one last hope. Maybe one of the kids who lived on the edge of town and were shuttled to the school by their parents would know where Jordan was.

"I'll take this side of the turn around." Mrs. Danielson pointed to the left.

Dani nodded. "Make sure you glance in the vehicles too. Jordy would still be in a car seat. If they have a child in the car, or even if the seat is empty, make a note of it. I'll check with those parents tomorrow."

Mrs. Danielson nodded and headed off to question the adults. She jogged over to the cars parked along the street.

Please let this be the answer. "Excuse me." Dani smiled at a young woman bouncing a toddler on her hip. "I was wondering if you've seen a small boy, two years old. He might have dark hair and look a little like me."

The woman shook her head, frowning. "I'm sorry. I'm pretty new to this town. We've only lived here about five months."

Dani sighed and stepped back. "That's okay. Welcome to Drover."

"Wait! Are you missing a child?"

"My brother." Dani gazed at the next car pulling away from the curb. "I don't mean to run off, but I must talk to the other people here before they leave."

The woman nodded. "Well, good luck."

Dani ran down the street. Every person she asked said the same thing: they hadn't seen a lost little boy. She stepped off the curb, sat down, drew her knees up and cradled her head in her hands. She'd been so sure she was going to get a lead today. *Dammit.*

"No luck?" Mrs. Danielson squatted beside her.

She shook her head. "No. It's like he vanished. I just don't get it. Drover's a small town. Someone had to see him."

"Come on." Mrs. Danielson stuck out her hand. "I'll drive you back to the house. Maybe Ethan's found something out that will help you."

The ride back took five minutes, with Dani staring blankly at the houses as they went by. She'd sworn never to give up hope, but last night she'd snuck Ethan's pack book out of his duffle bag and found out more about what the werewolves had done years ago. She clenched her teeth together. In all likelihood, she'd lost her brother, just as she'd lost her parents.

Mrs. Danielson pulled into the driveway. "Good. Ethan's home. I'm not going in, but I'll

call you in the morning. Get some rest, you're exhausted." She gave Dani a little hug.

"I will." Dani opened the car door. "Thanks, Mrs. Danielson."

Shoving her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, Dani walked to the house until a loud clatter from inside had her running through the door. "Ethan?"

"Here."

She kicked off her shoes and trotted down the hall. "Where are you?"

Ethan left her parents' room, rubbing the side of his head.

She frowned. "What are you doing in there?"

"Cleaning the room out." He turned and went back inside.

"What? Where's all of my parents' stuff?" She stood in the doorway and put her hand on her chest. Heaviness constricted her lungs. "Why? Why would you do such a thing?"

"It's time." He swung the hammer, popping the bed frame apart. "We'll move our things into this room and..."

The rest of his words faded away. She backed up, shaking her head. This wasn't right. She couldn't change Jordan's home. It was important to keep everything the same. It was too soon.

She spun around and stomped to the living room, where she glanced at the picture of her parents on her dad's birthday. His cheeks were puffed up in mid-blow while her mom held a

cake up in front of him with candles covering the top.

Stripping her memories of her parents away...was wrong.

“Dani?”

Ignoring him, she ripped off her clothes and left them lying on the floor. She opened the screen door and shifted. She wanted to run, to escape all her troubles. She poured all her anguish, frustrations, and heartbreak into dashing toward the woods.

“Dani, come back. Let’s talk about this.”

She blocked him out of her mind and gave her wolf free reign. Jumping over a fallen log, she headed in no specific direction. The urge to flee set her course. If she could continue running, she could ignore the pain.

Ethan had returned to Drover. After he’d won the alpha position, the pack was more than happy to welcome him back. Almost every night they sought him out for one problem or another. Even Brad, Shelley’s life mate, had shared a beer with him in the backyard a few days ago.

Dani sprinted toward the river. The burn and pain from overstretching her muscles was medicine for her soul. She wanted to hurt, to cry, to wallow in her grief. If she no longer suffered, it meant that her mourning for her parents was over. That she’d given up on Jordan.

I’ve failed.

She came to a skidding stop. *No.* She stalked the bank of the river. Had her excitement over

finding Ethan and falling in love with him pushed her need to get Jordy to the back of her mind? She sat on her haunches and whined. *Oh, God, am I giving up too? Does Ethan expect me to forget about my brother and start making our own family?*

She'd failed and had no idea where to turn to find Jordan. Ethan had exhausted all searches, and still there wasn't a clue to explore or a straw to grasp in hope. Her body ached. No one could ever make her stop searching, hunting, praying that Jordan would come back home. She pointed her snout up in the air, arched her neck and howled. *I'll never give up. Never.*

* * *

Ethan lay a couple hundred yards from the river bank, his front paws crossed and his head lying on his legs. He hadn't understood why Dani had run away and refused to answer him, but her cry of loneliness about undid him. A primal need to kill whatever had upset her and to protect his life mate came over him.

