



She outran her memories. She couldn't outrun her past.

Legacy, Book 3

Shelley is a killer. Never mind that her "crime" freed her from thirty-five years of brutal captivity—the bounty hunters on her trail don't care. For the first time in her life, she is on her own, free to put the past behind her and explore what it means to be a werewolf.

James Riley is dead tired. After a week untangling legal and financial affairs his brother's death left behind, he's feeling every ounce of his new responsibility as Wolf Creek pack alpha. He's not too tired, though, to notice his sexy waitress is a werewolf—one that strangely doesn't recognize him as one of her own kind.

After his questions rattle her composure and get her fired, Shelley figures the least James can do is drive her to the next town, but he wants more. He wants to take her home. And despite her fear, something inside her is irresistibly drawn to his commanding yet gentle presence.

James is willing to give Shelley all the time she needs to embrace her heritage, her sexuality, and eventually his love. But her past will not be denied...and her secrets demand a price paid in blood.

Warning: This book contains a hunky werewolf, a woman with a secret past, a lost family found, nasty bounty hunters, and lots of steamy hot sex!

**eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Legacy Found
Copyright © 2011 by N.J. Walters
ISBN: 978-1-60928-449-7
Edited by Heidi Moore
Cover by Scott Carpenter

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2011
www.samhainpublishing.com

Legacy Found

N.J. Walters

Dedication

To my husband Gerard, who taught me what love is all about.

Prologue

Seven months ago...

Blood. There was so much blood. It coated her hands and splattered her arms, face and clothing. She stumbled back from the body sprawled on the floor, hardly believing what she'd just done.

Scrambling away, she jerked her dress over her head and scrubbed at her arms and hands. When she'd wiped away the worst of it, she went to the sink and worked the pump handle until water flowed. Grabbing the bar of soap on the edge of the sink, she went to work.

She built up a thick lather between her hands and rubbed it over her body and face. She repeated the process, not caring about the water spilling on the floor, until she was clean. There was a threadbare towel on a peg next to the sink and she used it to quickly dry herself.

She didn't spare a glance for the large, gray-haired man as she hurried to the long, narrow closet that served as her sleeping area. She glared at the hated padlock that kept her confined within the small space each night and at the silver-plated manacles that were bolted to the floor. Those were snapped around her ankles at night to ensure she wouldn't escape while he slept.

She didn't have a bed. A simple pallet on the floor was where she slept. The walls were bare and there was no furniture. Her few meager bits of clothing were hung on hooks on the wall. She pulled on a clean dress and bundled her belongings together, shoving them in a paper bag. She didn't have much.

She left the closet and glanced around the room. She didn't want to take anything of his with her, but she wasn't stupid either. Skirting the body, she went to his desk and opened the top drawer. He kept a small amount of cash there for emergencies. She took it all, shoving it into her bag.

A weapon. She needed something to protect herself. All the guns were locked up and the key was in his pocket. There was nothing in heaven or hell that could make her touch him in order to get at it. She'd also never used a gun in her life.

That left the knife.

She steeled herself for what she was about to do. She'd just killed a man. There was no need to get squeamish now.

Creeping over to the body, she stared at the knife hilt protruding from his chest. The handle was carved from bone and it was very old, an antique that had belonged to his father and his father before him. Or so he'd told her many times. All she cared was the blade was sharp.

It had been her salvation.

It was startling how different he looked lying there on the worn plank floor. Blood stained his clothing and the floor around him. She'd stabbed him several times before managing to strike the final blow.

His skin was unnaturally pale, his lips slightly parted. A line of drool spilled out of the left corner of his mouth. He appeared smaller somehow. Nothing at all like the demon who'd haunted her days and nights for years.

She could do this.

Taking a deep breath, she reached down, wrapped her fingers around the handle and yanked the weapon from his cold, dead heart. She wiped the blade on the arm of his shirt, removing the worst of the blood. She quickly grabbed a dishtowel and wrapped the knife in it before adding it to her bag of belongings. She'd clean it better later. She had to get out of here. *Now*.

A sense of urgency drove her. She had no idea how long it might be before one of his friends showed up. They came and went at all hours of the day and night with no regularity. One of them might show up in the next minute or it might not be until next week.

Either way, she wasn't going to be here.

She scurried to the door, her bag clutched tight to her chest. The door creaked as she pulled it open.

Pausing, she turned back. She couldn't leave things as they were.

Swearing under her breath, she went to the woodstove and grabbed a box of matches. She struck one and watched the flame flicker, then burn higher. She walked to the worn-out, stained mattress in the corner and dropped the match.

It caught immediately.

She calmly walked to the door and shut it behind her. Focusing on the top of the hill, she climbed steadily, keeping away from the rough road that led to the cabin. Once she reached her destination, she paused and turned, staring back from where she'd come. She watched while the flames slowly engulfed the wooden structure.

It was in a clearing so she wasn't too worried about the surrounding forest. Still, she felt easier when the first drop of rain hit her face.

Turning her back on the macabre scene, she started walking. As she trudged through the thick brush, the rain started to beat down on her, quickly soaking her to the skin. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her body, silently berating herself for not stealing one of his jackets.

Chapter One

James Riley climbed out of his vehicle and pocketed his keys. Even though the air was cool and crisp, he didn't bother with his leather jacket. Taking a deep breath, he drank in the scent of the surrounding woods and damp earth. There was a hint of spring in the air despite the fact it was March and there were still patches of snow on the ground.

He raised his arms above his head, stretching out his cramped limbs as he surveyed the truck stop. He'd been on the road for a week now and was looking forward to getting home.

He was alpha of the Wolf Creek pack in North Carolina. As such, the financial concerns of the pack were his responsibility. That was the main reason for his trip. He'd been in so many banks and investment firms over the past few days he could barely remember them all. Then there had been the visits to specialty stores and markets that carried the arts and crafts many of his people produced.

He'd only been alpha for about six months and was still sorting out the mess that had been left behind when a group of young males had killed the previous alpha and threatened the security of the pack. His brother, the former alpha, had been a good male, but he hadn't had much of a head for business. Thankfully, two of the pack members were lawyers. That had helped things considerably.

His gut tightened. The memories of his brother's and sister-in-law's deaths were still fresh. He hadn't seen his brother in more than two decades, but that hadn't made the loss any easier to bear.

James swiveled his head in a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree arc, surveying the area around him. He wished he could shift into his wolf form and run through the woods, free and unfettered. Soon, he promised himself. For now, he needed to be on his guard.

He was always aware, always watching for danger. Paranormal bounty hunters were the bane of his kind. They killed indiscriminately—women, children and the elderly. It didn't matter to them. Their motto was the only good werewolf was a dead one.

There were plenty of trucks in the parking lot, which boded well for the food served inside. But at the moment there was no one in the lot but him. Everyone else was inside.

He took one more look around as he yanked his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a familiar number. It rang twice before being answered.

"Hello."

The knot in his gut relaxed slightly. "Hey, honey."

“Dad. Where are you?” As always, the love and concern in his daughter’s voice made him smile. He was so proud of her. Alexandra hadn’t even known she’d had wolf blood in her until a few months ago. Since then, she’d embraced her heritage and mated with a strong male. He was glad to have Joshua Striker looking out for his daughter.

“I’m at a roadside diner in Kentucky. I’m going to get something to eat and get back on the road. I’ve got two more stops to make, but I should make it home late tonight.”

“Don’t push it. Stop somewhere for the night if you need to. Everything here is fine.”

James didn’t commit one way or another. “Let me talk to Joshua.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too, Alex,” he answered gruffly.

A second later a male voice came over the line. “Striker.”

Striker was more than just the family name for Joshua and his brothers. It was a calling. Traditionally, the men of his family were the pack enforcers. They were judge, jury and, when necessary, executioner. Joshua had already proven he was more than capable of doing the job.

James didn’t waste words. “How are things?”

“Fairly quiet. Some rumblings from the Carlos and Jensen clans.”

James wanted to howl with frustration. They had enough trouble as a species without infighting. But that had never stopped werewolves. Their aggressive nature would be their downfall if they weren’t careful. “Serious?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

James trusted Joshua, but they were shorthanded now that Isaiah Striker had moved permanently to Chicago. “I’ll be back late tonight. I’ll call if something comes up.”

“Drive safe.”

James disconnected the call and slipped his phone back into his pocket. He’d destroy the phone as soon as he was home. Bounty hunters might be anti-government and anti-social, but they weren’t stupid. They used whatever technology might aid them in destroying all werewolves and that included using the services of hackers. Every member of the pack used disposable phones, changing them frequently.

His stomach rumbled, reminding him why he’d stopped at this roadside diner in the first place. All his senses were on alert as he crossed the paved lot and pulled open the door. The smell of coffee, ham and eggs tickled his nose.

He paused in the open doorway and removed his sunglasses, tucking them in his shirt pocket as he looked around. The place was crowded, mostly with men, but there were a few women as well. Almost all the tables were filled. The sound of chatter was punctuated with the noise of utensils clanking as they all ate. The coffeepot hissed and the grill sizzled in the kitchen.

Something else permeated the air, but James couldn't quite place it. Grease, sweat and food all mixed together to dull his preternatural sense of smell. Shrugging it off, he stepped inside and let the door swing shut behind him.

Several men glanced up from their meals and stared, but most ignored him, too intent on finishing their food and getting back on the road. To a trucker, time was money.

James scanned the room and sauntered over to a vacant booth in the far corner. He slid onto the vinyl bench seat and leaned back, trying to fit his large body comfortably into the space.

From his position, he had an unobstructed view of the room and the front door. There was also a window right beside him, which would allow for a quick escape if necessary.

The diner was surprisingly clean but dull. The paint on the walls was chipped, the linoleum on the floor scarred. And the seat cushions had seen better days. But the table gleamed and the condiment bottles were full. He plucked the menu from behind the shiny napkin dispenser and scanned it.

At the far end of the room, which James assumed led to the kitchen, a swinging door popped open. A woman backed into the room carrying a tray laden with plates. She looked like any waitress anywhere—harried and overworked. He went back to studying the menu, but his gaze was drawn again and again to the woman.

Giving up on the menu, he tossed it down on the table and studied her. She appeared to be in her early thirties, but it was hard to tell. She had the look of someone who'd had a hard life. Her hair had been pulled back into a tight bun, giving her face a pinched appearance.

As he watched, she competently served up the food from her tray, distributing plates to various tables, while nimbly sidestepping the roving hands of one of the truckers. His eyes narrowed as a burly driver patted her butt as she passed by. She jerked, but didn't stop. Head ducked down, she kept going.

Anger began to burn low in his gut. It was none of his business, he told himself. He couldn't afford to get involved. Not with paranormal bounty hunters searching for him and his daughter. The last thing he wanted to do was bring attention to himself and, through him, to his pack.

Still, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

She was dressed in a tacky pink polyester uniform that hung on her slender frame. It was hard to tell her shape. It was mostly hidden by the bulky dress, which was zipped up tight to her neck and fell all the way to her knees. Her legs were bare from her knees to her ankles and she wore white socks inside her battered canvas sneakers.

The woman was continually in motion, pouring coffee and serving food. Even though she worked without stopping, there was almost a fragile air about her, as if she'd been ill recently.

He wasn't sure she'd even seen him, but as soon as her tray was empty, she tucked it under her arm and hurried over to his table. "What can I get you?" She pulled an order pad and pen out of her pocket.

James froze in place. All his senses went on full alert. Her scent was ever so faint, almost as if she were masking it somehow. But it was there. “You’re a werewolf,” he whispered. He was so shocked he spoke before he could check his words.

The woman paled and swayed. His hand shot out to steady her, but she quickly pulled away, taking a step backward. “What? What did you say?” Her voice grew steadier with each word she spoke.

The soft tones of her voice skimmed over James like a caress. He was struck with the urge to draw her close to him, lay his head against her stomach and just listen to her talk. But fright still lingered in her dark chocolate-brown eyes in spite of her bravado. Her fingers clenched around the pen she was holding and she took another half-step backward.

“Nothing.” He kept his voice low and as unthreatening as possible. “I didn’t say anything important.”

She relaxed immediately, offering him a tiny smile that brightened her entire face. Up close, he could see that beneath her weariness, there was a beautiful woman. The skin on her heart-shaped face was as fine as a baby’s and appeared to be incredibly smooth. Her chin was slightly pointed, her cheekbones high. And her small nose turned up at the tip. Her eyebrows curved slightly and were the same light brown color as her hair.

He sat up straighter, every muscle in his body pulling tight. Deep within him, he could feel his wolf pacing restlessly.

“If you’re not ready to order, I can come back.” She glanced around the room, keeping an eye on her other customers.

James grabbed the small menu and scanned it quickly. “I’ll have the number three special. I like my bacon crispy and my hash browns not greasy.”

“Scrambled or fried eggs?” She scribbled away on her small order pad.

“Scrambled.”

“Okay.” Several of the men at another table got up and headed toward the cash register. “Coffee?”

James nodded. “Please.”

“I’ll be back with your coffee in a sec.” He watched as she hurried behind the counter and rang up their bills. The men talked and laughed, one of them a bit too loudly as he leaned toward the woman. She moved out of his reach and the man tensed.

James didn’t realize he was half out of his seat when one of the man’s companions slapped the trucker on the shoulder. Whatever the man said had them all laughing as they left the diner. James settled back down on the bench seat. What the hell was wrong with him?

She passed his order into the kitchen through an opening behind the counter, grabbed the coffee pot and hurried back to his table. On her way, she paused long enough to top off the cups of several other men. She turned over one of the clean mugs that rested on the table and began to fill it.

“What’s your name?”

The coffee pot jerked in her hand and some of the hot liquid sloshed over the rim. Just in time, James jerked his hand out of the way.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm such a klutz." She'd grabbed some napkins from the dispenser and began to wipe up the spilled coffee.

James didn't like the fear that edged her voice or the way she kept apologizing. "No harm done. I didn't mean to startle you."

She stared at him, her huge eyes blinking slowly as if she couldn't quite figure out what to make of him. "It was my fault," she began tentatively.

"No," he corrected. "It was my fault for startling you." He shifted in his seat, surprised by just how tight his jeans were becoming. He hadn't had a spontaneous erection in too many years to count. He prided himself on having total control of his body and this was more than a little disconcerting. "I shouldn't have asked you your name. After all, I'm a stranger to you. Forgive me if I made you uncomfortable."

"Shelley," she blurted out. "You can call me Shelley."

He nodded, instantly intrigued by the way she'd phrased it. She hadn't said, "my name is Shelley", but rather, "you can call me Shelley". Maybe it meant something, maybe not.

He held out his hand. "James. James Riley."

She glanced at his hand and wiped her own on the front of her uniform before shaking his. James noted the way the material pulled tight against her chest, briefly outlining her full breasts.

He gave her hand a quick squeeze, but was careful not to hold it for more than a second. She was as skittish as any wild creature around an unfamiliar beast.

"Order's up!" a deep male voice bellowed from the bowels of the kitchen.

Shelley jumped and laughed, a deep red creeping up over her cheeks. "I've got to get back to work." She all but ran from his table to the kitchen.

James sat back, picked up his mug and sipped his coffee. His nose hadn't lied at all. The lady was definitely one of his kind—a werewolf. And he was certainly attracted to her.

She obviously didn't want anyone to know what she was. He could understand her trying to hide her true identity from humans, but why was she afraid of other werewolves finding her? And why was she working in such a public place if that was a problem? Where was her pack?

And furthermore, why didn't she recognize him as a werewolf?

Because she hadn't. There had been absolutely no recognition on her face or in her demeanor to signal that she had any idea he was a werewolf.

He continued to watch the room, and Shelley, as he sipped his coffee and pondered the mystery surrounding her. She was continually in motion, her movements fluid and graceful.

James was surprised that she seemed to be the only waitress on staff this morning. It was a fairly busy spot and she hurried from the front counter to the kitchen and back into the dining room. In between, she

cleared tables and pocketed the few measly tips that had been left. More than once, he'd seen the disappointment on her face as she'd cleaned off a table where the occupants had left nothing but crumbs and spilled coffee behind.

Not too much time had passed when she bolted from the kitchen, tray in hand and hurried to his table. She deposited a huge platter of food in front of him. It was filled with a decent mound of scrambled eggs, golden-brown hash browns, crispy bacon and four slices of toast. If it tasted as good as it looked, he wasn't surprised that this place was busy. Truckers always knew the best, and cheapest, places to eat.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"More coffee, please."

"Be right back."

The crowd in the diner was beginning to thin out and only a couple other tables were filled. Shelley checked on them, pouring more coffee as she worked her way back to him. He waited until she'd topped up his mug again. "Thanks, Shelley."

Her shoulders tensed and her lips tightened. Once again, he'd startled her by using her name. Wasn't she used to anyone using it? Was it her real name?

James thought about just finishing his meal and leaving, but something inside him persisted in making him ask questions. "How long you worked here?"

"Not long." She started to back away again. From him or the questions or both?

"A year, a week?" he prompted.

"A few months." Another group of men got up from their table and Shelley hurried away before he could question her further.

Frustration gnawed at James as he finished the last few bites of his meal. He really should just pay his bill and leave. He'd already spent too much time away from Wolf Creek on business. With his leadership still so new, and rumblings of unrest from certain clans in the pack, it didn't pay for him to be away for too long.

He had his plate full with pack politics and finances at the moment. Why then was he so worried about a woman he'd just met?

Shelley took the men's money as they stepped up, one at a time, to pay at the register. All the while she made change her attention was drawn back to the man sitting in the corner. Although he hadn't done anything to draw attention to himself, he seemed to dominate the entire room simply by being there.

He was incredibly handsome. No, that wasn't quite right. His features were too rough, too blunt to be considered handsome. There was just something about him that she found attractive and scary at the same time. He was tall and lean, and his shoulders were so wide he took up almost the entire bench seat on his own.

Butterflies had fluttered wildly in her stomach when he'd asked her what her name was. The way he'd looked at her, studied her, had made her very uncomfortable. She knew she wasn't pretty. Knew she was flawed. Then why was he so interested in her?

Her heart had stopped when he'd called her a werewolf and had started pounding frantically when he'd denied saying anything important. Somehow, somehow, he knew.

Was he a bounty hunter? He smelled like they did sometimes after they'd been hunting—a wild, musky scent that sometimes permeated from her own skin. Fear and shame filled her. She knew she was different and different wasn't good. If she'd learned anything in her life, it was that.

Memories started to crowd into her brain, threatening what little peace of mind she'd achieved these past few months. She shoved them ruthlessly aside. That part of her life was over.

She shivered, her entire body trembling as two more men stepped up to the counter to pay. She gave them a wan smile and hurriedly checked them out.

Only the man in the corner remained. James was leaning back against his seat, mug in hand, sipping his coffee. All she needed to do was act normal until he left. She could do nothing that might arouse any further suspicion.

Shelley glanced at the clock on the wall. That was the last of the late breakfast crowd. It would be quiet for about an hour or so, until the early lunch group began to trickle in. This was the time of day when she managed to mop the floors and clean the restrooms.

First, she needed to finish clearing all the tables and reset them for the next group. Grabbing her tray, she worked her way from front to back, clearing and cleaning tables. When it was full, she carried the load into the kitchen, always aware that the stranger's eyes were on her.

She piled folded napkins, paper placemats, clean cutlery and mugs on her tray and returned to the dining room. Conscious of James watching her, she managed to drop several knives and spoons as she finished setting the places at each booth and table.

She'd just finished the last one, which was close to the booth where James was still seated, when he said her name. It was spoken so quietly she almost didn't hear it. Plastering a smile on her face, she turned to face him. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Sit with me." He motioned to the bench seat across from him. "Just for a minute."

Glancing toward the door to the kitchen, she chewed nervously on her bottom lip. Gus, the cook and owner of the diner, didn't like slackers. In fact, the girl whose job she'd gotten had been fired for taking one too many breaks. But Shelley had been on her feet for almost five hours now and deserved a few minutes.

Plus, refusing would only make the guy more suspicious. And that was the last thing she wanted. Laying her empty tray down on the table, she lowered herself to the end of the bench seat, perching on the edge.

James shook his head. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She didn't quite know what to make of that statement. She waited. He'd get to the point in his own time when he was good and ready. Men always did.

Once again, memories surged forward. Closing her eyes, she rubbed her forehead. The last thing she needed was a headache.

"Hey." She felt hard, warm fingers wrapping around her wrist and flinched away. Her eyes popped open in time to see him withdraw his hand. She expected to see anger on his face, but found concern instead.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." She nodded, knowing she was lying. She hadn't been okay for as far back as her memory went, and she didn't expect that to change anytime soon.

But it would, she thought fiercely. She would have a life of her own making, one in which she felt normal and not like some crazy freak. One where she was safe and could sleep at night without fear. She'd already taken the first steps toward it. She had a job, such as it was, and a small one-room apartment that belonged only to her.

James sat back and stared at her for so long, she began to fidget beneath his intense regard. She couldn't waste any more time. She started to push herself away from the table.

"I know you're a werewolf, Shelley."

She promptly fell back into her seat, fear holding her prisoner. She'd been afraid this would happen. Was there something about her that gave her away? He had to be a hunter. Who else would care?

For months, she'd been afraid of this. Had known it was a possibility that somehow, some way, someone would find out her secret. The only thing for her to do was to brazen it out. She would not allow them to take her again. She'd rather die.

Taking a deep breath, she began the performance of a lifetime. She straightened and put what she hoped was an indignant look on her face. "I have no idea what you're talking about. You're crazy."

He shook his head and sadness tinged his golden-brown eyes. She hated the idea of making him sad.

What was wrong with her? She didn't even know this man. She had to protect herself. God only knew that no one else would.

"Shelley." His voice was soft and unthreatening. "I know what you are. I can smell the wolf in you."

She was horrified. "You cannot!" Jumping up from the table, her fists clenched tight by her sides, she glared at him. "That's a lie."

"It's the truth."

She expected him to get angry, to yell or make a grab for her. Instead, his gaze was filled with pity and sadness. He was confusing her. "How could you know such a thing? If such a thing as werewolves

even existed. Which they don't." God, now she was babbling. She needed to shut up before she gave anything more away.

"I'm like you." The moment he said it everything fell into place. He was a werewolf. Why hadn't she recognized him?

She'd only seen one other male werewolf and that time was a blur in her mind, a nightmare she longed to forget. She took a step away from the man sitting before her. He was as dangerous to her as the hunters were. Dangerous to the life she was building for herself.

"Where do you come from?"

The memories and emotions that she'd been trying to escape all morning flooded over her, drowning her in the past. Pain, anger and shame surged forward and she clutched her hands to her head. She backed into the table behind her, struck her hip off the edge and stumbled away.

James jumped to his feet and grabbed her upper arms to steady her. She tried to jerk away, but he was too strong. She began to whimper, hating herself for being so weak, but fearing the punishment that always came whenever she did anything wrong.

He drew her closer to his body and brawny arms banded around her, holding her tight against a wide, muscular chest. Her harsh breathing was the only sound she could hear for the longest time and then gradually a new sound penetrated her fear—the heavy thud of James's heartbeat against her ear. She heard his voice softly whispering to her. Shushing her as he swayed with her in his arms.

Shelley came back to the present with a crash. What was she doing? She pulled away from him and was vaguely disappointed when he let her go. "I'm sorry," she murmured as she took another step backward.

James was staring intently at her. "Where were you born, Shelley? What's your family name? How old are you?"

She swallowed back the lump in her throat that threatened to choke her. There was no way she was telling him that, as best as she could figure, she was around fifty years old. She didn't look a day over thirty and, considering the harsh life she'd led, she felt more like a hundred. "Don't you know you shouldn't ask a woman her age?" Her feeble attempt at a joke fell flat.

Frustration filled James's face for the first time as he raked his fingers through his hair, dislodging the leather thong that had been holding it back. His long brown hair with the silvery streaks at the sides fell around his face. His dark eyes snapped with impatience, deepening the tiny lines radiating from the outer corners. His jaw was dark with stubble, his lips pursed. He looked wild and untamed.

Deep inside her, a small kernel of yearning sprang to life, shocking her. The longer he stared at her, the more it grew. A pulsing began low in her belly, frightening her. After all she'd been through, the last thing she thought she'd ever want was a man. But this man, or wolf, or whatever he was, standing in front of her was making her feel things she didn't want to feel.

“You have to go.” Shelley felt unstable, out of control. The wolf within her was stirring to life, and she was afraid she didn’t have enough energy to fight the beast back into submission.

“You have to go,” she repeated, fearing what would happen if he didn’t. She didn’t know what to do. Stand, run or attack?

Chapter Two

“Shelley!” A voice thundered. The kitchen door flew open, crashing against the wall, to reveal a huge man with large meaty hands clenched at his sides. He was totally bald, but his flaming red mustache was an indicator of his legendary temper.

His face was flushed as he lumbered forward. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? I’m not paying you to stand around doing nothing, you lazy bitch.” Gus himself was the reason that this diner didn’t have too much trouble. He was so big and volatile that most people walked softly around him.

“I’m sorry. I’ll get right to the cleaning.” She could feel James watching her, but didn’t care. She needed this job.

“Damn right you will. I’ll be docking an hour’s pay from your check. That will teach you to be lazy. I don’t pay good money for no work.”

Shelley tried to scurry out of his way, but it was too late. He shoved a table in front of her, cutting off her path to freedom. Her voice shook and her legs trembled.

“That’s fine. I’ll get right on the cleaning.”

“Shelley.” James said her name softly, but she didn’t dare look at him. He didn’t know Gus. The last thing she wanted was for him to get hurt on her behalf.

“You can stay later today too. I won’t put up with anyone who tries to cheat me.” He pointed his finger threateningly at her face. His large hand was only inches away. Shelley drew back. She didn’t think Gus would strike her, but she wasn’t taking any chances. Better to be safe.

A hand shot out in front of her, catching Gus’s wrist before his hand could move any closer. Gus’s face got redder and redder, sweat popping out on his brow as he tried to free himself. He swung his free hand, fisting it as it headed toward James. James caught it easily and now had both Gus’s hands trapped in his.

Shelley stared at James, who didn’t even seem to be exerting any effort.

“Don’t you know it’s not nice to threaten a lady?” James never raised his voice, but the sheer menace in it made her catch her breath. Even Gus swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple shifting up and down.

“This is my place and I’ll run it as I see fit,” Gus gritted out from between his clenched teeth. He swiveled his head around to her, his green eyes burning with anger. “You’re fired. You’ve got ten minutes to clear your stuff out of the apartment I rented you.”

“But—Gus?” Panic swelled inside her. She had nowhere to go and no way to get there.

“And I want your uniform back too.”

“Go and pack your things, Shelley.” James’s calm voice broke through her terror. “You’re coming with me.”

Gus gave a snide laugh. “She’s not much to look at, but you’re welcome to her.” Two seconds later, Gus was on his knees, crying out in agony as James’s fingers tightened around his wrists.

James leaned down until his face was only inches away from the other man. “One more word out of you and you won’t need to worry about who’ll be running your business. And if you call the cops or try and make trouble for either me or Shelley, I’ll be back.” He moved in even closer, baring his teeth and emitting a low growl. “And if I don’t come back, one of my friends will.”

Every speck of color drained from Gus’s face. “Sure. Whatever. You can have the lazy bitch. Just take her and go.”

Shelley could only stare at both men who were deciding her future without so much as a by your leave. Spinning around, she stalked out of the diner and around to the back of the building.

It was cold and the snow crunched under the soles of her canvas shoes. Wind flitted beneath her dress. She shivered, but it was more from fear than the cold. Where would she go? What would she do?

Climbing the rickety set of stairs, she hauled her key out of her pocket and jammed it into the flimsy lock. She could do this. It wasn’t the first time she’d had to start over and wouldn’t be the last. At least this time she was slightly better prepared.

Once she was inside, she pulled her tips out of her pocket and carefully added them to the money she’d managed to save. It wasn’t much, amounting to a little more than four hundred and twenty-five dollars, but it was hers.

Stripping off the hated pink uniform, she hauled on a faded long-sleeved dress that fell almost to her ankles. She hated the dress too, but hadn’t wanted to waste her money on clothing since Gus provided her work uniform. Besides which, she hadn’t been near any stores so she couldn’t have bought any new clothes even if she wanted to.

Grabbing her few changes of underwear, she stuffed them, a few pairs of socks and her spare dress into a paper grocery sack. Moving like someone in a trance, she walked into the miniscule bathroom and stared at herself in the tiny cracked mirror that hung over the sink.

She grasped the edges of the porcelain and stared at the white face peering back at her. Her skin looked as if it were stretched too tight over her face. She was pale. Her eyes appeared huge and had a haunted look in them. Reality was setting in. She was jobless and homeless and she had less than five hundred dollars and a sack full of belongings to her name.

Stumbling to the toilet, she fell to her knees and lost what was left of the meager meal she’d eaten hours earlier. When she was done, she wiped her face with a washcloth and brushed her teeth. Gathering

her few toiletries, she returned to the other room and stuffed them into the bag. That was it. She didn't own anything else. The bedclothes and towels, such as they were, came with the room.

She tugged on an old gray sweater that the previous tenant had left behind. It hung almost to her knees and she had to roll the sleeves back twice. It wasn't a coat, but it was warm. Knowing she had everything, she carefully rolled down the top of the bag and clasped it tight in her hand.

She gathered her uniform and room key and made her last trip down over the rickety stairs and back around to the diner.

Shelley had no idea what had gone on between the two men while she'd been gone and really didn't care. At this moment, she hated them both equally. Gus for firing her and James for getting her fired.

Gus was seated at a table, still pale and sweaty, while James leaned back against the table next to him, his arms folded casually over his chest and his booted feet crossed as if he didn't have a care in the world. Well, he didn't, did he? He wasn't the one who'd lost his job this morning.

Ignoring James, Shelley walked right up to Gus and dropped both the uniform and the key on the table in front of him. She did a quick calculation in her head, adding up the hours she'd worked since her last paycheck. "I've got fifty dollars coming to me. That's the difference in what you owe me minus the rent on the room and the meals I've eaten."

She'd expected him to protest and was shocked when he nodded in agreement. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a roll of bills and peeled off the fifty dollars. He hesitated for a moment and then handed it to her. She folded the notes and stuffed them deep in her pocket with her other money.

The paper sack made a crinkling sound as her fingers tightened around it. Still not looking at James, she turned her back on both men, marched out through the door of the diner and hurried toward the road. Her indignation carried her all the way to the road where she stopped. Her stomach roiled. "Not now," she muttered. She glanced to the right and then to the left, not knowing which way to go.

A pair of hands gently clasped her shoulders. She startled but didn't turn around. She'd known that James would follow her. A part of her was grateful not to be alone while another part of her wanted to shrug off his grasp and walk away. Before she could decide what to do, he began to speak.

"I know you're angry."

Now that was an understatement.

"I know you're confused and hurt, but this is truly for the best."

She spun around and poked him in the chest, surprised by her sheer audacity. "Better for who? You're not the one who's jobless and homeless." Tears threatened, but she blinked them back. She hadn't cried in about thirty years. It didn't change a damn thing and many times it only made things worse.

James wrapped his hand around hers, bringing it to his mouth. He kissed the top of her hand and her knuckles. "You're not homeless, Shelley. Your home is with your people. I'm taking you with me. Home to the Wolf Creek."

Was he crazy? He was a complete stranger. There was no way she was going with him.

She stilled as a dim memory tried to push forward, but it was quickly lost as James began to tug her toward the only truck left in the parking lot. "We'll talk more on the road. I don't want to hang around here any longer just in case Gus has a gun and decides to use it."

She hadn't even thought of that. Gripping her belongings tight, she let him lead her to the vehicle. She could always bail somewhere down the road. She didn't think he'd hurt her. Not that it mattered. She'd been hurt before and survived. She'd get a ride to the nearest town and make plans there. Surely there were other waitressing jobs to be had. She could wash dishes and clean houses too. *You're good at that*, she thought bitterly.

The skirt of her dress was wide enough to allow her to get into the truck with little problem. Once she was settled inside, James went around the front and climbed into the driver's seat. He quickly started the vehicle, put it into gear and eased it out of the lot and onto the highway. She glanced over her shoulder and watched the diner disappear before facing forward to whatever lay ahead.

James stared at the woman sitting silently next to him. It wasn't just that she was quiet. There was a stillness about her that bespoke of someone used to fading into the background, not wanting to bring any unwanted attention her way. He'd given her space and time, but an hour had passed and she'd yet to speak. It was time to get some answers.

"Where are you from?"

Even though he'd kept his voice low and as unthreatening as possible, she jerked at the sound. She shrugged and stared out the window.

"You had to come from somewhere," he continued patiently. "You said you'd only been working at the diner for about a few months."

"About six."

She was the least chatty woman he'd ever come across in his life. But he wasn't worried. He knew he'd eventually get her entire story. She had to have family somewhere, and if she didn't many packs would be glad to take her in. "Where were you before then?"

She stiffened and her breathing became shallower. "Here and there."

He could smell the fear rolling off her. Reaching out his right hand, he captured her left one, which was lying limply by her side. He felt her flinch, but she didn't pull away when he laced his fingers lightly though hers, not restraining her movement in any way, but just trying to reassure her. "Whatever or whoever it was, they can't hurt you now."

She gave a bark of bitter laughter as she rubbed her free hand across her forehead. "I'm not so sure about that." She sighed and shifted her body so she was turned more toward him. "What does it matter to

you where I was or what happened in my past? You've got no responsibility for me. You can just drop me off at the next decent-sized town and drive away."

Everything inside him rebelled at the mere thought of leaving Shelley. Instincts he'd thought long dead, sprang instantly to life, and for the first time in decades, he felt the male wolf within him sit up and take interest. Not since Leda, his mate who'd died decades ago, had he felt this way.

No! He shook his head. He didn't need that kind of pain again. But there was no way he was letting Shelley go off on her own. Just the fact that she was a female of his species meant he had to protect her.

"You know I can't do that, Shelley. There's no way I can abandon a female."

She shook her head and sighed again as she continued to rub her forehead. "Of course you can. I want to go to a town. No, a city. It's the least you can do considering you're the reason I don't have a home or a job."

He ignored her accusation. It was true, but he wouldn't change anything he'd done so it was a moot point. "Why don't you let your hair down out of that tight bun? It might help your headache."

She seemed surprised he'd even noticed she had one. But he'd seen the way she rubbed her forehead, the slight squint of pain around her eyes. She hesitated, but then a moment later she slid her hand from his, reached behind her head and began plucking out pins. She tucked them safely in her dress pocket and then ran her fingers through her hair.

It was thicker than James had expected and fell to just below her shoulders. The sun caught it, making the light brown strands shimmer. She gave him a tiny smile. She looked younger now and very, very beautiful. James swallowed and squirmed in his seat, trying to get comfortable. His jeans were suddenly very tight. For a man who'd had no problem with self-control for almost half a century, to say it was unsettling was an understatement.

Fortunately, the woman seemed to have no sense of her own appeal. His gut clenched. As soon as word got out of her existence, the males would be circling, fighting over her.

He didn't like to think of what would happen to her if a decent sort of werewolf didn't claim her. His culture was no different than humans in that respect. There were good males and bad ones, and these days too many of the males were desperate for a mate and had forgotten they needed to honor their females.

The wolf within him began to growl and the fine hair at his nape rose at the mere thought of another male touching her. Her skin was so fine he longed to reach out and stroke it. But his fingers were rough and calloused after years of hard labor. He was too harsh for such a soft, delicate creature.

He barely kept from jerking when her small hand slipped beneath his and, this time, it was she who joined their fingers together. Pleasure hummed within him, making his wolf settle.

James clenched his jaw to keep from swearing as he stared almost blindly out the front windshield. The asphalt was a slender ribbon that he followed automatically.

At his age and with his experience, he knew better than to fight his instincts. They'd saved his life too many times and had never led him astray. And at this moment, they were all clamoring that this female was special, that she belonged to him, with him. He might be a great believer in listening to his instincts, but he wasn't stupid. He wasn't about to do anything rash. He still needed answers.

"Where were you born?" James figured if he kept asking questions he might eventually get some answers.

This time there was no mistaking her fear. She jerked her hand away from his and all but huddled against the door, getting as far away from him as possible. Well hell. What could be so bad about asking her that?

"It's a simple question, Shelley." He kept glancing over at her, keeping one eye on the road. Her face had lost every bit of color. Not that she'd had much to begin with. But now, she looked positively ill. "Do you need me to stop?"

"No!" she shouted. She was trembling now, her entire body shaking.

"Talk to me, honey, or I'm going to pull this truck off the road and we're not going anywhere until I get some answers."

"Bully," she muttered.

"Whatever it takes." He really didn't care what she thought of him at this point. His only concern was for her well-being. He was pleased that her slight show of temper had brought some of the color back to her cheeks. They were flushed now, her eyes glaring at him. "Come on, Shelley. I won't stop asking until you tell me."

He eased his foot off the fuel pedal and the vehicle began to slow.

"I don't know," she cried. Burying her face in her hands, she hunched her shoulders forward as if to protect herself. "I don't remember. I don't remember." She was sobbing now, her entire body heaving. "I don't remember." Her voice was little more than a tortured whisper and James quickly pulled the truck off onto the shoulder of the road.

Undoing his own seatbelt and then hers, he slid to the center of the seat, gently lifted her into his arms and cradled her close against his body. Her tears shook him to the core. He hated them. Hated to see her cry.

"Shh," he crooned. "It's all right. Whatever it is, it's all right." She weighed little more than a child, but it certainly wasn't a child's body resting against him. It was all woman. From her soft, slight curves to the pliant mound of her full breast as it pressed against him.

His erection pushed tight against the front of his jeans, but he ignored his discomfort. He held her until she was cried out, until her breathing had leveled out again and only the occasional hiccup shook her as she slowly calmed. Tilting her head back against his arm, he pushed a lock of hair out of her face, tucking it behind the shell of her ear. "Better?"

She gave a watery laugh and sniffed. "Not really. Tears don't solve anything. I haven't cried in..." She shook her head. "I don't really remember the last time. Years, I guess."

"Then I'd say that you were due."

"You're a very unusual man, James Riley." She was so serious, her large chocolate-brown eyes luminous. He thought she looked good enough to eat.

He shrugged. "I don't know any other way to be." She started to shift away from him and his arms tightened reflexively around her. He only relaxed when he felt her settle back into his embrace. He wasn't ready for her to leave yet. She felt incredibly right wrapped in his arms. "Tell me what you do remember."

She rubbed her fingers against her temples as if her head still pained her. He waited while she seemed to gather her thoughts. Patience was the key to getting Shelley to open up to him and he suddenly found himself filled with boundless amounts of it where she was concerned. He knew they had to be back on the road soon, but there was time for this.

"Not much." She dropped her hands back into her lap and clasped them together. "Snippets of other people and places. People I don't really recognize." She glanced up at him and then away, and the sadness he glimpsed in her face almost brought tears to his eyes. He'd never seen anyone so sad. "I feel as if I should know them, but I can never quite reach for the knowledge." She shook her head. "Maybe I don't want to remember."

"Why wouldn't you want to remember?" He rubbed his hand over her arm, cuddling her closer.

"I couldn't go back to them even if I'd wanted to."

James stilled, his entire body going on alert. Whatever she was about to reveal to him, it wasn't going to be good. "What do you mean, you couldn't go back?"

Her hands were clenched so hard in her lap that her knuckles were completely white. "I..." She shook her head, curling tighter into herself.

"It's all right," he promised. "You can tell me." He continued to keep his voice low and soothing as he started to stroke her arm again.

She shook her head and her lips pursed together. He'd gotten as much as he was going to. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Chapter Three

Steve Macmillan sipped his drink as he surveyed the three men seated around the table with him. Some folks might think it was too early in the day for a drink, but he didn't care. The whiskey was smooth and mellow and heated his belly. But it didn't soothe the anger that seethed inside him.

He carefully set his glass back down on the scarred wood surface, hanging onto his temper by sheer willpower. What he really wanted to do was smash the glass against the faded beige walls. But that would be a waste of fine whiskey.

He was sick to death of being on the move, staying in cheap motels, but they'd had no choice. The debacle in Chicago last fall had landed them in a heap of trouble with a pack of werewolves. He'd spent the last five months hunting them and being hunted by them. It was a deadly cat-and-mouse game that had left five more dead on his side.

But they'd trapped and killed a dozen of those so-called purist wolves. Steve didn't care if a wolf's blood was pure or not. In his book, they all needed killing.

He'd enjoyed that part, but it had meant time away from his special project—finding the bitch that had murdered his father. Now it was time to get back on track.

That's why he'd gathered these men here in his motel room. Once they made plans, they'd split up and do some searching.

"What have you found?" He directed the question to the group, but it was Red Coulter, an old friend of his father's who answered him.

Red tipped the bottle beside his glass and poured. The amber liquid swirled before settling. The bottle hit the table with a thump and Red raised his glass. "Not much." He took a big swallow of bourbon and wiped his hand across his mouth. "She must have stolen Tom's money. I know he kept some on hand for emergencies. It's hard to tell what she took from the cabin. The fire destroyed damn near everything."

Fresh anger swamped him as Steve remembered the charred remains of his father's home in the Tennessee hills. At first, they'd believed it was an accident. But when they'd turned up only one body, he'd brought in an expert, a friend. The last thing any of them wanted was a formal investigation by the authorities. When it had been confirmed his father had been murdered, Steve and his men had torn down the cabin and buried his father's remains. Then he'd started hunting.

He'd never understood why his father had kept the female werewolf. She'd been a teenager when he'd captured her. She'd been around almost as long as Steve had and he was nearing forty.

His father had told him many times that he was studying her to learn more about their kind. Steve had known the old man had used her for sex and as a housekeeper. He didn't care about that. The bitch was passable enough and his father had been alone since Steve's mother had died in childbirth.

His father had made the fatal mistake of believing he'd tamed her and had let down his guard. All her kind were fucking animals and it was his job to put them down.