But...

Someone else hadn't hurt her.

He had.

He lifted his head. He'd thought it would give her something to look forward to if she could work on a new play room for Jordan.

I'm such an idiot.

Three times her age, and somehow, he'd missed the point of the relationship lessons his grandfather taught him many years ago.

If a woman walks away in anger, she's really telling you to bring her back. If a woman stops talking to you, it's because she wants you to do the talking. Whatever you do, you do it all for your mate. You make her a home, and she'll worship you till the end of time.

Panting, Ethan stood and walked toward Dani. Upset and lost in her own thoughts, she didn't seem to hear him approach. He wanted to howl because he'd made her cry. He stopped beside her and sat down. He had a hunch if he'd come up on her in his human form, she would have run off.

"Little one?" He lay on the ground. "I'm sorry."

Dani turned her gorgeous dark head toward him. Her typically dark eyes were lighter than usual, and rust-colored tear stains marred their inside corners. He closed his mouth. His ears flattened.

"It was callous of me to clean out your parents' room without asking your permission first. It's okay if you want to keep it the same. I can put everything back the way it was."

The silence radiating from Dani wounded him, but at least she wasn't running away. That encouraged him, so he crawled closer. He should have remembered his grandfather's advice back at the house and spared her this pain. Dani did

seem to want him to talk, and dammit, he'd speak all day if it kept her beside him.

"This morning while you were out searching, I sent four of the wolves over to Heisson County to the east." He stepped closer, brushing her fur with his side. "I thought it would be best if we expand our search to include the surrounding areas. I trust these men to do a thorough job."

Her ears perked up. The fur along her neck lifted in a wave. His heartbeat accelerated. He had to keep her attention.

"With that bit of business done, I rushed home because I wanted to surprise you." He lowered his head and licked his leg. "I thought I'd turn your bedroom, our bedroom, into a play room. Toddlers need an area where they can play, jump, and put their imagination to the test without worry about breaking the grownups' things. I figured we could purchase a few toys now, and that way when Jordan came home, he'd have everything he needs."

She whined. He leaned over and rested his head on the back of her neck forcing her to lower herself. *"Don't cry, little one. This is all new to me too. I made a mistake. I'll learn—"*

"No." She rolled over on her back and licked the side of his face. "Y-you did everything right. It's me. I-I'm so scared. You make me happier than I've ever been, but a part of me feels like I'm failing. It all seems so useless. Nothing we've done has helped us find him. How much longer can we go wishing that Jordan is still alive? What if—"

“What?” He rolled on top of her and pinned her to the ground. “You’ve done more than anyone, even me. You were a trooper during our training before coming to Drover, you helped me win the alpha position back, and you search every day for your brother.” He nipped at her neck and growled. “I don’t ever want to hear you say you’ve failed. You are the strongest person I know. Jordan is out there. You know it. Don’t give up now.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Where are we going?” Dani peered in the mirror behind the visor and finger-combed her hair. She pinched her cheeks to bring some color into her face. “Don’t you want to go home and rest? You were gone all day on top of taking me out to dinner.”

“Nope.” He glanced over at her, winked and turned his attention back to the road. “You deserve a night out. We’re both going to regroup, gather our energy, and reconnect for awhile.”

She popped the visor up and laughed. “Oh, I get it.”

Ethan glanced back and forth from her to the road. “Get what?”

Despite his attempt to appear innocent, the laugh lines at the corner of his eyes deepened and the corner of his mouth twitched. Her heart warmed. First he’d surprised her by taking her out on a dinner date, now he was trying to woo her.

He turned off the street onto a gravel road. She turned to study the area. The whole county was familiar territory, but she couldn’t remember if she’d ever gone down this particular path before.

He rolled down his window halfway. “I received some interesting news today.”

Dani sat up straighter and held her breath. "Jordy?"

"I'm sorry, but no." Ethan reached across the seat, squeezed her leg, and shook his head.

"Years ago I knew an old woman. At least she seemed ancient to me. Edith Hachette was a dear friend of my mother, so she probably wasn't up there in age like I'm remembering. When I was banned from Drover after being framed by Greggoire, I mean Loren, I asked Edith to keep a few boxes of things for me. Little things, but they held a lot of memories...good ones." He stopped in front of a light green house, put the car into park, and shut off the engine.

Dani followed him out of the car. "What does that have to do with us coming here?"

"Bill down at the Dryer Realty told me that Edith was still alive and kicking this afternoon when I stopped by his office on my rounds. This woman is almost my last link with my childhood. My relatives are gone, the childhood friends I grew up with have taken their life mates and joined other packs. There are only about a dozen werewolves left in Drover that are old enough to remember me, and how I was back then."

"You're still the same Ethan."

"Yeah, but most of the pack knows me through stories, and how you like to say, legends." He stepped up to the door, knocked, and exhaled. "I hope she remembers me."

The door swung open slowly. A petite, aged woman with a cane squinted at them. "Hello?"

Ethan grinned and his cheeks flushed. “Well, if it isn’t the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Edith frowned, then clumsily dug through her apron pocket to find a pair of glasses. She perched the spectacles on the end of her nose, leaned back, and peered up at Ethan. “Oh, Lord’s sake, child. I thought you were dead.” Her voice trembled as she reached out.

The loud surprised laughter coming from Ethan shocked Dani, though not in a bad way. Neither one of them had much to joke around about since meeting. Smiling, she rubbed Ethan’s arm. *Yes, I definitely want to have Ethan laugh more.*

Edith regaled them with stories from the past for almost two hours. If it wasn’t for the older woman’s eyes growing tired, Dani could have listened all day. She’d suspected Ethan was a mischievous child and hearing the truth first-hand filled her with happiness.

“We better get going, but if you don’t mind, I’d love to bring Dani back with me and visit you again.” Ethan stood up.

Edith waved a hand, as if shooing away the question. “You know better than to ask. You both are welcome here any time.” She struggled to rise out of her chair, gave up, and scoffed. “Getting old is a bitch.”

Ethan bent down and kissed her cheek.
“Stay right there. We’ll see ourselves out.”
She wagged her finger at him. “Don’t forget your stuff.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Excuse me?”
“Your boxes, boy.” She cackled. “And they say *my* memory is going.”

“You’ve kept them all these years?” Ethan smooched her cheek again. “Thank you. I never expected you to hold them this long. I don’t—”

“Nonsense.” She patted his cheek. “Your things are out in the garage on the shelf. You’ll see them.”

Ethan gathered Dani to his side and led her toward the door. He paused. “Hey, Edith? Do you mind if I drive Dani to the back of your property?”

The tender smile that came over Edith’s face hinted at a pleasant memory. “Of course you can,” she softly answered.

After Ethan had put the boxes in the car and Dani wiggled into the tiny space left for her, she stifled a yawn. Dusk was falling, and she’d had a long day. She figured Ethan was exhausted.

“Hang on. It could be a bumpy ride.” He pulled the car around the house and set off through the woods. “Doesn’t look like anyone has come back here for awhile.”

“What’s back here? It looks like part of the forest on the other side of town near our house.”

"It is. Haven't you explored the forest before?"

"No. Dad was pretty protective of me. I imagine it's different for boys." She cupped her hand against the side window and let her eyes adjust to the darkness to peer outside. "We're really climbing."

"Just wait. This is nothing yet." He studied the road.

He drove the rest of the way in silence and finally came to a stop. Dani opened her door, but didn't see anything special about this part of the forest.

Together, they strolled farther up the hill before Ethan pointed ahead of him. "Right there. It's even more spectacular in the daytime when you can see for miles and miles."

She gasped. "*Oh Ethan...*"

Standing at the edge of a cliff, she took in the view. Even in the darkness, she could make out the potpourri of trees splattered throughout the valley. The river forged a path dodging the trees. Outside of the forest, homes lay in orderly rows: the town. Headlights moved slowly, lighting the streets.

She tried to find her house while Ethan moved in behind her and pressed her back onto his chest. "It's peaceful up here," he said.

"Yes." Pointing, she asked, "Is that our neighborhood?"

"Yes." He nibbled her neck.

"What are you doing?"

“Mmm...” Nipping her earlobe, he turned her around. “The view wasn’t the only thing I wanted to show you.”

“Oh yeah?” She slid her hands inside his shirt to his hard stomach. “I think I’d like to see whatever this *thing* is you wanted to show me.”

He slowly took her hand and pulled it to the front of his jeans. “You’re sure?” Ethan wiggled his brows and grinned.