He shook off the dark memory and turned to Quinn, who met his gaze without flinching. He still wasn't sure about the quiet man. He'd held his own these past few months and was a crack shot with a rifle. That made him valuable. Quinn didn't say much and didn't offer anything about himself. Still, he was an asset Steve would readily use.

"There's been no sign of her using any of your father's credit cards," Mitch added. Mitch had been part of the clusterfuck in Chicago and had been working hard to make up for it ever since.

"That would be too easy," Red spat. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. A cloud of white smoke rose above his head as he took a long drag and exhaled. "But we're on it. We've got men all over the country watching for her. And our computer guy is monitoring every site he can think of. She has to surface eventually. We'll find her."

"Maybe she's dead," Quinn offered. "She was alone in the woods with little money and supplies."

"No chance of that, boy." Red rubbed his hand over the stubble on his jaw. "She's a wolf, pure and simple. That kind can survive in the woods a sight easier than you or I could."

The leftover pizza he'd eaten for breakfast was sitting heavy in his gut. Steve spun his glass between his hands, wishing it were her pretty neck between his fingers instead. He wanted to choke the life out of her. And he would. But not until she'd paid for what she'd taken from him. He had plans for her. Plenty of hunters would pay good money to have sex with a she-wolf. He'd sell her until she was worn out and then he'd kill her.

Oh, he'd find her if it took the rest of his life. And by the time he was done with her, Shelley would be begging for death.

Shelley had no idea what she was doing or how she'd found herself sitting in James's lap. His hand was warm as it stroked her arm and he smelled so good. Like fresh air and trees after a rainfall. She longed to lay her head on his shoulder and forget all her worries. She couldn't believe she'd actually cried all over him.

Why had she let down her guard around him? She'd actually told James a little about her past, which was something she was very careful never to do. What made him so special?

She sniffed and felt his arms tighten around her. He'd slipped beneath her defenses by simply showing her kindness. How sad was that?

She needed to remember she could only depend on herself. There were men looking for her. Evil men. There was no way she could involve someone else in the mess that was her life.

Alone was safer.

Reluctantly, she pushed away from him. This time, he let her go. She slid back onto the seat and swiped at her face with her hands. “Where are we?” She needed to change the subject. She was through talking about herself.

“Not far from Nashville.”

Everything inside her froze. She had been so intent on watching James, she hadn’t been paying attention to the road signs, hadn’t even noticed when they’d crossed the state line. Her limbs began to tremble and she clenched every muscle in her body to try to still the tremors. The last thing she wanted was for James to notice there was something wrong.

Shelley had intended to head in the opposite direction as soon as she’d saved enough money. Maybe up north to New York or west to California. She’d never, ever planned on setting foot back in this state again.

“You okay?” James’s voice was low, the concern evident.

She nodded, afraid that if she opened her mouth to speak the only thing that would come out would be a long moan of pain.

“Shelley?”

“I’m fine,” she whispered. “We shouldn’t just be sitting here on the side of the road.” The quicker they got moving, the faster they could leave this state behind them.

“I need to stop in Nashville to see a man.” James slid back to his seat, strapped on his seatbelt and pulled back into traffic. “Buckle up.”

She fumbled with her seatbelt until it snapped together. Leaning back, she rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes. She could get through this. The chances of her running into someone who knew her were slim to none.

“You said you wanted to be dropped off in a city,” James began.

Panic threatened to swamp her. Her fingers clenched the hem of her sweater. Everything would be fine. She refused to believe otherwise.

“But I don’t want to leave you here,” he continued. “Come home with me. Give yourself a few days to rest and think about things before you make a rash decision. It’s the least I can do after causing you to lose your job.”

The fact that she was considering his offer made her realize just how afraid she was. He was a complete stranger, a male, and one of *them*—a werewolf. It was difficult for her to think of that as being normal. She’d spent her entire life being told she was a freak, a monster, something to be reviled.

But no more. She'd gambled, taken her chance and had earned the right to live in peace. Could she actually trust another of her kind? She'd always been told her family had abandoned her, hadn't wanted her because she was weak.

She didn't know if it was the truth because she couldn't remember ever having a family. In her dreams, she caught the occasional glimpse of a face or heard a voice that seemed oddly familiar, but nothing concrete. She wasn't even sure exactly how old she was or where she'd come from.

The last seven months had pushed her to her limits. She was mentally and physically exhausted.

"My daughter would love to meet you," James added when she didn't answer him.

"You have a daughter?" Somehow that made him seem more approachable. Which was stupid. Having a kid didn't mean he was a good man.

"Yeah," he glanced at her and smiled. She could see the pride, the love in his face as he spoke of her. "Alexandra. She's married now, but lives next door."

Shelley nibbled on her bottom lip. This was her opportunity to learn more about herself. She'd worked blind her entire life, knowing only what she'd been told by her captor.

As if sensing her indecision, James tapped his fingers against the steering wheel as he drove. "Think about it. You can go to my meeting with me if you want or you can let me buy you something to eat while you wait. Take some time before you decide. No pressure."

She almost snorted. James might say there was no pressure, but he'd gotten his way about everything he wanted since they'd met. "Maybe," she conceded. She'd think about it and decide when they arrived in Nashville. If nothing else, his buying her a meal would save her some money. He owed her that much.

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she'd tossed up what little she'd eaten today. The motion of the truck was making her sleepy. She closed her eyes and leaned against the door. She'd just rest for a few minutes.

James glanced at Shelley for the hundredth time as he drove toward the city. Her breathing was even and her head was tilted at an awkward angle. He didn't know how she could sleep like that. She must be worn out.

The bulky sweater she wore was way too big for her. But rather than hiding her femininity, it accentuated it. Her hands looked delicate poking out from the folded-back cuffs. The fact that it hung so loosely on her emphasized her slight build.

He eyed the skirt of the dress she wore. The fabric was thin, not much good for cool weather. Her footwear was no better. She was still wearing the canvas sneakers she'd worn at work. She wasn't even wearing tights or stockings, just thin ankle socks. He'd have to see about getting her some new clothing.

All her belongings fit into one small paper bag. His fingers clenched around the wheel until his knuckles turned white. He wanted to reach out and touch her, smooth her silky hair from her face.

There was something about Shelley that made him want to protect her, care for her. He snorted as his dick flexed, pushing against the zipper of his jeans. He wanted to take her to bed for about a week too. And he didn't want to spend the time there sleeping.

Her scent filled the cab of his truck. It was light, almost floral. He breathed deep and his cock reacted, twitching once again.

He shifted in his seat, trying to get more comfortable. Wasn't going to happen any time soon. Not with his balls pulled up tight to his body and a huge erection straining for release.

James forced himself to focus on the road, changing lanes and merging with the thicker traffic as he entered the city. He'd been here before, but it had been more than twenty years ago. Still, he recognized landmarks and quickly found his way to his destination.

He found a parking spot and slid the truck into it. The cab grew quiet as he turned off the ignition. Shelley didn't move, didn't stir. He didn't want to wake her, but he didn't have much choice. Not only did he not want to leave her alone, he was afraid she might not be here when he returned.

He released his seatbelt and leaned closer. Her chest was rising and falling slowly, her breathing deep and relaxed. Her lips were slightly parted and he couldn't resist the temptation.

A lock of hair brushed her cheek and he pushed it aside with his thumb. Her skin was so soft. A low rumble began deep in his chest. He leaned forward and touched his lips to hers, keeping the contact light and undemanding.

She mumbled in her sleep but didn't wake. James traced her lush bottom lip with his tongue, almost moaning, as he tasted her. Heat and mint were tinged with a touch of salt from her skin.

Shelley stirred, her eyelids fluttered. Her dark brown eyes were slightly glazed as she stared at him. A second later, panic filled them. James eased back immediately. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her.

"We're here."

She blinked several times, her gaze going past him to the world outside. "Oh." She straightened and rubbed her eyes. "I must have dozed off." She frowned at him as if it were somehow his fault.

He fought back a grin, certain she wouldn't appreciate it. "You did." He glanced at his watch. "I've got a meeting I really need to get to. Are you up to coming with me?"

She shook her head.

"I don't want to leave you alone." His wolf was howling inside him, demanding he protect Shelley.

"You don't owe me anything. You brought me to a city. That's all I asked."

James was beginning to feel desperate. As alpha, he was used to his word being law. But Shelley wasn't a member of his pack. He couldn't demand anything of her or she'd run.

He buried all his alpha nature and tried to cajole her instead. "How about we find a coffee shop and you can wait there until I'm finished? My treat. Then we can talk."

Shelley studied his face and whatever she found there seemed to reassure her. "Okay."

Relief hit him like a blast from a furnace. If he could cancel this meeting, he would. But he'd already put it off for several months. He needed to deal with the bank manager today.

She pushed her door open and slid out. Reaching in, she grabbed her bag.

"You can leave that here. We'll lock up." And if she didn't take it, he knew for sure she'd be waiting for him when he was done.

Shelley hesitated and finally released her hold on the bag. Taking a deep breath, she pushed down the lock and shut the door.

James knew what a monumental step it was for her to trust him even this much. He wanted to howl, to strut with pleasure. Instead, he slid out of the truck, closed and locked his door and made his way to Shelley's side.

"I'll probably be an hour, maybe less." He pointed to a building just down the road. "I'll be at the bank if you need me." He glanced around and found exactly what he was looking for. "Why don't you wait in there?"

He put his hand on the small of her back and guided her toward the funky little coffee shop. There were three tables outside with one hearty soul sitting there sipping coffee. The rest of the patrons were inside. The day was a bit too chilly to be having coffee outdoors.

Shelley was twisting her head from side to side, trying to take in everything at once. He moved her along as quickly as he could without trying to rush her.

"We can look around after if you'd like," he offered.

"No." She shook her head and grabbed the door handle and pulled. The fragrant air, redolent with the scent of coffee and sweets, enveloped them in a warm wave of welcome.

James yanked a twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Get whatever you want. I'll be back as soon as I can." He closed his fingers around hers, lifted them to his lips and kissed the back of her hand. He left before she could object to the tiny caress.

As he left the coffee shop, the cold air hit him like a slap in the face. His wolf was pacing inside him, making him feel antsy. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to go back to Shelley. He gritted his teeth and crossed the street and headed to the bank. This was going to be the fastest meeting he'd ever had with a banker.

Her skin tingled where he'd kissed her. Shelley soaked in the warmth and the delicious smells surrounding her even as she turned to watch James. True to his word, he crossed the street and disappeared into the building he'd pointed out to her.

She shoved her hands into her sweater pockets, wishing she'd brought her belongings with her. What if he left without her?

"It doesn't matter," she whispered under her breath. She still had her money with her. Her fingers automatically closed around the twenty James had given her.

A man bumped her shoulder and excused himself when she startled. He gave her a strange look as he left the small shop. She realized she was just standing there like an idiot, blocking the doorway.

Hurrying to the counter, she checked out the display case. Her stomach growled. Suddenly she was starving.

"What can I get for you today?" An older woman with a shock of gray hair and brilliant blue eyes smiled at her from the other side of the counter.

"I think I'd like the chicken noodle soup." It was still a novelty to be able to choose her own food. For years she'd eaten whatever she was given.

"That comes with a roll. Whole wheat, multigrain or white." The woman began serving up the soup while she was talking.

"Multigrain. Please," Shelley added. "And one of those apple turnovers. And a coffee."

"Sure thing." The woman deftly filled the order, putting it all on a tray before ringing up the total.

Shelley paid and left a tip in the jar by the cash register. She pocketed the rest of the change. She hoped James didn't mind her leaving the tip. He'd told her to buy what she wanted. She only hoped he'd meant it.

Not that it mattered. She had enough money to pay him back. She shouldn't have taken his money in the first place, but she'd still been drowsy from the nap she'd taken in the truck and hadn't been thinking clearly.

She grabbed her tray and carried it to a small, round table near the window. Not that she was watching for James or anything. It simply gave her a good view of the street.

Shelley sat down, almost moaning in delight as a waft of warm air shot out from the radiator next to her table. She lifted her spoon and dipped it into the bowl. The liquid was steaming as she sipped it. Taste exploded in her mouth and she dipped her spoon again. The multigrain bun was fresh and delicious. But it was the apple turnover that she enjoyed the most. She hadn't had anything this wonderful in her entire life. It was filled with chunks of apple and the pastry was light and flaky.

When she was finished, she sipped her coffee. She couldn't remember ever being this full and content before. Meals had been sparse in her world for so long. Even at the diner, Gus hadn't been generous, making her pay for whatever she ate.

"That's done. Over," she muttered. Now that her belly was full and her head was clear, it was time to make plans.

Should she walk away and leave? She could get a bus ticket to anywhere. Shelley nibbled on her bottom lip, licking a sticky spot and tasting apple. A part of her didn't want to leave James. He made her

feel safe. And that was dangerous. She couldn't afford to let down her guard or get sloppy. There were men out there who wanted to kill her.

She fiddled with the handle of her spoon as she peered out the window, not really paying attention to the people or the world beyond the coffee shop.

Obviously, she needed another job and a place to stay. But first she needed to get as far away from this state as possible. A shiver raced down her spine and she tugged her sweater tighter around her. No, she couldn't stay here. Not where she'd lived for so many years. The cabin might be deep in the hills, but it was still the same state.

"You okay, honey?" The woman's voice was kind, but it still startled her. Shelley needed to start paying more attention to her surroundings. She usually did. She had no idea what was wrong with her today.

"I'm fine," she lied to the woman who'd served her. She was anything but fine.

"More coffee?"

"Please." She wasn't ready to leave the safe confines of the coffee shop yet and she didn't want anything else to eat.

She offered the woman a smile even though it felt unnatural. Picking up her mug, she sipped the hot beverage. She needed a plan.

First up was clothing. Whether she liked it or not, she needed something warmer to wear. Something more practical than the two dresses she owned.

Her gaze darted up and down the street. There were a few shops, but Shelley didn't want to waste money on new clothing. Gathering her courage, she pushed back her chair and walked to the counter.

The woman smiled, making the corners of her eyes crinkle. "Do you need anything?"

"Yes." Shelley nodded decisively. "Do you know of anywhere I can buy some clothes? Preferably a thrift shop."

The woman's eyes darkened and her smile was tinged with sadness, making Shelley very aware of her threadbare dress and secondhand sweater. "Sure, honey. There's a place just around the corner." She gave Shelley directions.

"It's not far?" Shelley didn't really want to be out of sight of the truck. Everything she owned was in there. She really didn't want to admit she didn't want to be too far from James either.

"Nah," the woman assured her. "It's only two minutes from here. Take the right at the next corner and it's only a few doors down."

"Thank you." Shelley quickly headed to the door, barely hearing the woman's "you're welcome" as she left.

The cold air was a harsh contrast to the warmth of the coffee shop. She almost turned around and went back inside. Instead, she stiffened her spine and marched down the sidewalk, following the directions she'd been given.

Sure enough, the shop was there. She could get what she needed and be back waiting outside the coffee shop before James got there. Excitement gave her butterflies in her stomach. For the first time in her life, she was going shopping for her own clothing.

Pushing open the door, she stepped inside.

Chapter Four

Impatience ate at James as he left the stuffy confines of the bank behind and headed to the coffee shop where he'd left Shelley. The meeting had gone well, but had lasted far longer than he'd anticipated.

His legs ate up the distance. He was so intent on his destination, he barely noticed how people practically jumped out of his way. All he knew was he wouldn't rest until he saw Shelley.

His instincts rose to the fore, the skin on the back of his neck prickling as he entered the small eatery. He glanced around, anxiety eating at him. Shelley was nowhere to be found.

Had she left him?

His wolf began to growl deep inside him, denying the possibility. It took everything in him not to tip back his head and howl. Shelley was his. And she was alone and vulnerable in a strange city. He should have insisted she come with him.

Frustration ate at him. No, he couldn't have done that. Shelley was panicked enough just being around him without him going all alpha on her.

Keeping his emotions on a short chain, James stalked up to the counter and pinned the older woman with a steely gaze. "Have you seen a woman with light brown hair, wearing a dress and a gray sweater?"

The woman hesitated, obviously undecided whether or not she should tell him anything.

He forced himself to relax a bit. His wolf was too close to the surface. The woman might not be able to see anything, but she could sense the predator inside him. "I was supposed to meet her here. I got tied up longer than I expected."

"She was here," the woman told him, somewhat reluctantly.

James nodded. "Yeah, I left her here. Told her to have something to eat. My meeting ran longer than I expected."

The older woman sighed. James figured she must have decided he was okay because she began talking. "She asked me if I knew of a place to buy used clothing. I sent her to the shop around the corner."

"Thank you." James's gratitude was heartfelt. He left without a backward glance and strode down the sidewalk.

He turned the corner and thought he caught a whiff of Shelley's scent. Wishful thinking or reality, he couldn't be sure. But she was close. He could sense it.

He scanned the store signs and found the one he was looking for—Second Time Around. The words "*gently used clothing*" were in smaller print on the large glass window.

He pulled open the door, ignoring the tinkle of the bell above him. He scanned the shop. It wasn't overly large, but it was packed with racks and shelves stuffed with clothing.

Shelley wasn't anywhere to be seen. But he could smell her. This time there was no doubt in his mind. He knew her unique scent now. It was a part of him.

He sniffed and followed his nose, skirting several other shoppers. He was almost to the back of the store when Shelley stepped out from behind a change room door and stood in front of a mirror.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

She'd been pretty in her faded dress and sweater. Hell, she'd even been pretty in the awful pink polyester uniform she'd been wearing when he'd first seen her. But in jeans and a form-fitting turtleneck sweater she was a knockout.

The faded denim cupped her heart-shaped bottom, making his fingers itch to touch it. Her legs were long and slender and seemed to go on forever.

As if sensing someone was watching her, she slowly turned.

When she saw him, she smiled. That smile of welcome slowly faded and her nostrils flared as he slowly walked toward her. The sweater was a deep chocolate color and matched her eyes to perfection. The soft wool hugged her breasts. She might be slender, but her chest was substantial.

His cock sprang to attention. Oh yeah, Shelley wasn't just pretty. She was smoking hot.

She tugged subconsciously at the hem of the sweater. "I was hoping to be back at the truck before your meeting ended. I guess I lost track of time."

He stopped in front of her, unable to speak. He was afraid if he opened his mouth, the only thing that would come out was a growl. He was so turned on right now, he could barely think. He hadn't felt this way since he was young. Not since Leda.

And even the thought of his dead wife and all the pain he'd suffered after her death couldn't stop him from wanting Shelley.

"James?" Her voice quavered and he could hear the fear in it.

He inwardly swore at himself for frightening her. "You look amazing."

Pink tinged her cheeks and she glanced at herself in the mirror. "You think so?"

It struck him that she wasn't just being coy and hoping for more compliments. She truly meant it. She had no idea just how sexy and beautiful she was.

He stood behind her and turned her so their reflections were both visible in the mirror. His hands rested lightly on her shoulders. Her hair flowed free around her shoulders, not really much longer than his.

She watched him as he hooked a lock of her hair over her ear, his fingers caressing her cheek. Her skin was soft and beautiful. Her eyes wide and wondering. The blush added some much needed color to her face.

“You’re incredible.” His voice was rough with pent-up desire. What he really wanted to do was back her into the small dressing room and strip those jeans down her legs. Then he’d nibble his way back up to her sweet pussy, part the slick folds with his thumbs and taste her.

He barely suppressed a groan and was glad she was standing in front of him so she couldn’t see his erection. If she moved back, she’d certainly feel it.

As if she’d read his mind, she swayed, her butt grazing him. Her eyes widened and then half closed. She nibbled on her bottom lip, a sign he was quickly coming to recognize as something she did when she was nervous or thinking hard.

“It’s okay, Shelley.” He ran his hands down her shoulders and over her arms. She shivered and he barely resisted the urge to wrap her in his embrace. He was close to making a spectacle out of them as it was.

“James?”

He shook his head. This wasn’t the time or the place. He knew better. He dropped his hands and took a step back. “Did you find any more clothes that you liked?”

She shuddered and smiled ruefully. “Truthfully, I found too much.” She laughed then and it made his entire body clench. He pretended he couldn’t see how her nipples were standing out in relief against the soft sweater. She was aroused, but she was also nervous. He could wait. He was good at that.

“Show me.”

Shelley went back to the dressing room with him close behind her. Her “too much” ended up being two more pairs of jeans, a T-shirt and two additional sweaters. His heart ached at how little it was.

“What about a coat and some boots?” There was a rack of ladies coats off to his left. He fished through it and found a lined leather jacket whose color matched the turtleneck sweater she was wearing. It was slightly battered, but that only added to the character of the coat. He tugged it off the hanger. “Try this.”

She didn’t take it, looking at the tag instead. She shook her head. “It’s too much.”

“Just try it on,” he encouraged. James swallowed his anger. What had her life been like that a twenty dollar used coat was too expensive? He already knew she hadn’t had an easy life, but he was afraid the truth was going to be even worse than he imagined.

Reluctantly, she took the jacket and slipped it on. It fit her to perfection. James stepped up beside her and zipped it closed. She watched him, an unreadable expression in her eyes.

“There. It looks great.” He eased her in front of the mirror again and was pleased at the delight in her eyes.

“Oh, it’s gorgeous.” She ran her hands up and down the leather before doing a little twirl. Her pleasure in such a small thing made his heart hurt even as it made him smile.

She shook her head. "But I can't. It's really too much." She shrugged out of it and handed it back to him. He tossed it over his shoulder.

"Do they have any boots or shoes?" She needed something more than thin canvas sneakers. If he had his way, he'd take her to the nearest department store and outfit her from head to toe. He could easily afford it. But he knew she'd never allow it. Whatever she'd been through in her life, she had pride and wouldn't accept what she saw as a handout.

"Over there." She motioned to the corner.

"What size do you wear?"

She shook her head. "Size nine."

James left her and went over to check out the footwear. He found a pair of slightly battered, lace-up boots. They weren't in the best of shape, but they were better than what she was wearing.

He went back to the dressing room and knocked on the door. "Shelley?"

The door opened a crack. She was dressed in the jeans and her bra. The sweater was back on a hanger. James swallowed hard as it became difficult to breath. The bra she was wearing was plain white cotton and it was barely large enough to contain the bounty of her breasts. He'd never seen anything sexier in his life.

"James?" His name was little more than a breathy whisper.

His heart pounded as he shifted closer. He had to have her. Now. He took a step closer.

"Find everything you were looking for?" The woman's voice shocked him back to reality. He clamped down on the need swirling like a maelstrom inside him and slowly turned to face her.

"We're good." He glanced at Shelley and back at the woman. "Can she wear the jeans, sweater and boots instead of the clothes she came in?"

"Sure," the sales clerk nodded. "We do that all the time. Just wait a second." She hurried back toward the front counter.

"James," Shelley whispered his name loudly. "I'm not sure what I'm buying yet."

He shoved the boots toward her. "Try these on. They're warmer and sturdier than your sneakers."

She automatically took the boots, holding them against her bare stomach. God, her skin was so smooth. He wanted to go down on his knees and bury his face against it.

He shifted uncomfortably. He was sweating now and his pants were way too tight. Thankfully, the clerk came back before he could do something stupid.

"Here we go. I'll just cut off the tags." She quickly snipped the tag from the jeans, the pair of boots, and the turtleneck James pointed to.

Shelley said nothing as he gathered up the rest of the clothing hanging on the hook in the dressing room. "Get dressed, honey." He closed the door before she could say anything. He knew he'd get an earful when they left the store, but he didn't care.

He plunked the clothing and the jacket on the counter. Shelley was heading toward him, her own clothing in a bundle, as the clerk finished totaling everything. "That's seventy-five dollars even." James took four twenties from his pocket and laid them on the counter.

"I'm not buying all that, James," she said as she reached his side and dumped her clothing on the counter. She was stiff with anger and, if he wasn't mistaken, shame. That was the last thing he wanted her to feel.

"I know you're not. I am." He took the jacket, from which the clerk had already snipped the tags, and slipped it over her shoulders. "Please, Shelley." He leaned down, his lips near her ear so the clerk couldn't hear. "Let me do this for you. It's the least I can do."

"Here's your change."

James took the money the saleslady handed him and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he picked up the large bag she'd put all the clothing into.

"Ready?" He asked Shelley.

She nodded and silently headed toward the exit.

Shelley wasn't quite sure what to think. She'd been happily trying on clothing when James had suddenly appeared. The way he'd looked at her had made her heart skip a beat. When it resumed beating, it was pounding so hard and fast her chest had hurt.

Her breasts had tingled and her nipples puckered. Not to mention the soft, liquid feeling between her thighs. She still couldn't quite believe she'd become aroused in the middle of a store.

It was astounding for her to become aroused at all. It had never happened to her before. Never.

Okay, that was a lie. It had never spontaneously happened before. But she had been completely aroused once before. And that time still shamed her. She'd been in her early twenties and she still wasn't quite certain what had happened to her. She'd had sex with a complete stranger, a man she'd only seen that one night. It was all a blur and not something she liked to remember.

Since then, about once a year she'd go through a period of feeling hot and needy. She hated it. It was a part of her animalistic nature that Tom had always berated her for. During that time, her body had craved sex even though emotionally and mentally she'd wanted nothing to do with a man. Not that she'd had much choice in the matter.

Whenever Tom wanted her, he took her. He owned her. Body and soul. He'd told her that enough times over the years. Then he'd laugh and tell her she didn't really have a soul. Animals didn't.

She paled and swayed, hating that she'd even thought about that time. It was behind her now.

"Shelley? You okay?" The bag crinkled as James shifted it and wrapped his free arm around her.

No, she wasn't okay, but she was working on it. And that brought her back to the here and now. "You can't buy me clothing. I'm going to pay you back." It would eat into her small reserve of money, but she

didn't have any choice. In her experience, you didn't get something for nothing. And she wasn't going to owe a man anything.

James didn't say anything as he unlocked the passenger door of the truck and opened it for her. She climbed in and he stood there watching her for several long seconds before shutting the door.

She let out a shaky breath as he went around to the driver's side and let himself in, stowing the bag from the shop behind his seat. He shoved the keys in the ignition and started the truck, but he made no move to pull out into traffic. Instead, he peered out the window.

Shelley dug into the pocket of her jeans where she'd stuffed her money. Dragging out a handful of bills, she counted out enough to pay for her clothing and repay the twenty James had given her to buy something to eat. She didn't want to owe him anything.

"Here." She thrust the crumpled bills at him.

Slowly, he turned to face her. His expression was blank as he glanced from her face to the money and back again. "No. I won't take your money, Shelley."

She ignored the little shiver of pleasure that rocketed through her when he said her name and placed the money on the seat beside him. "I can't let you buy me clothes."

"Why?" His voice was even and unthreatening, but she sensed the underlying anger in him and put one hand on the door handle just in case.

She wasn't sure why he was angry with her. "Because it's not right."

He laughed, but it was a bitter sound with no pleasure. "What's not right is you having nothing but a few ragged dresses to wear."

Her face heated and she knew her cheeks were red with shame. "It's all I had." She squared her shoulders, refusing to be embarrassed by her clothing.

"I know." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Maybe I should leave." Her hand pulled the handle and the door popped open.

James leaned across her and yanked it closed again. His large body was pressed against hers. He was too big. Too close. Her chest tightened and she couldn't drag enough air into her lungs. She grabbed her throat, unable to breathe. The blood vessels in her temples pulsed until her head felt as though it was pounding. Her hands shook and her eyes began to water.

She was having a panic attack.

James jerked back and took in the situation at a glance. He cupped her face between his large, calloused palms and gently spoke. "You're okay, Shelley. Everything is okay. Just calm down and take a deep breath. You can do it." He kept up the patter, speaking softly until she was able to suck in some air. "That's good," he crooned. "You're safe with me. I will never hurt you." He rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks in a circular pattern. "Just breathe, honey."

Another wave of humiliation washed over her. It seemed she was always going to be at a disadvantage around this man. She felt mortified by her lack of control. She'd thought she'd passed this stage several months ago.

James hooked a loose lock of hair behind her ear and smiled. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry." She still felt lightheaded, but not as though she was in danger of passing out. "I don't know what came over me." That wasn't quite true, but she wasn't about to go into details.

"Nothing to apologize for. These things happen." He eased back and Shelley felt bereft when he was no longer touching her, which was crazy. She didn't want him touching her. Did she?

Neither of them spoke and she took those few minutes to compose herself. She swiped at the tears in her eyes and took another deep, cleansing breath. Her heart was no longer racing, but her headache was getting worse. She needed time to think, to make a plan.

Her entire life had been unexpectedly turned upside down only a few hours ago. No wonder she was emotional and off-kilter.

"I really think you should come to Wolf Creek with me." He held up his hand before she could object. "No, listen to me. You can stay with my daughter and her husband and take a few days to figure out your next plan of action."

He shifted and something crunched beneath his thigh. He swore softly as he yanked out the money she'd tried to give him. "I can't take this. If anything, I owe you. I cost you your job, remember?" He caught her wrist with his free hand and pressed the money into her palm, closing her fingers around it.

His hand was warm where it touched her. It was also gentle. She wanted to go with him, but couldn't take a chance. She didn't trust anyone. Couldn't afford to.

She shook her head. "I can't."

Rather than get frustrated or angry, one corner of his mouth kicked up in a wry grin. "You're a stubborn little thing."

She just gaped at him, knowing her mouth was wide open. She really didn't understand this man at all. He wasn't reacting like any other male she'd ever met. That made him unpredictable.

He yanked on his seatbelt, put the truck in gear and pulled out of the parking spot, merging into traffic. "Buckle up. I'm going to stop for gas, then we'll leave town. You think about my offer for a bit longer before giving me your final answer."

Shelley pulled at the belt and realized she was still clutching the money in her hand. She stuffed it back into her pocket for now and then snapped her seatbelt into place.

James was such a strange man. He'd bought her clothing and food, refusing to let her repay him for it. Nor did he seem to want anything in exchange for his kindness.

Not yet anyway.

She hated the mistrust that ate at her, but she couldn't stop it. Nothing in her life thus far had disproved her theory. Nothing was free and men always wanted something from her. If she didn't give it, they took it.

Fear nibbled at her psyche, but she shoved it back. She would not give in to it. She'd faced her demon and come out the winner. She was alive. The demon wasn't.

But that didn't mean her ordeal was over. There were men out there looking for her. She knew it as well as she knew the sun would rise tomorrow morning and every morning after. It wasn't fair to drag James into that mess.

She'd get him to drop her in some town with a bus depot once they left Tennessee. She could buy a bus ticket to California where it was sunny all the time.

For some unknown reason, the thought depressed her.

She rubbed her finger up and down the soft denim of her jeans and snuggled into her warm coat. She'd never owned such fine clothing before, clothing she'd picked out for herself. Okay, maybe she hadn't chosen the coat, but she couldn't fault James's taste. She loved the leather jacket. It was stylish and the lining was warm and cozy, like a soft blanket.

She didn't want to leave him.

That was the bottom line and the problem she was struggling with right now. James made her feel safe. But that was just an illusion. She had to take care of herself.

She hadn't been paying any attention to where they were going, but she focused on their surroundings as he turned off the road. The sign announced it was a gas station.

"I'll just be a few minutes." James shut off the ignition and climbed out. He'd left the keys. It would be so easy for her to steal the truck and drive away. If only she could drive. She'd never learned how, but he didn't know that.

There was so much she didn't know how to do. But she was learning. Watching the battered, ancient television in her apartment and observing other folks had helped. But she still felt like a child in many respects, blindly trying to find her way. She'd never used a cell phone or a computer or had a bank account.

She straightened her shoulders, staring straight ahead. She refused to feel shame. What had happened to her wasn't her fault. She hadn't chosen to be abandoned by her family. She hadn't chosen her heritage. She hadn't chosen to be held captive for all those years. Those things simply were. But she was working to make her life better.

A knock on the window yanked her from her thoughts and she jerked around. James moved his hand, making a cranking motion. She fumbled for the handle and rolled down the window. The pungent smell of gasoline made her wrinkle her nose.

"I'm going in to pay. You want anything to drink or eat?"

She shook her head, feeling slightly exasperated. The man had to stop offering to buy things for her. “No, thank you.”

“Back in a sec.” He strode toward the small brick building to pay and she couldn’t help admiring his long legs and the way his jeans cupped his firm butt.

Heat suffused her cheeks as she quickly put up the window and, this time, it had nothing to do with shame and everything to do with desire. She fanned her face, grateful James wasn’t here to see her blush. The last thing he needed to know was that she was attracted to him.

Her hand went limp and dropped to her lap. She was attracted to James Riley. Only a day ago, she would have said that was impossible. There was no way she’d ever feel that way toward any man.

What made him so special?

A vehicle pulled in on the other side of the gas pumps and she automatically glanced over. Every bit of blood drained from her face as she caught sight of the man driving the black SUV. It couldn’t be.

But it was. She’d seen his face too many times to mistake it—handsome, yet cruel at the same time. He’d grown a goatee since she’d last seen him. It gave his face a more sinister look. His blond hair was longer than she remembered, but it still didn’t touch his shoulders.

Shelley turned away and hunched down in her seat. Should she run?

No. That would bring attention her way. Reaching her hand out blindly, she hit the lock on her door.

She leaned across the seat to lock the other door, but before she could, it popped open. She gasped and shrank away.

It was James and, of course, he noticed the way she was practically hiding under the dashboard. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and hunched lower, willing the man at the gas pump across from them not to notice her. “Drive.”

James’s asked no questions as he started the truck, but his head swiveled around and she knew he saw the man across from them putting fuel into his SUV. The man who would kill her without a thought. And why wouldn’t he? She’d killed his father.

It had to be coincidence that Steve Macmillan had turned up at the same place as her and James. Or maybe it was fate. A reminder of what she’d done and everything she had to lose.

There was no way he could have tracked her movements. When she’d awoken this morning, she’d had no idea she’d find herself at this particular gas station in Nashville today.

Desperation swept over her. If James didn’t hurry, nothing else would matter. The second Steve saw her she was dead.

But the truck was already moving. James pulled out of the lot and accelerated slowly, gliding easily into traffic. Shelley didn’t breathe, didn’t sit up until he’d driven for five minutes. She peered out the back window to make certain there was no sign of the SUV before slowly sitting up straight again.

Sweat made her new sweater cling to her torso. Her body trembled as adrenaline pumped through her veins. Fight or flight. It was a primitive reaction to danger. And Steve Macmillan was as dangerous as it got.

“You want to tell me what that was all about?” James tone was mild, but she knew he was curious. He had to be. She’d just acted slightly crazy and told him to drive. She paused as it occurred to her he’d done just that with no questions asked.

She shook her head. “You’re safer not knowing.”

Steve Macmillan casually scoped out the other vehicles as he pumped gas. Not that he expected to see anyone or anything special, but it was as natural to him as breathing to be aware of his surroundings. His father had taught him to always be on his guard. Those werewolves and other freaks of nature were everywhere.

He noticed the big man who walked out of the small convenience store attached to the gas bar. His movements were fluid with an animal grace that gave Steve pause.

That would be too much of a coincidence to run into a werewolf here. There wasn’t enough time to assess the man as he climbed into his vehicle. There was a passenger in the cab of the truck, but Steve couldn’t get a good look at her. And it was a woman. He caught a glimpse of her profile before she turned away. Her soft brown hair tumbled around her shoulders. Her leather jacket was scrunched up around her neck and ears, blocking most of her features from view.

The back of his neck began to itch and he released the nozzle of the gas hose and took a step to the right to get a better view of the passenger.

It didn’t help. The woman kept her head turned away from him. The driver glanced at Steve, his dark eyes narrowing slightly before he put the truck in gear and pulled away.

Steve watched as the vehicle disappeared down the road, automatically taking note of the license plate. Damn—the woman reminded him of someone. It would come to him in time. He was certain of it. It was probably nothing, but it wouldn’t hurt to check it out.

Chapter Five

Tension thrummed through James. He didn't know what had just happened to frighten Shelley, but something sure as hell had. Maybe it had something to do with the guy at the gas station and maybe it didn't. All he knew is Shelley wanted to get away from there so he drove.

The farther away they got, the more relaxed she became.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?" He kept his tone mild, sensing that she was close to the edge. Sweat was beaded on her forehead and her hands were shaking.

"You're safer not knowing."

Her words cut him like a knife. She was trying to protect him. He wasn't having it. He was male. He was alpha. It was his job to protect her. "I can take care of myself. It's you I'm worried about."

She shook her head and he had the urge to shake her until she told him what had just happened to frighten her. Not that he'd give in to it. There's no way he'd ever lay a hand on her in anger. He was very afraid she'd had more than her share of that kind of treatment in her life.

"Talk to me, Shelley."

She licked her lips and seemed to draw herself inward, all her earlier pleasure in her new clothing gone. That made him even angrier. Someone or something had stolen that joy from her.

James sighed, knowing that Shelley wasn't going to tell him anything. Not now. Not until she felt safe.

He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel as they left Nashville behind them and headed toward North Carolina. There had to be something he could do to get Shelley to open up to him. All he needed was time.

Why it was so important to him that she do so was something he didn't want to look at too closely, but he forced himself to. A man didn't reach his age without learning a thing or two about himself and about life. And James knew without a doubt that he couldn't let Shelley go. Not now. Maybe not ever. She was important.

There had to be something he could do to convince her to stay with him. He pondered everything he'd learned about her in the short time he'd known her. He shook his head in wonder. It was less than a day, could be measured in hours, yet he felt as though he knew her, knew her soul. He damn sure wanted her.

He shoved aside the fantasies of having her naked in his bed, her body undulating under his as he fucked her hard and fast. They were only making him tense and causing his clothing to be uncomfortably tight.

Being around Shelley made him feel alive in a way he hadn't felt in decades. Not since Leda, his mate, his wife, had died in childbirth all those years ago. The nightmares of those days smothered the sexual fantasies in a hurry. He couldn't go through that again.

James rubbed a hand across the back of his neck, trying to release some of the tension gripping him. His immediate problem was Shelley wanting to leave.

He ticked off what he knew about her in his brain. She was independent. She didn't like owing him money. Not that he thought she owed him anything, but obviously she did.

She was also afraid. The way she sometimes cowered before she caught herself doing it was a sign that she'd been abused. That knowledge ate at James's gut like acid. He'd like to find whoever had hurt her and rip them limb from limb. Females were to be protected. They were the hope, the heart, the future of their people.

He glanced at Shelley, but she was staring out the window, her body pressed as close to the door as she could get it.

He turned his attention back to the road and his problem. In spite of everything she'd been through, Shelley was strong. She was a survivor. She was also a caretaker.

Trying to protect him. He still couldn't quite wrap his head around that one. As alpha, he was the one who did the protecting. To have a female try to do so went against the natural order of his world.

Caretaker. The word tumbled through his mind as he turned over the problem, searching for a solution.

Shelley needed a safe place to stay for a while and she also needed to earn some money. She obviously didn't have much. Then there was the question of her heritage. She knew nothing about being a werewolf. Maybe she was a half-breed. There was no way of knowing. But either way she needed to learn about who and what she was.

It came to him then and he smiled inwardly. It could work. *It would work*, he assured himself. It had to. There was no way he was going to drop Shelley off and leave her at some bus stop like she wanted.

"How would you like a job?"

That got her attention fast. He could feel her eyes on him. He sent a quick glance in her direction and, sure enough, her dark brown eyes were watching him intently.

His body reacted predictably, his cock jerking, seeking her attention. He ignored his erection and pressed onward.

"I recently moved into a big house. What with business and family concerns, I haven't had the time or energy to keep it up. It's a mess. I need a housekeeper."

“A housekeeper?” She said the words as though she didn’t quite understand them.

James pressed his case. “You’d be responsible for cleaning and cooking and the laundry. You’d have your own room. Or you could stay with my daughter. Alex would love to have you.” He hated making the last offer. He wanted Shelley with him, in his home. But he was smart enough to give her a choice. If she opted to stay with Alexandra, he’d live with it. At least she’d be close.

Her mouth opened and closed and he pressed harder. “Of course, there’s a salary.” He named a number, figuring it was better than she’d been making at the diner. “No strings attached. Try it for a week and see if you like it. If at the end of the week you want to leave, you’ll have some more money saved and I’ll take you to the nearest town.” The last was a bit of a lie. He’d do his damndest to talk her out of leaving. But if she was set on going, he’d drive her wherever she wanted.

“Plus, you can take the time to talk to Alex and her husband. You can learn what it means to be a werewolf.” He pushed the one final thing he thought might entice her to say yes. “Maybe we can even figure out who you are and where you come from. What do you say?”

Shelley was too stunned to speak. James was offering her everything she needed. It was too good to be true. It had to be.

Yet it was tempting. Like chocolate cake, she wanted it even though she knew it wasn’t good for her.

Everything he said made sense. It would give her a week to plan and to make certain Steve Macmillan wasn’t anywhere around. She could save some money, while finding out about her heritage.

The knot in her belly grew. Did she really want to find out about her family? Did she really have a choice?

She knew she had to uncover the truth, no matter how bad it might be. Maybe they had abandoned her. But maybe they hadn’t.

That small voice of hope she’d thought had died years ago rose up to haunt her. It had been years since she’d dared to imagine that she hadn’t been abandoned, tossed away like garbage. That someone had missed her, searched for her.

She could easily do the job. She’d had years of experience keeping house for a man. A shudder of distaste wracked her and she suppressed those negative memories.

The real question was, did she really want to spend that much time with James? The feelings he stirred within her confused her enough now. What would they be like a week from now?

She straightened in her seat. She was strong enough to fight the emotions swirling within her. She could do the job without allowing herself to get closer to James.

At least she hoped she could.

James confused her. There was no doubt he was a dangerous man. Physically, he was tall, his shoulders wide, his body lean and hard. He moved with a grace that was unusual for a man his size. Or maybe it was normal for a male of her kind. A werewolf.

How would she know? The thought was bitter and left a foul taste in her mouth. The only male she'd ever met had only wanted sex with her. And she hadn't refused him. Her body had been out of control.