She smiled. Instead of answering him, she undid the button at his waist and pulled down the zipper. His cock stood erect, hard and warm. Planning to kneel, she bent her legs but Ethan held her up.

“Strip off your jeans, little one.”

Slipping off her shoes and socks, she wiggled out of the rest of her clothes, baring her bottom half. Ethan led her to a big boulder, which sat overlooking the valley and urged her to bend over the rock. Viewing the height from the edge left her dizzy, but added the spice of danger, too. The beauty of the land gave her goosebumps.

Ethan spread her legs and kissed the soft skin where buttock met the back of her thigh. She arched, and he smoothed the backs of her legs. She closed her eyes as his fingers and lips traveled between her legs. Her pussy seemed to thump to the rhythm of her heartbeat.

He licked the edge of her lower lips. She opened her legs wider and lifted her ass to give him better access. Warmth coiled in her core. She wanted more, to have his hardness fill her body and claim her.

Gentle pressure on her anus had her pushing back and moaning. Ethan stood and spread her lower lips wider while paying special attention to her clit and anus. The pleasures from the different sensations were instant. She pushed back and held onto the rock.

“More, Ethan. Please?” Little puffs of breath came from her mouth.

He entered her one slow inch at a time, letting her enjoy every delicious push on her inner muscles. She stretched, feeling her channel suck at his cock, drawing it farther inside of her. The reassuring thud of his heartbeat against her back comforted her, made her feel secure and loved while stealing her breath.

Rocking back and forth, she plunged down on his cock at the same time he thrust into her over and over. With his ball sac gently slapping her clit, she rose onto her toes and strained for release. She was so close.

Ethan circled his arm around her side and flicked her tiny nub with his finger. Electrifying jolts exploded from her core, and she bucked. *Oh, God.*

She cried out. Her womb convulsed, and a tidal wave of pleasure coursed through her body. She closed her eyes and concentrated on all the joy she received.

Another slow deliberate thrust before Ethan held himself still against her ass. He shuddered through his release setting off more spasms deep in her cunt.

She laid her cheek on the rock's surface. She sighed as the cool wind splashed over her heated body. "*That was amazing.*"

Ethan pulled her into his embrace, lingered over a kiss, then whispered, "I love you, little one."

Chapter Eighteen

Two months after coming back to Drover with Ethan, and they were no closer to finding Jordan. In fact, the situation was more depressing than ever.

Late one night, Dani set her hair brush in the drawer, then turned on the tap. She cupped her hands under the water, leaned forward, and patted her cheeks. Reaching for a towel, she dried her face and struggled to stay in control. Would she ever stop crying?

The last few days, she'd found herself breaking out in tears over the littlest things. If Ethan gave her one of his soul-searching kisses, she'd cry. She'd stroll past the new playroom and she'd imagine Jordan pushing a toy truck on the floor without a worry in the world, and she'd find her face wet with tears. She wasn't against crying—even Ethan explained that it was the body's way of keeping you healthy—but she felt incredibly hopeless.

Shutting off the light, she walked through the bedroom and down the hall. She had to pull herself together. Ethan planned on driving her to Farmington today to search.

Soft voices from the living room became clearer. She pushed back her hair and turned the corner. One of Greggoire's—Loren's—women

stood outside the front door glancing back and forth between Dani and Ethan.

Fear pierced her chest. Her wolf snarled, reminding her to be on guard. *"What is she doing here?"*

"Careful, Dani. She's come to tell us something. Don't do anything to chase her away."

Dani stepped beside Ethan and gazed at the woman, lit only by the porch light.

Dark blonde hair pulled back off her face, soiled clothing, and months, if not years, of hard stressful living were etched into her cheeks; she appeared older than she probably was. The woman tugged at the shirt she wore. Dani frowned. This person did not act like the raving killer she'd encountered the night she and Ethan broke into the former alpha's house. Nervous and scared, this woman seemed unsure if she should stay or run.

"Dani, this is Mary." Ethan stepped back. *"Ask her to come in. Let's see what brought her here."*

"Please, come in, Mary," Dani said, trying to sound hospitable. "Would you like a glass of water?"

"No...please." Mary came inside and sat on the edge of the couch. She closed her eyes and inhaled a big breath before opening her eyes again. "I have to...I want to...I'm sorry. I know I'm not making any sense."

Dani sat down on the fireplace hearth nearby. "It's okay. Take your time." *"Sit, big guy, you're scaring her."*

Choosing a big armchair, Ethan sat.

Not wanting to rush the woman, Dani gazed at her hands. She was shaking. Not wanting anyone to notice, she fiddled with a hangnail to keep busy.