And after he was done with her, Tom had shot the male with a tranquilizer dart and dragged him away. She wasn't sure what he did to the male, but she'd heard screaming for hours and finally a loud howl that was suddenly cut short. She shuddered, remembering how Tom had worn the fur of the male wolf as a coat for days afterwards.

Then Tom had settled in to watch her. She'd felt her body change. Her skin had itched and she'd scratched at her arms and legs until they'd bled. She'd felt wild. Out of control. As though something inside her was trying to break free. She'd been feverish for days, fighting whatever it was within her.

In the end, she'd lost. The wolf had been stronger. When the change had begun, she'd thought she was going to die. Her bones had cracked and reformed. Her body contorting as it changed. Fur had pushed through her skin, covering her entire body.

She'd tipped back her head to scream, but a long, low howl had emerged instead. She'd been herself, yet not. Something else was with her, sharing her mind and body. The wolf.

Shelley rubbed her hands up and down her arms, feeling a chill in spite of her coat and the warmth in the cab of the truck. She'd feared she'd never be able to change back. That she'd be stuck in that form forever.

Then she'd prayed that Tom would finally kill her.

He hadn't. Instead, he'd watched her for hours. Finally fear and exhaustion took their toll and she'd curled up and slept. She woke hours later in the midst of another change. When it was done, she was herself once again.

Tom had warned her to keep her mouth shut about what had happened. Who was she going to tell? His buddies? They all thought he should have killed her years before.

It took her months, but she'd managed to learn to control her wolf. She hadn't shifted in years. The change always brought out the worst in Tom. After the first time, he beat her every time she allowed her wolf to come out.

"Shelley?" Concern laced James's voice. She'd been silent for quite some time, lost in memories. Nightmares really. Daylight was quickly fading into dusk. Night closed in early in March.

"Okay. I'll do it," she blurted. Shelley hoped she was doing the right thing. "But only for a week," she added. She was leaving if she didn't feel right about the situation.

"Fair enough."

As though he sensed she didn't want to talk, James leaned forward and flicked on the radio. Country music rolled out of the speakers. "You have a preference?"

"Not really." She'd been listening to music at the diner for months, but Gus had kept it on a country station. Tom hadn't listened to music at all. She didn't even know what other kinds of music there were.

Feelings of inadequacy threatened to smother her. Defiantly, she reached out and pressed one of the buttons. When nothing happened, she frowned.

"Like this." James showed her how to search for other radio stations. And he did it in such a matter-of-fact way she didn't feel stupid.

She stopped when she came across a slow, rhythmic song she liked. She tapped her foot and her body began to sway. James startled her when he began to sing, his voice low and deep.

Goose bumps broke out on her skin and a shiver raced down her spine. She wasn't frightened or cold. Her body was reacting to James's voice.

Her skin felt sensitive. Prickly. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing getting deeper. Her nipples felt tight and she pressed her thighs together to try to still the restless sensation low in her belly.

She was aroused.

It wasn't unpleasant. Nor was it something she wanted to explore. She had too much on her plate without adding sex to the mix.

James's voice pitched lower, weaving a sensual spell around her. Luring her. She wouldn't give in.

Reaching out, she slapped at the buttons until the music stilled. Her breathing was loud and fast, the only thing she could hear above the whooshing sound in her ears.

The truck slowed and turned off the road. Shelley looked around, feeling frantic. A motel. James was pulling into a motel.

She clawed at the lock of her door and whipped off her seatbelt as he brought the truck to a stop. She had to get away. The cab of the truck was closing in around her.

"Shelley." She heard him call her name as if from a distance.

Air. She had to have air.

She jumped out of the truck and stumbled, barely catching herself before she fell to the hard, cold ground. There were a few patches of snow clinging to the shadowy base of a tree just to the right of the entrance to the motel. It was a silly thing to notice. But she'd found that focusing on something sometimes helped her control her panic attacks.

This was the second one today. Not surprising, all things considered. But she didn't like it. They left her feeling weak and helpless. And she was neither of those things.

James hovered next to her but didn't touch her. A part of her was glad he was keeping his distance. Another part of her longed to have his strong arms around her like he'd done earlier today.

"It'll get better, Shelley."

She didn't know who he was trying to convince, himself or her.

Minutes ticked by and finally she felt the vise loosening from around her chest. A bird called out in the distance and she could hear the rumble of traffic on the road beyond.

Slowly, she turned to face James. His eyes were narrowed and a muscle jerked in his jaw. He didn't look angry, she decided. Not really. She couldn't quite figure him out.

He reached his hand out, his movements slow and even. She forced herself not to flinch as he tucked a lock of hair around her ear. "Okay now?"

"I'm fine. I'm usually not this bad." For some reason she didn't want him to view her as weak, as a victim.

"Don't worry about it." He motioned to the truck. "How about we get our stuff and check in for the night. I don't know about you, but I could do with a good meal and some sleep. I've been on the road for a week."

Shelley realized just how little she knew about James. She knew his home was in North Carolina and that he had a daughter. Oh, and that he'd recently moved into a new house. That was pretty much it if you didn't count the fact that he was a werewolf, one that she was physically attracted to.

She nibbled her lower lip. Would they share a room? Did that mean he wanted sex? She didn't want to squander her money on a motel room, but she wasn't having sex with any man again unless it was her choice.

Once again, James seemed to understand her fears. "Just sleep, Shelley. I'll get a room with two double beds." He stared down at her, his piercing golden-brown eyes unflinching. "I promise."

Taking a deep breath, she made the decision to trust him. He'd kept his promises so far. He hadn't hurt her. In fact, everything he'd done had been to protect her in some way.

"Okay."

He smiled and reached in around her and dragged out her two bags of belongings and a leather case. He shut the door and locked it. "After you." He tilted his head toward the door.

Shelley strode toward it, back straight, head held high.

The fluorescent light in the lobby hummed as they walked toward the counter. The place looked a little worn around the edges, but clean. Kind of like her.

The male desk clerk was efficient and, before she knew it, James was leading her outside again and down the walkway. He stopped in front of room 115.

She watched as he deftly juggled their bags and the keycard, fitting it into the slot. She would have offered to do it for him, but she'd never used one before and was tired of appearing ignorant around him.

James pushed the door open and ushered her inside. The walls were beige, as was the carpet and the drapes. But, true to his word, there were two double beds with a built-in nightstand separating them.

He dumped their bags on top of the low dresser. “You can use the bathroom to freshen up if you’d like. I’ve got to make a quick phone call and then we can go to the dining room and get something to eat.”

Shelley hurried into the bathroom and shut the door, more because she needed a few minutes alone than anything else. But, since she was there, she decided to take advantage of the fact. She used the bathroom and washed her hands. When she was done, she splashed some water on her face and finger-combed her hair. Thankfully, her hair was straight and she was able to make herself presentable enough to go to dinner.

Having done as much as she could, she reached for the door handle. Either James was finished with his call or he wasn’t. Curiosity ate at her and she wondered who he was calling. His daughter? Did he have a girlfriend? Probably not if he needed a housekeeper. In her limited experience, men always expected the women around them to clean up after them. Besides, he’d asked her to move in with him. She didn’t think he would have done that if he had a girlfriend.

She eased the door open and listened.

James waited until Shelley had closed the door behind her before pulling out his cell phone. He didn’t like how pale she was. The last panic attack had taken him by surprise. They’d been driving along listening to the radio when suddenly she’d been frantic to shut off the music. She’d been quiet for so long, obviously lost in thought for quite a while before the attack had struck.

He’d seen the motel and pulled in. She needed some food and rest. Not that his actions were completely altruistic. He wanted the opportunity to talk more with her, to get closer to her before he took her home.

He was under no misconceptions. The moment the word went out there was an unattached female under his roof all the unmated males in his pack would be sniffing at his front door.

A low growl broke from his throat.

Nobody was touching Shelley. Not without her consent. And maybe not even then. All his protective instincts were aroused. He’d only felt this way about two other females—his dead wife and his daughter. And the feelings he had for Shelley were anything but paternal. She was a sexy, strong female who’d obviously dealt with more than her fair share of hardships.

She was also a female lost and alone. It was his duty to protect her.

Having settled his mind, he placed his call, smiling when Alex answered. “Where are you? Are you close to home?”

James chuckled. “Slow down. Anyone would think you missed your old man.”

“And anyone would be right,” she answered tartly. “Seriously, where are you?”

He glanced around the room, doing his best to avoid looking at the beds. They reminded him of everything he wanted to do to and with Shelley.

He cleared his throat and ambled to the window. Pulling back the edge of the curtain, he looked out. It was almost full dark now, but he could see as clearly as if it were midday thanks to his preternatural vision.

“Dad?” Concern laced Alex’s voice.

“Sorry, honey. I got distracted for a second.” He let the curtain fall back into place. “I’m at a motel for the night. I’ll be home tomorrow.”

“Is anything wrong?” Now James could hear Joshua in the background demanding to speak to him.

Hoping to avoid causing any disharmony between his daughter and her husband, he hurried to reassure her. “Everything is fine.”

He started to tell her about Shelley, but hesitated. He heard the door to the bathroom open, but Shelley didn’t come out. He walked across the room and gently pushed the door. She stood there looking both defiant and slightly guilty.

He motioned her out. Alex’s voice filled his ear but he hadn’t heard a word she’d said. All of him was focused on Shelley. “Just a second, honey.”

He put his hand over the phone. Shelley raised her left eyebrow in question. “That’s Alex. Is it okay if I tell her about you?”

Shelley’s eyes widened and he knew he’d surprised her by asking. Normally he wouldn’t have, but Shelley was special. He wanted her to feel more in control of her situation. That was the key to keeping her happy and close to him while he untangled all the emotions and instincts she brought out in him.

“Sure.”

James put the phone back to his ear. Alex was gone and Joshua was on the line demanding answers. “Everything is fine,” he growled. “Just shut up and listen, Joshua.” He tacked on the last when Shelley’s eyes widened and she took a step away from him. She’d thought he was still talking to his daughter instead of his son-in-law. Not that she looked reassured. She sidled over to her bag, giving him a wide berth.

“Listen up, Striker.” James was going to beat his second-in-command when he got home if he didn’t close his mouth and pay attention. Thankfully, Joshua went quiet on the other end. “I got delayed and I’m bringing home a guest.”

“Who?” James could hear the caution in Joshua’s voice.

“A female I ran across working as a waitress in a roadside diner. She’s a wolf, but she has no idea where she comes from or who her family is.”

“Half-breed?”

That could be a problem with some of the pack, but not with most. Alex was a half-breed and his people had learned he would not tolerate any slight to her. “Don’t know.”

That would be the first order of business when he got back to Wolf Creek. He’d talk to Shelley. Maybe he’d have Alex talk to her. She might open up more to another female. Anything she could remember about her childhood would help them uncover her past.

“Good enough.” That’s what he liked about his son-in-law. He didn’t waste words. There was no doubt in Joshua’s mind that she’d be staying. No decent werewolf would leave a female of their species alone and undefended.

“Let me talk to Alex.” He knew Shelley was listening to every word he said. Could probably hear every word Joshua spoke too. She rooted through her paper bag and dug out an elastic band and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. James frowned. He liked it down.

He heard Joshua murmur and then his daughter was back on the phone. “You’re bringing a woman home with you?” James smiled at her tone, a mixture of amazement and curiosity. “Who is she? Where did you find her?”

“Tomorrow, Alex. You’ll meet Shelley tomorrow.”

Alex sighed. “I’ll wait, if I must.”

“You must.” He smiled, easily picturing her teasing expression. “See you tomorrow.”

“Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, honey.” He ended the call and tucked his phone back in his pocket.

Shelley was waiting for him, an expression of amazement on her face. “What?”

She shook her head and said nothing.

James shrugged. Who could understand the mind of a female? “How about we go and get some dinner?”

“Sounds good to me, but only if you let me pay.”

James shrugged. “We can talk about that after we’ve eaten.” No way was he letting her pay for his meal. He wanted to take care of her. That included making sure she didn’t go hungry.

He also needed some time away from those beds. A bead of sweat rolled down his back. Tonight was going to be tough. Sleeping near Shelley, but not able to touch her.

He wasn’t looking forward to it.

He grabbed the keycard from the dresser and swept out his arm. “After you.”

“What have you got for me, Red?” Steve Macmillan tucked his phone between his ear and his shoulder. He had a pen and a notebook ready.

“It’s registered to some sort of company. LeVeau Holdings. The company has been around about thirty years or so.”

“Do you have an address?” Impatience rang in his voice.

“Well, that’s the problem.” He could hear Red scratching his beard and knew the older man would talk in his own time. If it had been one of his own men, he’d have been yelling at him about now. But Red was an old friend of his father’s, practically an uncle. He was also one of the few people in the world that Steve respected, so he gave the man more leeway than he gave others.

“It’s registered to some fancy pants lawyers in Chicago.”

“Huh.” That in itself was interesting. There’d been a lot of werewolf activity in that city over the past year. “Get Sawyer on it.” If anyone could hack into the lawyer’s computer system it was Sawyer. “Have him do whatever needs doing. I want to find out who that guy was.” More than that, he wanted to know who his passenger was.

“I’m on it.”

“In the meantime, circulate that license plate number. I want to know if anyone sees that truck. I’m heading to North Carolina tomorrow. There have been some rumors out there. I’m going to do a bit of nosing around.”

“You want me to send anyone?”

Steve thought about it for a moment. “Yeah. Send Quinn and Mitch.” If shit went down, he wanted a front line of defense.

“Will do. You take care, boy.”

“I will, Red.” He hung up and tucked his phone away. His stomach growled. Time to get himself a good meal. He stood, grabbed his jacket and slipped it on. Maybe he’d stop into a local bar and see if he couldn’t find himself a willing woman. He was horny and tense. A night of fucking would go a long way toward alleviating both those problems.

He headed out, locking the motel room door behind him.

Quinn’s phone let out a jangle and he answered it before it could ring again. “Quinn.”

“Get your ass to North Carolina.” Red rattled off a motel address. “Steve will meet you there.” Red was the only one who called Macmillan by his first name. They went back a long way as far as Quinn could tell.

“I’m gone.” He hung up and stared out his truck window. He hadn’t even reached the apartment the hunters kept in Kentucky, where he was going to be stationed for the foreseeable future.

These guys seemed to have unlimited resources with apartments in many major cities. Quinn knew they also had isolated cabins all over the country.

“Fuck!” He slammed his hand against the steering wheel, ignoring the sharp pain radiating up his arm. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

He was bone tired and sick at heart. He’d been at this for so long he could barely remember what life was like before he’d joined the bounty hunters.

“Suck it up,” he muttered. He briefly closed his eyes, reaching out mentally, searching for that indescribable link he’d always had with his twin. Nothing. But Quinn knew in his heart his other half was still alive. That was what kept him going.

Putting the truck in gear, he started driving. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Six

Shelley was feeling pleasantly full as she walked into their motel room almost an hour later. “That was delicious.” She knew she’d already said that three times, but it was true. She’d never eaten fettuccine alfredo before and she’d loved every mouthful of it.

James grunted. He’d been quiet, almost withdrawn, during their meal. She hadn’t had much to say, but way too much to think about. As a result, dinner had been a fairly silent affair.

She wondered if everything was okay at home but didn’t feel as though she should ask him. From everything she’d heard of his phone call, his daughter seemed fine. She had no idea what he was thinking.

She almost snorted. Who could figure out the mind of a male? She’d made a study of it her entire life and she still got surprised on occasion, especially since meeting James. He challenged everything she thought she knew about the opposite gender. Better to keep quiet and leave him to his mood.

He closed the door and set the lock. The finality of the gesture set loose a flock of butterflies in her stomach. Her nerves jangled. She was alone in a motel room with a man she’d only met this morning.

All her sensible arguments flew out the window. She took a deep breath. She would not panic. Not this time.

“Why don’t you get ready for bed? You can have the shower first.” James motioned to the bathroom. He was watching her with those golden eyes, an unreadable expression on his face.

A shower sounded like a wonderful idea. She grabbed a few things from her bag and hurriedly shut herself in the bathroom. Closing the door, she leaned against it and released a breath. How was she going to manage to sleep with James only a few feet away from her? Would he let her sleep alone or would he try something? Did she want him to?

Groaning, she pushed away from the door and looked for a place to put her bundle of clothing. There was only a sink and toilet. The little alcove outside the bathroom contained a mirror and a counter. She put the lid of the toilet down and put her things there.

She didn’t have a nightgown, so she’d brought her clean dress and a pair of underwear for wearing to bed. It would cover her from head to toe and make her feel more comfortable.

Biting her bottom lip, she went back to the door and pushed in the lock. Not that it would keep James out if he wanted to get in. She had no idea just how strong he was, but she knew he was all muscle beneath his clothing. It was evident in the way he moved, in the way his shoulders filled out his shirt, his biceps straining at the sleeves.

Her skin flushed and she felt restless. She was glad there was no mirror in this room. Didn't want to see how red her face was. What did it matter how strong James was or how he looked beneath his clothing?

Shelley tugged off her jeans, folding them carefully before setting them on the floor. She loved her new clothing. Pants were so much more comfortable than wearing a dress all the time. The freedom of movement was amazing.

Her sweater came next. Followed by her socks and underwear. Naked, she started the shower running and stepped beneath the spray. It was hot, warming her chilled skin.

She shivered, trying not to remember Steve Macmillan's face. He looked a lot like his father had all those years ago when he'd captured her. Tom Macmillan had been intelligent, strong and as mean as a snake.

"Don't think about it." Shelley grabbed a paper-covered bar of soap and tore off the packaging, tossing it on the floor outside the shower. She worked the sliver of soap into a lather and started rubbing, working her way from head to toe until she felt clean.

James was in the other room listening to her taking a shower. Her nipples tightened, becoming little red nubs. She put her hands over them, but it didn't ease the growing ache inside her. If anything it made things worse.

Shelley didn't understand. She knew what physical arousal was. Had experienced it before in her life. And she hated it. Because of a biological reaction, she'd accepted a man she hadn't even known. After that, once a year, she'd gone through a period where her skin had ached and her body had longed for sex.

Mentally, she hadn't wanted a man, but her body hadn't cared. She'd craved the feel of a thick cock working in and out of her pussy. Needed a man filling her.

Tears of shame rolled down her face. She'd hated that part of her nature most of all. Tom would always laugh at her after, calling her a whore. And he was right. What kind of woman would do the things she'd done?

Swiping at her cheeks, she thrust her head beneath the spray and quickly used the bar of soap to wash her hair. As she worked the lather through the slick strands, she wondered why she was having a physical reaction to James.

She wasn't in heat. That's what Tom had called it. Shelley had never named it, had done her best to ignore it. Had prayed each year that it wouldn't happen. Nothing had helped her avoid it.

No, that time was at least several months away. But her body was responding to James anyway. There was no other explanation for it. She was attracted to him.

Shelley shivered and quickly rinsed the soap from her hair. She couldn't afford to be attracted to anyone. She could only depend on herself. The only reason she was going with James was to get away from Steve and to take a job to earn some money. She wasn't staying.

She twisted the taps, shutting off the flow. The silence was almost overwhelming after the patter of water against the porcelain tub. She grabbed one of the towels and quickly dried her body before wrapping it around her head.

The air was cool, causing goose bumps to race down her skin. It had nothing to do with the fact she was going to see James in a minute. At least that's what she told herself.

Sighing, she pulled on a clean pair of panties and dragged her cotton dress over her head, doing up the buttons in the front. When she was done, she unwound the towel from her head and dried her hair as best as she could. When the towel was hanging from the rack and she'd cleaned up behind herself, she gathered her pile of clothing and unlocked the door.

There was only one light on, the one between the two beds. Not that she needed light to see. Her vision was astoundingly good in the dark. But it made the room seem smaller, more intimate.

It was also warmer. A blast of heat was released from the unit in the wall. It felt heavenly. James was stretched out on the bed closest to the bathroom and to the main door, so she scurried past him and carefully put her clothing away.

Not knowing what else to do, she pulled back the bedclothes and climbed beneath them, angling her body so she could see James. He looked so big and strong. He'd removed his flannel shirt and was wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt. With his hands stacked behind his head, she could see just how enormous his biceps really were. The tight fabric of his shirt clung to his flat stomach. His legs were long, his thighs thick.

She swallowed when her gaze fell on the substantial bulge in the front of his jeans.

"How are you feeling?" His low voice broke the silence.

She swallowed twice before she could answer. "I'm okay."

"Liar." His tone was so gentle, so soft, it took her a moment to realize exactly what he'd said.

Shelley didn't know how to answer his accusation so she kept her mouth shut. James was in a strange mood. Then again, she barely knew the man. Maybe this was his normal mood and the rest of the day had been an anomaly.

She was totally confused. By him. By herself.

"Tell me about yourself, Shelley. Where do you come from? Where have you been living?"

Bitterness coated her mouth. She'd known this was coming. Had anticipated it. But it surprised her how much it hurt. She'd expected better from James. Although why she should, she had no idea.

"Is that the price I have to pay for the room, for supper?" There was no suppressing the anger in her voice.

James rolled and pushed himself into a seated position on the side of his bed. Shelley jerked to the far end of her mattress, ready to jump out of bed if she needed to fight. Her heart was pounding. The sound of blood rushing in her ears made it difficult to hear. Waves of anxiety swamped her as she waited to see what James would do.

Idiot, she berated herself. She knew better than to directly challenge a man. But the events of the day had left her reeling and she'd lowered her guard.

James sat with his hands clasped between his spread thighs, his head slightly lowered. "No. You don't have to tell me anything. You don't owe me anything." There was no mistaking the angry edge to his voice.

Shelley relaxed ever so slightly, but stayed ready to respond to whatever situation arose.

He raked his fingers through his hair. It flowed easily and looked as soft as silk. Her fingers curled into fists beneath the blankets. She wanted to touch it to see if it was as soft as it looked.

James raised his head and his amazing hair settled around his shoulders. He looked tired. Frustrated.

Shelley nibbled on her bottom lip. He'd gone out of his way to help her today even though he obviously had business of his own to attend to. He'd also made her lose her job. Maybe he was just trying to settle the scales between them.

"I know you don't believe me, but I just want to help you." Bending down, he unlaced his boots and yanked them off, setting them neatly by the side of the bed. His socks followed.

The man even had sexy feet.

Unintentionally, she'd relaxed, moving closer to him again. She rubbed a hand over her face, trying to make sense of all the conflicting signals he was sending out. Or maybe it was her giving off mixed signals. Maybe she just wasn't able to read the signs and understand what he wanted.

"Why?" She shifted and the sheets made a soft swooshing sound. "Why do you want to help me?"

James reached out and it took all her willpower not to flinch from his touch. His fingers lightly grazed the side of her face. "Because you're a female in trouble, because you need it and because I can't help myself." He pulled his hand away, but her skin still tingled where he'd touched her.

"There's something about you that attracts me on a physical and emotional level, Shelley."

She tensed and her sex began to throb as if understanding his words. His gaze heated as he continued.

"I can't remember the last time I wanted a female as much as I want you." His hands fisted in his lap, his knuckles turning white. "But I would never take what you wouldn't willingly give. I get the feeling that's been done to you too many times in your life."

A wave of shame washed over her and she turned her face into her pillow, unable and unwilling to face him. Memories materialize from the mists of her past to haunt her. Images of all the times she'd had sex when she was in the throes of heat, and times when she'd fought with everything she had, only to lose in the end. She whimpered, hating the weakness the memories brought with them. She wasn't that woman anymore.

The mattress depressed and she knew James was sitting next to her. Could smell his unique male scent, wild and comforting all at once. Could feel the heat from his large body.

She was so cold. She was tired of being afraid. What would it be like to have sex with a man and have it be of her choosing? No biology driving her to seek a man, any man. No being taken against her will. What would it be like to be with a man solely because she wanted to be, because it was what she wanted?

Shelley couldn't really imagine it. Nor could she do it. As physically drawn to James as she was, as aroused as her body was, emotionally she wasn't ready for sex.

"It's okay, Shelley." James stroked the back of her head with his large palm, the motion comforting.

She turned to face him, giving him her full honesty. "I can't. I'm not ready."

He nodded. "I didn't expect you would be. It's too soon. But, Shelley," he said with a slow, sexy smile, "that doesn't mean I'm going to stop trying to make you ready."

Her breasts ached where they brushed against the cotton of the dress she was wearing as a nightgown. Her legs shifted restlessly against the mattress. What did he mean by that?

She knew she was breathing way too fast. She parted her lips, licking the bottom one with her tongue. His eyes followed the motion, their color deepening, pupils dilating.

His hand stroked from her head down the curve of her throat. "So beautiful. So strong." He brushed the edge of her jaw. Up and down. Up and down. The rhythm was slow and mesmerizing. Totally unrushed.

In her experience, men wanted sex fast and hard. She'd never had a man simply touch her face.

His thumb rubbed over her lower lip and she couldn't resist letting her tongue touch it. He tasted salty and warm. He sucked in a breath but, other than that, he changed nothing, keeping up the slow, steady motion of his thumb.

"Let me touch you," he coaxed. "You're in control." He leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers. He eased back, his eyes never leaving her face. "Let me pleasure you. Stroke your skin. Taste you." He licked the curve of her jaw ending up near her ear and then captured the lobe between his teeth, tugging carefully. Her core tightened and released, sending a flush of moisture to the crotch of her panties.

She moaned, unable to help herself.

"That's it," he praised. "Do you like that?" His breath was warm and slightly moist against her ear. His tongue swirled around the whorls, flicking and teasing.

Her sex spasmed. Her legs jerked involuntarily. Her body was alive with sensation, humming with need.

She eased away so she could see him. His expression was intent, but not at all out of control. Could she do this? Could she let him touch her? Did she want him to?

That was a resounding, *yes!* She'd never felt anything like his touch before. It brought nothing but pleasure. She'd lived for around fifty years and never felt anything like it.

"I'm in control?" She had to be sure.

"Absolutely. You say stop and I stop."

“And I’m not going all the way.” It sounded stupid to say it out loud, but she needed to hear him say it.

“That’s not what this is about.” James tugged his shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor, exposing a large expanse of hard, male chest. “This is all that’s coming off and that’s only so we’re both comfortable.” He stretched out on the bed beside her, his large body taking up most of the space.

Did she trust him to keep his word? It came down to that. Her mind might be telling her she was a fool to trust any man, but her heart was telling her to go for it. She didn’t know when, or if, she’d ever have this opportunity again.

Just once in her life, she wanted to understand what it was like to be close to a man who didn’t want to hurt her or take from her. Once she left James and set out on her own, she didn’t think she’d ever meet another man who would even tempt her to do something this wild and crazy.

There was something about him that called to her on a cellular level. It was as though she already knew who he was.

His patience was what finally tipped the scales. Even though he was obviously aroused, he waited, not pushing her, giving her time to think.

“Okay.”

He smiled then. Not a half-smile or a quirking of his lips, but a real one that made his face light up. God, the man was handsome.

“You won’t be sorry.”

She nodded, praying he was right.

Chapter Seven

James thought his cock was going to explode. Lying here so close to Shelley was pure pleasure and utter torture. But that was his problem. There was no way he would do anything to betray the trust she'd given him.

He still couldn't believe she'd agreed. But he planned on taking full advantage of it. He'd go slowly, even if it killed him. His only goal was to bring Shelley to orgasm, to have her experience pleasure.

Every muscle in his body was tense, screaming for action. It was obvious that Shelley had been abused physically and emotionally and probably sexually as well. His instinct was to hunt down whoever was responsible and kill them.

And he would. Eventually.

But for now, he had Shelley warm and willing. He tugged at the covers she held tight in her hands. She released the death grip she had on them and he kept pulling until they were bunched around her waist.

He'd almost come in his jeans when she'd walked out of the bathroom wearing only a thin cotton dress. He could tell she wasn't wearing a bra beneath it. Her breasts had swayed invitingly.

It had taken all his willpower not to pounce on her and drag her down onto the bed with him. But Shelley wasn't like most female werewolves—sure of herself and her sexuality. She needed him to go slow. To let her set the pace.

Her breathing was fast, her chest rising and falling swiftly. He had to take her mind off what was about to happen, to make her lose herself in the erotic connection between them, to revel in the heat, the pleasure.

He leaned down and kissed her. Gently at first. Their mouths barely touching. He kept up the undemanding caress and was finally rewarded when her lips parted.

Taking advantage of that small break, he eased his tongue inside. She sucked in a startled breath but didn't stop him. He stroked his tongue over hers, inviting her to touch, to play.

Her movements were tentative at first, but eventually she moved her tongue against his. He groaned as pleasure enveloped him. The only place they were touching was their lips and tongues, but it was making him crazy. His cock throbbed incessantly, a nonstop reminder of how much he wanted Shelley.

Her lips were warm, their kiss unhurried, a leisurely foray into her sexual awakening. He knew she'd had sex before. If nothing else, biology would have demanded it. But she was still untried when it came to

pleasure. That much was apparent from the breathy little gasps and moans she emitted as he rubbed his tongue over hers and withdrew to lick and nip at her slightly swollen lips.

"I'm going to unbutton your dress now." James wanted to give her a chance to object, to remind her she was in charge.

Shelley tensed but nodded. "Okay." Her voice was breathy. Sexy.

She looked so beautiful with her light brown hair flowing over the white pillowcase, her brown eyes slumberous, her pupils dilated. Her lips were rosier than normal and damp from their kiss.

The muscles in his shoulders were as hard as steel as he fingered the first button, sliding it through the small hole. The fabric parted to reveal a small swatch of pale skin.

James glanced up, watching Shelley's expression. He undid another button. Her breathing quickened and she tensed slightly. But he could smell her arousal. It was greater than her fear.

Pleased, he kept up the slow pace until all the buttons were undone. He folded the material back, exposing two full breasts tipped with rosy nipples.

"You're beautiful, Shelley."

The look she gave him was filled with uncertainty and, once again, anger threatened to consume him. That a female this giving and brave and beautiful didn't understand her worth was a crime.

James wanted to bury his face between the two generous mounds and just breathe in her sweet scent. But first, he had to get her used to his touch. And she had to accustom herself to touching him.

Shelley's hands were fisted by her sides and he lifted the one closest to him and brought it to his lips. "Relax," he murmured. He nibbled at her white knuckles, licking at the seams between her fingers. Finally she emitted a small groan and her fingers unclenched.

"That's it," he crooned and placed a kiss in the center of her open palm. He caught the heel of her hand between his teeth and nipped gently. She laughed. It was a small one, but the sound warmed his heart.

Guiding her, he brought her hand to his chest and flattened it against his skin. His heart beat heavy and hard and he knew she could feel it.

"Don't be afraid of me, Shelley." He released her and was inordinately pleased when she kept her hand on his chest. "Touch me if you want to. Explore. You're the one in control."

Carefully, he laid his hand over one of her breasts. The nipple stabbed the center of his palm. Her eyelids fluttered but didn't close all the way. Instead her gaze went from the hand she had on his chest to the one he had on hers.

James began a lazy motion, circling her breast with his hand. As though he had all the time in the world, he went round and round, letting his fingers graze the lush curves. Shelley moved restlessly against him and her fingers began to caress his chest.

He wanted to howl with the pleasure of her touch. Her fingers tangled briefly in his chest hair before moving upward to test the muscles in his shoulders.

It was time to push her a little. He shifted his hand and allowed his thumb to tease her nipple. Shelley gasped and released a low moan. Her pleasure was his, sinking deep into his bones. He wanted to wring a hundred moans from her, hear her scream his name as she came.

Leaning over her, he lowered his head and curled his tongue across the straining nipple. Her fingers eased up his neck to clutch at his hair, holding him in place.

Triumph filled him as she tugged him nearer. With a low growl, he closed his lips around the tight bud and sucked. Shelley cried out. He could sense her uncertainty and he pulled back, blowing on the damp nipple.

“Should I stop?” *God no*, he silently prayed. He had to touch her, to taste her sweet flesh. His inner wolf howled, adding his pleas to the universe. His instincts were screaming at him to bond this female to him as quickly as he could. She was special. Important.

But he’d back away before he’d do anything to hurt her.

The conflicting instincts were making him more tense by the second.

“Shelley?”

She held her body motionless, but she was still touching him. That gave him hope. If she wasn’t ready to go any further, he’d try again tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that until she finally trusted him. He had a feeling he could wait forever for this particular female.

“No, but I don’t want to go too far.”

A slow smile pulled at his lips. “Whatever you want. This is all about pleasure.” James lowered his head and began to caress her breasts. “Yours,” he whispered as he took the pert nipple into his mouth and sucked.

Shelley’s body was out of control. She wasn’t in heat, but her body was reacting as though it was. Every nerve ending in her skin tingled with awareness. The heat from James’s body surrounded her. His woodsy male scent teased her nostrils. It was a lure that drew her nearer, made her want to drag him atop her until he covered her from head to toe.

His hair was as soft as it looked. The texture was silky and it slid through her fingers as she desperately tried to hold him to her. The silver strands didn’t detract from his looks in any way. If anything they made him seem more masculine. Experienced. Sure.

The wet heat from his mouth closed around her straining nipple and his tongue teased the hard nub. Her core throbbed, the folds of her sex hot and wet. She ached so bad it hurt.

She wanted more but didn’t know how to ask for it.

As if sensing her unrest, James cupped her other breast in his hand while his teeth and tongue and lips paid homage to the first. And that’s exactly what it felt like to her. Paying homage.

Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked hard to force them back. James made her feel precious. Special. For the first time in her life, she felt as though she mattered.

She lost all sense of time as James touched her. The sheets were rapidly warming up or maybe it was her skin heating them. She was hot. Needy. Wanting.

Before, she'd always been made to feel ashamed of these feelings. But with James they were natural. Right.

Driven by some deep instinct, she let her fingers trail through his hair, her nails teasing his scalp. He gave a low growl of pleasure. Encouraged, she ran her fingers over the thick cords of his neck and down to his wide shoulders. Muscles rippled beneath her fingers.

James might not have the bulky build of some men, but he was all hard, lean, rosy muscle. She felt his biceps, marveling at how big they were.

There was no doubt in her mind that James was incredibly strong. But for the first time in her life, she didn't fear a male's strength. Right or wrong, she trusted him not to use his strength against her.

James raised his head, his golden eyes watchful. "I want to touch you between your legs."

His blunt words frightened her even as they aroused her. She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat and nodded. She wanted this.

"The words, Shelley. Give me the words," he insisted. She knew then he wouldn't go forward unless she voiced her wants.

"Touch me. There." She was almost breathless by the time she finished. Her heart was racing so fast and her breathing was increasing. If she weren't careful, she'd pass out.

"Breathe with me," James commanded. He placed one of her hands against his heart and took a deep breath. "In and out."

"I'm okay," she insisted. "I'm not having a panic attack."

The corners of his mouth turned up in a sexy grin. "No. Then it must be arousal."

The man was blatantly sexual, not afraid to say or do anything. Shelley could feel heat creeping up her cheeks. She couldn't speak, but nodded.

James rolled off the mattress and tossed the covers down to the foot of the bed. Shelley felt exposed even though the only parts of her showing were her feet and her breasts. The long sleeves of the dress even covered her arms all the way to her wrists.

She was glad for that. She was self-conscious about her body. She was too thin and her skin bore the scars from her years of imprisonment. They were mostly on her back, but still, it wasn't something she wanted James to see. Not now. Not ever.

James eased back down onto the bed beside her and slowly began to raise her dress. The fabric slid up her calves, over her knees and thighs. He didn't stop until it was bunched around her waist, leaving her exposed from the waist down.

He eased her legs apart and knelt between her thighs. "I can smell your heat."

She turned her head away, uncomfortable that he could smell her reaction to him.

"Look at me." His voice was gentle, but she knew he'd sit there forever if she didn't do as he asked.

She met his gaze and waited.

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about." He stroked his hands up and down her thighs, coming closer to the apex with each pass. "What's happening to you is totally natural. You're a beautiful female and you're attracted to me as I am to you."

It was hard to concentrate on what he was saying as his fingers teased the creases at the tops of her thighs where her legs and torso met.

"It's mutual want. Mutual desire." He slid his fingers through her pubic hair.

She swallowed hard as his hand continued lower.

"This is about both of us finding enjoyment in your sexual pleasure." He stroked his fingers over the hot, slick folds of her pussy. A long, low moan spilled from her mouth. Every cell in her body seemed to be tense. Waiting.

"Open your legs and let me taste you."

She could hear the desire, the need in his voice. It tightened her throat and made her chest ache. Wanting to give him as much as she could, she slid her legs apart, opening herself to him.

James's chest heaved. His skin was covered in a light sheen of sweat. She knew his jeans couldn't be comfortable at all. But she wasn't ready to take that final step. Not yet.

She nibbled on her bottom lip. Should she put a halt to this? It wasn't fair to James.

Before she could decide, he settled on his stomach between her thighs and licked up one side of her labia and down the other. Her hips bowed off the bed and a strangled cry broke from her throat.

Heat washed over her and her channel began to throb a primal rhythm.

"You taste sweet and salty and sexy." James made almost a purring sound against her sex as he lapped at her swollen folds again and again. "I could spend all night eating your pussy."

A bead of sweat rolled down her temple. Her nipples were hard, tight nubs stabbing at the air. Shelley longed to rip her dress off but couldn't bring herself to do it.

James caught the nub of nerves at the apex of her thighs between his lips and sucked. Shelley cried out, her sex spasming. She felt as though she might explode.

As if knowing exactly what she needed, James slid one thick finger into her tight channel. Her wet sheath clutched at it even as he withdrew and plunged in again.

Shelley started to pump her hips, chanting, "James, James," over and over. He thrust his finger in and out, continuing to tease and suck her clit.

Everything inside her clenched. Hard. Then pleasure exploded through her. Her hips bucked. Her inner muscles spasmed around his finger. She threw back her head and released a cry that sounded more like a howl, but she didn't care. She'd never felt anything like this.

Sex had been mostly quick and painful in her life. It had given her some measure of relief when she was in heat. But never had it been like this. It overwhelmed her senses, leaving her flying through the air, never wanting to come back down.

Nothing this wondrous could last and eventually she realized James had removed his hand from between her legs and was sitting beside her, watching her.

He smiled. "You okay?"

She wiggled her toes as she thought about it. Was she okay? That was such a pallid word for what she was feeling. Overwhelmed. Incredible. Afraid. Exhilarated.

"I'm okay." She licked her lips, still trying to catch her breath and quiet her racing heart. "How about you?" Now that was a stupid question. The man had a huge ridge in the front of his jeans.

"I'm perfect." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "Thank you for giving me such a wonderful gift."

She brought her eyebrows together in a frown. "But you did everything."

He shook his head. "No, you gave me your trust and the beauty of your orgasm." He licked his finger. "You taste sweet and hot."

She flushed but didn't look away. It was pointless to be embarrassed after what they'd just done.

James gently eased the skirt of her dress over her legs before he buttoned the front. The material brushed against her breasts, drawing a low moan from her. Her nipples were still extremely sensitive.

He hesitated for a moment, as though he might say something, but then he shook himself and stood. The muscles of his chest gleamed with sweat and his abs rippled as he moved. "I need to take a shower. I'll only be a few minutes."

Feeling slightly bereft, she nodded. What else could she do? Of course he needed a shower after all day. "Sure."

James turned and headed to the bathroom. Shelley didn't realize she was holding her breath until the door closed. She released the pent-up breath with a whoosh and stared up at the ceiling. Her body was like a live wire, sated but still aroused.

She brought her hands up and cupped her breasts through her dress. It felt good but nowhere near as good as when James had touched her. Sighing, she dropped her hands back to her sides, tensing when the shower came on in the other room.

She wasn't sure she was ready to face James when he came out. Sitting up, she grabbed the blankets and pulled them over her. Even though she was still too warm, she felt better being covered.

Closing her eyes, she easily imagined the water rolling down James's muscular chest. Bronze skin pulled taut over hard, lean muscle. There was no doubt about it. James Riley was prime. Uttering a groan of frustration, Shelley rolled over on her side and stared at the empty bed across from her.

James was in hell. His skin ached and his wolf was demanding release. He leaned his hands against the tiled wall and let the water beat down on his head.

His balls were full and heavy and his cock was threatening to explode. Veins pulsed and throbbed up and down his shaft and liquid seeped from the bulbous red head.

He could still taste Shelley. He licked his lips and his cock jerked. Damn, she was like nothing he'd ever tasted in his life. Sweet and spicy. A mixture that seemed made for him.

Her smell mingled with his and he'd hated to take a shower, to wash it away. He frowned as he lifted his right hand from the wall and brought it to his nose. It was faint, but it was still there. Shelley.

He curled his fingers into a fist, wanting to smash it against the wall to relieve some of the tension thrumming through him. He'd only glimpsed parts of her body, but he'd seen several small scars near her waist. And there were very old scars circling her ankles, as though she'd been chained and her skin had been rubbed raw. Repeatedly.

He wanted to roar in anger. His teeth elongated and his fingernails morphed into claws. He took a deep breath, struggling for control. Werewolves were fast healers. To have such old scars, the torture would have to have been prolonged and often.

Shelley was obviously keeping secrets from him and that could be dangerous. He had to find out more about her past, how she'd ended up working at a roadside diner with hardly any clothing or money to her name.

Because sometime during the last half hour or so, he'd had to admit to himself that Shelley was his. His mate. He'd had one in his lifetime and never expected to find another. But fate worked in mysterious ways and sometimes it sucker-punched you.

He raised his head and let the water pour over his face.

He didn't want a mate. Didn't want to risk the heartache that came with such a connection. But he knew himself well and knew he couldn't let Shelley go. She was a gift beyond price and it was his job to make her want to stay with him.

And that job had begun tonight.

He wasn't done yet. If he hoped to sleep next to Shelley, he had to do something about his massive erection. Grabbing the tiny sliver of soap that passed for a bar, he rubbed it between his hands. When he'd worked up a thick lather, he tossed it back into the built-in dish and wrapped his fingers around his shaft.

The way he was feeling this wouldn't take long.

He closed his eyes and pictured Shelley lying on the bed before him like a treat, her full breasts tipped with tight red nipples, begging to be tasted. Her legs spread wide, her pussy gleaming with her cream.

He pumped his hand up and down his cock, working it from base to tip. His balls pulled up tighter to his body. He increased the tempo as his fantasy expanded.

He might not have seen her totally naked, but his imagination could easily make up for that. Her skin gleamed as she touched her breasts, tugging at her swollen nipples with her thumbs and forefingers.

His hand worked faster.

She opened her legs wider and arched her hips in clear invitation.

James groaned and gripped his cock hard, pumping fast. He gritted his teeth to keep from yelling while he came. White fluid shot out of the tip of his shaft, coating his hand and spilling over into the tub.

His lungs were working like a bellows as he eased his hand away and grabbed the soap. Not giving himself any more time to think, he scrubbed his body, washing away all remnants of sweat and his orgasm.

When he was done, he turned off the water and stepped out onto the cool tile floor. There was only one clean towel left, but it did the job.

He picked up his jeans and tugged them on. He hated wearing them, but he didn't have much choice. He couldn't go back in the room naked, not without possibly making Shelley nervous, and he didn't wear underwear.

The jeans felt heavy and confining. His only concession to comfort was leaving them unbuttoned.

He hung up the towel and left the bathroom, flicking off the light behind him. The room was quiet with only the light whoosh from the heating unit and the soft, even sound of Shelley's breathing. She'd fallen asleep.

He crept over to the side of the bed and stood beside it, watching her. There was nothing remarkable about her features. Her chin was a little pointy and her nose turned up slightly. But to him she was the most beautiful creature in the world.

Her heart-shaped face and dark, luminous eyes, which were closed now, fascinated him. Her rosy lips begged him to taste them. And her inner strength shone like a beacon in the night.

James reached out and clicked off the light between their beds. She was a werewolf and would be able to see perfectly in the dark if she awoke. Still, he went to the window and tugged open the drapes a bit to allow some moonlight to seep in.

Satisfied, he went back to her bed and crawled in beside her. She moved slightly but didn't wake as he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her into the curve of his body. She felt right there, as if she'd always been a part of him.

James closed his eyes and sighed. It was incredible to think when he'd rolled out of bed this morning he hadn't even known she existed.

Chapter Eight

Shelley woke slowly, feeling sleepy and warm. The alarm clock hadn't gone off so she hadn't slept in. She still had plenty of time before she had to get up. Lying there, she enjoyed a rare moment of well-being.

She'd spent most of her life on edge, never knowing what she was going to face from Tom Macmillan each day. Just as it had for all those years in his presence, tension crept in, depriving her of her relaxed state.

It was then she felt the weight around her waist. Sleep fled when she realized the warmth she was feeling was coming from the large male body behind her. The weight she was feeling was his arm.

Memory came flooding back in a torrent. James. Yesterday she'd lost her job and fled with him. She'd bought new clothes. Well, new to her. And she'd seen Steve Macmillan, Tom's son.

A shiver raced down her spine. Now there was a man who was even meaner than his father. And that was saying something.

"Cold?" James tugged the covers closer, tucking them around her body.

Her face flushed as another memory sprang forward. James touching her all over, his hands and fingers pleasuring her until she'd exploded in a blazing orgasm. This time when she shivered it wasn't from cold or fear, but from desire.

"Shelley?" James turned her to face him, but not before she felt his erection pressing against her back. He was awake and aroused. And why not? It's not like they'd had sex last night. He'd pleased her and she'd fallen asleep before he'd finished his shower.

Her sex throbbed. She wanted James but, at the same time, was afraid. Too much of her life had been controlled by a man. She was finally tasting freedom and wasn't about to give it up. Not for anyone. She'd die first.

His lips brushed her forehead in a gentle caress and she sighed. All her resolve, all her good intentions, flew out the window whenever he touched her.

"You okay?" He brushed a lock of hair out of her face. Dawn hadn't quite arrived, but the room was light enough for her to make out his features. Not that she needed the light. She had exceptional vision.

"I'm fine." She had to say something and her thoughts were too jumbled to come up with much in the way of intelligent conversation.

“Come here.” He gently pulled her into the curve of his body, urging her to rest her head on his shoulder. His skin was firm and warm and she couldn’t resist snuggling closer and inhaling his familiar woodsy scent. She rested her hand on his stomach and the muscles of his abs rippled beneath her touch.

He didn’t pounce on her. Didn’t demand sex. James was unlike any man she’d ever known. He confused her and drew her at the same time.

He was so strong. It would be so easy to let him take care of her. But that wouldn’t do. She had to learn to stand on her own two feet. The past seven months had been a steep learning curve for her. She’d heard about things like telephones and televisions, but she’d never used either of them until she’d escaped. She could cook and clean, but she’d never operated a computer. She’d seen Tom’s friends use cell phones and laptops, but she’d never been close enough to touch one.

She’d never been to a store, never gone shopping until recently. Or if she had, she hadn’t remembered it. Her life before Tom was a blank, filled with the occasional shadowy memory that only brought her pain when she tried to remember. After the first ten years of her captivity, she’d stopped trying to remember and concentrated all her efforts on staying alive and trying to escape.

As though James knew where her thoughts had gone, he rubbed his hand up and down her arm and asked, “What happened to you?”

She sighed. She didn’t owe him any explanation. Not really. But he was taking her into his home to work, letting her meet his daughter. And she wasn’t even going to think about what he’d done for her last night.

Her skin warmed and she suddenly felt overheated. Her flesh was tender to the touch. Her breasts ached and the area between her thighs was damp. She was aroused by his nearness, his scent.

He had to be able to smell her. If he was like her then his sense of smell was exceptional. But he said nothing. Made no motion to pressure her into sex.

Surely she owed him something for his kindness. Besides, he’d offered to help her uncover her past. If he was going to do that, he had to know what happened to her.

Opening her mouth, she uttered the four words that might unlock the key to her past. “I was a prisoner.”

James had been lying in bed enjoying the pre-dawn moments with Shelley tucked into his arms. He’d slept fairly well considering he’d had to deal with a raging hard-on all night long.

Shelley felt right in his embrace. Like something that had been missing from his life. She helped make him feel more complete.

He knew she was still nervous and uncertain around him. That would change only with time, when she finally understood he would do nothing to harm her.

She was aroused. He could smell her heat. It was sweet and spicy and musky. He wanted to go down on her, spread her legs wide and eat her for breakfast. He grinned and licked his lips. But he kept still because he sensed her unease with her physical response to him.

She wasn't ready for a repeat of last night. Not yet. Hopefully later.

James didn't want to do anything to disturb the quiet, intimate mood, but knew he needed answers. He was taking her home today. There would be questions and he needed a place to start searching for answers.

When he'd asked what had happened to her, he hadn't quite expected the answer she offered.

I was a prisoner.

Those words burned in his brain. His body tensed for action, muscles rippling, breathing increasing. His wolf howled inside him. James gritted his teeth and concentrated on keeping himself from changing. He didn't know if Shelley had been around many of her kind and wasn't certain how she'd react if he suddenly shifted.

Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. His nails lengthened into claws briefly before receding once again.

"What happened?" The words were little more than a guttural snarl.

Shelley's entire being was thrumming with anxiety, but he couldn't do anything to reassure her. Not yet. He was too busy trying to control his primal nature, which wanted to track down whoever had done this to her and rip them to shreds.

That would come later. For now, he had to keep Shelley talking. She was starting to open up to him. The last thing he wanted her to do was shut back down. He took a deep breath and began rubbing his hand up and down her arm again in a soothing manner. He needed her to relax.

James got control of himself. His wolf, lethal and wild, crouched within him, but neither by a twitch of his muscles nor by the tone of his voice, did he betray the violence swirling within him. "Who took you?"

Shelley didn't look at him, keeping her face buried against his chest. Her voice was low, barely a whisper, but he heard every word.

"I was in a cabin in the woods somewhere in Tennessee. I'm not quite sure where." James felt her tension as she spoke, heard the flatness of her words and knew she was lying. Not about being held prisoner, but not knowing where the cabin was. He'd bet every dollar he owned, which was a considerable amount, that she could easily lead him there. He didn't call her on it. Not now. Once he'd gained her trust she would tell him.

"I was there for so long—" Shelley broke off, her fingers curling into a fist on his chest. He placed his hand over hers, feeling the tension vibrate through her fingers. "When I got a chance to get away, I took it. I ran and ran and ran." She stopped abruptly. "Anyway, I got a job in the diner in Kentucky and that's where you found me."

“How did you get away?” It was hard, but he kept his voice even and unthreatening when all he wanted to do was find her captors and tear their limbs from their bodies.

She shook her head and folded her arms around herself.

His mind swirled with the possibilities. “How long?” His voice was gruff as he swallowed a surge of fury.

She shrugged. “I’m not quite sure. But I think it was somewhere between thirty and forty years.”

His mind went blank and a red haze seemed to fill him. “How old are you?” The words were all but growled. He could smell her fear but he was unable to contain his volatile emotions any longer.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. Somewhere between forty-five and fifty-five, I guess.”

He tilted back his head and howled. The sound echoed in the small confines of the room, bouncing off the walls. James could feel the cords of his neck straining as he shook with the force of his anger. He hadn’t felt this kind of rage since Leda had died in his arms.

Shelley rolled away from him, slapped her hands over her ears and began to tremble. That knocked him back to reality in a hurry. He leaned against her and buried his face in her hair, inhaling her unique scent as he took a large breath to try and calm himself. “I’m sorry, Shelley. I’m so sorry.”

He eased her into his arms and sat back against the headboard, cradling her to his chest. He couldn’t even begin to comprehend exactly what that kind of imprisonment would do to someone, what kind of abuse she had endured.

He put his thumb against her chin, gently pushing until she tilted her head back and looked at him. Her face was pale, but her expression was one of determination. She might look fragile, but he couldn’t imagine many males enduring what she had and coming out alive.

Her hand slowly came up and wrapped around his wrist. The contact soothed the angry wolf inside him. They sat there for a long time as they both assimilated what had just happened. It was James who broke the silence. “You were only a child, a teenager at best, which is still very much a child among our kind. We don’t reach adulthood until our early twenties.”

She nodded. “I think that’s why I can’t remember too much of what came before. Whenever I brought up the past, he’d...” She buried her face against his bare chest. “He’d beat me.”

James knew the man was dead. He had to be. Otherwise how would she have escaped? But that still didn’t keep him from wanting to exact some kind of revenge against him. The fact that he couldn’t only added to his anger and frustration.

As much as he didn’t want to know the rest, there was a question he had to ask, even though he already knew the truth. “Did he...” He swallowed hard, having a hard time forcing the words past his lips. “Did he rape you?”

“Not at first. But after a few years, when I was older.”

Anguish tore through him and tears pricked his eyes. The thought of this gentle creature at some man's mercy for all those years was almost too much to bear. But since she obviously had, he could do no less.

He held her tight, wanting to erase those years from her mind, but knowing there was no way to make that happen. "It's all right." Her soft voice pulled him from his reverie. Her fingers that had been clinging so tight to him were now patting his chest, calming him. "I survived and I have the rest of my life."

How had he ever for a moment thought this woman was fragile or weak? Her inner strength was greater than anyone he'd ever known. She'd not only survived her ordeal, but she was determined to put it behind her and to build a life for herself.

He had so many questions he still needed answers to. How had she made her first transition? And she had to have done so in order to know what a werewolf was. For a female to shift into her wolf form for the first time required a male werewolf and sexual relations for it to happen. It was Mother Nature's way of ensuring the species mated and procreated. It might not be fair to the females but it was the way things were for them.

What happened to the male who'd first mated with her? Was he the one who'd held her captive? Everything inside him said no. She seemed to know next to nothing about their species. This was something else. Something more sinister.

Other questions surged forward. Was she a half-breed or a full-blooded werewolf? What did she remember about her family? What had happened to her captor? It wouldn't do to assume he was dead. Maybe he'd gotten lax with security after all these years. Maybe he'd dropped dead of a heart attack due to old age. Thirty to forty years was a long time.

But there was something he needed to do before he asked any more questions.

Taking his time and giving her every opportunity to say no or to move away, James lowered his head toward her and brushed her forehead with his lips. Then he did the same with her temples, her eyelids, her pert little nose and her chin. Her breathing deepened, but she kept her eyes open, watching him.

"I think you are the bravest and most beautiful woman I've ever known," he whispered as he rubbed his lips over hers. He barely made contact with her soft mouth, not wanting to push or crowd her. A bead of sweat rolled down his back as he struggled to maintain control. Not for anything in the world would he want to do anything that would upset Shelley or frighten her. Not when she'd already been through so much.

She deserved to be cherished and loved. And he was just the male to do it.

He stroked his tongue along the seam of her mouth and her lips parted ever so slightly. He dipped inside, not pushing, but merely tasting before slipping out again. He kept their kiss light and playful even though his head was pounding and his body aching for a deeper contact.

Finally, he eased back. His control was becoming more precarious with each passing second. He knew she had to feel his swollen dick poking into her side. There was no way she couldn't.

They were both gasping for breath as they stared at one another. Shelley smiled and put her fingers to her lips. James swallowed a groan, wanting to suck on those lovely, slender fingers. His erection twitched uncomfortably.

"I'd never been kissed before yesterday."

The sheer brutality under which she'd lived came crashing down upon him. He was at a loss for words. Unable to express the anger he felt on her behalf. Another part of him, the more primitive side, was thrilled that he'd been the first to kiss those sweet lips.

He cleared his throat. "Then I thank you for allowing me such a precious gift."

Something niggled at the back of his brain, something she'd said back at the diner. *Call me Shelley*, she'd said. "Shelley isn't your real name, is it?"

She stiffened and he was immediately sorry that he'd opened his mouth.

"I don't know." She surprised him. He really hadn't expected her to answer him. "It's the only name I know, yet it's not quite right."

He wrapped both his hands around her, holding her close to his heart. "It doesn't matter. We'll figure out where you come from. I won't let you go until we find your rightful home." What he didn't say aloud was that he wanted her to make her home with him.

He had to ask the one question that needed answering. Even though he knew in his heart it was the truth, he needed her to confirm it. "Was your captor a bounty hunter?"

Shelley was emotionally exhausted by what had just transpired. She'd told James things that she'd never expected to tell another person. Maybe it was because she knew he was like her. He knew she was different, but he wasn't disgusted by it at all.

Her lips still tingled from where he'd kissed her. She hadn't thought that she'd ever kiss a man, let alone that she'd like it. And they'd certainly done a lot more than kiss.

Her body was warm from the heat radiating from him and she could feel the imprint of his erection against her side. He was very aroused, yet he'd done nothing about it. Tom certainly wouldn't have hesitated. She shivered with revulsion and shoved that thought out of her head. Tom was dead and she never had to think about him again. Those days were over.

But in order to claim her future, she had to examine the past. She knew that now. And that started by answering all James's questions, no matter how uncomfortable they made her.

"Bounty hunter? I'm not sure what you mean by that. He and his friends were hunters. They were always talking about catching prey and bagging wolves."

A muscle ticked in his jaw and James briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were filled with raw determination and power. Energy radiated from him, like a vibration.

“Fucking bounty hunters had you for more than thirty years.” She realized he’d moved from beyond anger into fury. Yet, she didn’t fear him. She knew his rage was aimed at Tom and his buddies, not her.

Still, her heart pounded and her palms grew damp. She eased out of James’s arms. They tightened briefly before he let her go. Shelley crawled off the bed. James sat there with his head tilted back, his bare chest gleaming with sweat, his lungs pumping hard. His jean-clad legs shifted restlessly.

He couldn’t have been comfortable sleeping in them last night. She knew he’d done so for her sake and that made her love—appreciate—that was the word she’d meant. She *appreciated* him all the more.

Her head swam. She’d almost said the “L” word. Even if it was in her own mind, it was scary. She couldn’t love him. She barely knew him.

That wasn’t quite true either. She knew him better than she’d ever known another male. She knew he was strong and courageous and fair. That he had a temper, but would never take it out on someone else. He was kind and generous and sexy as sin. A giving and caring lover. Someone she was coming to trust. Did trust, considering how much she’d told him this morning.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.” James’s voice was low and calm.

There was pain in his eyes and it occurred to her that she’d hurt him by moving away from him. “You didn’t. Not really.” She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. She was still wearing her thin dress with nothing underneath it.

She hurried to her clothing and bundled it into her arms. “I’m going to get dressed now.” Obviously. Still she felt she needed to say something. She turned to go to the bathroom before she said something even more stupid.

“This isn’t over, Shelley. We still have more to talk about.” She felt more than heard James come up behind her. He rested his hands on her shoulders and the warmth sank into her bones.

“I know. Just not now.” She was jittery, her stomach half-sick from thinking about the past. She needed a break before she went any further.

“Okay. You get ready and we’ll get some breakfast before we hit the road.” He released her and she glanced over her shoulder. He loomed behind her, large and fierce. His eyes flashed a darker golden before he turned away and headed to his duffle.

Shelley hurried into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. She yanked her makeshift nightgown over her head and fumbled into her clothing. When she was fully dressed, she used the facilities and washed her face. Her brush was in the other room.

Feeling decidedly nervous, she left the dubious safety of the bathroom. James was fully dressed in jeans and a tight white T-shirt that hugged every muscle in his torso. He’d thrown a brown plaid shirt over it, leaving it open. His duffle was zipped and sitting on the bed.

"I'm almost ready." She stuffed her dress into her bag of belongings and dragged the brush through her hair before pulling it back into a short ponytail and anchoring it with an elastic.

"No rush. We'll make it home today."

Home. The word was foreign to Shelley. She couldn't remember ever having one. She supposed she must have at some point. She'd obviously been living somewhere when Tom had taken her. His cabin was the only place she could remember and she'd never once called it home.

Shoving the brush into the bag, she closed it. James held her coat open for her and waited. She slid one arm into a sleeve and then the other and he eased it over her back. His fingers lingered, rubbing her nape. His lips brushed the top of her head before he stepped away.

He grabbed his coat, shouldered his duffle and opened the door. "Let's go."

Shelley grabbed the shopping bag with all her new clothing as well as the bag that held her other belongings. She stepped out into the hall, wondering what challenges and surprises today would bring.

Steve Macmillan answered his phone on the first ring, keeping his other hand on the wheel of his truck. "What have you got?" He was feeling mellow this morning. He'd hit a roadside bar and found a willing lady to take him home last night. She'd been blonde, stacked and wild in the sack. She also had a tight ass he wouldn't forget anytime soon. He'd left her warm bed twenty-minutes ago after a quick fuck for the road. Not only had he gotten laid last night, he'd saved the money he would have had to spend on a motel.

All he needed now was coffee, food and information and he was set.

Red was already talking, so he listened, his mood growing darker with each word the man spoke. "Sawyer still ain't been able to find out who the owner of that company is."

"Then why are you calling me?"

"Now you know me better than that, Steve," Red insisted. "I wouldn't have called if I didn't have something. That truck you saw was seen in the parking lot of a motel in North Carolina."

Steve felt his good mood returning. "Tell me more, Red. Make me happy."

Red chuckled. "I put out the word you were looking for this truck and Jessup phoned a few hours later. Seems he was on the road and just happened to stop at a motel last night."

"Is he following them?" Steve's heart began to beat faster. This could be a wild goose chase but he was willing to take that chance. There was something about the way the driver of that truck had moved. Coupled with the suspicious actions of the passenger and it was something he wanted to check out. He couldn't shake the niggling suspicion that the woman in the passenger seat was familiar.

"Yup. Said he's in his truck waiting for 'em to leave." Red rattled off Jessup's cell-phone number. "I gave him your number, but you can call him if you want. And Quinn is already in North Carolina. He said you weren't checked into the motel last night."

Steve smiled as he remembered the blond. “No, I got waylaid last night.”

“You want him to meet you somewhere?”

“Yeah.” Steve turned in at a fast-food place and gave Red the location. “I’m having breakfast before I hit the road. Have him meet me here.” He pulled into a parking spot and turned off the ignition. “If he’s not going to be able to get here within the next hour, have him call me.”

“Will do.”

Steve tucked his phone into his pocket and climbed out of his truck, locking it behind him. He hated leaving his weapons unattended, but he was parked close enough to keep a watch on them while he ate.

He was in the mood for pancakes. He might hate Shelley’s guts, but the bitch had made the best pancakes. Halfway across the parking lot, he suddenly stopped.

The woman from the truck. He’d finally figured out what was familiar about her. The quick glance he’d caught of her had reminded him of Shelley. She certainly had the same hair color. He was used to picturing her with her hair tied back, not down. It had thrown him off.

Probably coincidence. After all, what were the odds of him seeing a truck that had her as a passenger? Plus, what would Shelley be doing with that guy?

Steve started walking again, his brain working furiously. If that guy was a werewolf, then it would make sense. Maybe Shelley had hooked up with one of her own kind.

Maybe he was barking up the wrong tree. Not that it mattered. He planned to check out the big dude anyway. Maybe he’d get a chance to bag him a werewolf. Shelley was out there somewhere. He’d find her eventually. He’d been working on the other side of the country and hadn’t seen her in a few years, but that didn’t matter. She could dye her hair or change her appearance however she liked. He’d find her no matter how long it took.

Smiling, he pulled open the door and walked to the counter. “I’ll have the pancake special. Double the bacon. And pour me a large cup of coffee while I’m waiting.” He was hungry.

Quinn hung up his phone and his gut clenched. The game was on again. Macmillan hadn’t shown up at the motel last night and Quinn had orders to meet him at some breakfast joint within the hour. He could easily make it.

More and more, he was beginning to wonder what the hell he was doing. He didn’t even know if the hunters knew anything about his twin. But it was the only link he had.

He couldn’t give up.

He’d already eaten, so there was nothing to hold him up. But he couldn’t make himself start his truck. Not yet.

He dialed another number and breathed a sigh of relief when it was answered by a familiar voice. “Hey.”

“Where are you?”

“North Carolina.”

“Shit.”

Quinn tensed. “Talk to me, Craig.”

“I’ve been doing some research. There’s not much out there. But I managed to hack into some of the bounty hunter sites you don’t have access to.”

“Be careful, little brother.” Quinn worried about Craig. He was the strong one. Not that Craig was a slouch, but Quinn had always taken care of all of them. A familiar pain clutched his heart. He hadn’t done a good enough job or Chris would still be with them.

Craig snorted. “I’m always careful. Anyway, I hacked into some email accounts.”

“You what?” Quinn felt a headache coming on.

“And,” his brother continued. “There are rumors of a werewolf pack in North Carolina. They don’t know anything for certain. There’s also some chatter that some guy named Sawyer is looking for the owner of a company called LeVeau Holdings. It’s owned by a guy named James LeVeau, but beyond that they don’t have any useful information.”

“Sawyer is Macmillan’s computer guy. His hacker.”

“He’s an amateur.”

Quinn wanted to beat his head against the steering wheel but knew it wouldn’t do much good. Craig was too smart for his own good sometimes. “Just be careful.”

“I will.” Craig paused. “I won’t do anything stupid. But you be careful. I couldn’t bear to lose you too.”

“I’m going to find Chris.”

“I know you will, but it’s been almost a year and a half...” Craig trailed off not finishing the thought.

“Not much longer, I promise.”

“Okay. Take care.”

“You too.” Quinn tucked his phone away, started his truck and headed out. This was his last trip with the hunters. After more than a year with no word, maybe it was time to try something different.

“Maybe not.” Quinn knew himself well and he knew he wouldn’t stop looking. No matter what.

Chapter Nine

Breakfast had been a quick and silent affair. Shelley didn't sense that James was mad at her, just giving her the space she'd asked him for. They'd been driving for an hour now and she had no idea how close they were to his home.

"How much farther to Wolf Creek?"

"Another hour or so." James kept his eyes on the road. He'd seemed tense since they'd left the motel.

Shelley looked out the window and watched the world roll by. Cars and trucks whizzed in both directions, everyone with a destination. She wasn't sure how she felt about spending time with werewolves, which was weird considering she was one.

"Are we born different or does it happen some other way?" Tom had never really told her.

James frowned as he glanced her way. "You really don't know anything about your heritage, do you?"

She shrugged. There was no point denying it. Her knowledge about werewolves was limited to mostly hunting them. That's all Tom and his buddies talked about.

"We're a different species and we're born that way. You don't become a werewolf by being bitten. That only happens in books and movies." James paused for a brief second before asking, "Do you know if both your parents were werewolves or if only one of them was?"

"Does it matter?" She thought about it and shook her head. "I really don't know." Memories of before Tom were murky at best.

"Not to me, but to some. If you have only one parent who is a wolf, the wolf can still be dominant, but you'll be considered a half-breed. There are some purist werewolf groups who want to destroy all those who aren't full wolf."

"Great." Shelley slumped slightly in her seat and wrapped her arms around herself. "So I have to worry about the hunters *and* these other wolves." What she was finding out about her kind wasn't very encouraging.

James shrugged. "There are good folks and bad folks in all walks of life, wolf or otherwise. Most will accept you with open arms."

She was quickly becoming attuned to his moods and could feel his tension rising. There was something he wasn't telling her. "What? What is it?"

"Females are scarce. What with infighting among packs and bounty hunters we've lost many of our women. Plus, there just haven't been as many female children born this past century or so. It all adds up to more males searching for a mate."

Shelley shivered. That didn't sound good. She hadn't left one bad situation only to be thrust into another one. "Maybe you should drop me off at the next town?" She was no longer sure she wanted to go to Wolf Creek. There would certainly be more than a few unattached males there.

"No one will hurt you and no one will touch you. You'll be safe in my home."

"How can you be so sure?" she demanded. It was easy for him to say. He wasn't the one in danger of being taken by some overzealous male.

The muscles in his jaw worked. At first she wasn't certain he was going to answer her. Finally, he ground out. "I'm alpha. My word is law."

Shelley sat back. She was stunned. "So you're their leader?" She wanted to make certain she understood.

"Yes."

Maybe that explained the sense of power, of command, that surrounded James. Was she going to continue to trust him?

The answer was surprisingly easy. Yes, she was. He hadn't lied to her, hadn't sugarcoated his answers to her questions. Instead, he'd laid the plain, unvarnished truth before her when it would have been easier for him to leave out pertinent facts. She wouldn't have known any better until it was too late for her to back out.

"Okay."

His shoulders relaxed and his muscles softened slightly. "You won't be sorry," he promised, his words soft and intimate in the small space of the truck cab.

Shelley's skin began to tingle. He'd said something similar last night and she certainly hadn't been sorry. The atmosphere in the truck became charged with sexual tension. She wasn't ready to deal with what was happening between them. Not yet, at any rate.

She cleared her throat and rubbed her moist palms over her jean-clad thighs.

His hand reached over and covered one of hers. "Don't be nervous. I want you, Shelley. Make no mistake about that. But I will never take what you don't offer."

It was a pledge. A promise. One that warmed her heart. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze before returning his hand to the steering wheel.

A few more minutes passed in a companionable silence. Thoughts whirled in Shelley's head. She realized she had a million questions and finally someone who could answer them for her.

She started with one that pricked her curiosity. "How old are you?" She had no idea just how long her kind could live.

He laughed. "Older than you, honey. I'm one hundred and sixty years old."

"Wow! That old?"

He laughed again. "Don't spare my ego."

She could feel the heat on her cheeks and knew she was blushing. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult you." Tom would have backhanded her if she'd dared to say anything like that about him. *Stop it!* Those days were done and she had no idea how most men were.

That wasn't quite true. After all those months at the diner, she knew that a lot of men were crude and could be mean, but she really didn't know anything about male werewolves. Just thinking the word "werewolf" felt bold to Shelley. She'd buried that part of herself for so long just to survive, and had been filled with shame for what she was, that she hadn't allowed herself to even think about her people.

"We actually live to be around five hundred, give or take a few decades. You're still fairly young. And—" he turned and shot her a grin, "—I'm not so old."

The grin changed his face, making it less austere and very compelling. She hadn't known him long, but she felt closer to him than she ever had to anyone else in her life. He knew the worst about her and still seemed to like her. Perhaps her life was taking a turn for the better.

Maybe among her own people she would find some measure of peace and understanding and protection. Even if she didn't stay she'd at least be better educated about who and what she was.

"Tell me more." She was like a dry sponge, wanting to absorb as much as she could. Time was short.

"Well, we mature into adulthood in our early twenties. Males will make their first change into a wolf around that time."

"What about females?" Her legs trembled and her shoulders hunched as the memories of her first change sprang to mind.

She sensed his hesitation but, once again, he gave her an honest answer. "Females come into heat around that time."

There was that hated word. *Heat*. She'd hated being so out of control of her body due to some biological imperative she had no power over. Tom had always claimed that was the difference between humans and animals.

James continued, his voice low and calm. "To ensure the species survives, the female is biologically programmed to want a male at this time. She chooses one and he claims her as his mate. Once they have sex and he claims her in the way of our people, she will be able to make the change as well."

"That's not fair," Shelley blurted. She was shaking now. Cold to the marrow of her bones. She'd had no choice. She knew that now. But it didn't make what happened to her any easier to bear.

She swiped at her cheek, hating the lone tear that rolled down. Tears were weak. Useless.

James slowly eased the truck onto the shoulder of the road and put it in park. He turned to her, his gaze solemn. "No, it's not fair."

She glanced away, but he caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned her face toward him. She jerked away when all she wanted to do was throw herself into his arms and cling to him. She felt as though she was unraveling, coming apart on the inside.

“How did you make your first change? I know you did, Shelley,” he continued when she said nothing. “You knew what I meant the first time I called you a werewolf. I could see it in your eyes.”

“He captured a male and brought him back with him.”

“Who?”

Shelley ignored his question, lost in the past. “He’d drugged the male and dragged him into the cage he kept me locked in while he was gone. I had no idea who he was or what was going to happen.”

Her entire body was vibrating now. She was so cold.

“My body had been feeling strange for weeks, but now it was out of control. My skin was so hot. I ached all over. I wanted to tear at my flesh.” She was panting hard now, finding it difficult to breathe.

“The male came round eventually. He went half mad, throwing himself against the bars and howling. Howling. Howling.” She slapped her hands over her ears as though she could stop the memory.

“Shelley.” James reached for her but she recoiled from his touch. He dropped his hand on the seat between them.

She shook her head. The dark memories spewed out of her like a seething volcano that had finally erupted. “Then he saw me and everything changed. He ripped off my clothes, threw me down on my stomach and...” She looked away, unable to finish.

“It’s okay, Shelley. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t fight him,” she screamed. “I let him do what he wanted.”

James undid her seatbelt and eased her closer, tucking her face against his chest. His big hand was so warm as he cupped the back of her head. “It wasn’t your fault,” he insisted. “You were young and afraid. You had no idea what to expect. Throw in the biology factor and you did what you had to do in order to survive. But it’s not supposed to be that way.”

“How is it supposed to be?” Her voice was muffled against his shirt.

James rubbed his hand over her hair and down her shoulder, his touch easing some of her tension. He didn’t seem disgusted by what she’d done. Her breakfast churned in her belly like acid. Her entire life, that moment had haunted her.

“You’re supposed to be surrounded by family and friends. Males come from miles around to court your favor. Your parents are there to guide you and help you make a choice. Then the joining between you and your chosen mate is a beautiful and natural thing.”

She sniffed and rubbed at her face. She wasn’t really crying. Not really. James made it all sound so natural and beautiful. Not scary and ugly like what had happened to her.

"I suspect whatever tranquilizer the male was given affected him to some degree. He should have had more control." James arm tightened around her. His heartbeat was strong and steady beneath her cheek.

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does." James sighed, ruffling her hair. "I suspect you made your change soon after that."

Shelley nodded. "The male was tranquilized again and removed from the cage. I never saw him again." But his final howl still haunted her. "He was killed by the hunter."

"What happened to you?"

She took a deep breath. James's scent surrounded her, comforting her. His calm acceptance gave her the courage to continue. "I was scared to death. I had no idea if I could change back or not. Finally, I was exhausted and the change happened. I couldn't control it at first, but I quickly learned to." She flinched involuntarily and forced herself to move away from James. He was kind but she couldn't come to rely on him. She wasn't staying. Wasn't going to bring down the wrath of the hunters on him and his family. And they would be looking for her. Of that she had no doubt. She'd killed one of them.

"How did you get away?"

Shelley shook her head, sat back in her seat and pulled on her seatbelt. The click of the belt buckle was like a punctuation mark, ending their discussion.

James snapped on his seatbelt and put the truck in gear. After checking the traffic, he pulled back onto the highway. Shelley closed her eyes. She was done talking. The rhythm of the vehicle gradually relaxed her.

Tension thrummed through James's body like a live wire. The things she'd shared with him were horrific. And the hunters called *them* animals. How in the hell had she survived all those years?

The only thing she knew about sex and mating was warped. She didn't have any normal sexual experiences. It made him even more determined to show her the delights, the pleasures that could be found between a male and female if there was caring and respect between them.

He wondered what she looked like in her wolf form. She'd be delicate, but strong, just as she was as a human. He imagined her fur would be soft brown, her eyes dark and intelligent. He longed to see her.

His wolf was restless inside him, wanting to break free of the confines of civilization and run through the forest and mountains. He wanted to show Shelley the joys to be found in her wolf. From the way she spoke, he sensed nothing but shame for that part of herself.

He still didn't know who had taken her or what had happened to her captor. Shelley wasn't talking about him. Not yet. James was confident she would once she felt safe and secure.

He was determined to give her justice. Retribution. He also wanted to give her a safe home, with him.

He glanced over at her. Several tendrils of her hair had escaped her ponytail and were resting against her cheekbone. Her eyes were closed, her long lashes brushing against her pale skin.

Her head was resting against the seat, but he could tell she wasn't asleep. She jerked every time he hit a bump in the road. No, she definitely wasn't sleeping. He expected she was emotionally drained after their talk and just wanted to be left alone.

That was fine. For now.

Even after everything she'd told him, there was a sense of calm, a stillness about her that was peaceful. James felt no need to make conversation.

He left her pretending to sleep and turned his attention back to the road. He really wished that she would fall asleep for a while. There were dark circles beneath her eyes. She'd obviously been overworking and not sleeping well. And last night, he'd kept her busy until late, and today had been an emotional roller coaster.

Considering what she'd told him about herself, he was surprised she'd been able to let down her guard enough to sleep with him wrapped around her last night. Either she'd been totally exhausted or she trusted him on some level. He wanted to believe it was the latter even though it was more likely the former.

Just thinking about what she'd been through was enough to burn a hole in his gut. Blood pumped like acid through his veins. How anyone could do such a thing to another person was beyond him. He was no saint, but he killed only to survive. Actively capturing and keeping Shelley captive for all those years was pure evil. There was no other word for it.

In spite of the torture and trauma she'd been through, she was a gentle soul. But she also had a will of steel to come out of an ordeal like that and not be totally insane. He wasn't sure that even he could have survived all those years of captivity.

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel and he took several deep breaths as his fury started to grow, yet again. Every time he thought about it, he wanted to strike out at her captor. But anger wasn't what she needed from him.

"How much longer?"

It was the first time she'd spoken in a while. Her voice was soft and slightly slurred by fatigue, but her dulcet tones shot straight to his groin, making his cock stir.

The primitive urge to take Shelley home and protect and care for her was overriding all else. Once she was safe, he wanted to spend hours caressing her soft skin, learning the curves and hollows of her body and licking her from head to toe. He wanted to bury his cock in her moist, welcoming heat and hear her cry his name as she came.

"Almost there." His voice was rough with desire. Shelley's tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip. He could smell her arousal. Tightening his grip on the wheel, he pushed down a little harder on the gas pedal. The quicker he got her home, the better.

Jessup followed at a discreet distance. Last thing he wanted to do was tip off the guy in the truck that he was being followed. He was careful to keep several other vehicles between them at all times, hanging back just far enough to keep them in his sights. His truck was nondescript, dusty and basic black. There were hundreds of them on the roads around here.

For a moment, he thought he'd been caught when the guy pulled his truck off the road. He'd been forced to continue driving. He'd stopped about a mile up the road at a truck stop and waited, all the while praying the guy wasn't about to turn around. Macmillan would kill him if he lost them.

His patience had been rewarded a short time later, and now they were both back on the road. Jessup had no idea where he was going or why he was following the guy in the truck. He didn't know why the stranger and his female passenger were of interest.

It didn't matter to him. He'd been told to follow them and he would. Soon as they stopped, he'd call Macmillan and let him know where they were. What happened then was up to the boss.

He suspected Macmillan thought they might be werewolves. Hard to tell from how much Jessup had seen. But it was worth a look. If they were human, they'd never even know anyone had been trailing them.

If they weren't human...

Jessup grinned and sped up as the truck a few vehicles ahead of him picked up speed. It would be time to go hunting.

Chapter Ten

Shelley was nervous. The closer they got to Wolf Creek, the more she was finding it difficult to stay calm. She didn't know these people. What in the world had she been thinking to agree to come here?

"Everything is going to be fine," James reassured her. Easy for him to say. He knew what to expect. She was the one about to step off the edge of a cliff and into the unknown.

He'd turned the truck off the main road about ten minutes ago and now they were bouncing along a rutted track of hard-packed dirt that could at best be called a path. Good thing he was driving a truck. Otherwise they probably wouldn't have made it over parts of it.

Tires dipped and she was thrown to the right. Thankfully, her seatbelt kept her from pitching forward and hitting her head.

James grinned. "Gonna have to get the road graded again." She noticed the closer he got to his home, the lighter his mood got. She envied him that feeling. She'd never had it. Or, if she had, she certainly couldn't remember it.

Shelley snorted. "This is hardly a road."

"What can I say? We discourage visitors." He manhandled the wheel to the left. Several tree branches brushed against the side of the vehicle. They were headed deep into the surrounding forest.

She was grateful she hadn't eaten much breakfast. With all the jostling around and her nerves, she might not have been able to keep it down.

A part of her was excited. This was her first step in discovering who she really was. No matter what she found out about her past and her family, it was information she needed if she truly wanted to make a life for herself.

And if James was to be believed, she had a lot of years left to live. She planned on making the most of them.

The truck took a sharp right turn and ended up in a clearing. A large barn-like structure stood there with several padlocked doors. James stopped the truck and jumped out. "I'll just be a second."

He strode toward the building. Withdrawing a key from his pocket, he unlocked one set of double doors and pushed them open. Shelley leaned forward, interested in spite of her mounting trepidation.

James was back in a flash. He put the truck in gear and drove right into the building. "We keep our vehicles stored here. We'll walk the rest of the way. It's not far."

“Wow. You weren’t kidding about not liking visitors.” There were several more trucks, a car and an SUV already stored in the garage. All this secrecy, the house deep in the woods was much like being with the hunters.

Shelley swallowed hard and broke out in a cold sweat.

“Shelley?” James had shut off the truck and was watching her.

She shrugged. “It’s a lot like where I came from. A secluded cabin in the middle of the woods.”

James swore under his breath. “I’m sorry about that. But this is very different.” He lightly touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “You’re free to roam here, not a prisoner. And there are lots of people to talk to.”

“I know.” She clung to his words “*not a prisoner*” and took a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

She unhooked her seatbelt and climbed out of the truck. The slamming of her door echoed throughout the large structure. “This is some place.”

“Works for us. There are several privately owned vehicles and a few communal ones. Anyone who needs to go somewhere can borrow one.”

She walked around to James’s side of the truck. He slipped on his jacket and pulled out their bags from where they were stored behind the seat.

Shelley glanced out the wide open doors, enjoying the crisp, clean air. She inhaled deep and her nostrils filled with the scent of fresh pine and the more earthy smell of damp ground and rotted leaves. Most of the snow was melted, but there were still patches between the trees.

A crow cawed in the distance. Tree branches rustled and danced in the wind.

“Ready?” James was waiting, his bag slung over his shoulder and her two bags held in one hand.

“I can take those.” She grabbed the handle of the shopping bag and the top of her brown paper bag. It wasn’t much, but it was all she had.

“I can carry them for you.” James reluctantly gave up the bags after she tugged several times.

“I know you can, but I can carry them myself.” There was more at stake here than just her bags. She needed him to understand that she could look after herself, could stand on her own two feet. She’d fought to gain her independence and wasn’t about to give it up.

James leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on her forehead. “I know you can, Shelley. But all of us need some help sometimes.” He stepped back and headed to the door, leaving her to follow.

She stepped outside, looking around with interest as he shut and locked the wide doors. From the outside, the structure really did look like a barn. Unless you broke inside, you’d never know there were vehicles stored here.

“Which way?” Shelley could see two possible trails, but had no idea which one was the right one.

James put one hand on the small of her back and pointed to the left. “That way.”

They set off. Shelley had an entire colony of butterflies beating inside her stomach. Her skin tingled. Her senses were heightened.

She could smell James next to her, a combination of clean male sweat, a tinge of the woodsy-scented soap he favored, and the unique musky smell that was all hot male. All James.

Her breasts swelled and her nipples puckered. Shelley stumbled over a tree root and would have ended up face down in the dirt if James hadn't caught her by the arm. Now was not the time to get aroused. Not when she was about to meet his family. What would they think of her?

"Careful." He held her steady, peering down at her. His nostrils flared and his eyelids lowered. "Shelley." He said her name, nothing more, but it sent a shaft of heat flaring from her breasts to between her thighs.

He slowly lowered his head and nuzzled the curve of her jaw. His lips grazed over her skin. "I want to touch you," he murmured against her ear.

The bags dropped to the ground as her fingers opened of their own accord and reached for him. James. Just James. Since the moment he'd stepped into her life, he'd changed everything.

He caught her earlobe between his teeth and nibbled. She moaned as it sent sensual shivers rushing down her neck and arms. She shifted from one foot to the other as she caught his shoulders for support. The leather of his coat crinkled beneath her fingers.

"But this isn't the time or the place. They're waiting for us up at the compound." His words were as effective as a bucket of ice water.