"My biggest fear is you'll ban me from Drover after I tell you what I know." Mary lifted her chin. "I have no other home."

"It depends on what you have to say." He leaned back in his chair. "I'm a fair leader. I'll listen."

Mary nodded. "I've heard that about you. Please, I ask that you hear me out, and I promise I'll tell you everything."

The damn tears welled up in Dani's eyes again. She blinked the moisture away. *Please, not now. Be strong.* "I will."

Blood pounded in her ears. This could be the lead she'd searched for since the day Jordan was kidnapped. Who better to know what happened than Loren's lover? *Dammit.* Why hadn't she thought of that? Ethan and she had both disregarded the obvious, thinking that if Loren didn't know who had stolen Jordan from him, his women wouldn't either.

"You've probably guessed that Greggoire used Jimmy to enhance his abilities." Mary's legs trembled and she rubbed her knees.

Dani sat up. "Jimmy?"

"Sorry." Mary shook her head. "I don't know his real name. Jimmy is the name Greggoire gave him. I know he was your brother though. That I'm positive of."

Dani kneeled beside the couch. "Was? What do you mean? He's okay. Where is he? What did he do to him?"

"Let her speak, little one. We promised her that. Don't jump to conclusions."

Dani caught a sob in her throat. "P-please...g-go on."

"Carolyn and I were in charge of taking care of him." A small smile lit up her face for an instant and then disappeared. "Carolyn was also Greggoire's lover. I didn't like it, but...later, I was just happy to have someone to talk with who knew what I had to go through. I stopped worrying if she was going to steal my man from me. I even came to accept that Greggoire brought a human into our home."

Mary reached into her pants pocket and removed a tissue. She quietly blew her nose. "We loved that little boy as if he were our own. He's such a good baby. But the more treatments Greggoire had, the meaner he became. Carolyn and I would take shifts watching over Jimmy. We'd never let him get hurt. You have to believe that." She gazed at Dani.

Dani nodded. Hope filled her. She bit her tongue to let the woman finish her story.

"Carolyn received the worst of Greggoire's treatment. He'd rape her, and when he was finished, he'd treat her like a piece of garbage. Several times, I knew she should have gone to the hospital, because she had no way to heal herself. I was afraid he'd kill her." She wiped her cheeks. "Carolyn...she started to retreat from

me, and instead became almost obsessed at never letting Jimmy out of her arms. She'd carry him around the house singing to him, playing imaginary games. Of course, Jimmy ate up the attention, but...I worried that Carolyn was losing touch with reality."

Dani couldn't stand it anymore. Desperate to share some of Ethan's strength, she sat on the edge of his armchair. Mary was talking about her little brother. Hope had her heart singing with this current news about Jordan, but inside, hearing about the abuse going on in the home, she feared the worst.

"Greggoire told us one night that he was going to make sure he was the strongest wolf who had ever lived." Mary raised her brows at Ethan. "We were to ready the boy for the next phase."

Dani tensed. Ethan laid his hand on her back.

"Greggoire left the house. I was so upset. I went upstairs to use the bathroom and try to figure out what to do. When I came back downstairs, Carolyn and Jimmy were gone. Greggoire was livid when he found out."

"Greggoire never found them?" Dani bit down on her lip. A slight salty taste filled her mouth.

"No, he didn't." Mary blew out her breath and glanced at Ethan. "That night your mate killed him."

"Do you know where my brother is now? Is he okay?"

"He's fine."

Ethan guided Dani off the chair and stood, approaching Mary. "You are safe in the Drover Pack. Under the circumstances, I think what you did was very brave. There is no need to banish you from your home. We would appreciate you telling us where we can find Dani's brother, though. My mate has lived in hell the last two years not knowing. You do realize the boy belongs with Dani. She's the only family he has."

Mary nodded. "Thank you. I can show you where he is. I-I know it's asking a lot, and you've already showed me much kindness, but could you help Carolyn? Maybe find someone, a doctor, who will help her recover. She didn't deserve Greggoire's treatment. I'm afraid it might be too late to undo the damage he's caused."

"I will do whatever's in my power to find her help." Ethan slipped his arm around Dani.

She clutched his shirt in her hands and let the tears fall. It was almost over. Soon she'd have Jordy back home with her.

Chapter Nineteen

Mary had informed them that Carolyn hid with Jordan in a secret cave, so Dani, Ethan, and Mary hiked deep into the forest, Mary in the lead. Loaded with a backpack of supplies, Dani paid no attention to what direction they headed.