Shelley jolted back. Lungs heaving, eyes wide, she glanced around, hoping no one had seen them. She couldn't see or sense anyone. Absently, she rubbed her hand over her ear. She didn't know if she was trying to rub James's touch into her skin or trying to remove it.

Their stolen moment left her feeling unsettled and too warm. She glanced in dismay at her bags sitting on the damp ground. A small sound of worry escaped as she bent down and jerked them into her hands. On examination, they didn't appear to have soaked through.

James waited, his expression one of masculine need. His breathing was deep and slow and his muscles were tense. There was also no disguising the erection pressing against the zipper of his jeans.

Shelley glanced away and chewed on her bottom lip. She shouldn't have come. This wasn't going to work.

"Come on," he all but growled.

She took a step back. "Maybe I should just go."

James put his hands on his hips. He was a very large, very imposing man. His hair was pulled back and tied at his nape with a piece of leather. The silver mixed with brown at his temples, making him look mature, experienced. His golden-brown eyes were piercing as they watched her. She felt naked before him. Exposed.

His hard expression softened slightly. "Trust me." He held out his hand. It was a large hand. Strong and calloused and male. It was a hand that could hurt or help, depending on his mood.

Taking a deep breath, she gripped both her bags in one hand and reached out with her free one.

His fingers closed around hers. "Come on. They're waiting."

For a moment, James feared Shelley was going to flee. He hadn't meant to give in to the sensual pull that existed between them. But when she'd stumbled and he'd caught her, he'd gotten a whiff of her sweet skin. She was also slightly aroused and that had set off every primal instinct inside him.

He wanted to claim Shelley, to make her his.

But that couldn't happen. Not yet. It was too soon. Shelley would see it as trading one prison for another and that was something he couldn't live with.

Still, he hadn't been able to resist a quick nibble and a kiss. The passion between them flared so fast and hot it had almost gotten out of control. It was only the knowledge that his daughter and some of the pack were waiting that had made him take a step back.

Later. He made the promise to her and to himself. There would be time later to explore the growing sexual attraction between them.

He held her hand firmly, but not so much so that she'd feel trapped. Shelley was wound so tight it wouldn't take much for her to snap. She'd been through so much in the past few days and was about to face even more.

The compound came into view and he tried to see it through her eyes. A ten-foot wooden fence surrounded the area that contained his home and those of the Striker family. There were five homes and various sheds and other buildings within the clearing. A low mountain backed onto one side of the compound, giving it natural protection.

"What do you think?" He glanced at Shelley and was instantly concerned by her pallor.

She swallowed several times, her throat rippling. "It's imposing." He noticed she was eyeing the large gates that now stood open.

"We close them at night for extra protection, but they're opened every morning." The last thing she needed to feel was confined in any way.

James could sense several members of his family inside. They were growing more impatient by the second. If they didn't move soon, Alex wouldn't wait much longer.

Shelley could hear them too. Smell them. With her preternatural senses, they were too close for her not to be able to. Her bottom lip was red and moist where she'd been worrying it with her teeth.

"Ready?"

She squared her shoulders and gave a single nod. "Let's do this."

Pride filled him as he ushered her forward, past the gate and into the compound. The clearing held a small welcoming committee.

James was pleased to see it was only immediate family. Good. Joshua had told only his brothers about their guest.

Still, he could feel Shelley practically vibrating next to him, could smell her growing fear. Yet, her face showed none of her concern. Her expression was calm; her steps slow and measured.

Alex smiled and rushed toward him, arms outstretched. “Dad.”

He caught her easily, returning her hug. Shelley sidled off to his right and he reached out and caught her, returning her to his side. “Alex, honey, I want you to meet Shelley.” He turned to Shelley. “This is my daughter, Alexandra.”

“Call me Alex.” She thrust her hand toward Shelley.

Shelley could only stare at the beautiful woman with her hand outstretched in greeting. There was no doubt she was James’s daughter. They shared the same hair color and she was long and lean like her father. Their eyes were very different though. Alex’s were a pale silvery gray, while James’s were piercing golden brown.

Alex’s smile began to fade, and her hand lowered. Shelley realized she’d been standing and staring for too long. The last thing she wanted to do was offend James’s daughter. That wouldn’t get her off on the right foot here. She thrust out her hand. “I’m very glad to meet you.”

The young woman’s smile widened again and there was no doubting that her greeting was sincere.

“I’m so glad you came home with Dad.” Alex glanced at James. “He told us a little bit about your situation. I’m sure we can help.”

She was overwhelmed by Alex’s willingness to involve herself in Shelley’s problems. She felt nothing but welcome from the other woman. There was no sense of being an unwanted guest or an intruder. She felt herself starting to relax. Then Alex turned to the four large men standing behind her.

“This is my husband, Joshua Striker.” She motioned to the extremely large male standing just behind her. He had shaggy black hair that fell to his shoulders and eyes so dark she couldn’t quite tell if they were brown or black. His face was rough-hewn, all angles and planes. He was also staring at her. All the males were.

“Joshua?” James stepped up beside her and she was glad for his presence. “Is there a problem?”

Joshua took a step forward. His expression grew harder and Shelley automatically took a step back. He froze. He started to speak, cleared his throat and tried again. “Rachel?” The name came out as a hoarse tortured whisper.

Alex gasped and James swore.

Had he misheard her name? “No, I’m Shelley.”

She glanced at James for support, but he was looking from the men to her and back to them again.

Joshua moved forward like a man in a trance, shaking his head as he came toward her. She braced her legs to keep from whirling around and running. She had a feeling if she tried to leave, he'd be on her before she made it to the gate. There was something primal, almost animalistic, about him.

"Rachel," he said the name again, and this time a whisper came from the back of her mind. A memory long suppressed. Like a ghost from a life she didn't remember, she could suddenly hear a voice calling her by that name. The male was younger, but he was important to her somehow.

Shelley frowned. A dull throbbing began behind her eyes. The pain hit her so swift and hard it made her dizzy. Her stomach roiled as the three other men stepped toward her.

"Who are you?" she asked. She knew his name, but suddenly needed to know much more. Her eyes scanned all four men. She didn't know all their names, but she *knew* them.

Run!

The thought came out of nowhere. She didn't question her instincts and whirled to obey. The sudden movement made her dizzy and she felt herself falling.

Strong arms caught her just as her legs seemed to crumble out from beneath her. James. She'd know his touch, his scent anywhere. He caught her before she hit the ground and lifted her into his arms.

She was suddenly ashamed of herself for being a coward. If she ran, she'd never know the truth. "Put me down."

James shook his head. "No. Not until you're steadier."

Ignoring James for the moment, she turned back to Joshua and his brothers. There was no doubt in her mind the men were all related. She studied them. They were all staring at her as though they'd seen a ghost. "I know you." Her voice was barely even a whisper, more of just a sigh, but they heard her.

"How, Shelley? How do you know them?" James kept his voice low and non-threatening as the brothers all came closer.

"I'm not sure." She was trembling so hard now, her teeth were chattering. She was suddenly so cold. So afraid. Her head pounded and she rubbed her temples, trying to get some relief from the pain.

She was afraid to admit the truth to herself. She knew she was related to them. Somehow. Someway. Had they seen some weakness inside her when she was a child and given her away as Tom had always told her?

"It's okay, Shelley. They won't hurt you." She clung to James's reassurance, needing the comfort. She didn't know if she was strong enough to face this. She hadn't expected to come face to face with her past so soon.

Joshua reached out his hand and touched her face. "Is it really you, Rachel?" She flinched away and he dropped his hand back down by his side, unable to hide the pain from his face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She didn't know what to do. She was at a real disadvantage here. "Please put me down, James."

She held her breath as James let her legs drop slowly until her feet were touching the ground. He waited until she was steady before removing one hand. He kept one arm locked around her waist. To keep her close to him or to keep her from running? She wasn't sure, but she appreciated the support.

James addressed the group. "You know I found Shelley working at a diner on my way home. She'd been working there about six months." James tucked her closer to him as he continued his bare-bones explanation.

"James." She wasn't sure she wanted them to know about her past. It was so ugly. She felt ugly and ashamed. Tainted by it.

She knew James understood, but he shook his head. "Better it come out quick so we can deal with it."

Shelley knew he was right, but that didn't make it any less of an ordeal. "Okay."

Before she could muster up the courage to speak, James was already talking. "Shelley has been a prisoner for more than thirty-five years and doesn't have any memory of her life before that."

"Oh my God." This came from another of the males.

Shelley reached out her hand and tentatively touched Joshua's face. Her hand shook as she traced the outline of his forehead and cheeks. She couldn't believe her audacity, nor the fact that he stood there and let her touch him. Having James stand with her made her braver.

"You look familiar." Her voice trembled. He was a ghost from a dream.

Joshua reached out his hand again and this time Shelley didn't flinch away. He stroked his hand over her hair. "You're my sister. You're Rachel." He briefly closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Alexandra hovered close to her husband, offering her silent support. "You're all grown up, but you look exactly the same." His gaze hardened and went from her to James and back to her again. "Who took you from us?"

His question shook her to her core. "You mean you didn't toss me away?"

Joshua threw back his head and howled. It was filled with a mixture of anguish and fury. His brothers all tipped back their heads and joined in the fierce cry.

Shelley slapped her hands over her ears. It was all too much. Her entire body was trembling. "I need to sit down," she whispered to James.

"Enough." His voice wasn't loud, but it carried. The brothers broke off their pained call. "Let's take this inside."

The other three men stepped up to her side.

"I'm Micah, and this is Levi." He jerked his thumb at the identical male standing next to him. They were both tall, good-looking men with brown hair and chocolate brown eyes.

"This is Simon," Micah continued. Simon looked more like Joshua with his black hair and dark eyes.

She nodded at them all, unable to find her voice.

“Rachel?”

When Joshua called her Rachel again, she shook her head. “Rachel is dead. I don’t know who she was. Please call me Shelley.”

She could see the men struggling with it, but they all eventually nodded. Joshua’s face was somber as he said her name for the first time. “It’s only a name. I’ll gladly call you Shelley or any other name that you want. I just want my sister back.”

Shelley smiled as the first tear rolled down her cheek. Both Micah and Levi turned aside and swiped at their faces and cleared their throats. After all these years, she would finally know the truth.

Joshua couldn’t stop staring at Shelley. His head was still whirling, his heart pounding. He was grateful for Alexandra’s support. His wife kept her hand on his arm as if knowing he needed her touch.

His sister was alive. Except she wasn’t the bright-eyed, mischievous teenage girl he remembered. She was a woman grown and from the little he’d learned, she’d lived through untold horrors that none of them could truly imagine. What his mind did conjure up was enough to drive him mad.

She’d been a prisoner all these years.

He wanted vengeance, wanted the ground to run red with the blood of her captors. It made his heart hurt that she really didn’t remember them or her life before. His arms ached to hold her close, but he knew she’d flinch away from him. It was enough that she was home.

Hopefully, more would come in time. And if it didn’t, they’d forge a new relationship. Now that he’d found her, he wasn’t going to lose her again. He and his family owed James LeVeau Riley a huge debt that could never be repaid.

She had been alive and they’d stopped looking. Had she watched for them? Waited for her family to come and rescue her? What had happened to her as the days had turned into weeks? The weeks into months? The months into years? No wonder she didn’t remember them. He wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t want to remember them.

They followed James as he led her to his house. It was time to talk. Time to try to get past his anger and reforge his bond with his sister.

Jessup faded back into the forest, tucking his binoculars into his pack. He hadn’t gotten too close, hanging as far back as he dared. Those bastards had superior senses and could see and smell what humans couldn’t. He’d been careful to stay upwind and keep behind cover. Thankfully, the big guy was distracted with the female he’d brought with him.

But he knew where they were now. Could see the houses in the distance. There was no longer any doubt. They were werewolves. Those howls had made his skin crawl and goose bumps still trailed up and down his arms.

He slowly worked his way out of the woods, not wanting to be in there alone. There were too many of them for him to handle on his own.

When he reached the safety of the road and his truck, he yanked out his cell phone. You couldn't use one close to those bastards. They had incredible hearing.

It was answered on the first ring. "Talk to me."

"Hey, boss. I found them. And you were right. They're werewolves. I counted five males and two females, including the two from the truck I followed."

"Good work."

Jessup smiled. It wasn't often Macmillan gave out such high praise.

"Give me your location, and I'll round up Red and a few boys and we'll meet you there."

Jessup gave him the information he needed and ended the call. Then he settled back to wait. Already the familiar anticipation was rising inside him. He couldn't wait to go hunting.

Chapter Eleven

Shelley sat huddled in one corner of a large sofa. James's house was rather large for one man. It was built from logs, but there was a rough elegance to the place. A huge fireplace made from natural stone dominated one wall of the living room. A fire crackled and popped in the grate, adding warmth to the space. Several large sofas and chairs were clustered around it, making a cozy seating area she might have appreciated if she weren't the center of attention.

Alex strode from the kitchen area carrying a tray filled with mugs. Shelley could smell strong, hot coffee and fragrant tea. She shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her.

The men, her brothers—and how weird was it to say that—ranged around the room. The twins sat on the sofa opposite her, Simon sat on the edge of one of the chairs and Joshua was pacing back and forth in front of the hearth. James sat a few feet away from her.

"Here," Alex set the tray on the wooden coffee table and handed her one of the mugs. "I thought you might like tea better. You've had a shock."

"Thank you." Shelley accepted the mug and held it between her two hands, thankful for the heat. She sipped the tea. It was sweet, but the warm beverage helped settle her stomach and her nerves.

Joshua stopped pacing and took the mug his wife handed him. He leaned down and kissed her cheek. Shelley noticed he was always watching her, touching her. Her hair, her back, her shoulder. Shelley doubted either of them even noticed. But she did.

Her life had been void of such contact and she was fascinated by the easy way they showed one another affection.

"Shelley?" Joshua sat on the edge of the coffee table, leaving only about a foot of distance between them. Her reprieve was over. "What happened?"

She was tired of answering all the questions. She wanted some answers of her own. "Why don't you tell me what happened? I don't remember and I only have one man's account of what did, and I can't trust what he told me."

"Who is he?" Joshua growled.

Shelley held her ground. She raised her mug to her lips and sipped her tea. When Joshua still didn't answer her, she raised her eyebrow at him in question.

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. It disappeared as he started to tell his story. “You were only a kid. Fifteen years old.” He took a deep breath and slowly released it. Alex sat next to him on the table and placed her hand on his thigh.

“Isaiah, our older brother, was going for a run in the woods. You couldn’t shift to your wolf yet because you hadn’t reached maturity. But you wanted to go with him. He wanted to go alone. So he told you no and took off. He never knew you followed him.”

Shelley’s head began to throb. What Joshua was telling her sounded like something she’d dreamed years ago. But it obviously hadn’t been a dream, but a memory. “Go on,” she prompted.

Joshua shrugged his massive shoulders. “Not much more to tell. I noticed you weren’t around, but we all assumed you were with Isaiah. The longer you were both gone, the more unlikely that seemed and we started searching for you. When Isaiah returned home and we discovered you weren’t with him, we were all worried sick.”

She swallowed hard as nausea threatened. Her head was pounding. She rubbed her forehead to try to relieve some of the tension tightening around her skull like a vise. “Then what?”

“Then we searched and searched and searched. I thought Isaiah would go mad. He blamed himself for not taking you with him.” Joshua’s hands tightened into fists. “Then we smelled the men. Hunters,” he growled the word like it was foul. “We knew they’d taken you.”

Shelley nodded. The early days of her captivity were a blur, for which she was eternally grateful. She’d been drugged and terrified. And so very young, especially for her species.

At least she knew that her family had cared for her. Had searched for her. That was something.

“Do we have parents?”

Joshua closed his eyes in pain and shook his head. “Our father died years ago, attacked by hunters and rogue werewolves.”

“Dogs,” Levi muttered.

“Our mother died not long after of a broken heart. Losing you and then him was too much for her.”

“I’m sorry.” Shelley really didn’t know what to say. They weren’t real to her. She had no memory of them at all. “That had to have been hard on you.”

Joshua’s head snapped up and he studied her with his bottomless dark eyes. “You don’t remember them, do you?”

She shook her head, unwilling to lie. “No.”

One corner of Joshua’s mouth kicked up in a grin. “You were such a little tomboy, running after all of us. You were closer to Isaiah than you were to our father. He was a busy man. Aloof. That was his way.”

A memory popped into her head of a tall, muscular male with shaggy brown hair and dark brown eyes. He had rugged features that might have been scary except he was smiling at her, teasing her. Was that Isaiah or a figment of her imagination?

At this point, she couldn't sort out fact from fiction. She was going to assume it was a memory and not imagination.

"Isaiah searched for years. Long after the rest of us had given up. We assumed you were dead." Joshua hung his head and sighed. When he raised it, she could see the pain shimmering in his eyes. "We should have looked longer and harder."

Shelley's throat tightened as Alex leaned against Joshua and rubbed her face against his shoulder. There was such love there. "How long? How long did you look?" She needed to know. It was important if she was ever going to reconcile with her past.

"Years." Micah leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Decades," Joshua corrected. "Isaiah never really gave up. Even now, he still searches for information. He always planned on killing your captors if he discovered who they were."

A single tear escaped and rolled down her face. Shelley swiped it away. Her chest ached and her heart pounded against her ribs. She hadn't been thrown away. Abandoned, as Tom had claimed. She had a family who'd searched for her. Who'd never forgotten her.

"Thank you."

All four of her brothers looked pained. "Don't thank us," Joshua told her. "We failed you." He reached out and took her hand, gently rubbing his fingers over hers. "You obviously rescued yourself."

Shelley tensed. She knew what was coming.

"How did you get away? After all those years?"

She stared at her brother and knew she owed him the truth. Owed it to all of them. Especially to James after he'd insisted she come home with him. Without James, she might never have discovered the truth.

It felt strange to know she had family. She felt no true connection to them. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Only time would tell. Maybe she wasn't capable of such a connection. The years of captivity had damaged her in many ways.

"Tell us what you remember, Shelley." James shifted closer, offering his support.

She ignored the pain in her head and slowly withdrew her hand from her brother's. She took a sip of her tea, letting the warmth slide down her throat and calm her stomach. She offered Alex and the rest of them a strained smile.

"I honestly don't remember much about that day or those first few months of captivity. I think I was kept drugged."

Joshua frowned. "But human drugs don't affect us."

"I don't think they were human drugs. More like animal tranquilizers. Heavy doses." Shelley strained to remember things she'd spent decades trying to forget. "I overheard a lot over the years. And I know he kept a supply on hand in case I escaped."

She frowned. "I was kept caged for the most part during the early years. At least during the night."

Joshua growled, a low, deadly sound. Levi and Micah reached toward him, putting their hands on his shoulders. She envied the easy camaraderie between them.

“His name, Shelley. What’s his name?” Simon, the youngest of her brothers, sat forward, his gaze intent.

She swallowed, not wanting to say the name aloud. “Tom,” she whispered.

Shelley looked down at her hands, fully expecting to see Tom’s blood there. She set her mug down and rubbed her palms over her jeans. “I kept his house, cooked his food and did his laundry.” No way did she want to talk about what else had happened.

James touched her shoulder and she leaned into his hand. Of all of them, he was the one who was most familiar to her. The one she trusted. She swallowed hard and forced herself to continue. “The years went on and eventually he’d lock me in a closet at night.” Her ankles bore the scars of all those years of being wrapped in silver-coated manacles every night.

“But you’ve changed into your wolf form, haven’t you?” Joshua frowned.

Shelley nodded.

“How?” This from Micah.

She shook her head. She wasn’t talking about that. She’d told James. She didn’t want to relive it again.

“Shelley?” Joshua prompted.

“No.” She straightened her shoulders. “There are some things you don’t need to know.” Before he could protest, she hurried on. “Anyway, I got away and ran. I found a job about a month later and that’s where James found me.” That was all she was telling them, all they needed to know.

Steve Macmillan pulled his SUV off the road and onto a rutted path. From here, it couldn’t be seen from the road. And even if it was, who cared? It was just a bunch of good ol’ boys out hunting. Why, they were practically performing a public service, keeping the world safe for the human sheep who were unaware that monsters really existed. The fact it happened to be fun was a bonus.

He killed the ignition and climbed out. Jessup was waiting right where he said he’d be. Quinn angled his truck off the road and quickly joined him.

“What have you got?” Steve was impatient to get moving. He hated these fucking wolves with his entire being. They were nothing but animals. Hadn’t that she-bitch killed his father?

Jessup held up his cell phone. “Got a couple of pictures. They’re not the greatest because I couldn’t get close, but they’re better than nothing.”

Steve took the phone and started scanning the photos. He recognized the big male from the gas station. But it was the photo of the woman that stopped him cold. It was grainy and a little blurry, but that didn’t matter. He might not have seen her in a few years, but he’d recognize that bitch anywhere. Shelley.

The fates had smiled on him. What were the odds of her falling right into his lap? After the debacle of the past few months it looked like the gods were smiling on him.

“Well, well, well.” Quinn and Jessup both tensed. “Look what we have here.” He tossed the phone to Quinn, who looked at the picture.

“A woman?”

“Not just any woman.” Steve rubbed his hands together. He couldn’t wait to recapture that bitch and make her pay for his father’s death. “That’s Shelley.”

Quinn took a second look at the photo while Jessup whistled almost soundlessly between his teeth. “You’ve been looking for her for months, boss.”

“That I have, Jessup.” Only a handful of men knew about Shelley’s existence and he planned to keep it that way. For the time being anyway. He clapped the man on the shoulder. “Red and the boys will be here soon. Then we’ll do some recon.”

Steve walked a few feet away from the other two and pulled out his cell phone.

Red answered on the first ring. “We’ll be there in a couple of hours.”

“That’s good.” He glanced over at Jessup and Quinn but they were quietly talking. “Who else knows where we’re going?”

“No one. You said you wanted to keep things quiet. Why?”

“It’s her, Red.”

“You sure?”

“Jessup has a picture.” Steve still couldn’t quite believe his luck. “I’m gonna tranq the bitch and take her to your cabin for a spell.”

“You sure that’s wise?”

“I’m not my father, Red. I won’t make the mistake of treating her like a pet, forgetting what she really is. But she has to pay for what she’s done.”

“It’s your call.”

“Yes, it is. See you when you get here.” Steve closed his phone and tucked it away.

The house was quiet now. The wind pushed at the windows and the wood creaked as the structure cooled. Shelley lay in bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Her brothers had asked more questions, but she hadn’t given any answers. Her pounding headache had gotten too bad to ignore. She couldn’t tell if it was from all the tension or from her suppressed memories. Either way, her head hurt and her stomach churned. James had sensed her discomfort and called a halt to the questions.

It surprised her that her brothers had obeyed him. But then she remembered that James was alpha of this pack. And from the little she did know about wolves, she knew that meant what he said was law.

Then had come the debate over her accommodations. Joshua had assumed she'd be going home with him and Alex. James had told her it was her choice. She'd chosen to stay with him.

She'd hurt Joshua and the others even though she hadn't meant to. But he was a stranger to her. They all were. As much as she wanted to, she felt no attachment to them. Had no real memories.

She actually experienced pangs of guilt for not feeling something more for them. Obviously, they'd loved their sister. But she wasn't that young girl.

She needed some space, time to think. The past two days had been crazy.

A long, hot bath had eased some of her aches. A simple meal of soup and fresh bread had done the rest. Her headache was down to a manageable level and her stomach was settled.

A good night's sleep was exactly what she needed.

Problem was, her mind wouldn't stop working. She kept replaying the conversation with her brothers over and over in her head and matching what they'd told her to faint memories of her own.

Her body also ached. Her skin was so sensitive she hadn't been able to bring herself to pull on her old dress as a nightgown. Instead, she decided to sleep naked. But even the sheets were proving too much for her to bear.

Sighing, she rolled over onto her side and stared out the window. She liked that the windows were low enough for her to see the woods beyond. She'd spent too many years unable to see anything at night, locked in a windowless room and shackled to the floor.

The mattress was firm, but comfortable. The sheets fresh. She didn't take those things for granted. Not after decades of sleeping on a thin pallet on the floor. She should have been asleep two seconds after her head hit the pillow.

Instead, she was lying here thinking. Maybe she should count sheep.

There was no sound, more of a stirring in the air. She didn't hear him, but she could smell him. Shelley turned onto her back and stared at the door, willing it to open.

The handle turned and James was there. "Can't sleep?"

She sat up in bed, tugging the covers around her. "No."

Without hesitation, James closed the door, walked to the bed and sat on the corner of the mattress. His nearness set her on edge, made every cell in her body sit up and take notice.

"Want to talk about it?"

Did she want to talk? No. She was tired of talking. Tired of thinking. What she wanted was something to take her mind off everything that had happened. She knew she couldn't run from her problems. That she would have to deal with them in the morning. But she wanted a break. God knows she deserved one.

"No."

James placed his hand on her leg. Granted, the blankets covered her, but she could still feel his touch through them, and it branded her.

“What do you want?” His voice was low, seductive. He ran his hand up and down her leg, the action both soothing and arousing.

Her body was responding to his nearness. It remembered the pleasure he’d given her last night and longed for a repeat performance. Her breasts felt swollen and tight and she knew her nipples were puckered. Her belly quivered and she was wet between her thighs.

Shelley pressed her legs together to try to ease the throbbing ache in her sex. It didn’t work.

James’s nostrils quivered and she knew he could smell her arousal. She couldn’t hide her reaction to him. Yet, he made no move to press her for more. His hand continued to stroke up and down her leg from thigh to calf.

“Shelley?”

She closed her eyes briefly and gathered her courage. If life had taught her one thing, it was to take advantage of the good things that came her way because they were fleeting. James was one of those good things. She’d never met a male she’d wanted before. She wasn’t in heat, wasn’t being forced. She simply wanted him.

What a treasure it would be to be able to touch him the way he’d touched her last night. To feel his hard muscles beneath her hand. To discover what gave him pleasure and what made him gasp.

She still had no idea where her future might lead her. But she knew she couldn’t stay here. She might not know her brothers, but there was no way she was going to remain here and perhaps bring the wrath of the hunters down on them.

Seeing Steve Macmillan had been a sharp reminder that her life was not her own. She’d spend the rest of her years looking over her shoulder.

No, she couldn’t stay. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t take some good memories with her. Ones that would have to last a lifetime.

Shelley might not have much experience with life, but she knew she’d never meet another male like James. Never feel the way he made her feel. What was between them was special. She’d never forgive herself if she didn’t reach out and experience the magic between them.

She licked her lips. “I don’t know if I’m ready to go all the way.” She felt stupid saying it, but knew James understood.

His hand paused on her leg. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” He stood and she was afraid he was leaving.

She held out her hand. “No, you don’t understand.”

James took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her palm. “What do you want, Shelley? Tell me, and if I can do it, it’s yours.”

Taking the final plunge, she blurted, “I want to touch you.”

Chapter Twelve

James wasn't certain he'd heard Shelley correctly. "You want to touch me?"

She nodded and his cock immediately sprang to attention. He narrowed his gaze, studying her. Shelley had been through a lot today. Discovering she had a family, brothers who loved her, had shaken her. James still couldn't believe she was Rachel Striker. He barely remembered her. She'd been little more than a baby when he'd left the pack and set out on his own all those years ago.

As much as he wanted Shelley, he didn't want to take advantage of her. "Are you sure?"

"Only if you want me too." She nibbled on her bottom lip, looking uncertain and uncomfortable. He hadn't meant to make her feel that way. He wanted her to feel free to ask for what she wanted in bed. That's what a relationship was all about.

James rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. Her tongue touched his skin, making his scalp tighten. "I'd love for you to touch me." His voice was thick with need.

He stood, pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside. Taking his time, he shucked his jeans, glad he was already barefoot so he didn't have to worry about boots and socks. Naked and aroused, he stood before her, letting her look her fill.

His cock was jutting toward her. The thick shaft pulsed as blood pumped to it. The mushroom-shaped head was red and moist.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. He thought he might come then and there.

Then Shelley reached out her hand and touched him.

He clenched his teeth together but was unable to keep in the hiss of pleasure as she stroked her fingers up and down his shaft from base to tip.

"Your skin is so soft. Like velvet." He could hear the arousal in her voice and it kicked up his own another notch.

Standing next to the bed not touching her was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. But it was exciting too. Her eyes devoured him, her body shifting, as if yearning to be closer.

The night air was cool against his heated flesh, but where she touched him, he was on fire.

"So hard underneath." Shelley wrapped her fingers around him and stroked his erection.

He growled, loving the way her hand felt on his cock. The fact that she wanted to touch him, was doing so of her own accord, almost pushed him over the edge.

And when her thumb rubbed over the bulbous head, collecting and spreading the clear liquid that seeped from the tip, James had to take a step back.

Shelley gave him a questioning look. "I'm close to the edge," he warned her. She was making a mockery of his usual cool control that he was known for.

Not giving her too much time to think about what he was doing, he stretched out on the bed beside her and rolled onto his back. He stacked his hand behind his head and laced his fingers together to keep from touching her. "Go ahead." This was what she wanted, so this was what he'd give her, not matter what it cost him. "Touch me."

Shelley's hands were still trembling. Touching James was like trying to capture the power of a lightning storm—wild and electric. His skin was so smooth, yet very hard. And he was hot. Heavens, the man radiated heat like no one she'd ever known.

She'd enjoyed touching his cock, feeling the way it jumped and jerked beneath her fingers. It helped her to know she wasn't the only one affected by whatever it was between them. Sexual attraction, for sure, but it was so much more than that.

Disappointment had hit her hard when he'd pulled away. But excitement quickly returned when he stretched out beside her seconds later and offered himself up to her like some pagan sacrifice.

She licked her lips, not quite knowing where to touch him first. His chest was wide and roped with muscles, his skin tanned. He had a thick smattering of chest hair, which tapered down to a thin line bisecting his torso. It spread out again when it reached his groin. He was so masculine.

A magnificent male animal.

James groaned and her gaze flew to his. He was watching her, his golden eyes slightly hooded. Excitement speared through her. She really was in charge of whatever happened between them.

She smiled and licked her lips. James's chest heaved slightly. A light sheen of perspiration coated his torso. Shelley reached out and laid her hands on his shoulders. The sheet slipped down to her waist, leaving her naked from the waist up. Leaning forward, she brushed her lips over his. His mouth parted and his tongue brushed against hers.

Her sex pulsed. Cream slipped from her core. She ached to feel his hands on her. But first, she wanted to touch him the way he'd touched her last night.

Sitting back, she smiled and ran her hands over the undersides of his arms. His biceps flexed. Delighted, she measured the wide expanse of his chest. He really was quite incredible. He looked long and lean, but there was no hiding his strength.

Feeling quite daring, she flicked her thumbs over his flat brown nipples. James jerked and groaned. His entire body tensed and his chest heaved.

She was watching for his reaction and noted the flare of heat in his eyes. She did it again.

His jaw tightened and a muscle jumped beneath his eye.

Bending down, Shelley licked one of the tiny nubs and was rewarded with a guttural groan. His arousal was feeding hers. Never before had touching a man made her hot.

She rubbed her breasts against his chest, loving the way the wiry hairs abraded her tender nipples. It helped. Momentarily. But the ache between her thighs just seemed to grow more intense with each passing second.

Moaning, she worked her way down his torso, kissing his ribs, licking and nipping at his supple flesh. His thighs were like tree trunks, long and hard. But it was what was standing up between them that really interested her. She sat back on her heels and studied his cock.

It was so dark and the head was almost purple it was so engorged. Fluid seeped from the tip. The sight of it made her sex clutch with need.

“Shelley.” James’s voice was little more than a harsh growl. His face was taut and he looked as though he was in pain. She didn’t want that.

She didn’t give herself time to think about what she was about to do. The only other times in her life she’d given oral sex it had been forced. She’d never done it of her own free will.

This time she wanted to. James’s scent wafted around her. Musky, woodsy and all male, it enticed her to touch, to taste, to claim. Leaning down, she licked over the slit at the tip of his cock. His hips came off the bed and the head of his shaft bumped against her lips, demanding entrance.

Shelley parted her lips and took him into her mouth. He tasted salty and hot. She swirled her tongue around the mushroom-shaped head. His hips jerked again, driving him deeper.

Panic threatened and she wrapped her hand around his shaft to keep him from going too far. As if sensing her discomfort, he stilled.

“God, you can stop if you want, but I’m praying you won’t.” His honesty made her smile and she gently sucked on the top of his shaft. He groaned and she could sense his struggle to control himself, to keep from moving.

Her breathing was getting labored as she continued to stroke her hand up and down his cock. Using her tongue, lips and mouth, she licked and sucked and kissed his hard length.

She felt as though she was running a fever. Her skin was damp and her breath was coming in short, hard puffs. Her sex was swollen and wet. Her channel was slick and throbbing.

James’s erection pulsed against her hands and lips. She wanted to keep touching him, but she needed him to touch her too.

She drew back and rested her face against his thigh. “James.” She didn’t quite know what to ask for.

“What? Tell me what you need from me.”

“Touch me.” She was desperate to feel his hands on her body, to once again experience the unique connection that seemed to exist between them. She plain wanted to feel.

James grabbed her hips and maneuvered her so that she was straddling his chest but facing away from him. She froze. He would be able to see her swollen pussy. She was completely open to him.

He stilled, his hands resting on her hips. "It's up to you, Shelley. But I want to eat you until you scream with pleasure. I want to taste your cream on my lips and feel it running down my face."

"Yes." That's what she wanted to. Her breasts swelled and her core spasmed at his words.

He tugged her hips closer and she felt his thumbs spread her folds wide. Hot breath caressed her skin. Then his mouth covered her.

James moaned at his first taste of Shelley. It was even better than he remembered. Sweet. Succulent. And all his.

He lapped at her slick folds, finding her swollen clit. When he pressed down on it with his tongue, she moaned and pressed closer to his face.

He loved it. Loved her acceptance, her trust.

There was only the two of them in the house. The night was dark with few stars in the sky. Still, there was more than enough light to allow him to see every creamy inch of her naked skin.

James still couldn't believe he had Shelley in his home. She still wasn't in his bed. But he was committed to getting her there. One step at a time, he promised himself. He'd get her there eventually. And when he did, he was going to keep her there.

Her breath was warm against his cock, but she'd stopped sucking him. "Touch me, Shelley," he pleaded. He needed her hands and mouth on him.

She jolted slightly and then gave a slightly self-conscious laugh. "I'm sorry."

Now he felt like a jerk. "No." He reached down and brushed her hair away from her face. "Don't be sorry. Whatever you want to do is fine with me. If you want to just enjoy me touching you, that's perfectly okay."

She shook her head and her hair brushed over his shaft, making it twitch. "I want to. It's just when you touch me I forget everything else."

A slow smile crossed his lips. He liked the sound of that. He settled himself against the pillows and set to work pleasuring Shelley. Her pussy was so pretty. Pink and wet and delicate.

He carefully probed at her opening with one finger. She tensed and then moaned as he pushed inward. Her channel was moist and warm and clutched at it, pulling it deeper.

Then it was his turn to groan when she took his cock into her mouth. And her hands weren't still either. One hand pumped up and down his shaft while the other one found his testicles and cuddled them against her palm.

He wasn't going to last.

But he wanted Shelley to come first. He added a second finger, inching it into her slick pussy to join the first. She squirmed, bringing her sex closer to his face. He took full advantage and began to ply his tongue and mouth to her clit. He licked and sucked and gently pulled on it.

Her sexy moans and whimpers filled the air and her hips undulated. Her smell, her heat was intoxicating. He couldn't breathe without inhaling her essence. Shelley.

His cock swelled and he felt a familiar tightness building in the base of his shaft. "I'm going to come." He had to warn her in case she wanted to pull away. He wanted to come in her mouth, but wouldn't force her to do anything she didn't want to do.

He thought the top might blow off his head when instead of pulling away she took him deeper into her mouth. Hot wetness surrounded his cock head as she rode up and down the top few inches of his shaft with her soft mouth.

He was in heaven.

Shelley was also close. He could tell by the way her pussy clutched at his fingers, her inner walls rippling around them. Her breathing was loud and the little noises of pleasure she made were enough to push him over the edge.

He felt his orgasm begin low in his balls. It shot up his shaft and spilled into her warm mouth. He yelled her name as he came and Shelley took all of him, swallowing and licking. He'd never felt anything like it in his life.

Not to be outdone, he captured her clit between his lips and sucked hard. He scissored his fingers, searching out her most sensitive spots while he plunged his fingers in and out of her swollen pussy.

She cried out and convulsed. Her sheath tightened and released in a rhythmic dance. He lapped at her sex and her juices spilled over his fingers.

When it was finally over, he gently slid his fingers from her hot depths and licked them with his tongue, not wanting to waste a single drop.

She lay sprawled over him, her face on his belly, her breath warm on his semi-erect shaft. He caressed her bottom, loving the feel of her pliant flesh. She had a great ass.

He had no idea how much time passed before Shelley stirred. He was in no hurry for her to move. He had a spectacular view. He smiled and ran his finger over her swollen folds. She twitched and moaned.

He felt her stiffen slightly and knew the second when she realized the position she was in. He thought he was ready for her to move, but he still almost got a knee in the face as she scrambled off him.

James laughed and caught her from behind, tumbling her into his arms. Shelley stared up at him, her face flushed with pleasure and with a slight blush. That she could still feel self-conscious after what they'd just done amused him. Shelley was a treasure.

He brushed her hair away from her face and smiled at her. "How do you feel?"

She licked her lips and he couldn't resist dipping down for a quick kiss. That swiftly changed to a much longer one as her lips parted and her tongue flicked out. He could taste himself on her lips. His cock began to grow and lengthen as their essences mingled on their lips and in their mouths.

Shelley shivered and James forced himself to pull away. He tugged at the covers, shifting them both until he was able to pull them over her. He cuddled her close, encouraging her to use his shoulder as a pillow. "Better?"

"Hmm." It wasn't much of an answer, but the way she snuggled next to him was more than answer enough.

Her breathing slowed and she relaxed against him. James ran his hand up and down her shoulder and back. He didn't talk. Now was not the time. Now was the time to solidify their physical connection. He kept his touch light but firm and was rewarded when he felt her slip into sleep.

He wanted to howl with pleasure, with triumph. To jump out of bed, shift and run through the woods. He wanted everyone to know Shelley belonged to him.

That would come in time. He wouldn't allow any other outcome.

He hadn't claimed her as his own. Not yet. He had to get her used to the idea of sex first before he explained about mating and claiming to her. For now, he was content to have her in his arms where he knew she was safe.

James lay in bed and listened to the sounds of the night outside his home. With Shelley settled in his arms, he finally closed his eyes and slept.

Chapter Thirteen

Shelley was alone in bed when she woke. She'd slept long and deep during the night and, as a result, was feeling much better this morning. She rolled over and placed her hand on the mattress next to her. James was gone, but the indent of his body was still there. That, coupled with the memory of waking several times during the night with his arms around her, assured her he wasn't long up.

She dragged herself out of bed and into the shower. The hot water helped revive her. She quickly dried off and pulled on some clean clothes, choosing a pair of her new jeans and a thick V-neck sweater the color of oatmeal.

She brushed her hair and pulled it back in a low ponytail. Satisfied she looked presentable, she went back to her room, tidying it before heading to the kitchen to find something to eat.

She slowed as she got closer. Although she'd been expecting to find them here, it was still difficult to face her family, these strangers who were her brothers. Already, she knew their individual voices and smells. They were all here.

But so was James. Taking a deep breath, Shelley made her way into the kitchen, shoulders back, head held high. "Good morning."

Alex was at the stove cooking eggs and James was pouring coffee. He smiled and walked over to her, dropping a quick kiss on her forehead. "Morning. You want some coffee?"

Shelley knew that her brothers and Alex were staring at them. There was nothing she could do about that. They were naturally curious about her. "Sure."

Trying to act nonchalant, she went to the stove and smiled at Alex. "What can I do to help?"

Alex seemed slightly surprised by the offer, but quickly returned Shelley's smile. "The bacon and hash browns are done, but I haven't started the toast yet."

"I'll handle that." The bread was stacked next to the toaster, so she popped four slices down. Turning toward her brothers, she crossed her arms over her chest and nodded. They all ranged around the large kitchen table. The thing was huge and made to seat about twelve people, although her four brothers seemed to dominate it.

"How did you sleep?" Joshua studied her intently.

She told herself she wouldn't blush. She was an adult and whatever she did was her business. These men were strangers. It didn't matter what they thought.

In spite of her internal lecture, she felt the heat climbing up her face. She was glad when the toast popped and she had an excuse to turn her back on them. “I slept well.” She buttered the toast and piled it on a plate before putting down four more slices.

“I see.” Joshua said nothing else, but she could feel his gaze on her. The other three hadn’t said much, but she could sense them waiting.

Alex broke the growing tension by giving orders. “Micah, can you pour juice? Dad, I need the large bowl for the eggs. And Joshua, honey, could you pour me some more coffee?” All the men sprang into action, and by the time the rest of the food was on the table the next batch of toast was ready. Shelley was amazed at how easily Alex ordered the men about. Even more awe-inspiring was the fact that they did as she asked.

Shelley buttered the toast and carried the plate to the table. James stood next to an empty chair and motioned her into it. She was on his immediate right when he took his chair at the head of the table. Joshua sat at the other end with Alex on his right. Micah and Levi sat next to Alex, while Simon sat next to her.

She didn’t think she’d be able to eat much, but breakfast was a surprisingly relaxed affair. Food was offered and piled on her plate. The men ate and talked of community and family matters. Alex asked her father about his trip.

And Shelley sat there, soaking it all in. This was what a real family was like. She didn’t feel a part of it, but it was nice to sit and watch them all interact with one another. There was no denying the connection they all had, the love that bound them together.

“How are the hash browns?” James leaned over to ask her.

“They’re good.” She’d only managed to eat two, but they were delicious.

“Don’t worry so much. Everything will work itself out. Eat up. We all have to talk after breakfast. There’s a lot we need to know and there are things you have to learn about pack life.”

Nerves hit her, making her stomach churn, and she laid her fork down across her plate. No way could she eat now. James’s words sounded ominous. Although they were meant to reassure her, they’d had the opposite effect.

Shelley picked at her food while the rest of them ate, her pleasure in the meal and the moment gone. Part of her wanted to just run away. Her life had been much simpler before she’d met James.

But hiding from the truth wouldn’t help. She wanted all the cards on the table. Wanted to know exactly what she was dealing with. She wasn’t staying here. That wasn’t in her plans, not with hunters after her. But she needed to learn about werewolves and their culture in case she ever had to deal with them again.

She also needed to earn some more money. Plus, there was a part of her that wanted to get to know her brothers. A part of her that yearned for some kind of connection. She hadn’t realized she was so lonely until she’d watched all of them together.

Then there was James. Shelley knew that no matter where she went or how far away she traveled, he would always be a part of her. She felt his gaze on her and managed to nibble on a slice of toast.

She closed her eyes and inhaled, taking in the sounds and smells of the room. No, she would never forget any of them.

James felt like kicking his own ass. Shelley had been alert and eating until he'd mentioned they needed to talk after breakfast. Now she was tense. Worst of all, she wasn't eating. She was too thin and needed to eat more.

He knew Joshua had questions. None of them had missed the kiss he'd given Shelley this morning, nor the fact that he'd seated her next to him in a place of honor.

Tough. They'd better get used to it. Shelley was important to him and he was staking his claim before representatives of the other families arrived this morning. They wouldn't all make it here, but James expected at least four or five wolves at his door within the hour. If not sooner.

Conversation dwindled as they finished their breakfast. That is, everyone except Shelley. She kept pushing around her food with her fork. Finally, James could stand it no longer.

He shoved aside his plate. His cutlery rattled. Everyone else put down their forks and knives and waited for him to speak.

"As you all know, Shelley knew next to nothing about pack life or her werewolf heritage before I met her. I've filled her in on some of the basics."

The younger Striker males grumbled, but Joshua sat rigid in his chair, his muscles coiled and ready for action. James knew how he felt. He'd like to have a crack at the hunter who captured her.

Alex sent her a commiserating look. "That's a lot to take in at once. But at least you're a pure werewolf. Not a half-breed like me. That will take away some of the pressure."

Shelley raised one eyebrow and James answered her unasked question. "I met Alex's mother in Chicago. After I found out she was pregnant, I settled there. Her mother left when she was a baby, so I raised her myself. I knew it was too dangerous to bring her back to the pack."

"Then why are you here now?" Shelley directed her question at Alex.

Alex gave her a humorless grin. "I started to go into heat. At the time I had no idea what it was." She shot her father a glare. "Joshua showed up at our garage in Chicago before Dad had a chance to tell me what was going on. By then there were several groups of werewolves after me—purists, who wanted to kill me, and single males who wanted to mate with me. Not to mention the bounty hunters."

Shelley's eyes widened in growing horror and fascination. "What happened?"

"Joshua." Alex leaned in closer to her mate. "He came to protect me, to bring me back to the safety of the pack. While we were running from everyone, we fell in love."

Joshua growled low in the back of his throat and his younger brothers laughed. “Alex didn’t know our ways, didn’t know I’d have to accept challenges from all the single males who would want to claim her as their own.” Joshua captured Alex’s hand in his and brought her fingers to his lips.

His wife snorted. “I didn’t much care for their challenge and told them so.”

“She threatened to castrate anyone other than Joshua who climbed into bed with her and then proceeded to take herself to bed.” This from Micah, who gazed at Alex with a look of deep admiration.

“Claiming? Challenge? Is this what I have to look forward to?” Shelley’s throat tightened as she spoke. This was getting more complicated by the second. She shoved back from the table and all the men jumped from their seats.

James held out a placating hand. “You don’t need to worry about that, Shelley. You’re under my protection.”

“Our protection,” Joshua interjected.

“They’ll want to meet you, but no male will be allowed to touch you. Not without your agreement.” James reached out to her but let his hand fall back to his side without touching her.

She felt bereft. Abandoned. After everything they’d done last night, he still wanted her to meet other males? Well, what had she expected? A declaration of undying love?

Shelley rubbed her fingers over her forehead. Her headache was coming back. “I should never have come here,” she muttered.

Several low grumbles and growls came from around the room. She looked up to see her brothers’ distressed faces. She’d hurt them. Again. “I’m sorry. It’s just that my life is a mess.”

“And it’s our job to help you sort everything out.” Joshua came around the table until he was standing right in front of her, blocking her view of James. Her brother raised his hand and gently stroked her face. “Let us help you, Shelley.”

Her throat got tight and she had to blink back tears. He was a good man. They were all good men. They didn’t deserve the baggage she brought with her. “I can’t.”

His hand fell away and he took a step back. His face was as hard as stone. Shelley wanted to sink to the floor and cry. Her heart was breaking. She’d finally found a family that wanted her and she couldn’t stay. Couldn’t allow them and all they’d built to be threatened by Steve Macmillan and the bounty hunters who were searching for her.

Plus, this was all a bit too much for her. Too much had happened too fast. She couldn’t assimilate it all. Everyone had expectations of her. Ones she wasn’t sure she could, or even wanted to meet.

She looked to James for his support, but his expression told her nothing. He looked remote and cold, every inch the alpha he was. Alex had slipped her arm around her mate, offering silent comfort. Shelley kept her head down, not wanting to see what her other brothers thought of her proclamation.

They'd offered her everything and she'd thrown it back in their faces.

Swallowing hard, she gathered her courage. "I'll get my things and leave."

"No." James shook his head. "You'll stay the week as planned. There's no need to make any hasty decisions."

The longer she stayed the more dangerous it was for all of them. But a part of her was selfish, wanting this time with her brothers and Alex. With James.

Her stomach cramped and her heart throbbed at the mere thought of walking away and leaving James. She knew she'd have to do it eventually. Had to be strong.

"Shelley?" Simon, her youngest brother, called her name.

She raised her head and stared at his familiar face. All her brothers shared similar coloring and appearance. And so did she. For the first time in her memory, she belonged somewhere. With someone.

"A week." She couldn't promise any more than that.

The tension swirling in the room abated somewhat. Then the knock came on the front door. It was more of a pounding really. Shelley's head jerked toward the sound. She could smell them. Males. Four of them.

She turned to James. He stared at her, his gaze unreadable. He walked to her side and took her arm. "It's time to meet some of the pack." He nodded toward Joshua. "Show them into the living room."

His hand at the small of her back, James guided her to the living room and motioned her to a chair. "Why don't you sit and try to relax."

"I'll stand." No way was she going to let her guard down with all these males sniffing around. And that's why they were here. She was a single female and, from what James had told her, single females weren't plentiful. That made her an object of interest. Not because they cared for her, but because they wanted to mate with her.

Shelley's blood ran cold. There was no way she'd allow that to happen. She'd been held against her will her entire life. She'd finally found freedom and wasn't about to give it up for anyone. Especially some male she didn't even know.

Her first experience with a male werewolf had been under less than optimum conditions. And that was an understatement if there ever was one. The sex had been okay, but only because she'd been in heat. She had no desire to repeat the experience. She wanted more than a physical coupling now. Much more. Her glance drifted to James who was standing beside her, arms crossed over his chair, legs slightly spread. He looked intimidating. And sexy.

She glanced away. Okay, maybe there was one male she'd be willing to have sex with. But he wanted her to meet other males.

Shelley couldn't rid herself of the sense of hurt, of abandonment that flooded her. She was being foolish. James had never promised her anything other than a job and a chance to learn about her past and her culture, and that was exactly what he was doing.

Male voices grew louder. Footsteps echoed on the hardwood floors. Four large males walked into the room, followed by Joshua, Alexandra, Micah, Levi and Simon.

The guests all nodded in greeting to James, but their gazes kept flicking toward her.

"I see the rumor is true, James. You have a female staying with you." The male who spoke had pale blue eyes and dark hair.

"This is Shelley." James turned to her. "This is Donovan Brody." He indicated the man who had spoken.

Another man stepped forward. "I'm Grady Tallant. It's a pleasure to meet you, Shelley." He was a tall, hugely built man.

"I'm Gavin Wallace," said another with dark blond hair.

"Etienne LeVeau. A distant cousin of James's." A lean, dark man gave her a roughish smile.

Testosterone clogged the air until Shelley thought she couldn't breathe. She didn't return their smile. It was taking all her courage to simply face them. In her experience, a gathering of males was a dangerous thing that never ended well for her.

Memories threatened to overwhelm her. Years of rape, torture and beatings. She swayed and swallowed back the bitter bile in her throat.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist and she was pulled into the curve of a familiar male body. James. She took comfort and drew strength from him.

She'd survived much worse. She could do this.

Shelley met each man's gaze and inclined her head.

"Shelley is our sister." Joshua stepped up to stand by her right side. Micah and Levi flanked their brother while Simon took up a station on James left side.

Donovan Brody's eyes widened. "Oh my God. I thought there was something familiar about her. Rachel Striker."

"Shelley," she snapped, her voice brisk. "My name is Shelley. I don't know who Rachel Striker was." And that admission brought with it great pain, because Rachel Striker had had everything she'd ever wanted—a family that loved her, a sense of security, a sense of place. Shelley had none of those things.

"But you're a single female," Etienne began, only to be stopped by James.

"Shelley is under my protection and that of the Striker brothers. She is not inclined to mate with any male at the moment. You will all respect that." Shelley shivered at the pure menace in James's voice.

The men respectfully inclined their heads, deferring to James as alpha. "Of course."

A twinkle entered Gavin's eyes. "That doesn't mean we can't try to change her mind."

Shelley felt more bemused then threatened by Gavin's statement. On the other hand, Donovan Brody and Grady Tallant were somber, almost brooding. She didn't know what to think of Etienne.

"The others will want to meet her." Grady crossed his arms over his chest, his tone almost challenging.

"They can meet her, but no one pressures her in any way." There was no mistaking the steel in Joshua's voice.

"I'm not staying for long." She thought to ease the situation. Instead, she made it worse. The tension in the room rose to epic proportions. She felt so threatened she tried to take a step away. But she wasn't going anywhere, not with James's arm banded around her.

The threat of violence pulsed, a living, breathing monster just waiting to attack.

"What does she mean she's not staying?"

Shelley's backbone snapped back into place when Donovan addressed James instead of her. "*She* means that *she's* only agreed to stay a week." Honestly, did these men think they could control her? She'd been tested in the fires of hell and come out the other side. No way was anyone other than herself in the driver's seat.

At least Donovan had the grace to look slightly sheepish. "I apologize. But I'm hoping you'll stay longer. Consider making this your home."

"Enough. Shelley will make up her mind when she's damn well good and ready." James released her and stepped in front of her. "This meeting is over."

The four men all nodded to James and to her. "We'll be back later," Grady added. "Maybe you'll feel more like talking then."

"Maybe." Shelley didn't want to commit herself to anything, but she did want them gone. A compromise seemed the quickest way to accomplish that.

They left and she breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind them.

"Well, that went well."

Shelley stared in disbelief at Alex. The other woman nodded. "The first time I met them they challenged Joshua to a fight for the right to claim me. You got away with just talking."

Shelley burst into laughter, releasing the tension bottled up inside her. Joshua appeared slightly disgruntled, which made her laugh harder. Alex linked her arm with Shelley. "Come on. Let's get another cup of coffee and have a talk."

She glanced over her shoulder as she left the room with Alex. James was watching her, a gleam in his eye that sent a shiver down her spine and left her feeling slightly breathless.

Macmillan stared at the five other men assembled around him. They'd camped out overnight, not willing to attack during the night when the werewolves would have the advantage with their preternatural

senses. "Okay, according to what Jessup saw, there are five males and two females, all werewolves. There's six of us, but we have the element of surprise." He rubbed the stock of his rifle. "And these babies."

Red laughed. "Got me plenty of silver bullets."

"I want a new rug. I'm hoping some of those bastards shift."

"You'll get your chance, Mitch. Now listen up." Macmillan narrowed his eyes. "No fuck-ups this time. We go in quiet, take our positions and attack when I give the signal."

"Anyone else know about this place, boss?" Quinn asked.

Macmillan pinned him with a black gaze. "No, and we're going to keep it that way." He turned back to the group. "No one shoots the woman in the picture but me. We clear on that?" Only Red knew he had tranquilizer darts in his rifle and planned on capturing and not killing her. "The rest are fair game."

All the men nodded.

"Okay. We go to silent. Hand gestures only. Never forget that these bastards have incredible hearing."

They stood in a semi-circle, a group of tough men, all handpicked by him for this mission. They couldn't fail. Not this time. Shelley would soon be in his grasp and he'd make her pay for what she'd done.

"Let's go." Macmillan headed into the woods with Jessup at his side. Red and Quinn were behind them with Mitch and his buddy, Amos, bringing up the rear.

Chapter Fourteen

“So what do you think of the place?”

Shelley sipped her coffee, using the time to try to think of an answer that wouldn't be insulting. She was enjoying Alex's company and didn't want to do anything that might alienate the only other female werewolf she'd ever known.

“The house is beautiful.” And it was. All rough-hewn log and polished wood. It was masculine, but comfortable at the same time. It should have reminded her of Tom's cabin, but it was totally different. It felt like a home.

“They can be a bit overwhelming.”

Shelley snorted. “That's an understatement.”

Alex traced the rim of her mug with her finger. “I kinda know what you're going through. I didn't know anything about my heritage. Dad had planned to tell me but things happened too quickly.”

“How did you deal with it?”

Alex shoved her hand through her short brown hair and gave a small self-conscious laugh. “It wasn't easy. Everything that I'd ever thought about my life was a lie and I was on the run for my life with a complete stranger.”

“Joshua?”

She nodded. “Yes, Joshua. He's... Well, overwhelming is the first word that comes to mind. Followed by intimidating and sexy.”

Shelley wrapped her hands around her mug and stared out the large dining room window. It was so peaceful here. The trees swayed in the breeze and the mountains stood majestic and proud in the distance. It struck her suddenly that she could live here and maybe find some semblance of peace. If only her past wasn't hanging over her. If only she hadn't killed a man.

“You okay?” Alex reached out and covered Shelley's hand with her own.

Shelley offered the younger woman a smile. “Not yet. But I will be.”

Alex sat back and pulled one of her jean-clad legs up so that her heel was resting on her chair. She rested her chin on her bent knee. “It's a totally different culture. Males are dominant. They're more primal. More basic than humans.”

Shelley shivered, remembering how she'd spent last night. James was undeniably primal and sexy and earthy. "They certainly are." She'd meant her voice to come out as steady and assured. Instead, it sounded slightly breathy.

The other woman's gaze narrowed and she studied Shelley. "You're attracted to my father, aren't you?"

It would be easier to lie, but Shelley just couldn't do it. "Yes. But nothing can come of it. I'm not staying."

"Why not?" There was no accusation or jealousy in Alex's voice, just honest curiosity.

Shelley shook her head, only willing to share so much with James's daughter. "I can't. There's too much in my past..." She trailed off, not quite knowing what to say. How could she tell Alex she'd killed a man in cold blood and now his son and fellow bounty hunters would be hunting her for the rest of her life?

She couldn't. Better to keep her silence.

"I really wish you would stay. It would be nice to have another woman around."

She could hear the wistfulness in Alex's voice. "There's aren't any other females here?"

"Some." Alex sighed and took a sip of her coffee. "I'm a half-breed. And that makes some of the folks of the pack less than welcoming."

"But your father is alpha. Plus, you're a healthy female, mated to one of the males of the pack." It didn't make sense to Shelley.

"You'd think that would be all that mattered." Alex gave a small laugh, but Shelley could sense the other woman's pain.

"No wonder werewolves are dying out. If they're that closed-minded, bigoted and blood-thirsty maybe it's for the best." It was a violent culture that she'd sprung from.

"No." Alex shook her head. "There are plenty of wonderful men, like Joshua and my father and your brothers." She smiled. "Some really great females too. Your brother Isaiah's mate, Meredith, is kickass. She was alpha of her own pack for years."

"Really? On her own?" Now that was a female Shelley wouldn't mind meeting. Although the thought of meeting her eldest brother left her slightly shaken.

"Yup. She's something. And she's got two sons of her own and a bunch of adopted half-breeds. You'll meet them soon."

Not if she didn't stay. Shelley kept that thought to herself.

Alex pushed aside her cooling coffee. "Let's go outside. I can show you the compound. I've got a patch all cleared for a vegetable garden this year. Plus, I've been learning how to weave. Donovan Brody's grandmother is teaching me. I've got a few pieces at our place you could see."

Alex stood and Shelley followed suit. "Are you sure it's safe?"

“Absolutely. Joshua and my father are around. Plus, I expect Simon and the twins are skulking around outside.”

“I should clean house or something. I came here to work as a housekeeper for your father.” She was beginning to feel guilty about not upholding her end of the bargain.

“You can start work tomorrow. Today is your first full day here. Time to look around and get acclimated.”

“If you’re certain it’s safe.” Shelley found Alex’s enthusiasm catching. She suddenly wanted to see where her brothers lived, the place that they, and James, called home.

“Perfectly. Come on.” Alex headed toward the front door with Shelley following close behind.

The crisp spring air was scented with the tang of pine and earth. Shelley paused on the porch to drink in the entire area. There were five homes in total. James lived in the largest one, but the others were all quite lovely. Made of logs, they seemed to blend into the surrounding woods. All the homes circled a fifty-foot clearing. There were a few smaller buildings, which she assumed were sheds.

“Come on.” Alex waited at the bottom of the stairs. “Joshua and I live right there.” She pointed to the story-and-a-half home next door. “The twins share that one and Simon lives there.” Alex pointed out the two homes.

“What about the other one?” There was a slight breeze and a lock of hair that had come loose from her ponytail blew across her face. Shelley tucked it behind her ear. She took the three steps down to the ground and followed Alex.

“That’s Isaiah’s place. Or it used to be. Now it’s more of a guesthouse. Isaiah and his pack use it when they come to visit.”

The mention of her oldest brother’s name made her nerves jangle. She hadn’t met him, wasn’t even certain she was going to get the opportunity.

“And over here is where I’m planting my garden.”

Shelley followed Alex around the compound. She toured the woodshed and various storage sheds. There was also a woodworking studio where both Micah and Levi were currently working. The sweet scent of cedar tickled her nose as they stepped inside.

Both men smiled in greeting. Already, Shelley could tell the men apart. It had more to do with the look in their eyes, the way they held their bodies. Micah smiled more freely, seemed more open, while Levi was more cautious.

“Hey, ladies.” Micah put aside the hand sander he was using and brushed at the sawdust on his hands and clothing.

“What are you working on?” Alex went to Micah and he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

A pang of jealousy hit Shelley hard. They might be her brothers, but she didn’t feel as though she could approach them.

Levi stepped up beside her and gave her a sad smile. "Would you like to see what I'm making?"

His offer soothed some of the bitterness. "I'd like that."

She spent the next ten minutes examining a table Levi was making. It was intricately carved. Beauty mixed with function. Then Micah wanted to show her the shelf he was sanding. Again it was a simple design, but the craftsmanship was incredible.

"There's no electricity out here." Shelley frowned as she looked around.

"Nope. We do all our work by hand." Levi pointed to the cast-iron woodstove in the corner. "That keeps us warm on cold days."

"And if we really need electricity, we run an extension cord from the house."

Shelley hadn't thought about the logistics of living in the middle of nowhere. "The houses are all wired though."

Levi nodded. "A combination of solar panels on all the rooftops and power we generate from harnessing the wind and Wolf Creek itself."

"Wow." They were really self-sufficient here.

"And if that fails, we've got gas-powered generators and plenty of fuel." Micah leaned against the workbench and crossed his feet at the ankles.

"You also build your own furniture." Shelley motioned to several other pieces in progress.

"We sell what we don't need." Levi brushed his hand over several pieces. "It's how we make our living."

"And speaking of making a living," Alex interjected. "We should let you boys get back to it."

Shelley was glad to step outside. It was incredible to spend time with her brothers, but they were still little more than handsome strangers to her. She still felt no connection to them, not in her heart where it mattered. Maybe in time that would change. But time was something she had little of.

Shaking off her mood, she took another deep breath and followed Alex. It was a beautiful morning even though there was a slight chill to the air. Neither of them had a coat, but they were both wearing sweaters. Still, Shelley rubbed her hands up and down her arms to help stay warm.

Alex glanced back and noticed. "We should go to my place. I can make us some more coffee or hot chocolate if you'd like, and we can get warm. I never meant to keep you outside so long."

Shelley smiled. "I don't mind. I'm enjoying it." And she was. The younger woman was good company. And being outside, free to do whatever she wanted was invigorating.

She felt someone watching her and swiveled her head around. James was standing on his porch talking with Joshua, but his eyes were on her. Shelley couldn't look away. There was something about James that tugged at her on an elemental basis. There was no understanding it. No explaining it. It simply was.

Macmillan checked his binoculars again. He held up two fingers and pointed to the women. Then he pointed to the porch. He did it again and pointed to the smaller building behind one of the houses. That accounted for six of the seven.

Quinn and Mitch were on the right. Jessup and Amos on the left. Red was beside him. They moved in slowly, not wanting to alert anyone to their presence. It took them fifteen long minutes to get into position.

He took a deep breath and released it slowly. This was the moment he'd been waiting for since he found out about his father's death. Shelley was down there. Soon she'd be in his hands. And he planned to make her pay for what she'd done. By the time he was done with her she'd wish she'd jammed that knife into her own heart instead of his father's.

He raised his hand and brought it down sharply. A second passed. Then a shot rang out. The fight was on.

James's head jerked up. There was something wrong. The forest was quiet. He raised his head and sniffed the air. A loud crack exploded into the silence.

"Get down!" Head bent, he sprinted across the clearing toward Shelley and Alex with Joshua racing behind him. The women were out in the open. Vulnerable. His heart pounded as he threw himself at them, knocking both to the ground just as another shot ran out.

A low howl broke from behind him. Quickly followed by another.

"Are you okay?" Joshua was dragging Alex to safety so James grabbed Shelley and pulled her closer to the cover of the house.

"I'm fine. What's going on?" Twigs and grass were tangled in her hair and her face was smudged with dirt where he'd tackled her.

"We're under attack. Get inside." James was already stripping his shirt and kicking off his boots. Within seconds he was naked. He shifted without thought, ready to fight and defend his pack. His woman.

Shelley scrambled away from him, her back hitting the side of the house as he shifted. Bones cracked. Limbs reformed. Thick fur covered his body as he went from man to wolf.

He was magnificent. Majestic. Powerful. Shelley had never seen a wolf like him. He leaned in and licked her face before spinning around and sprinting to the entrance of the compound to meet their attackers head on.

Shelley couldn't believe what was happening. One minute she'd been enjoying the cool spring morning with Alex, the next someone was shooting at them. She still couldn't believe how fast James had moved. He'd saved both her and Alex from serious injury or possibly even being killed.

Shots continued to rain down on them. She scooted closer to the building. A bullet ricocheted off the wall behind her, sending large splinters of wood flying. Several hit her face and stung her cheek.

The smart thing would be to crawl inside the house where it was safer. But she couldn't do that. Not when James was fighting for his life. For their lives.

She knew she was still in shock. Watching James change from man to wolf had left her slightly stunned. Intellectually, she knew he was a werewolf. But the only person she'd ever seen change was herself. It had taken her off-guard.

James was a big man, but he was huge in wolf form, his fur a silvery gray much like the hair at his temples. His eyes were still the familiar golden-brown. In them, she recognized intelligence and understanding. He wasn't James, but he was. He and the wolf were one and the same.

It wasn't monstrous to watch, as Tom had always claimed. It was beautiful. He was beautiful. His tongue was slightly rough but she'd felt comforted, felt his promise of protection when he'd licked her.

"Shelley," Alex hissed off to her left. "Can you shoot a rifle?" Alex was about twenty feet away, hunkered down just outside her house. She had two rifles beside her.

"No." That was something else she'd never learned how to do.

"Damn," Alex muttered. She grabbed up one of the rifles and raised it, ready to shoot.

Around them, chaos had broken out in the compound. Joshua had also shifted and was heading toward the wide-open gate. She instantly recognized the large black wolf as her brother.

Levi and Micah were working their way toward the entrance, rifles in hand.

Simon slithered up beside Alex and lifted the other rifle. "Mind if I borrow this?"

Alex shook her head. "Be my guest."

All Shelley could do was watch as several men raced into the compound, shooting as they came. She didn't recognize the first three who fought their way inside, but she recognized their kind. Bounty hunters. They were dressed in camouflage and denim and all were shooting to kill. The fourth man in made her heart freeze with fear. Steve Macmillan. Somehow he'd found her.

James raced across the ground, moving faster than she'd thought possible. At the last second the muscles in his hind legs coiled and he sprang. The hunter raised his rifle and fired, but his aim was off, knocked aside by James's strong forelegs. Powerful jaws opened and clamped down on the hunter's throat. He cried out and fell to the ground, blood pouring down his neck. His cries stopped and he went silent.

Micah and Levi returned fire as the hunters scrambled for cover. One of the hunters was spun around as a bullet hit him square in the chest. He fell to the dirt, not moving.

Shelley felt useless. Less than useless. She needed to fight. She'd brought this on all of them. Somehow Steve Macmillan had found her. An axe sat propped next to a load of wood waiting to be split. Staying on her elbows, she dragged her body to the side of the house. She heard Alex calling her name but ignored her.

Taking a quick glance around, she scrambled to her feet. On a dead run, she grabbed the axe and kept going, circling the house and coming out on the other side, closer to the fighting.

The continuous spray of bullets from the hunters had Joshua and James pinned down behind a shed. Levi, Micah and Simon returned fire. Shelley heard a cry behind her and saw Simon fall.

Alex screamed his name. Levi sprang from the side of one of the houses, while Micah covered him. Closing the distance faster than seemed possible, he grabbed his younger brother and dragged him to safety, swearing the whole while.

Shelley blocked out everything happening around her. The sound of her brother's moans, the blast of the gunfire, the pounding of her heart. She sorted through the smells. Blood. The acrid smell of the bullets. James. For a moment, she stopped and breathed in his unique scent. It was the same, yet different. Not unpleasant. Man and wolf together.

For the first time in years, she felt her wolf clamoring to get out and wasn't afraid of it. "Soon," she whispered. But not yet.

Shelley tightened her grip on the handle of the axe and concentrated. The stench of sweat mixed with fear and excitement. These hunters loved to fight and kill, and they expected to win. She paused and sniffed again. All except one. One of the hunters smelled different from the rest. She frowned and sniffed again.

Before she could figure out what that difference was, the scent she'd been looking for almost smothered her. Steve Macmillan. She'd grown up with the stink of his hatred burning her nostril, his disdain swirling around her. Now she could smell his need for revenge.

He was hunkered down behind a tree, his men in front of him. Her lip curled. Coward. He'd always allowed others to take the fall and then swooped in for the glory. She'd heard enough of his bragging tales at his father's kitchen table to figure that out.

A shot rang out. This one was from behind them.

Shelley eased down beside the house and looked over her shoulder. That didn't make any sense. She sniffed the wind and frowned. Wolves. She was getting nothing but wolves from that side. Another shot rang out and Levi swore. "Fucking Carlos clan. What the hell do they think they're doing?"

It just kept getting better and better. Now they were under attack on two fronts.

A wolf came barreling around the side of the house. Shelley stood slowly and raised her axe. She had no idea if he was friend or foe. Another wolf was right behind him, bearing down on him fast. Five feet from her, the wolf behind sprang, coming down on top of the other one.

Growls filled the air as blood and fur flew. Powerful jaws and sharp teeth tore at flesh. Lethal claws ripped. Shelley was momentarily spellbound by the sight. It was so violent. So raw.

Finally, one of the wolves lay dead. The larger one turned toward her. She raised the axe, ready to fight. His blue eyes were unusual, but familiar. She'd met him this morning. Donovan Brody.

He gave a low growl. If a wolf could sound disgruntled and pissed off, this one did. He whirled away and took off toward the sound of more fighting.

James. Where was James?

Shelley forgot the dead wolf only feet away and eased toward the corner of the house. It was still hard to see where everyone was. She concentrated on trying to sort out the scents, but it was becoming more difficult with the bitter smell from the guns and the metallic stench of blood filling the air around her.

A flash to her right got her attention. Someone was on the move. She glimpsed a familiar face. Macmillan.

Moving, she raced to the house next door. She had to kill him. Her nightmare would never end until he was dead.

She tore around the corner of James's house and skidded to a dead stop. James stood there in wolf form, teeth bared as he snarled a warning at Steve Macmillan.

The hunter held his rifle ready, a taunting grin on his face. "You're going to make a great rug for the side of my bed."

Shelley screamed. Every ounce of rage she'd ever felt spewed to the surface at that moment. She would not let him hurt James. She drew back her arm and flung it forward, releasing the axe. The blade flashed in the morning sun and Macmillan was forced to dodge back. James started to move, but Macmillan brought his rifle around and held it on her.

"Stop right there, wolf. Or I'll shoot the little bitch."

James froze.

"Come here, Shelley. You didn't think you could get away with what you did, did you? I've got plans for you."

Shelley didn't know what to do. If she went with him, she was dead. If she didn't, he'd kill James. There was only one choice she could make.

"I'll go with you. Just leave the rest of them alone."

"Sure, Shelley. I only want you."

She could read the lie in his voice, but knew she had no choice. Maybe she could knock aside his gun when she got close enough.

"Now, bitch. I'm running out of patience."

Shelley took a step toward him. James's hind legs quivered as though he was getting ready to jump.

Steve grinned. "Try it, wolf, and you'll be dead before you get halfway. Shoot him, Quinn."

Shelley froze as another hunter stepped out behind James. He raised his rifle. A shot ran out and she screamed. But it wasn't James who fell to the ground, but Macmillan. Blood blossomed on the front of his shirt, spreading rapidly.

The blue-eyed hunter Macmillan had called Quinn ignored them, hurrying to Macmillan's side.

"You bastard," Steve gasped.

"Where is Chris Lawton?"

Steve gasped again. “You traitor. Who the hell is Chris...” Blood bubbled up from his throat and he took his last breath.

Behind them, Shelley heard more yells and the sounds of fighting, but she couldn’t look away from the scene before her. James shifted, the wolf receding and the man appearing. Naked, with blood staining his hands, James was an intimidating sight.

He shot a glare at her. She glared right back. She knew he was mad at her but didn’t care. She’d done what she thought was right, and she’d do it again in a heartbeat.

“What the hell is going on?” The voice was deep. Authoritative. And very familiar.

Shelley turned to see a huge male striding forward. He must have been about six and a half feet tall and he was all pissed-off male in blue jeans and a tight T-shirt. His deep mahogany hair was shaggy and hung down around his shoulders. His deep-set chocolate brown eyes were eerily familiar. She saw the same ones peering out at her each time she looked in a mirror.

“Isaiah.” As if a dam burst in her mind, memories flooded into her consciousness.

He stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes were blazing as he studied her. “My God. Rachel. It is you.” He walked forward like a man in a trance and grabbed her into his arms, holding her close to his heart.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, unafraid of this big man. She remembered him. He’d been more of a father to her than her father had been. She took a deep breath and his familiar scent surrounded her.

“I remember you.” The words were torn from her throat.

He leaned away and brushed her hair from her face. “Are you real?” The pain and anguish in his voice was so real it made her heart ache. She nodded, unable to speak.

“I hate to break up this reunion, but we have a problem.” Anger and some other emotion she couldn’t pin down vibrated from James.

Shelley pulled away from her brother and tried not to look at the dead man lying in the dirt beside them. She had to own up to the trouble she’d brought to his home. “This is my fault. He was searching for me.”

“It’s not anyone’s fault.” The hunter who’d shot Steve had his hands in the air. His rifle sat on the dirt at his feet.

James studied the hunter. “Who are you?”

“Quinn.” The tall, light-haired man offered no more than that.

James stood, hands on his hips, studying the stranger. Shelley wished he’d put on a pair of pants. Watching him strut around naked was doing funny things to her body, which were totally inappropriate given the circumstances.

“The rest of them are dead.” Joshua walked up beside James and handed him a pair of jeans.

“So are the Carlos cousins.” Donovan stepped forward, looking tall and menacing. She was glad he was fully clothed. She wasn’t quite ready to see another naked man. “Those bastards took advantage of the chaos with the hunters to try to kill James and nab Alex and Shelley.”

James growled low in his throat as he hauled on the jeans. He zipped up the fly but didn’t bother to button them. “I’ll deal with the rest of that clan later.”

He studied Quinn. “You need to give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just kill you.”

But Quinn wasn’t paying any attention to James. His eyes were glued on Donovan Brody.

Shelley glanced from one man to the other, noting the similarities between them. They were of the same height and build. Where Donovan’s hair was dark brown, Quinn’s was blond. But the facial shape was the same. And so were their eyes. Pale ice blue.

James’s tension went up a notch. “Somebody better start talking.”

Quinn addressed Donovan. “Do you remember Sandra Lawton?”

Donovan frowned. “I’m not sure.”

“Maybe you’ll remember a tall blonde woman you lived with for a few months about twenty-five years ago in New York. You apparently had a great time for a while. One morning, you left without a word. She searched for you but never found you.”

Donovan’s gaze narrowed. “I remember. Sandy. She said her name was Sandy.”

Quinn nodded. “Yeah, well, you left more than just a good time behind.” He straightened his spine and braced his legs apart. Shelley knew what he was going to say before he spoke. “I’m your son.”

Quinn was numb as he stood there and stared at his father. He’d failed Chris. Steve Macmillan was dead, his time with the bounty hunters was at an end and he was no closer to his goal. He’d have to find some other way of searching for his twin. That’s assuming he got out of this situation alive.

He could shift to his wolf form, but that wouldn’t help him here. Not with so many other pureblooded wolves around. They might even kill him for being a half-breed. That happened a lot as he’d discovered during his years of searching for his heritage. He didn’t lose any sleep over killing those fuckers. They’d kill him and his twin if they had a chance.

He recognized Isaiah Striker and his brother Joshua. His mother had discovered Donovan Brody’s secret in the time they’d been together. She’d known what he was but had loved him anyway. She’d followed him in secret several times when he’d met with others of his kind, wanting to learn more about her mysterious lover. She’d seen the Striker brothers, had learned their names.

When he was five, his mother had seen the brothers walking down a street in New York and had pointed them out to him and Chris. Told them who these men were. What they were.

The other man. The one in charge, he didn’t know at all. He was one scary bastard.

Then there was the man he'd searched for all his adult life. Now that he was standing in front of his father, he didn't quite know what to do, what to say.

"If you're Donovan Brody's son, what the hell are you doing with bounty hunters?" It was the alpha male that spoke.

"James," his father cautioned the other male. It felt weird to be staring at the man who was his father. For years he'd been nothing more than a memory shared by Quinn's mother.

Something deep inside him stirred when his father stood up for him. But he wasn't reading much into it. They still might decide to kill him. The other man's name struck a chord. "James? James LeVeau?"

The male's eyes narrowed and pure menace flowed from him. He was one scary dude. "James Riley now. Why do you want to know?"

He motioned to Steve's body. "He has one of his hackers searching a holding company belonging to you. He saw you and your truck in Nashville and got suspicious. When he turned up next to nothing it made him even more so."

James strode forward until he was standing right in front of Quinn. Wearing nothing but a pair of jeans, he was an intimidating sight. But Quinn wasn't backing down.

"I'm only going to ask once more. Why?"

Quinn sighed, knowing he had to tell the truth if he wanted to have a chance of getting out of here alive. "As you already guessed, I'm a half-breed." James nodded. The fact that he wasn't ordering Quinn's immediate death was slightly reassuring.

"I have a twin. We were attacked more than a year ago. It took me a while to understand why it happened. We didn't know much about our heritage. Only what our mother was able to piece together."

James nodded. "Go on."

"Chris disappeared and I haven't been able to find a trace. I infiltrated the hunters to see if they had Chris." Quinn nodded his head toward Joshua. "You can thank me for that call you got telling you to go to Chicago last fall."

Joshua glanced at Isaiah, but neither of them spoke.

Quinn glared at James. "To save your life, I just killed the last link to my twin." Defeat all but smothered him. What would he do now?

Donovan stepped up. "You're my son." He had a dazed look on his face, as though he couldn't quite believe it.

Quinn inclined his head. "Mom always said I was the spitting image of you."

"Where is she now?"

"Dead. She died when I was eighteen."

"I'm sorry."

Quinn shrugged. “She knew what you were. And good thing too or we would have been seriously fucked.” Obviously, Donovan couldn’t be too sorry. He’d never given his mother another thought.

“She knew? She never said anything.”

“She loved you anyway.” Bitterness crept into Quinn’s voice as he remembered his mother sitting in their crappy little apartment, staring out the window, watching for a man who never came. “She spent years hoping you would come back. We even lived in the same rundown place until we were ten.” He shut his mouth. He was saying way too much.

“I’m sorry for that.”

“Would it have mattered?” Quinn couldn’t stop himself from asking. “If you’d known she was pregnant?”

“Yes.” Donovan crossed his arms over his chest.

Quinn didn’t know what he expected. Certainly not tears of joy or immediate acceptance. But maybe a little more emotion. Not that he cared. All he cared about was finding Chris.

“I have another son?” Donovan asked. “Just like you.”

“No.” They all stared quizzically at Quinn.

“But you said you had a twin.” James frowned.

“I do.” Quinn heaved a deep breath. “Chris is my twin sister.”

Chapter Fifteen

James took a deep breath and decided it was high time for him to take control of the highly charged situation. He motioned to Grady Tallant, who'd joined the fight. "Gather as many men as you need and get rid of the bodies. Strip them of any weapons and identification. Send out a party to find their vehicles. We need to dispose of them."

He nodded and Grady headed off.

He turned to Donovan Brody, who was watching the young man—Quinn Lawton—like he couldn't quite believe his eyes. And no wonder. It wasn't every day you found out you had a son and a daughter you hadn't known about. "Take Quinn into the house. We need to talk." James needed as much information about this situation as he could get.

"Levi, you and Micah take Simon home and tend to his wound." From what James could see it looked as though a silver bullet had hit his shoulder. They'd been lucky no one was killed.

"Gavin, you and Etienne watch the front and back gates. Just in case there are any more hunters or some other members of the Carlos clan decide they want to try to kill me."

"Alpha." Gavin called James by his formal title, inclined his head and headed off with Etienne.

Finally, James turned to Shelley. He admitted that he'd avoided looking at her. Her first morning here and already they'd faced an attack from hunters and an internal threat from fellow wolves. Blood stained the ground and the air was thick with death. Not exactly the welcome he'd envisioned for her.

She'd probably decide she was better off out in the world on her own.

He raked his fingers through his hair and shook off those negative thoughts. She'd promised him a week and he was holding her to it. "Come inside, Shelley."

Her face was pale, but her lips were set in a thin line. Stubborn woman. Instead of going inside for safety, she'd attacked a hunter, wielding nothing but an axe and determination. His blood still ran cold thinking about it.

Her face was smudged with dirt and blood and her new clothes might never recover. Her hair was hanging around her face, her ponytail holder long gone.

He'd never seen a more beautiful woman in his life.

His body hardened. Muscles tensing. His breathing deepened and he sniffed her unique perfume. Under the fear he caught a tinge of arousal. His cock responded immediately, springing to attention.

Now that the heat of battle was over, another heat was upon him.

“James,” Joshua called from the porch steps.

James wanted to do nothing more than take Shelley in his arms and hold her until she understood he’d protect her with his life, would never let them take her again. Instead, he had to deal with the fallout from this latest attack. Sometimes, being alpha just plain sucked.

He held out his hand. “Come here.” He softened his tone and she inched forward. She was chewing on her bottom lip, a sure sign of nerves. He caught a glimpse of her pink tongue and it kicked up his arousal another notch.

Shelley kept her head down as she passed him. He wasn’t letting her avoid him that easily. He put his hand on her back, guiding her inside.

The group was waiting in the foyer. James turned to Joshua. “Have some coffee. We’ll be down as soon as I make sure Shelley is all right.”

Joshua raised an eyebrow but inclined his head. “As you wish.” He turned and strode toward the kitchen.

“James,” Shelley began. He closed his eyes briefly and savored the sound of his name coming from her lips.

“Upstairs.” He urged her up the stairs to the bathroom, trying not to notice how perfectly her jeans cupped her heart-shaped ass. She kept glancing over her shoulder at him, nibbling on her bottom lip.

Finally, he couldn’t take the temptation any longer. He backed her up against the bathroom door and placed his hands on either side of her head, caging her with his body. Leaning down, he licked her bottom lip. It was red and slightly swollen where she’d been worrying it.

He moaned as her taste exploded on his tongue. Spicy and sweet. His.

Her hands crept up his chest and around his neck. He deepened the kiss, teasing the inside of her mouth. Her tongue sought out his. Twining. Touching.

Something deep inside him relaxed. Shelley was safe. She was here. And she was returning his kiss.

James ate at Shelley’s lips, teasing and tempting. Her fingers fisted in his hair, holding him close. Elation raced through him. She still wanted him. She’d seen him shift into his wolf, seen him kill a man, and she still desired him.

Only the fact that he had a houseful of people waiting for him made him back away. He eased his lips from hers and rested his forehead against hers. “Later,” he promised. “I need to deal with the situation downstairs.”

Shelley jerked slightly, her hand coming to her lips. “Of course.”

James hated to see the fear and self-consciousness return to her face. He liked her much better when her eyes were slumberous and sexy and filled with need. For him.

He urged her into the bathroom and grabbed a facecloth. Wetting it, he then brought it to her face and dabbed at the several slight cuts.

Shelley put her hand over his. "It's nothing. Just a few splinters of wood."

"Let me see to you." He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else until she'd been taken care of.

Standing quietly next to the sink, Shelley allowed him to wash her cuts and remove several small splinters of wood before dabbing them with some antibacterial ointment he found in the cabinet.

"There. All done." He dumped the tube of ointment on the counter and washed his hands.