The foliage grew thicker. Dani stepped over a fallen branch and stumbled. She caught herself on the back of Ethan's jeans.

"You okay?"

"Yes." She picked up her pace. She'd crawl through burning coals to find her brother. "How much farther do we have to travel?"

Mary stopped and turned around. "About five minutes." She wiped her forearm across her mouth. "Carolyn's fragile. I know she wouldn't do any harm to Jordan under normal circumstances, but I have to warn you, she's become more protective of that kid than any she-wolf I've run across. Go gently."

Nodding, Dani stepped around Ethan and told Mary, "Thank you so much."

"I had to right the wrong. I wish I never was involved in the whole mess." Mary pointed northeast. "It won't take long."

They arrived at the mouth of the cave not long after dawn, the rising sun lighting their way. Ethan helped Mary move the tree limbs

Carolyn had used to hide the entrance. Dani set the backpack down. The toast and juice Ethan had forced her to nibble earlier tumbled around in her stomach.

Mary brushed off her hands. "Dani, I know it'll be hard for you to see Jordan for the first time, but it's important that Carolyn doesn't feel attacked or threatened. I'm not sure how she's going to react when she finds out you've come for the boy."

My brother. I've come for my brother. Dani swallowed. "Okay."

"Why don't you stay behind me, Dani?" Ethan slid his arm around her. "She knows the connection between you and Jordan. Let me talk to her, and I'll try to distract her from you until we have figured out how to bring Jordan out of the cave."

She nodded. "Yes. I'll do anything."

Mary glanced back and forth between her and Ethan. "Okay, let's go do it."

Leading the way inside, Mary put her finger to her lips. A drop of moisture from the rock ceiling dripped on Dani's neck and slid underneath the collar of her shirt. She shivered and touched Ethan's back. *"It's so cold in here. Do you think Jordan is all right?"*

"He's fine. I imagine he is tough like his sister." He put his hand behind him.

Dani took it and held on. *"Thank you. I would never have survived the last couple months without you."*

“Carolyn? It’s me, Mary.” She raised her arm and stepped forward. “I’ve brought someone with me.”

Mary’s words echoed against the rocks. Dani held her breath and waited to hear if there was an answer.

“I’m going to come back there. It’s safe. No one is here to hurt you.” Mary motioned for them to follow.

The tunnel narrowed, and Dani let go of Ethan so they could walk single file. Darkness enveloped them, and the cold stone walls brushed her arms, allowing her to trace the path ahead.

“There’s a small opening, little one. You’ll have to crawl in. Be careful you don’t bump your head.”

She felt around in front of her searching for the gap. Her heartbeat accelerated. Crouching, she found the crack in the rock. She never thought of herself as claustrophobic, but she’d never experienced such closed quarters like this in her life. Thankful for her ability to see in the dark, she crawled five or six feet through the narrow passage before she saw Ethan standing.

Climbing to her feet, she heard the soft giggles of a child. *“Ethan! Listen!”* The laughter sounded so close, but she’d yet to catch sight of Jordan.

“Caro? I’ve brought you a candy bar and another baggy of those little fish crackers that Jimmy loves so much.” Mary reached inside her

jacket pocket and removed the items. "We just want to talk. You can feed Jimmy."

Dani wanted to shout for her to bring Jordan out, but she held her tongue. She hid behind Ethan. His size would shield her from Mary's view.

"Carolyn? This is Ethan Tolene. I'm the new alpha of the Drover Pack." Ethan spoke softly. "I've come with some news. Mary thought you'd like to hear it from me." He paused. "You won't have to worry about Greggoire any longer. He's dead."

As if celebrating the news, a child's shriek of happiness echoed in the alcove. Dani cried out. She covered her mouth as her body folded and lowered her chin to her chest. She had to stay silent. If she'd messed up their plans, she'd never forgive herself.

"Use your wolf, little one."

She dug deep into her soul and called her wolf. The confidence that she'd bring her brother home buoyed her. She straightened, and her body stopped trembling. The tears dried. The sensation of a growl tickled through her chest.

"Are you sure he's dead?"

Dani smiled. *"Keep talking, Ethan. Let her know what you did. She deserves to know vengeance was done."*

"Yes. I killed him myself." Ethan spoke louder. "It's not right for a werewolf to play with his gifts. It makes wolves mean and violent. He needed to be killed."

A shuffling sound came. Dani froze. Unable to deny herself a glimpse of her brother, she leaned a little to her left to peek between Ethan's arm and his body.