Shelley caught his thick wrist, her slender fingers not quite going all the way around. "Thank you."

He nodded. "Get changed and come down to the kitchen." James was surprised Isaiah hadn't already come upstairs to check on her. He still had to be in shock. Joshua must have called him and told him the news, but actually seeing his sister in the flesh made it real.

Shelley nodded and headed to her room. James stopped in his own room long enough to grab a shirt. He left it unbuttoned and didn't bother with socks or shoes, rather padded barefoot down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Alex had made coffee so he swung by the counter and poured himself a mug. Isaiah sat, arms folded across his chest. His wife Meredith was next to him. James hadn't realized she was with him and inclined his head in greeting. She returned the nod, looking as aloof and regal as ever. Isaiah had certainly met his match with that female.

Alex was seated next to Joshua, her hand linked with his. They were a unit, a mated pair, and no one would ever come between them. That gave James a lot of comfort. He couldn't have wished for a better mate for his daughter.

Donovan and Quinn were staring at one another. Seated side by side, the resemblance was uncanny.

James heard Shelley's soft footsteps on the stairs and turned to watch her walk into the kitchen. Everyone who needed to be here was accounted for.

"You want some coffee?" Shelley still appeared far too pale for his liking. But worse, he could sense her fear and apprehension.

"Please."

James poured up another mug and handed it to her. It pleased him that she stayed close to him. He seated her next to him and turned to the business at hand.

"Tell me everything you know." He pinned Quinn with a steely gaze and listened as the younger man recounted everything. The attack on his family. Being separated from his twin. Going undercover with the hunters. The long empty search. The call from Steve Macmillan to come to North Carolina.

Finally, Quinn's voice trailed off.

"He recognized me at the gas station in Nashville." Shelley broke the silence.

Quinn shook his head. "I don't think so. Not consciously. Not at first. But something about you and James made him suspicious and he ran the plates of the truck. What he came up with made him want to dig deeper."

The younger man turned to James. "Your bad luck that a hunter spotted your truck outside a motel and he followed you here."

James had mulled over everything. "So no one else knows our location?"

"I don't think so. Macmillan wanted to keep it wrapped tight. He didn't want anyone to know about her." Quinn motioned to Shelley.

"Why?" Isaiah sat forward, resting his forearms on the table. "Why was he after you, Rachel?"

"Shelley. My name is Shelley."

James could see Isaiah was disgruntled, but he'd have to get used to the new name. The girl who was Rachel had died long ago. A brutal death at the hands of the hunters. The woman who was born was Shelley. Strong and patient and a survivor.

"Shelley," Isaiah conceded. "Why was this Macmillan guy after you?"

Shelley could feel her entire body trembling. Everyone was watching her. Soon they would all know that this tragedy was her fault. Her time here was coming to an end. They wouldn't want her to stay now. Not after this.

But the truth needed to come out. She needed to tell someone, release the burden weighing her down. It was all a part of dealing with her past so she could have a future.

"I killed his father." She waited, but no one condemned her. Licking her dry lips, she gathered her courage. "Tom. That was his father's name. He was the one who captured me all those years ago."

Isaiah swore. His eyes blazed with fury. The woman sitting beside him placed her hand on his arm. Shelley hadn't met her, but she assumed it was Meredith, his mate.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring this trouble to all of you."

"Fuck that." Isaiah jumped up from his chair, knocking it to the floor. "I wish I'd found you years ago and killed the lot of them." He whirled around to face Quinn. "And you. You're a part of this. You let them get close to my sister. To my sister-in-law. My brothers."

Quinn surged out of his seat and slammed his hands down flat on the table. "I didn't let them get hurt. I killed Macmillan. I risked my sister's life for your women." He took a deep breath, his chest heaving. "I also helped save your wife's pack in Chicago by calling your brother. I knew who you were. I've been able to find out a few things about my heritage over the past few years." He took a deep breath. "I won't deny I've killed. But only those sanctimonious pureblooded wolves who would have killed me or my sister and brother if they found us."

James jumped on Quinn's last statement. "You have another brother?"

“Yeah. He’s fully human. He’s younger than we are. My mom was in a relationship with *another* loser.” He shot a glare at Donovan. “Craig is how I found the hunters, how I’ve managed to learn as much about werewolves as I have. He’s hell on wheels with a computer.”

“But how did he find me and get my phone number?” Joshua asked.

Quinn smirked. “I did that all on my own. Isaiah used the same phone all while he was in Chicago.” He turned to face the older brother. “I followed you into Meredith’s club one night. You left your phone in your coat pocket and your coat at the table when you went to the john. I lifted your phone and got your number. I also copied the numbers you called. It wasn’t hard to figure out the one you called the most had to be your family or your alpha. I was gone before you got back to your table.”

“You’re good.” Isaiah eased back into his seat.

“Sit down, Quinn,” James ordered. “If we were going to kill you, you’d already be dead.”

Slowly, the younger man eased back down onto his seat.

Aggression seeped from the males in the room. She almost expected them to snarl and snap at one another any second. Shelley could feel the wolf inside her react to it, bristling and pacing. “I’m so sorry for all this.” She needed to make amends, but didn’t know how. “I’ll leave as soon as I pack my things.”

Every eye turned to her and the tension in the room grew thick. She swallowed hard, but squared her shoulders.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Isaiah looked as though he was going to jump over the table and grab her. Meredith’s hand on his arm seemed to be the only thing restraining him.

“You’re staying with us,” Joshua insisted, a deep frown on his face.

“I’m not a prisoner. I can leave if I want to,” she shot back. Crazy. She was going crazy. To be arguing to leave when all she wanted to do was stay, she had to be insane.

“No. You’re not a prisoner.” James’s calm voice soothed some of the unsettled feelings inside her. “But you did promise me a week.”

She was so confused. The last few days had changed everything she’d ever believed about herself and her family. Her past had caught up to her and now her future was uncertain.

It was a relief that James had offered her a lifeline. “A week.” Actually it was more like six days now. But it would give her time to figure out her next move.

Her brothers settled back, but she could tell they weren’t pleased with her. She rubbed her forehead. This wasn’t going well. She’d hoped to build some kind of relationship with her family. That wouldn’t happen if they were angry with her.

Levi entered the house, taking some of the attention from her, for which she was eternally grateful.

“How is Simon?” James asked.

“Well. I removed the bullet and he’s stitched up. He should be fine in a few days.”

It shamed Shelley that she hadn't been the first one to ask about him. Her heart had almost stopped when she'd heard him yell, seen him fall. They might be virtual strangers, but they were already working their way into her heart.

The room seemed to close around her. The air grew thinner, making it harder to breathe. A panic attack. She couldn't have one now. Not here.

Fingers closed around hers. She glanced at her lap. James's hand covered hers, offering silent comfort. He knew. Her gaze flew to his face and all she read was concern.

She concentrated on his face. Taking one breath at a time. She could almost hear his voice in her head telling her what to do. Gradually, her panic faded and she was able to pay attention to the conversation going on around her.

"Do you know for certain that hunters have your sister?" Donovan asked Quinn.

"Who else would take her?"

"Wolves." Donovan rolled his coffee mug back and forth between his hands. "The fact is that females are scarce and a rogue werewolf might have taken a female to mate with."

"You mean some bastard kidnapped her and turned her into his sex slave?"

Shelley could all too easily understand Quinn's concern. No female deserved to be taken and kept against her will.

"Maybe she isn't being kept against her will." Donovan faced his son. "Have you thought of that?"

Quinn shook his head. "No. We're extremely close. She'd contact me if she could. She knows I'll never stop searching for her." He turned to Isaiah and Joshua. "You above anyone should understand that."

James held up his hand. "Enough. Give Isaiah and Joshua all the information you have and we'll help you make inquiries."

"How? My brother's the best there is when it comes to hacking computers. If he hasn't been able to find a trace of her, what makes you think you can?"

James stared at the young man. "We have resources you don't."

Isaiah leaned forward and banged his head against the table with a heavy thunk before raising it to glare at James. "You don't mean—"

James grinned. "You'll be talking to Damek soon enough."

"Who's Damek?" Quinn asked.

"You'll find out when you head to Chicago with Isaiah. I think you should have your brother join you there. It's time we all started working together. We'll find Chris."

"I want in on this," Donovan insisted.

James looked at Quinn. "That's between you and Quinn. This meeting is done." He stood and Joshua ushered Quinn and Donovan out of the room. Levi followed. Alex paused long enough to kiss her father's cheek and hug Shelley.

“Don’t worry. Everything will work out.”

Shelley wished she shared Alex’s surety.

Isaiah stood with his woman beside him. “Rach— I mean, Shelley. I want you to meet Meredith, my mate.”

“It’s a pleasure.” The tall, slender woman held out her hand. She was striking with her long black hair and blue eyes. She was dressed in slacks and a blouse, but she seemed sophisticated. Shelley felt like a poor relation next to her.

She rubbed her damp palm over the leg of her jeans before she took Meredith’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Why don’t we go over to our house so we can talk?” Isaiah swept his arm around his wife. Shelley glanced at James and then away. She couldn’t depend on him for support. He had more important things to do than babysit her.

“Sure.” She walked toward the door with her family, but she could feel James’s eyes on her as she walked away.

Letting Shelley leave with her brother wasn’t easy. Every protective instinct inside James was urging him to sweep her into his arms and carry her to his bedroom. She belonged with him.

But she was still planning on leaving.

Her panic attack had caught him off-guard. He’d noted her loss of color and the way she’d stiffened and immediately known what was happening. Like a wild animal who’d tasted freedom, she panicked whenever she felt as though her freedom was being challenged.

Isaiah had almost blown it by insisting she stay.

Thankfully, he’d been able to smooth it over by reminding Shelley she’d promised him a week. Six days now. Not nearly long enough, but it would have to do. He had his work cut out for him to get Shelley to want to stay.

He would make it happen. Any other outcome was unacceptable.

James carried his mug to the sink and poured out his cold coffee. He hadn’t even managed a sip. He heard footsteps on the porch and knew Grady and the others had arrived.

It was time to deal with pack problems. He’d been too lenient and the Carlos family had once again threatened the safety of the pack. He set aside his mug, padded to the front door and swung it open. He stepped out onto the porch.

“Tell me what you’ve learned.” James waited patiently as Grady began to speak.

Chapter Sixteen

Shelley lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. It was going to be another long night. Since her escape last fall, she'd spent many sleepless nights worrying about how she was going to survive, if the hunters would find her and if she'd ever discover anything about her family or her roots.

The worst had happened and the hunters had found her. But that threat was now gone. She'd survived.

But the best had also happened. She'd found her family and now understood more about her heritage, about being a werewolf.

She sighed and flipped onto her side, tucking her hand beneath her pillow. It had been strange to spend time with her family. *Family*. The word itself was foreign to her. They'd made such an effort to accept her, but she was finding it difficult. She didn't know how to act in social situations and it made her feel awkward.

Still, all her brothers and her sisters-in-laws had been very kind. They'd told stories from their childhood, allowing her to sit back and take it all in. Bits and pieces of disjointed memories were coming back to her and she was beginning to remember how much her brothers had loved her.

It still felt slightly removed from her, as if those events had happened to someone else. But they were helping her understand her brothers and herself much better.

Joshua had fired up an outdoor grill and barbecued steaks, while Alex had baked potatoes and whipped up a huge garden salad.

It was all so normal.

Shelley liked all of them. It had been a relief to see Simon seated in a comfortable chair, his arm in a sling to keep his shoulder immobile. He'd been pale but smiling as he participated in the conversation.

None of them seemed to hold a grudge or blame her for leading the bounty hunters to their door.

It was going to be hard to leave here. But she had to. Didn't she?

Shelley flung back the covers in disgust and padded to the window. Standing there, she stared out over the night. The moon was bright, illuminating the few patches of snow hiding in the shade of the large fir trees. Spring was taking hold. It was a time for new beginnings.

What did she want out of life?

The freedom to choose. That was the biggest thing. After so many years of being a prisoner, she wanted to eat what she wanted to eat, wear what she wanted to wear. Beyond that, it was a blur. She'd honestly thought she wouldn't live that long, not with the hunters on her tail.

Now that the threat was gone, she was left floundering.

A slight disturbance in the air told her she wasn't alone. It was only when she sensed him that she freely admitted to herself that she'd been waiting for him. For James.

Strong arms banded around her from behind and his lips caressed the top of her head. Sighing, she leaned back against James's bare chest. His thick erection pressed against her behind. He was naked and the barrier of her sleeping gown was so thin it might as well not exist.

"Can't sleep?" His voice was rough and tender. He rocked her slowly back and forth.

She shook her head. "No. Too much to think about."

His sigh fluffed her hair. "You don't have to decide anything tonight or tomorrow or the day after that. Give yourself some time."

She continued to stare out the window. She loved the view. It was so peaceful. So perfect. "I have to do something." She had to make plans for her future. She knew her brothers wanted her to stay here. Had in fact pressured her to do so. Part of her wanted to run, but another part of her wanted to stay and see what it might be like to belong to an actual family.

James's lips caressed the side of her jaw, working their way down her neck. "There's plenty of time. No one is going to make you do anything you don't want to."

He'd hit on her main worry. She was afraid of giving in to her brothers' demands in order to fit in. She hadn't figured out if staying was what she wanted to do.

James continued nipping and sucking her neck, making it difficult to think. "James." His name came out as a long moan. Her nipples were taut and the heavy pulse of arousal beat low in her belly.

"Hmmm," he answered, the vibration cascading down her neck to her breasts and lower.

She covered his hands with hers and lifted them until they touched her breasts. He flicked his thumbs, caressing her tight nipples, and she leaned forward, pressing them more firmly against his questing fingers.

James slowly lifted the gown, pulling it over her head and whisking it away. Naked, she turned and linked her hands around his neck.

"Are you sure?" James cupped her face in his hands, his gaze solemn. "You've been through a lot today. I don't want to take advantage of you."

Her heart thudded wildly as she went up on her toes and kissed his hard jaw. She tunneled her fingers through his hair and pulled his face down to hers. She wanted this. Wanted to experience the wild sensations that shot through her whenever James touched her. He made her feel alive. Like she belonged.

It was dangerous to trust those emotions, but she couldn't help herself. After facing death today, seeing him face death, she needed to touch him, to have his hands on her body.

His kiss was gentle, as though he was afraid of frightening her. As much as she appreciated what he was doing, she wanted him wild, out of control, caught up in the heat that exploded whenever they touched.

Shelley rubbed her breasts against his chest. The wiry hair felt good against her swollen nipples. Her belly slid over his hard shaft and she could feel it pulsing against her, vibrantly alive and ready to pleasure her.

An answering throb began deep in her core. The lips of her sex swelled and dampened with growing need. She wanted to feel his cock sliding in and out of her slick channel. Filling her. Completing her.

Tongues tangled and breathing quickened as she deepened their kiss. She ate at his lips, desperately trying to imprint his taste so she'd never forget it.

He grabbed her hips, holding her steady. She felt him quiver as if he was uncertain whether or not to push her away or pull her closer.

She took the decision out of his hands by pulling away. His chest was heaving and his eyes were smoldering as she took his hand and led him toward the bed.

He followed but dug in his heels when they stood beside it. "I can't go slow, can't give you what you need. Not tonight. I'm too close to the edge." James dragged a hand through his hair and took a step away.

She followed him. "I don't want you to go slow. Not tonight."

His nostrils flared, and for a second she thought she saw his wolf semi-imposed on his face. She blinked and it was gone. The female wolf inside her rubbed sensuously against Shelley's skin, whining to be released. She wanted James's wolf as much as Shelley wanted James. No, they were one and the same, part of the whole.

"Shelley."

She heard the warning in his voice and ignored it. "No. All my life I've had to accept whatever males took me. This is my choice. I want you."

She felt the change in the atmosphere. James seemed to grow larger, more imposing. The muscles in his arms and legs grew rigid as his cock bobbed in front of him. Testosterone and pheromones pulsed through the air, surrounding her in their potent mix. Cream slid from her core in answer. Oh yes, she wanted him.

James's golden eyes narrowed. "After tonight, you won't remember those other men." He growled the possessive words. Instead of frightening her, they sent a shiver of desire skating over her bare skin.

He pounced, taking her down onto the bed. Panic threatened until he rolled so he was flat on his back and she was lying on top of him. He cupped the back of her head in his large hand and pulled her down so he could kiss her. He angled her face so he could deepen it.

Their breath mingled, their tongues twined together, their teeth clinked as they struggled to get closer. Shelley rubbed her body against his, wanting to feel his hardness, his maleness. He was so strong, so commanding, yet she had no fear.

It was a heady experience.

James tugged her back and stared at her. "Sit up."

She did and that brought her pussy snug against his erection. They both groaned as she experimented with sliding back and forth over his hard shaft.

“Fuck, yes,” he moaned. His eyes were half closed, but she could still see the smoldering gleam in them. He reached up and cupped her breasts, teasing her red, puckered nipples between his thumbs and forefingers.

She panted hard and continued to work herself over his cock. Each stroke stimulated her clit until she thought she’d explode.

“Take what you need,” he gritted out from between clenched teeth. He looked feral, primal and tapped into the same wild feelings that existed inside her.

Her skin was flush with pleasure. Each time he gently pinched her nipples, her pussy spasmed. He arched his hips, bringing her clit and slick folds in closer contact with his thick shaft.

Her orgasm struck hard and fast. She cried out as her inner muscles contracted. Her sheath clutched and grabbed, but found nothing but air. Her entire body shook and she collapsed against James. He banded his thickly muscled arms around her and held her tight.

When she could finally breathe again, Shelley pushed upright. The motion pressed her mound against his throbbing erection. He hadn’t come. Was still hard.

And she still wasn’t fulfilled. It wasn’t going to be enough for her to just have an orgasm. She wanted to feel James deep inside, a part of her.

Sweat covered his torso. His breathing was labored, his chest expanding and contracting with each gasp of air he sucked into his lungs. He watched her, demanding nothing. And that made her want to give him everything. He was unlike any other man she’d ever met. Controlled. Strong. Sure of himself.

“Shelley, you have to stop.” His voice was low. Guttural. He wasn’t as in control as he seemed.

“No, I don’t,” she countered.

She gripped his shaft in her hand and pumped up and down. It was wet from her juices. Blood pulsed through his hard length, keeping it thick and hard. The bulbous head was darker, almost purple, and fluid seeped from the slit at the top. She licked her lips, remembering his salty, masculine taste.

A low growl filled the air and James’s hips arched off the mattress. “You’re killing me.”

She shook her head. There were so many things she wanted to say, to tell him. She’d never expected to want a man, to trust one. He’d given her back hope, shown her that not all men were alike. He’d brought her into his home, helped her understand her culture and find her family. He’d protected her, was still protecting her from himself.

But words wouldn’t come, so she showed him instead. Going up on her knees, she angled the head of his cock toward her opening.

He stilled. “Are you sure?”

Shelley answered with action, not words, lowering herself over the thick head of his cock. The muscles at the opening of her sheath were swollen and tight, but she pressed down until the broad tip was in. Her channel pulsed and rippled.

James groaned and grabbed her hips. "I can't wait." That was all the warning she got. He surged up as he pulled her down. His thick shaft forged inward, stretching her to the limits. Filling her. She squirmed, trying to get comfortable. James was a big man in every way.

He held her steady. "Don't move." A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, disappearing into his hair. She loved the shock of silver mixed with the many shades of brown. It was sexy.

She tried to do as he asked. Really, she did. But it was impossible. She had to move.

Raising herself a couple of inches, she slowly came back down. A low moan broke from deep within her. Her body stretched to accommodate him. She could feel the pulsing of his cock deep inside her. He was truly a part of her.

She lifted up and came down, again and again. Never more than a few inches at a time.

"Shelley," he growled her name.

She didn't know what to do. Her breasts ached, her pussy throbbed and each movement was almost painful. It wasn't enough. She stared hopelessly down at him. "Help me."

He banded his arm around her waist and flipped them so she was flat on her back and he loomed large above her. The motion sent his cock deeper. She pulled her legs up, desperately trying to make more room for him.

James shoved his arms beneath her legs and planted his hands by her head. The change in position left her legs wide open. She was unable to move, unable to control the depth of his thrust. She should have been scared to be at the mercy of a male. Instead, she couldn't get him deep enough.

He started slow but quickly picked up the pace. He hammered his cock into her, angling his body so he stroked her clit each time he drove deep.

Her mouth fell open on a silent scream. Her head fell back and she closed her eyes, trying to understand the sensations rocketing through her. Her body was on fire. Her skin about to burst into flames.

"Look at me," he commanded. "Watch me take you."

She opened her eyes, unable to do anything else. He was so big and strong. All alpha male as he drilled into her over and over. With his hair falling around his face and his eyes gleaming, he looked fierce. She could see the wolf inside him, desperately clamoring to get out. But the man was in charge. In control.

Each stroke of his cock stretched her channel. She felt the pulse of his shaft against the slick walls, felt him touch her womb. They were both covered in a sheen of sweat as he took her.

Her breasts ached so she covered them with her hands.

"Fuck, yes. Touch yourself."

She plumped up the sensitive mounds and rubbed her thumbs over the hard tips. She moaned and her inner muscles clenched, drawing a gasp from James.

“Now, Shelley. Now.” He pumped harder. She felt his cock swelling, getting even larger, the burst of fluid deep inside her as he filled her with his essence.

He stroked again and pushed her over the edge. This time when her orgasm struck, her pussy clamped down hard on his shaft. He didn’t stop moving, but continued to pump hard and deep. She cried out again, her entire body jerking and spasming.

Her thighs quivered and her arms shook. She clutched at James’s shoulders, needing something solid to hold on to. He gave a final shudder and groan and fell to the mattress, angling his body away from her torso.

They were still intimately joined and the occasional aftershock shook them both as they recovered. Shelley didn’t think she’d ever be able to move again. Every preconceived notion she’d ever had about sex had been shot out the window.

She’d had sex during heat, been caught up in a mindless biological sensation she couldn’t control. She’d also been taken against her will. But never had she experienced anything like this. She felt closer to James than she ever had to another person.

She decided not to think about it but to simply enjoy it.

James lifted his head and kissed her. A quick peck on the lips before he pulled out and collapsed beside her. He reached out his arm and pulled her into the curve of his body and kissed the top of her head. “Sleep. You can worry in the morning.”

Strangely enough, his words made sense. She didn’t have to decide anything right now. Content in a way she’d never been before, she snuggled close, rubbing her butt against his semi-erect cock.

He laughed and tightened his arms around her.

The smell of sex, of their joining, permeated the air around her. Her skin was sticky and hot. She should get up and go to the bathroom and get cleaned up.

Instead, she savored the smells, the sensations of making love with James. She stilled as she considered her choice of words. Making love.

Because it was more than just sex. She respected James. Cared for him. That didn’t mean it was necessarily love. It couldn’t be. They hadn’t known each other long enough.

“Stop thinking. You’re keeping me awake.” James kissed her temple and covered one of her breasts with his palm, squeezing gently. “Sleep.”

Releasing all thoughts, she simply enjoyed lying next to James, his hard body wrapped around hers with the moonlight shining in on them.

In the house next door, Alex lay in her husband's arms, feeling very content. Joshua always knew just how to touch her, to please her. He kissed her temple and she snuggled closer.

"I like her." They'd been talking about Shelley before they'd gotten sidetracked.

"I don't want to lose her."

She could hear the fear in Joshua's voice. She patted his chest. "I'll do everything I can to convince her to stay."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles one after the other. They'd just made love but she was suddenly breathless all over again.

"James wants her."

Alex wasn't certain how she'd felt about that at first, but the more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea. Her father had been alone for far too long. "I think you're right."

"You don't mind?" Joshua shifted in the bed so he could look at her.

She shrugged. "As long as he's happy, that's all that matters to me." And she meant it. Shelley had a lot of problems to work through. But heck, who didn't? She wasn't exactly problem-free herself. She was still dealing with the issue of being a half-breed werewolf.

"Don't worry. It will all work out." Joshua rolled her beneath him, covering her with his large body.

Alex wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, forgetting about all their problems for now.

Across the compound, Quinn lay on a firm mattress and held a phone to his ear. "Yeah, Craig, I'm fine. No, I've told you everything. Hold tight and I'll get back to you in a few days."

"I can be there sometime tomorrow if you need me."

Quinn closed his eyes as emotion welled up inside him. He could always count on his younger brother. "I know, man, but I'm okay."

"I'm only a call away." Craig paused, and Quinn knew what was coming next. "What's he like?"

He being Quinn's father. Or rather, sperm donor. He'd never been a father.

"It's like looking in a mirror, except for the difference in hair color." Which was spooky as hell. The guy looked more like his older brother than his father. But he'd learned that werewolves lived longer than normal humans.

"But what's he like?" Craig persisted.

"I honestly don't know. I met Donovan Brody. We talked for a few minutes and I'll see him again tomorrow. They had a lot of pack politics and shit to deal with after the attack today."

"I'm glad you're out of that." Craig never missed the opportunity to let him know what he thought about the bounty hunters.

"Me too." He'd lost a part of his soul this past year and wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get it back.

“Do they really think some werewolf might have her?”

“That’s the current thought, and they may be right.” Quinn watched the shadows dancing on the ceiling. “I’m open to the possibility. I haven’t found anything to suggest the hunters have her.”

“Fuck.”

“You said it, brother.” Quinn turned onto his side and stared out the window. “Look, I gotta go. I’ll keep in contact.”

“You let me know where you’ll be and I’ll come to you. I’m only renting this dive I call home month to month.”

“Will do. Take care, Craig.”

“You too.”

Quinn thumbed off his phone and tossed it onto the nightstand. He was surprised he’d been allowed to keep it. Then again, Levi Striker was in the bed next door and Micah was bunked out in the room on his other side. Either one or both of them had probably heard the entire conversation. Werewolves’ preternatural hearing made it difficult to have a private conversation.

Either way, he didn’t care. He was more than ready to start the search for his twin. “Hang in there, Chris,” he whispered. “I’m coming for you.”

Chapter Seventeen

Her week was up today. Shelley peered out the kitchen window, wondering how the time had gone by so quickly. She'd spent her days puttering around James's house and getting to know her family and other members of the community. True to their word, the males had all been back, but they hadn't pressured her in any way.

She'd spent time with Alex and Meredith, coming to like and respect both women. She'd also come to know her brothers much better. The more time she spent with them, the more she remembered.

Isaiah was the one she had the most memories of. They'd spent time talking and simply being together. The one thing she hadn't been able to make herself do was shift into her wolf form. Too many years of training and conditioning had taken their toll. She was afraid of that part of herself even as she was coming to accept it in the people around her.

She'd seen all her brothers shift and run as a family. She'd longed to go with them but had been unable to make herself take that final step. James had stayed with her, his arm around her waist, telling her not to worry, not to push herself. That there was plenty of time.

Well, time had run out.

And then there was James. The man was insatiable. She smiled, a private smile of pleasure. She was insatiable too when it came to him. He came to her bed every night. Some nights they'd simply pleasure one another. Other nights, they'd go all the way. She still wasn't comfortable saying they were making love, but she wasn't going to label it simply sex. It was much more than that.

Just this morning, he'd rolled her onto her side facing him, draped her leg over his thigh and slid into her before she was fully awake. She'd opened her eyes to find him gently rocking them both to orgasm.

She'd clung to him after, not knowing what today would bring. She had to make some decisions about her future.

"Penny for your thoughts." As though her musings had conjured him, James slid up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. It was a familiar pose, one she was coming to love. He made her feel cared for and safe.

"I'm not certain they're worth that much," she offered.

He released her and turned her to face him. "Let me be the judge of that."

She leaned against the kitchen counter and stared up into his face. When had he become so important to her? She rubbed her hand over her forehead. "It's been a week."

James tensed, his expression going from lazy, tolerant male to fierce predator in a heartbeat. Yet, she didn't fear him. A week of being with him and her family had gone a long way to helping her get past the years of imprisonment.

Not that she believed she was totally over them. No, it might take her the rest of her long life to put those years behind her. If she ever did. But she'd made a good start.

James had taught her that not all men were cruel. He'd shown her that there were good males out there. Those who stood by their word and protected those around them.

He'd also shown her that she was more than simply a werewolf. She was a female with a female's needs. She shifted her weight from one foot to another, uncomfortable as the familiar blast of desire shot through her.

All the man had to do was look at her and she wanted him.

His eyes half-closed and he took a deep breath. She knew he could smell her arousal but she didn't care.

"You don't have to go." He pulled her closer and rocked her hips against his rather large erection. "Stay." He leaned forward and brushed a kiss over her temple and down her cheekbone. "Stay with me," he coaxed as he nibbled on her neck just below her ear.

"I can't." It would be too easy to remain here, to let James continue to take care of her. She'd never learn how to stand on her own two feet that way.

After all her years of captivity, Shelley needed to be free. To make her own decisions. To forge her own path in life.

"I can't," she whispered. Her chest hurt and breathing became difficult. She wanted to stay but had to leave.

James tightened his arms around her briefly and then moved back a step. "Where will you go?"

Perversely, she wanted him to argue with her. God, what was wrong with her? She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to keep his warmth as long as possible.

Shelley shrugged. "Isaiah wants me to go to Chicago with him."

James closed his eyes briefly and nodded. "When will you leave?"

She chewed on her bottom lip. "He wants to leave this morning." Her stomach was churning. She was making the right decision. Wasn't she? If she stayed she'd have the pressure of all the males wanting to mate with her. Plus, the more time she spent with James, the more he'd come to mean to her. As it was, she felt as though she was freefalling without a safety net.

The panic attack hit her hard and fast. Her breath caught in her throat. Her skin went hot and then cold. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and her hands began to shake.

"Breathe." James was beside her. He didn't touch her but kept repeating that single word over and over. She kept her eyes on his face, memorizing every hard plane and line.

The feeling of fear and dread slowly receded and she was able to suck some much needed air into her lungs.

“That’s it,” he encouraged. “One breath at a time.”

The world seemed to stop as she watched him. She’d known him a little more than a week but he’d become such a huge part of her life. She was going to miss him so much.

Leaving was going to be like cutting off a piece of herself. But like any surgery, it was best done swiftly.

“I need to finish packing.” And that was a total lie. She didn’t have that much and had shoved all of it into her two shopping bags earlier this morning.

James stood aside and she scurried out of the kitchen, feeling his eyes on her until she was out of sight. Up in her room, she shut the door and sank down on the edge of the bed and buried her face in her hands.

How was she going to do this? How was she going to leave?

Swiping at the tears on her cheeks, she straightened her spine. “You have to do this,” she said aloud. She needed to get strong, to learn to accept her wolf, to shift. Maybe then she could come back on her own terms. Maybe then she could be the female James needed by his side.

That thought stopped her cold. That was why she was really leaving. She didn’t feel worthy.

James was alpha of this pack. He needed a strong female beside him, not one who was literally afraid of herself.

She needed to get beyond her past, to accept all aspects of herself. Maybe when she was finally whole again, she could be what James needed. Maybe then she could return and see where the attraction between them might go. Maybe it would be too late by then.

That thought made her heart ache. But she shoved it aside. She knew what she needed to do.

James wanted to drive his fist through the wall. He needed to feel the sting of pain to distract him from the total destruction of his heart. Shelley was leaving him.

He knew it wasn’t logical to feel that way. Shelley was doing what she felt she needed to do. Still, he felt betrayed.

After spending the last week in her bed, he’d thought he’d gotten through to her, thought she’d understood how he felt about her.

All the hair on his body bristled as the wolf inside him howled for release. He clamped his hands around the edge of the countertop, not surprised to see claws instead of fingers. He was close.

His mate was leaving him and he didn’t think he’d survive.

But he would because this was what she needed. He needed to set her free if he was ever going to have a chance of claiming her as his mate. If he kept her here, forced her to stay, she'd never forgive him. And he'd be as bad as those bastard bounty hunters.

No, as hard as it was, he was going to have to let her go.

His heart felt as though a gigantic boulder was lying on it. She hadn't even left and already he was bereft.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened and rolled his shoulders. He could do this. For Shelley. For himself. She was only going to Chicago and would be with her brother. Isaiah would take good care of her, and James could find a lot of reasons to head to Chicago on business.

He would court her long distance if that's what it took.

Resolved, he turned when he heard footsteps behind him. It wasn't Shelley, but a female he loved all the same.

Alex stopped a few feet away. "What's wrong?"

He smiled ruefully. His daughter knew him too well. "Shelley is leaving with Isaiah today."

She frowned. "I thought she was staying."

James absently rubbed his hand over his chest. "So did I."

"Aren't you going to do anything to stop her?" Alex demanded.

James crossed his arms over his chest. "What should I do? Should I lock her in her room? Maybe chain her up somewhere?" Alex paled, but he couldn't stop. "She's already had too much of that in her life. She needs to make her own choices."

"I know." She tentatively walked up to him and put her hand on his arm. James knew his muscles were as hard as steel. "I just wanted her to stay."

He sighed and pulled his daughter into his arms, kissing the top of her head. "Me too." She had no idea just how much.

Alex pulled away. "I'm going to go up and say goodbye."

He nodded and turned back to stare out the window. The beauty of the trees and mountains that usually soothed his soul did nothing for him today. How could they when he knew he was losing his heart.

A tentative knock came on the door. Shelley knew it wasn't James. She took a deep breath. "Come in, Alex."

The door opened and the younger woman stuck her head in. As always, Shelley was struck by just how alike father and daughter were. "I heard you were leaving." Alex stepped inside but left the door ajar. As usual, Alex was wearing jeans and a sweater. She was less intimidating than Meredith who always seemed to look put together and classy no matter what she was wearing.

"Yes." She nodded, not knowing what else to say.

"I wish you would stay." There was no mistaking the honesty in the younger woman's voice.

"I can't." Shelley sighed.

"Why? I know you like it here. Don't you?"

"It's not that simple, Alex."

"Why not?"

Shelley just shook her head. Alex didn't understand. Couldn't understand. Yes, she'd dealt with a lot herself, finding out she wasn't human but really half werewolf. But she was confident in her ability to deal with it. Alex knew who she was. Knew how to stand on her own two feet.

Shelley was still learning. Had barely begun to find her own feet, her identity. She couldn't expect James to wait for her to figure out her life. Nor could she ask him to take her with all the problems she had. She had to deal with her issues and become a strong female. To figure out who she really was.

"Will you come back?"

That was a question she could answer honestly. "Yes. I'd like to."

Alex came to her and wrapped her arms around her in a hug. Shelley returned it, blinking back tears. "I'd like that. And I know my father would."

Shelley tried hard not to think about James. If she dwelled on him too much, she'd never find the strength to leave. There were more footsteps in the hallway and she knew the time had come.

"Hey." Meredith stood decked out in jeans and boots and a cashmere sweater. Her leather jacket was hooked over her arm. Her long, black hair was pulled away from her face and clipped in the back. It emphasized the beauty of her face. Even in what should have been casual attire, she looked impeccable. "It's time."

Shelley felt underdressed standing beside her. Her choices were limited, as was her knowledge of fashion. But it wouldn't always be that way, she promised herself. She'd work hard and do whatever it took to become whole and healthy again. And that meant learning about every aspect of life.

Alex hugged her hard again. "Remember, you're welcome here anytime. You can stay with me and Joshua if you want."

Touched by the offer, Shelley hugged her back. "Thank you."

"Can I help you with your stuff?" Meredith motioned to the two bags on the bed.

"No, I've got it." It wasn't that she didn't trust Meredith. It was just hard to relinquish control. Everything she owned was in those two bags. And a little voice in the back of her head reminded her that James had bought most of it for her.

She'd pay him back. As soon as she started working at Meredith's nightclub, Haven, she'd send money back to James. That would put them on a more even footing. She didn't want to owe him. Didn't want him to have to take care of her. She wanted to be his equal.

"I'm ready." Grabbing her belongings, she left the room without a backward glance and headed down the hall.

James was waiting for them by the front door. It hurt to look at him so she kept her gaze averted. He murmured to Alex and Meredith as they hurried out the door. She started to go past him but he stopped her.

"Shelley."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and stared up at him. His eyes were molten gold as they held her spellbound. When he cupped the side of her face in his hand and leaned inward, she couldn't move.

Their lips barely met. He pulled back, swore and swooped down, capturing her mouth. The bags crumpled between them as he yanked her against him and plundered her mouth.

He tasted like coffee and a hint of mint from his toothpaste. But beyond that was the flavor of hot male. Of desire. Of want and need.

The bags fell from her nerveless fingers and she grabbed the front of his shirt to anchor herself. His tongue tangled with hers. Their breath mingled. His cock throbbed against her belly.

She didn't know how long the kiss lasted. She was lost. In James. In his taste, his scent, the feel of his body against hers, the whimpering sounds of need that came from deep inside her.

It was a shock when he pushed her away. He bent down and picked up the bags at her feet and handed them to her. She took them automatically and closed her arms around them.

"This isn't over," he growled. "Not by a long shot."

"James?"

He dropped a quick, hard kiss on her lips and motioned to the door. With his hand on the small of her back, she stepped outside. Isaiah and Meredith were waiting. So were her brothers and Alex.

This was much harder than she'd expected it to be. In seven short days, she'd come to know these men. They were no longer strangers. They'd welcomed her with open arms even when she'd held herself back from fear of being hurt.

Joshua pulled her into his arms. "Don't stay away too long, Shelley." He kissed her forehead and handed her off to Levi.

"I'll miss you." His voice was gruff as he hugged her.

Then Micah had her, his arms so tight around her she could barely breathe. "Come back."

Finally, it was Simon's turn. "I'm coming to Chicago in a few weeks," he promised. She smiled, her heart lightening slightly. She would be glad to see him.

Isaiah waited patiently beside his mate. The look of understanding in his gaze was almost her undoing. She wanted to run back inside James's house and stay. It was only the fact she knew she was doing the right thing that enabled her to turn and face him.

His face was fierce, the harsh angles and planes even more austere and forbidding than usual. His golden eyes were hard as he stared at her.

His gaze flicked to Isaiah's. "Take good care of her."

Her brother inclined his head. "You have my word."

James nodded and then turned and walked away. She watched until he disappeared from view.

"Come, little sister. It's time to go." Isaiah urged her toward the gate and beyond. She turned at the last second and saw her family standing there, watching her. Only James was missing.

She stumbled slightly. Only quick action by Isaiah kept her from falling. She murmured her thanks and kept walking. The world had changed so much in such a short time. The snow had finally melted and tiny flowers were poking their heads up through the moist ground. Buds covered the trees. Soon leaves would appear and change the entire face of the forest.

And she wouldn't be here to see it.

She heard a wolf howl in the distance and her heart stuttered. The mournful sound made her soul ache. It was the sound of a creature in pain.

It was James.

All the beatings she'd endured. The rapes. The pain. The long, lonely years with no hope. Nothing hurt her as badly as the thought of James in pain.

She came to a halt, her feet refusing to take another step forward. Her wolf howled and fought for release. She knew James was her mate. Wanted him with her entire being.

What was she doing?

She loved James.

It was as simple and as complicated as that. A little more than a week ago, she would have said it was impossible for her to ever love a man. Then James had walked into the diner where she'd worked and changed her life forever.

Had changed her.

In a few short days, she'd found her family, come to understand her heritage and taken the first real steps toward healing the wounds of the past.

James had risked his life for her. He had never offered any recriminations for bringing the wrath of the hunters down on his pack. All he'd ever done was offer her support.

He was letting her go because he knew it was what she wanted.

"Shelley?" Isaiah peered down at her, concern etched on his face.

"I can't do this." She took a step away. Her back hit a tree and she stared wildly around, her belongings clutched tight in her arms.

"Do what?" His voice was gentle. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

There was so much love. So much understanding. All of them had given her so much and she'd all but thrown it back in their faces with her need to stand on her own two feet.

But that was wrong.

Wolves were pack animals. She'd been alone far too long, cut off from her kind and her family. If she ever wanted to fully heal, she'd have to embrace who and what she truly was.

She licked her dry lips. Her heart beat so hard and wild she knew her brother could probably hear it.

Isaiah hooked his arm around Meredith and smiled. "Don't be afraid to go after what you want. We're all here for you. If things don't work out here, you're always welcome in Chicago."

"And we want you to come for a visit, even if you don't stay," Meredith added. "I want you to meet my pack, my family."

Their continued generosity astounded her.

As though he could read her mind, Isaiah cupped her face in his hands and leaned down. "We're family. It doesn't matter if your name is Rachel or Shelley. You're my sister and I want you to be happy."

A low sob was torn from somewhere deep within her and she flung herself into his arms. "I'm sorry," she whispered, brokenly. "Sorry I disobeyed you that day and got caught."

The guilt had been eating at her. She'd disobeyed the rules about going out alone and had caused nothing but grief and hardship for her family.

His arms tightened around her. Then she felt Meredith's arms enclose her as well.

"It wasn't your fault." His voice was fierce. "Do you understand me? It was those fucking hunters." Isaiah pulled back and glared at her. "We all broke rules as pups. That's part of growing. Learning. But none of us paid. Not like you did." He brushed away the tears from her face as another howl echoed across the air.

"Go." He pushed her away. "Go to him. Tell him how you feel."

She gave a watery laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to those of us who love you both." Meredith's words comforted her. They loved her.

Shelley knew what she had to do.

She thrust her two bags of belongings at her brother. "Can you take this back for me?"

He smiled. "Yeah, I'll make sure your things are safe."

Shelley knew he understood what a big deal it was for her to leave her few belongings with him. Ducking behind a bush, she began to yank at her sweater and jeans. Meredith was beside her a few seconds later, gathering and folding clothing. "I'll make sure you're clothing gets back to James's house." Leaning forward, she kissed Shelley's cheek. "Go for it, honey."

Naked, Shelley stood and took a deep breath. She barely felt the chill of the spring air or the damp ground beneath her feet. She hadn't willingly changed in decades. It happened around the time she went into heat, but that was involuntary and she'd fought it with all her might.

This was different. For the first time in her life she wanted to shift into her wolf.