"Here, Caro." Mary approached the woman and handed over the snacks.

Dani recognized the woman from the dead alpha's house. She carried a large bundle in front of her body wrapped head to toe in a blanket. Little sneakered feet kicked out happily from the bottom.

"Can I hold Jimmy while you eat?" Mary held out her hands and cooed at the child.

"No!" Carolyn turned her body to shield Jordan.

"Remember, I told you that you're safe now. Jimmy's safe. No one will ever hurt him." Mary stroked Carolyn's arm. "You've done a great job protecting him, but Greggoire's gone. You can let him go."

"No." Carolyn shook her head violently back and forth, emitting a loud whine.

Jordan began to cry.

"Carolyn, thank you." Dani stepped out from behind Ethan. She crept closer to her brother, but Carolyn cried out. "I'm not coming any closer. Mary has told me what a wonderful mother you have been to my brother. I know how important that is, because I lost my mother and father when Greggoire killed them."

"Y-you'll want to take him away from me." Carolyn swayed side to side in an effort to settle

Jordan down. Her hold on him remained strong and secure. "I raised him! Not you."

"I know you did." Dani smiled. "I would love to have you in our life. J-Jimmy needs lots of love from everyone."

"Carolyn, why don't you let Dani hold the child and you can come outside with me. It's nice out. The sun is shining." Mary stroked Jordan's back. "Won't that feel nice, the warmth on your shoulders and face?"

"Dani...go closer."

She stepped in another foot. "We had a beautiful walk this morning. It won't be long until all the leaves will be changing colors." Dani moved again. "I bet Jimmy would have a lovely time rolling in a pile of leaves, wouldn't he?" She continued to inch her way to Carolyn's side. "You must be feeding him well. He's got so big."

Carolyn gazed at the boy. "He eats like a piggy. Don't you, chub cheeks? Oh, yes you do...you do. You eat everything I feed you."

Jordan giggled and kicked.

"Carolyn, I want you to trust me." Dani reached out and laid her hand on the blanket. Her fingers shuddered against the tiny curve of Jordan's back. It took all her power to restrain herself from grabbing her brother from his kidnapper. "See? I'm not going to take him from you. I really am thankful for all you've done."

"W-why are you here? Y-you want to steal him from me." Tears pooled in Carolyn's eyes. "He's mine."

“Yes, he’s yours. You can see him whenever you want.” Dani dropped her hand and gazed into Carolyn’s face. “You need someone who’ll take care of you. Protect you from things that hurt. Wouldn’t you like to feel better?”

“I’m scared.” Her voice was laden with real fear.

“Oh sweetie, I know you are.” She glanced back at Ethan. “I swear on my life, that the big guy over there will always protect you. He’s real good at that.”

Carolyn sniffed. “He looks like you.”

“Ethan?”

“No.” Carolyn lowered the blanket revealing a head full of wavy dark brown hair. “Jimmy.”

The air whooshed out of her body. A face with a pert little nose, big brown eyes, and the sweetest smile with drool dripping from his lip looked back at her. She crossed her arms to keep from reaching out and pulling Jordan to her chest. She swallowed. She didn’t want to frighten him, so she concentrated on keeping it together. Later, she’d lie down in bed and cry for all the pain and suffering she’d endured through the last two years. But not right now. She needed to have Carolyn hand over her brother.

Chapter Twenty

Childish giggles filled the room. Dani lay on the living room floor propping her head up on her hand. Ethan, in his wolf form, jumped in front of Jordan growling, which set off a new round of laughter.

Her little brother loved seeing Dani and Ethan turn into their wolves, and the show had become a nightly ritual. Dani reached out and tickled his side. "You getting tired yet, Jordy?"

Jordan shook his head, almost toppling over. "No!"

"When will he learn a new word? I think he's overused that one."

"Guess what, Jordy? Ethan wants you to learn a new word." She pulled Jordan over next to her. "Say Dani."

"No!" He turned to Ethan and flapped his arms.

"How about you ride Ethan's wolf to the bedroom, and let him slobber all over you before you go to sleep?" She pushed up off the floor, groaning, and scooped up Jordan. "Gah. Your sister feels old. This time be nice. Nice wolfy. You don't want to pull his fur."

Dani sat Jordan on Ethan's shoulders and kept a good hold on the baby's waist. Walking beside the wolf, she smiled. Jordan had his

hands dug deep in Ethan's fur. She was sure his squeal of delight pierced every werewolf's ears within a mile.

"Okay, here you go, big boy." She set Jordan on his feet. "Tell Ethan night-night."

Jordan threw himself at the wolf, wrapped his chubby arms around Ethan's neck, and babbled nonsense. Dani sighed. Jordan had been out of her life two years, three months and four days, yet he'd integrated into their household as though he'd always lived with them.

"Come, give me some love." She squatted and held out her arms.

He ran to her and threw himself into her embrace. She laughed. "You are so strong." She swept him up in the air, smooching his cheek the whole way to the changing table. "Let's get your diaper changed and then I'll find Wolfy. I think Wolfy is sleepy."

"No!" Jordan giggled.

"Oh yes, he is." She briskly dealt with a soiled diaper, replacing it with a clean one.

Ethan brushed her leg. She glanced down. In his mouth was Jordan's favorite stuffed animal. "Here we go." She handed Wolfy to Jordan and carried them both over to the crib.

She kissed his forehead. "I love you. Sleep tight, my brother," she whispered, smoothing the hair off his forehead. She backed out of the room to wordless babble as Jordan talked to his Wolfy. Once he was down, he'd sleep all night, giving her seven blessed hours of quiet.

Closing the door halfway, she turned, reaching for her mate's thick fur. That Ethan went out of his way to spend so much time with her and Jordan always amazed her. She plopped down on the couch and raised her legs to the coffee table.

Ethan shifted and sat down beside her. Pulling her into his arms, he stroked her side. "You're overdressed."

She snuggled down and closed her eyes. "Who knew taking care of a two year old would be so exhausting? I don't remember being this tired in my life."

"Hmm." He slipped his hand under the hem of her shirt and caressed her stomach. "It's not chasing after Jordan that is making you so tired, little one."

She sniffled a yawn. "What do you think it is?"

"You're pregnant."

Dani shot off his lap. "I'm what? I couldn't be. It takes werewolves longer to conceive." She stared at Ethan, but he just sat there smiling.

"No...seriously..."

"Pregnant." He nodded.

She counted. Not trusting herself, she then tapped the number out with her fingers. "Oh, my God. That's why I've been crying, eating, sleeping, and generally acting lazy. I thought I was recouping from all the stress I've been under. I remember my mom acting the same way when she was pregnant with Jordy."

Ethan stood up. "Come, little one."

“What are we doing?” She let him lead her down the hall.

He gave her a wink, then peeked into Jordan’s room and smiled. “He’s asleep.”

He led her to their bedroom and helped her remove her clothes. She yawned again before getting into bed. Lying on her back, she stretched and sighed. Ethan climbed between her legs. She let her arms fall to the sides and closed her eyes. Using his tongue, Ethan gently licked her lower lips. She wiggled as her legs widened and the delightful sensations inside her multiplied.

Ethan worked his way up to her clit, flicking the bundle of nerves. She gyrated her hips in time with his mouth. Delicious warmth flushed the surface of her skin. She reached down and buried her fingers in his hair. “God, that feels wonderful.”

“Umm-hmm.”

She moaned and gave his hair a little tug. “Come here. I want you inside of me.”

He lifted his head. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She smiled. “I can stay awake a little longer.”

Ethan crawled up her body, placing small kisses along her stomach, her breasts, her neck. Finally capturing her mouth, he entered her pussy. She arched against him. Slowly, he slid in and out, rebuilding the fire he’d started with his lips.

The house was quiet. There was no rush in their lovemaking. They had all the time in the

world. Just the two of them together, the way it's supposed to be when werewolves mate.

A different kind of tension coiled in her soul as she skimmed her lips against his mouth. So loving, so tender. Her fierce alpha not only protected, fought, and sheltered her, but stood by her side and supported her. He gave her completeness.

The wave of pleasure snuck up on her, and she shuddered underneath him. Her inner muscles squeezed his cock. He groaned and plunged balls deep inside of her. His eyelids involuntarily lowered, his hips trembled between her legs, and an almost pained look came across his features before pleasure consumed him. She watched all the emotions play out on his face.

Ethan remained connected to her until he lost all strength and his limbs shook. Rolling off of her, he pulled her close and covered them both with a blanket.

She sighed. "I love you."

"I love you too, little one." He kissed her. "Rest. Morning comes soon enough."

~End~

~ About the Author ~

Abby Wood loves to surround herself with family, critters, and laughter. A huge animal lover, she's often found discussing story plots with the animals while mucking the barn in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. In between chores and raising a family, she enjoys trying out new recipes and adding more boots to her closet. She loves to write stories that allow readers to escape into a brand new world.

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