Closing her eyes, she embraced the wilder part of herself. Primal. Instinctual. She reached for it. Welcomed it. Her wolf howled. The sheer happiness and acceptance of that part of herself rushed through her. The wolf held no grudge against being imprisoned all these years. It understood survival.

But now it was time to live. Freely. As she was meant to.

Her bones cracked and reformed as she fell to her hands and knees. The moss was soft against her skin as she threw back her head and let it happen. Fur covered her skin. Her facial features shifted, her jaw elongating.

When it was done, the world appeared different. Sharper. More detailed. Her hearing was always good, but this was even better. She lifted her nose and sniffed the air. The earthy smell of the ground mixed with the tangy pine needles. She scented a squirrel in the tree to her left and the perfume of an early flower off to her right. The wind ruffled her fur as she watched a beetle climb up a tree trunk.

It was incredible.

“You’re beautiful.” Isaiah dropped to his knees beside her and held out his hand. She trotted forward and nuzzled his palm. His fingers rubbed through her thick fur. “I’m so proud of you.”

A howl sounded in the distance and she swung her head around. James was out there. Alone.

“Go,” her brother urged her.

Giving no further thought to her belongings, she darted off into the underbrush. She trusted her family. She trusted James.

Shelley savored that feeling as she jumped over a fallen log and under yet another. A creek trickled off to her right, but she ignored it. Exploring could wait for another time. She had to find James.

As urgent as her mission was, she couldn’t help but experience the exhilaration coursing through her veins. She felt more alive than she ever had. Whole.

She finally understood that she and the wolf were one. Not separate.

Her paws made little sound as she raced over the soft ground. Moss, pine needles and dead leaves carpeted the forest floor, cushioning her steps. The sun came through the trees, painting the world with dark and light.

Shelley paused, raised her head and sniffed the air. He was close.

Instinct made her lift her head and open her mouth. What emerged was a long, baleful howl. She needed James with her. Now.

The air around her thickened. She sensed him before she saw him. Like a silvery ghost, the gray wolf emerged from behind a thick clump of trees.

Her entire body quivered. She bent her back legs, ready for action.

James erupted with no warning. Turning on her hind legs, Shelley darted off. Some instinct told her to run. To make him catch her.

It wasn't fear making her heart beat faster, filling her veins with pure exhilaration. It was desire. Love. Need.

He was gaining on her. She pushed hard, but was no match for the large male wolf chasing her.

He pounced, taking her down easily. They rolled across the mossy ground, a tangle of limbs and fur. He stood over her, his hackles raised, a snarl on his face.

Shelley lay beneath him, panting hard, totally submissive.

She loved him. She'd hurt him. This was her way of telling him without words.

He leaned down and caught the slack skin of her neck between his teeth. She didn't flinch away. Instead, she arched her neck, offering him her complete trust.

He stilled and his grip changed. James began to nuzzle and lick her neck, her ears, her muzzle. She returned the wolf caress, nipping playfully at his ears.

He pounced and rolled with her. Like two children, they nipped and played and frolicked. For the first time in her life, Shelley felt totally free.

She hadn't needed to leave him to find herself. All she'd had to do was embrace every part of her. There would be problems in the future, but she was confident she could handle them with James at her side.

They started running. It only took her a few minutes to realize he was leading her back toward the compound. The tall fence came into view. Her brothers were all standing near one of the houses talking. They paused to watch as the two of them raced into the yard and up to James's front door.

Shelley stayed in wolf form as James shifted and opened the door. She wasn't quite ready to be naked in front of a crowd. Given her years of captivity, she might never be comfortable with it. But that was okay. She could deal with it.

"Shelley." There was so much emotion in her name. James closed the door behind him. Naked, he was tall and broad and strong. Human or wolf, he was a fierce predator, one who would protect what was his.

Closing her eyes, she let the change wash over her. Her wolf went easily, understanding that she would be allowed to run free from now on. Her wolf also trusted what was about to happen.

Her eyes popped open as muscled arms lifted and carried her up the stairs toward the bedrooms. This time, he bypassed her room and took her to his.

Large and masculine, like the man himself, his room was filled with heavy wood furniture. The green comforter folded at the foot of his bed was the only splash of color in an otherwise austere space.

Yet, she didn't feel out of place or unwelcome.

He set her down on the bed and followed her down. "You're mine. Now and forever."

She knew what he wanted and nodded. She wanted it too. "Now and forever."

Chapter Eighteen

James was having a hard time believing Shelley was here with him. One minute, he'd been running in the forest, trying to escape the ache in his heart, the utter loneliness her leaving had brought. The next, he'd heard Shelley howl. Somehow, he'd known it was her. He'd smelled her. The rich, musky scent of female wolf. His wolf had stalked her, claiming her, dominating her in that form.

She was his.

He'd barely restrained himself from mounting her in animal form. But he'd managed. He wanted, needed, to be in his human form to claim her as his mate.

He knew they should talk. He had no idea why she'd come back. And right now, he didn't care. Maybe it was unfair of him, but quite frankly, he didn't give a shit. She'd come back to him, was naked in his bed and ready to accept his claim.

He threw one thick, muscled thigh over her legs to keep her pinned to the bed as he leaned down and captured her lips. She was so damn sweet. And she'd put him through hell.

His urge to be gentle fought with his urge to punish.

He pulled back and bared his teeth at her. "Don't you ever leave me again," he growled.

She brushed a lock of his gray hair out of his eyes and offered him a solemn promise. "I won't."

His wolf howled, urging him to flip her onto her stomach and claim her before she changed her mind.

The male wanted to touch, to taste, to savor every second of what was to come.

He kissed her again, his tongue tracing her full lower lip before plunging inside. She was so responsive. Little whimpers of pleasure came from her throat, making him crazy with need.

Their tongues danced. Twined.

He covered one plump breast with his hand, loving the way her nipple puckered and stabbed his palm. She writhed beneath him, pushing her breast more fully into his hand.

He released her lips and peppered kisses along her forehead, down the slope of her nose and along her cheekbones. He nipped at her jaw and licked the curve of her neck.

Working lower, he traced the line of her collarbone, marveling at her courage. After everything she'd been through, she was able to give herself so completely. It was nothing less than a miracle considering they'd only known each other for a matter of days.

Guilt began to tickle his conscience and he pulled back. "Are you sure?" There was no going back once he'd claimed her in the way of their people.

She nodded, her gaze solemn. She looked lovely with her light brown hair spread across his white sheets. "I'm sure. Are you?" She nibbled her bottom lip. His cock jerked as he watched her tongue soothe the small sting. "I come with a lot of baggage. Some might not like your choice of mate."

"Screw 'em." Savage pleasure washed through him. "You're mine. Anyone who doesn't like it can get the hell out or fight me for leadership of the pack."

Worry filtered into her gaze. She raised her arms and locked them around his neck. "I don't want you to have to fight."

He shrugged. "Nature of the species. When the time comes, I'll step down. But that won't be for quite a few years yet."

He'd had enough talking and slid down her body until his mouth was level with her breasts. Capturing one perky nipple, he suckled gently. Her hands slid to his shoulders, clutching at them.

The feel of her nails scoring his skin made him crazy. Leaving her breast, he continued lower. He lapped at her flat stomach, tasting heat and salt from her skin. His teeth grazed her hipbones and she arched her hips and moaned.

He could smell her now. Heat and woman and a touch of floral that was uniquely Shelley. He made a space for himself between her legs and went to work. He wanted her crazy for him when he took her.

Her legs shifted restlessly as he ran his hands over her inner thighs, teasing the crease at the tops of her legs.

"James."

His name was little more than a breathy gasp but his balls drew up tight to his body. He wasn't going to make it much longer. Not this time.

Opening her with his fingers, he blew on her slick folds. She quivered, tilting her hips toward him in silent offering. This was what he wanted. Shelley—willing and ready to accept him.

He ate at her delicate folds. Tasting, licking, nipping. He dipped his tongue into her slick channel. Damn, she tasted sweet. He couldn't get enough of her.

She sobbed and writhed beneath him as he devoured her. He captured her clit between his lips and teased it with the tip of his tongue. Her long, tortured moan was music to his ears.

Pressing two thick fingers into her tight channel, he worked them deep. He wanted her ready for his claiming, which would be more intense than anything they'd done so far.

She gave a shattered cry and arched off the bed. Her inner muscles clutched at his fingers. Cream coated his hand. He kept working them until he sensed she'd had enough.

When she collapsed back onto the mattress with a smile playing on her lips, he knew she was ready.

Coming over her, he kissed her softly.

Then he sat back on his heels and rolled her onto her stomach. She tensed, but didn't object.

“Come up onto your knees.” He’d explained to her about the claiming process, so she knew what was about to happen. Tucking his hands beneath her, he urged her upward. Shelley rose up, resting her weight on her hands as she pushed her butt up into the air.

The long length of her spine was delicate and very feminine. But it was marred by a crisscross of pale scars. Shelley had never mentioned them, so neither had he. She also had scars circling her slender ankles.

Just thinking about her being shackled made him want to kill someone. He hated that she’d had to save herself but was eternally grateful that she’d been able to.

He hated the scars. What they represented. He leaned down and kissed several of them.

Shelley stilled. “I know they’re ugly.”

“No.” He kissed another one. “They’re badges of courage. Of survival.”

“I don’t want to talk about them.”

He didn’t want to spoil their claiming with talk of her past. She’d tell him about them when she was ready. If that was tomorrow or ten years from now it didn’t matter to him. Only she mattered.

He gently eased her thighs apart, breathing a sigh of relief when she didn’t object. “That’s it,” he encouraged. He couldn’t resist caressing her ass. It was round and firm. “Spread your legs and make room for me.”

The wolf inside him howled as her legs slid open even farther. He fingered the dark cleft of her ass, flicking his thumb over the tight opening. She jerked, but remained steady.

He shifted until he was settled between her soft thighs. Holding her steady with his hands at her waist, he angled his body so his cock slid over her heated folds, bumping her clit. Her moist heat enveloped his cock as he repeated the action again and again.

Slowly, Shelley relaxed and began to move with him. “That’s it, baby,” he crooned. “I want you to feel good.”

He slid his hands over her sides and around to her front to cup her breasts. Her nipples were so tight. Hard little nubs of pleasure. He caught them between his fingers and pinched, careful to exert just the right amount of pressure.

She was panting hard now. But so was he. His heart was racing. His cock aching.

Easing back, he fit the head of his cock to her opening. He pushed past the natural constriction and slid the head of his shaft into her channel.

Sweat beaded on his temple. The sheets were cool beneath his knees. The air in the room was warm and filled with the scent of sex. Of male and female. His cock head was throbbing and hot as her sheath rippled around him.

“Forever,” he gritted out as he surged inward. She was tight, her inner muscles contracting around his shaft. She tilted her head back, a low cry coming from her lips.

Swearing, he worked his hips back and forth, going deeper with each thrust. “Relax, Shelley. You can take me like this. Take all of me,” he pleaded.

Every nerve ending in her body was on fire. Shelley didn’t know if she’d survive this. She only knew she had to.

The orgasm had ripped her to pieces, leaving her shaky and exhausted. Now a new energy gripped her. Expectation flooded her with adrenaline. It was time for them to complete the claiming.

She knew what it entailed. She knew James had to take her from behind in order for her to be claimed, for them to be considered mated. It was a submissive/dominant position. One that required trust. She hadn’t been too sure she’d ever want to make herself that vulnerable to a man. Now, she couldn’t wait for it to happen.

She was more aware of her body than she’d ever been in her life. Especially the imperfections. James had mentioned her scars for the first time. She knew he’d seen them. It was impossible for him not to, considering he spent every night in her bed. But they hadn’t turned him off. He saw them as badges of valor. For the first time, she didn’t mind them so much. Not that she’d ever want to talk about how she got them, but she could live with them.

She was panting hard now. Her hair was damp and hung around her face. The sheets below her were pristine white.

His hands gripped her waist in an unbreakable bond before shifting to her breasts. The ache was almost unbearable, but nothing compared to the need to have his shaft buried in her core.

She wanted him. Needed him. Loved him.

She’d cried out when he’d finally put the head of his cock to her opening and pushed. Her inner muscles were sensitized and swollen after her orgasm and it made it more difficult to accept him. James wasn’t a small man.

But she wanted him.

Desperately, she breathed in and out, trying to relax. He used his grip on her breasts to rock her as he made shallow thrusts, pushing deeper with each one.

“Take all of me.” She heard the urgency, the need in his words.

Shelley found a rhythm, rolling her hips back to meet him as he forged inward. Patiently, he worked his cock until he was buried to the hilt. She felt stretched to the limit. She had little control in this position. But she trusted James.

They were both panting hard now. There seemed to be a shortage of air in the room. It was thick with the scent of her cream, his heat, their growing need.

She sensed the growing determination in him and it fired her own. They belonged together and she wasn’t going to let her past rob her of her future. Not any longer.

A new sense of purpose grew in her and she shoved her ass back, wanting him to be a part of her.

He growled and began to thrust. There was no slow deliberation now. Hard and fast, he took her. His balls smacked against her sensitive clit with each thrust, driving her up quickly.

He caressed her breasts, massaging them, teasing her nipples as he pumped his cock into her core over and over. "You feel so fucking good." His voice was guttural as he plunged over and over.

Shelley was mindless of everything but the need to find completion. He was deeper than he'd ever gone before. She bucked and shoved against him. He gripped her tighter. His hips hammered against her.

The wet slap of skin against skin was an erotic sound that made her even hotter. His cock rubbed against a sensitive spot in her channel and she felt her inner muscles contract.

"That's it, baby. Come for me." James urged her on. His thrusts became harder, more violent.

She cried his name. He swelled inside her and she knew this was it. The claiming was upon them. Her sheath tightened around his cock, rippling around his hard length, locking him inside her.

Arching back, she cried out again as her body was drenched in pleasure. Her arms shook. Her thighs quivered. Only James's hold on her was keeping her from falling face down on the bed.

He was rigid behind her. She dimly heard him yell. Felt his hot, wet release as he came. With his cock head swelled, he was locked in her core. His orgasm seemed to go on forever and sent her flying over the edge twice more. He leaned down, caught the back of her neck between his teeth and nipped, marking her.

Spasms of pleasure shot through her and she moaned, loving the sign of his possession. She didn't fear James. She knew he'd do whatever he thought she needed, no matter the cost to himself. That knowledge was priceless.

Her heart raced and her lungs burned as she struggled to get enough air into them. The room around her began to fade and her arms buckled. Her head hit the pillow.

She heard James swear and then she was lying on the mattress with him practically on top of her. He was still buried in her core.

She turned her head and sucked in a breath. James angled his torso off her and she was immediately more comfortable.

Shelley couldn't believe what had happened. The first time she'd been claimed by a male it hadn't been her choice. She hadn't even known the male or understood what was happening. She'd been so lost in her first needling, she hadn't cared. He'd been tranquilized and dragged away from her and killed before she'd even learned his name.

This experience had been totally different. This felt right. This was her choice. James was her mate.

They were still joined, his cock still pulsing within her. She liked the feeling and it made her smile. She had no idea how long they spent like that before James finally moved.

It wasn't easy to disengage their bodies. Their skin was practically glued together with sweat. They both moaned and then she laughed as he dragged himself up and landed face down on the pillow next to her.

He slowly turned his head and stared at her. "Are you laughing at me?"

She couldn't help herself. She felt so good. Amazing in fact. Light. As though the shackles of the past were finally gone. "Yes."

He smiled and it changed his entire face. The lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. He seemed happier. Younger. Not the same tough-as-nails alpha he showed to the world. Oh, that part of him was still there. But this was a side of himself he showed to few.

He dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "We need a bath."

He rolled off the bed and dragged her groaning after him. They stumbled into the master bathroom and she leaned against the vanity while James set the water running in the tub.

When he was satisfied with the heat level, he straightened and turned. There was the alpha male. Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes as he studied her naked body. He prowled toward her, slid his hand behind her neck and pulled her toward him. "You're mine now."

Where once his claim would have sent her into a panic, made her run, now it made her feel wanted and loved. She slid her hands over his massive chest, tugging none too gently on his chest hair. "And you're mine."

He growled and nipped playfully at her neck before scooping her into his arms and depositing her into the tub. He climbed in behind her and pulled her back into his arms. They lay there, not talking, as the tub filled.

As soon as he turned off the taps, James grabbed a bar of soap from the built-in shelf and rubbed it between his hands. The lather built quickly and he set the soap on her stomach and began to wash her.

He started at her neck and worked his way down her arms. It was erotic to feel his soapy fingers slide through hers. She lolled in the water, enjoying his attentions. When her arms were done, he started on her torso. He purposely touched every square inch of it, excluding her breasts.

Her breathing got quicker. Shallower. Her nipples were red and tight, eager for his touch. "James," she moaned. Tired of waiting, she grabbed his hands and placed them over her breasts.

"Oh, is this what you wanted?" he teased, plucking at her soapy nipples.

"Yes." She ground her butt against his erection, which was growing rapidly beneath her.

He growled, sliding one hand between her thighs. There was no teasing. He shoved two fingers right inside her. She gasped and jerked, sending a wave of water over the side of the tub.

"James," she gasped.

"What?" he asked innocently. "You don't like this?"

He worked his fingers in and out in a game of advance and retreat until she couldn't speak.

"I love your pussy," he whispered in her ear. "So hot and tight and pink."

She could feel her cheeks turning red at his graphic words. But her embarrassment was quickly forgotten as he traced the whorls of her ear with his tongue.

"You're so responsive. So perfect for me," he praised between licking and nipping her neck.

He hooked his legs between hers and parted her legs, leaving her open for him to play with. He stroked his thumb over her clit while he drove his fingers into her again and again.

It should have been impossible for her to come. She was exhausted. Sexually wrung out. Yet the familiar heat rose within her. Her channel rippled around his fingers and she came yet again.

This one wasn't quite as explosive as the last one, but it was still devastating to her senses. For a female who had always equated sex with something bad, her opinion was swiftly changing.

Oh, the lack of control was still there. But she knew it was mutual. Plus, he cared for her. Wanted her pleasure. Didn't want to dominate and control her every move.

For the first time in her life, she felt as though she was a part of something. A real partner. A mate.

"Beautiful," he whispered. He wrapped his arms around her. And this time there was nothing sexual about the embrace. It was all about comfort.

Tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. She was emotionally spent. The morning had been a complete roller coaster.

"It's okay." James stood and rinsed the soap off both of them. He helped her out of the tub, pulling the plug so the water would drain. Grabbing a towel, he began to roughly dry her. "Don't cry, Shelley." He dabbed at her face. "You're killing me here."

But she couldn't help herself. She swiped at the tears but they kept coming. James dragged the towel over his body and tossed it aside. He lifted her again and left the bathroom behind. He bypassed his bed, which was a total wreck, and headed down the hall to her room.

Shouldering the door open, he padded to the bed and managed to turn the covers down. He didn't release her as he sat on the mattress and stretched out. He grabbed the sheets with one hand and dragged them up, covering them.

His heart beat next to her ear as she snuggled against him. He sifted his fingers through her hair. "Everything will be fine. You've just been through a lot."

She hated that she was weak. That she was reduced to tears. Saying nothing, she wrapped her arms around him and held on.

"I've got you," he promised. "Sleep for a bit. You'll feel better after a nap."

For the first time in her life, she truly trusted a male. Not just any male. Her mate. He would keep her safe while she slept. She'd be stronger when she woke and ready to deal with everything.

"Thank you," she whispered.

His arms tightened around her. Lips brushed the top of her head and she sighed. Exhaustion overtook her and she slid gently into sleep, lulled by the sound of his strong heartbeat.

Chapter Nineteen

Shelley had no idea how much time had passed when she woke. She kept her eyes closed as she soaked up the reality of the situation. James's arms were still locked around her. He'd held her while she'd slept, just as he'd promised.

Her fingers were locked around a few strands of his chest hair and her thigh was thrown across his. Heat radiated from his large body, comforting her. The hair on his legs tickled her inner thigh. She could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath her hand.

She took a few minutes to simply enjoy being in his arms. It was quiet, but she could hear sounds from outside and knew it was still daytime. Probably sometime in the afternoon. It had certainly been an eventful morning.

I know you're awake.

She stilled at the voice in her head. *James?*

Who else?

What is this? What's happening?

He caught her chin in his hand and tilted her head up. "Open your eyes."

She did and he smiled at her before lowering his head to kiss her. "It's part of being a mated pair. We can communicate telepathically if we choose to. You were open and receptive. That's why I was able to talk with you."

"That's amazing."

"Useful too, in case of emergency." He stretched and she leaned back, propping herself up on one arm to watch.

Oh, he was a prime specimen of a male. His biceps flexed and rippled as he raised his arms over his head. His chest flexed and his abs tightened into delineated bands of muscle. Stubble darkened his jaw, making him look dangerous. His brown and gray hair gave him the appearance of maturity, adding to his edgy look.

Shelley shivered and her body responded to his nearness. She wanted him again.

He caught her in his golden gaze. "Not this time. Not yet." He brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "We need to talk."

Sitting up, she wrapped the sheet around her and leaned against the headboard. He was right. But where to begin.

“You came back.” He settled in next to her, angling his body slightly so he could see her.

She nodded.

“Why?” His voice was soft, but she could hear the need beneath it.

Taking a deep breath, she sought the words to explain. “I was heading to Chicago with Isaiah and Meredith. But the farther away from you I got, the more I started to panic. I knew I was making a mistake.”

His golden gaze never left her face, but he said nothing.

She glanced away and traced her finger over her sheet-covered thigh. “You’ve done so much for me. You took me away from Gus’s diner. Bought me clothes. Offered me a job and a place to stay. Found my family.”

“So it’s gratitude.” His flat, unemotional words made her jerk her head up. James’s face was like stone.

“Yes. No.” She cupped his stubborn jaw, feeling the stubble brush her fingers. “It’s gratitude but so much more.” She withdrew her hand and curled her fingers in her lap.

She licked her dry lips and continued. “I didn’t remember ever living in a pack before. Didn’t know what it was truly like until I came here.”

“You’ve seen it at its best and worst.”

“I have,” she agreed. “It’s not always pretty, but there is a sense of belonging, of being part of something. I never had that before.”

James closed his eyes and sighed. “You always had a home here, Shelley. You didn’t have to mate with me in order to secure your place.”

Oh, she was doing this all wrong. He didn’t understand.

“I love you,” she blurted.

His head jerked up and his eyes popped open, pinning her in place. “Say that again.”

“I love you.” Determined to lay everything on the table, she continued. “I know I’ve got problems. Will probably always have some issues, but I’m strong enough to deal with them.”

“We’re strong enough,” he corrected.

Those words settled inside her heart, warming it and soothing old hurts. “We are,” she agreed, sensing he needed to hear the words. “You gave me the courage to meet my family, to begin to put my past behind me. To embrace the other part of myself. My wolf. Without you, I’m not sure I’d have ever found the courage to shift into my other half.”

“You did all those things yourself. My God, Shelley, I’ve never met another creature—human, werewolf or otherwise—who’s as courageous as you. The things you survived.” He shook his head.

She felt her cheeks warming and knew she was blushing at his praise. “I did what I had to do.” She was no hero.

"You did more than that. You overcame all those years of captivity. And it's only been a matter of months, Shelley. It's going to take time."

"I know." Pulling her legs tight to her chest, she rested her chin on her knees. "I was leaving when it finally occurred to me that I was hurting myself and you. I can work on my problems here just as easily as I could in Chicago."

"You can do anything you want." His confidence in her made her believe. "You're strong and beautiful in both forms, female and wolf."

"I want to be worthy of being your mate," she blurted out. "You're alpha, leader of this pack. You need a mate others will respect."

He growled and grabbed her chin, angling her face toward his. "You are worthy. I'm the one who's not worthy. You're a prize. Any male would be proud to call you his mate. My Lord, woman, what you survived is nothing short of a miracle. One of your own making. All those years and you never gave up." James pressed his forehead against hers.

A weight she was carrying on her shoulders and in her heart seemed to fall away. She traced the contours of his cheek and he nuzzled her nose with his.

Werewolves were very tactile. Always touching. She'd never had that before. Hadn't realized what she was missing.

"I'll have good days and bad days," she warned. She knew a few months weren't near enough to put the past behind her. She still had nightmares, although those had all but disappeared since James had started sleeping with her. His mere presence seemed to chase them away.

"So will I." He kissed her nose. "I'm not an easy man to live with." His lips grazed her cheekbone and her jaw.

"No," she teased. "Really?"

He laughed and the rough sound sent shivers down her spine. She shuddered as his breath warmed her face.

He stilled, sensing her growing arousal. "Tell me again," he demanded.

She knew what he wanted and gave it. "I love you." He hadn't said the words back and that caused a pang in her heart. But he'd already given her so much. And she knew he cared deeply for her. It was enough.

"God, woman." He caught her in his arms and rolled them across the large bed. She laughed as he shoved aside the tangled sheets and tugged her on top of him.

Laughter fled as he slid his thick shaft inside her without warning. She gasped and then moaned as her moist channel stretched to accommodate him.

There was no rush, no words as he wrapped his arms around her and rocked them both to completion. Her orgasm flowed over her, comforting and somehow deeper than any other time they'd come together. Maybe it was because she'd said the words, said she loved him.

Still quivering from aftershocks, she snuggled close, struggling to catch her breath.

"I love you."

She stilled as the harsh whisper reached her ears. She raised her head, not certain she'd heard correctly. His gaze was fierce as he captured her face in his hands. "I love you," he repeated. "You're mine. You belong to me. I promise to always protect you."

Tears pricked her eyes. She struggled to keep them from escaping, but it was no use. They seeped out of the corners of her eyes and trickled down her cheekbones.

He swiped at them with his thumbs. "Don't cry, baby. Don't cry."

"Oh, James." She kissed him then, hard and deep. She never wanted this moment to end. Their tongues twined, mated. His cock flexed, still deep inside her, making her laugh. He was insatiable.

He rubbed his hand over her butt, squeezing gently. "That's what you do to me." They lay there a few more minutes and then he sighed. "We have to get up. There are still a lot of loose ends to deal with."

Shelley sat up and eased off James. She shuddered as his semi-erection slipped from her. "Okay." She was determined to stand by him, to be the kind of mate he needed. His responsibilities were many and vast. She didn't know them all, but observing him this past week had been an education. An alpha was much more than a figurehead. He was like the CEO of a major corporation and mayor of a town, plus the Chief of Police.

James rolled out of bed and padded to the window. "They're all waiting."

Shelley lowered her head into her hands. "They're all going to know what we've been doing," she wailed. She'd been so caught up with what was going on between her and James she'd forgotten they'd all seen them enter his home together.

James laughed. "They'll only have to take one look at you to know." He came to stand beside her and brushed his finger down her neck. "You have beard rash."

"I do not." She rushed to the dresser mirror to inspect her face and neck. "It will fade."

He came up behind her and nuzzled her neck. The prickly stubble brushed her skin. "Not if I don't stop doing this."

She laughed. She couldn't help herself. He was incorrigible. "I'll wear a turtleneck sweater."

"They'll still be able to smell me. I marked you during our joining. Humans might not be able to detect it, but other werewolves will." Satisfaction tinged his voice. "They'll all know you're mine. We'll have the formal ceremony as soon as possible." He stilled and raised his head.

She was coming to know him well and knew he was waiting for her agreement. He was all alpha male, but he wanted her to be happy. "That sounds fine."

He dropped another kiss on her neck and straightened. "Get dressed. I'll be back." She watched the play of muscles in his tight butt as he walked away.

"Get a grip," she told herself and turned back to the dresser only to remember it was empty. Isaiah had her clothing.

Grabbing a sheet, she wrapped it around herself and padded down the hallway. She could hear water running and knew James was getting cleaned up. Shelley sighed, wondering if he had something she could wear. It wouldn't fit, but she'd be covered.

She happened to glance down the stairs and there at the bottom were her two bags. She was torn between being thrilled to have clothing to wear and being mortified that her brother had come into the house while she and James were having sex and she hadn't heard him.

She finally chose to be happy to have clothing. Hurrying down the stairs, she grabbed the bags and darted back to her room. She yanked open the bags, drew out everything she needed and went into the bathroom. If she was quick, she could wash and dress and be ready when James was.

James stepped beneath the spray of cool water and rinsed the soap from his body. He was still partially aroused even after claiming Shelley and taking her several times. He had a feeling he's spend most of the rest of his days in this predicament. And he didn't give a damn.

He felt alive for the first time in decades. Shelley was his mate. And she loved him.

His chest swelled and he bowed his head, letting the water cascade over him. She was his miracle.

Twisting off the taps, he cut off the flow and stepped out of the shower. He grabbed a towel and dried off. Tossing the towel over a rod to dry, he walked silently to his room. He cocked his head to one side, tracking Shelley's location, and could hear water running down the hall.

He closed his eyes and swore as his cock swelled. It was all too easy to picture Shelley naked, the warm spray caressing her skin, trailing over her breasts to pool between her thighs.

He shuddered and shook off the image. It was time to get dressed and deal with pack problems. But tonight. Tonight was another story. If Shelley wasn't too sore, he planned to eat her from head to toe before sinking into her sweet heat.

And those thoughts weren't helping. He grinned. He was acting more like a newly transformed male than a mature one. He dressed in jeans, boots and a shirt, leaving the tails hanging out to cover his erection.

James went down the hall and into Shelley's room just as she stepped out of the bathroom. True to her word, she was wearing a turtleneck sweater. Her jeans fit her to perfection, skimming her slight curves.

But it was her smile and the quiet love in her eyes that set his heart pounding. "Ready?" He held out his hand to her.

She took it and nodded. "I am."

Together they went down the stairs to face her family.

Quinn stared at the man who was his father. He wasn't certain how he felt about him even after spending time with him this past week. He actually felt more at home with the Striker brothers.

He snorted. Maybe because he didn't really have a connection to them. Not like he did to Donovan Brody.

"You okay?" Simon asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Quinn liked the youngest Striker brother. He was the closest in age to Quinn. If you could call thirty-five years close. Quinn was twenty-five while Simon was sixty.

He shook his head, still amazed. It was one thing to intellectually understand that werewolves had a much longer lifespan than humans, but it was another thing to be confronted with the reality of it.

James Riley, the alpha of the pack, was one hundred and sixty years old. That was truly mind-boggling.

Quinn's head whipped up as he caught the scent of his father on the breeze. And not just his father, but several other males as well.

As if on cue, the front door of the main house opened and James stepped out with Shelley by his side. The big man placed a possessive hand on her back as he guided her down the steps. Shelley gave him a smile that was filled with love and caring.

He was glad for them both, but especially for her. She'd been through hell. But thoughts of what Shelley had been through brought them back around to his sister. Where was she?

Quinn shoved all negative thoughts aside. He would find Chris if it was the last thing he ever did. He studied all the males gathering in the clearing. Donovan nodded to him. It was like peering into a mirror. Disconcerting, yet familiar. Their hair color was the only major difference. His father's features were a little harder and older, but that was to be expected since Donovan was about a century older.

Gavin and Grady walked beside him and they were quickly joined by all the Striker brothers. Alex and Meredith rounded out the group. James kept one arm around Shelley and raised the other for silence.

Immediately, everyone turned their attention to him.

"Shelley and I have mated."

Alex gasped and gave a glad cry before running over to hug Shelley. "I'm so glad. For both of you." She hugged her father too before her husband tugged her back to his side.

James turned to face Isaiah and Joshua. "I will take care of your sister," he pledged.

Isaiah nodded and offered his hand. Joshua glanced at his sister. "Is this what you want?"

James bristled slightly but Shelley nodded and smiled. "It is."

"Good enough." Joshua turned to his alpha and offered a slight bow. "We Striker brothers have just gotten our sister back. She's very precious to us. I couldn't think of another male I'd rather see her mated with."

James inclined his head slightly and turned to the other males. "You all accept my claim?"

Donovan and Gavin immediately agreed. Grady shook his head and sighed. "I must be getting old. First Joshua and now you. I gotta learn to move faster." He grinned and offered his hand and his congratulations to the couple. Quinn found it fascinating to watch pack dynamics at work.

Once that was done, James was all business again. His sharp gaze went from Quinn to Donovan and back to Quinn. "Have you decided?"

There wasn't much of a decision to make. James Riley had decreed that Quinn was going to Chicago where Isaiah and his contacts would help him locate Chris. "I'm in and so is Craig." He wasn't spending any more time separated from his family. The last year had been hell on earth.

"He's human," Donovan protested.

"He's my family." He wasn't budging from this. If Craig wasn't welcome, the two of them would set out on their own.

Donovan started to protest, but James held up his hand and the other male went silent. "Your brother knows what you are?"

"Oh, yeah. I'd never have made it without him. I trust him more than I trust any of you." Several of the males growled, but Quinn wasn't backing down.

"Then he's more than welcome." James's eyes passed over the crowd, his piercing golden gaze pinning each man in turn. "Anyone have a problem with that?"

When no one spoke, James continued. "You'll go with Isaiah and Meredith." He glanced at them. "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as you're done with us," Isaiah answered. "We've been away long enough."

"Understood." James focused on Quinn once again. "Gather your belongings and be ready to leave."

Frustration ate at him, but he held his tongue. He'd be more in the thick of things once they reached Chicago and he had Craig with him.

James reached out and rested his large hand on Quinn's shoulder. "We'll find her. She's one of us, just as you are. You and your family always have a place here. And that includes Craig."

Quinn's throat felt tight and he nodded. "Thanks." It was strange to be offered a home. He hadn't had one since his mom had passed away. Not really. They'd been too busy trying to stay together and alive. He and Chris had had the added burden of dealing with the changes in their bodies and discovering what it truly meant to be a half-breed werewolf.

Their mom had never been sure if they'd be part wolf too but had done her best to prepare them for that eventuality. And thank God she had. Otherwise they might never have survived.

Quinn glanced at his father again. He wanted to feel something for the male, but didn't. Not yet. Maybe in time. Maybe never. The only thing that mattered now was finding Chris.

Epilogue

James stood on the front porch and gazed up at the clear night sky. The stars twinkled and the moon was almost full. He heard her coming up behind him before her slender arms wrapped around him.

“How are you doing?”

That was the question, wasn't it? He'd done something today that no alpha ever wanted to do. He'd banished some of his people from the pack. A wolf without a pack was fair game for hunters. They would find it difficult to live in the outside world without the protection the pack offered. Some of them had never had to deal with humans before, preferring to leave it up to him and others. And maybe that was part of the problem. Because they'd spent too many years insulated from reality, they hadn't wanted to accept his leadership or his half-breed daughter.

“James?” she questioned softly.

He reached around and tugged her into his arms. Shelley eased the ache in his heart. “I'm okay.”

She traced her fingers over the buttons of his shirt. “I know this evening wasn't easy for you.”

That was an understatement. After Isaiah, Meredith and Quinn had left for Chicago, James had called a meeting of the entire pack. They'd all shown up, many curious to know what was going on.

The first announcement had been the return of Shelley to the pack and the fact that they'd mated. That had been greeted with celebration. After all, Shelley's bloodlines were impeccable.

But even then there was grumbling. Some folks thought she was tainted by all the years she'd spent with the hunters. The fucking Carlos clan was never happy and the Jenson clan had been quick to support them.

“I'm sorry you had to hear the insults tonight.” That had been the hardest part for him. Not being able to protect Shelley from the venom that had been tossed her way.

She shook her head. “It's not your fault. We talked about this before everyone arrived. I knew it was a possibility.” She linked her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. “I'm more shocked that it was only a handful of them. Most of the pack accepted me.”

She was right. James had to focus on the positive.

Shelley leaned back and he could see her clearly. Damn, he loved her more than life itself. She'd left her hair down and it flowed around her shoulders. The light from the house made it shimmer like a halo around her face, emphasizing its heart-shaped and fine features.

She looked as delicate as an angel but had a core of steel.

“Besides, after Donovan and Grady told you what they had ferreted out, you had to call them on it.”

Shelley was right, but that hadn't made it any easier to pull six members of his pack in front of him and banish them for their betrayal. They'd been shocked. Then angry. Disbelief had been written across their faces. What had they expected? That he'd smack them on the wrists and send them home?

It had been within his rights to kill them. After all, they'd threatened the alpha and the stability of the pack.

The ones who'd tried to kill him during the hunters' attack were already dead, killed during the fight. These males had known the traitors had talked about ways of getting rid of James and his daughter and had done nothing to stop them. They were guilty by association and apathy. For that reason, he'd banished them instead of killing them outright.

Several of the males had families who chose to go into exile with them. He hated to lose them. These past few months had depleted his pack.

“It's time to rebuild. To start anew.” Tomorrow was the official mating ceremony for him and Shelley. During it, he intended to start bringing his pack into the new millennium. There were other half-breeds out there. Males and females who needed a pack, needed to understand who and what they were. Meredith's pack and Quinn were proof of that.

“I'll do whatever I can to help,” she promised.

James held her close to his heart, wondering how he'd gotten so lucky. “You help just by being here.”

He could tell she couldn't quite believe him. He took her shoulders in his hands and held her away. “I'm not just saying that. Being alpha is lonely without a mate. You can never show doubt or indecision to the pack. My word is law. I can talk to you, mull over ideas. You offer suggestions and support. That's priceless.”

She smiled at him then and he lost his train of thought. “You do the same for me.” She shook her head. “I'm so glad you stopped into my diner. You changed my life, my world.”

“You changed mine too.” He pulled her close and kissed her, needing to reestablish their bond.

Shelley kissed James, letting him feel all the love she had for him. She'd ached for him today, but she'd also been proud. He'd made hard decisions, but fair ones. The pack was lucky to have him as alpha. Under his guidance they would grow and prosper. And she planned to be right by his side, helping.

James, her brothers and the pack had already given her so much. She longed to share it with other lost souls.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the house. The door slammed shut behind her. She didn't worry about anything but the feel of his arms around her and his lips on hers. She trusted him to take care of all the rest.

The mattress creaked as he sat and rolled, taking them both flat onto the bed. She really loved his king-sized bed.

He hadn't released her mouth, his kiss almost desperate. She longed to ease his pain.

She broke away. "I love you."

James smiled down at her. "I love you too. Now and always."

She'd been lost and he'd found her. Or maybe they'd found each other. She liked the sound of that.

Then he started kissing her again and she forgot everything but the feel of his hard body against hers.

About the Author

N.J. Walters has always been a voracious reader of romance novels and decided one day that she could write one as well. The contemporary story, *Discovering Dani*, was the very first novel she wrote while living in a little town much like the one Dani O'Rourke lives in, though all other similarities to Dani's life pretty much end there. Then she wrote another one that followed up on Dani's friends and neighbors. But she didn't consider herself a "real" writer yet.

Just a few years later N. J. had a mid-life crisis at a fairly young age, gave notice after ten years at her job on a Friday and received a tentative acceptance for her first published novel (an erotic romance) from a publisher on the following Sunday.

Happily married for over eighteen years to the love of her life, with his encouragement and support she gave up the job of selling books for the more pleasurable job of writing them. She now spends her days writing, reading and reviewing books. It's a tough life, but someone's got to do it. And some days she actually feels like a "real" writer.

N.J. enjoys hearing from readers, and she can be reached at njwalters22@yahoo.ca. You can check out her web site at www.njwalters.com.

Look for these titles by N.J. Walters

Now Available:

Discovering Dani
The Way Home
The Return of Patrick O'Rourke
The Seduction of Shamus O'Rourke
A Legal Affair
By the Book
Past Promises
Alexandra's Legacy
A Touch of Magic

Coming Soon:

Dreams of Seduction
Love in Flames

Love comes howling when—and where—you least expect it.

Isaiah's Haven

© 2010 N.J. Walters

Legacy, Book 2

Isaiah Striker puts family first, the pack a distant second. Which is precisely the reason he's in noisy, crowded Chicago instead of alone in his beloved woods. One look at the owner of Haven nightclub, however, and a simple favor for his brother turns into something else entirely.

Meredith Cross holds her small pack together with sheer determination. After years on the run, they hide in the glare of the city's nightlife. Isaiah may heat her blood, but she can't afford to risk the lives of the outcast half-breeds in her care. Once exposed, every bounty hunter and werewolf purist in smelling distance will hunt them down.

But when their sexual attraction spirals out of control, a moment's distraction is all it takes to lead danger right to Meredith's door. For Meredith there's only one choice: her pack.

But Isaiah knows his mate when he sees her. And he's not giving up without a fight.

Warning: This book contains hot sex, a jazzy nightclub, sexy werewolves, rogue werewolves, nasty bounty hunters, a mysterious vampire, and did I mention hot sex?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Isaiah's Haven:

"Is there a problem?" Hank strode up to stand just to the side of the stranger.

"No problem. This gentleman was just leaving." She pleaded with Isaiah with her eyes. If he insisted on repeating his claim of her being a werewolf, he wouldn't get out of here alive. There was only one of him and three male werewolves. Was he a hunter or just a human who believed in such things?

She took a deep breath. She needed to be calm. What she got was a blast of pheromones and a jolt of arousal. A spicier scent filled her nose and made her sex clench with need. She almost moaned aloud as a shiver of need wracked her body and her nipples tightened. How had she missed this? He was a werewolf.

Impossible. She blinked in astonishment. In all the years they'd been here this had never happened. Male werewolves tended to stay away from the city, not liking the crowds or the closed-in space. It was one of the main reasons why she lived here with her sons and her adopted family.

Oh God! Hank. He was only a half-breed and many full-blooded werewolves were as bad as the bounty hunters wanting them dead. Teague, Neema and Kevin were all half-breeds as well. Their safety depended on her keeping control of this situation at all costs. She straightened her shoulders. If he thought to threaten her family, he was mistaken.

"You need to leave," she repeated. "Now."

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth turning up ever so slightly. It made him look sexier, if that was even possible.

Hank reached out to grab Isaiah's arm.

"You don't want to do that, pup," Isaiah warned.

Hank froze with his hand in the air. Benjamin growled low in his chest. Kevin came out from the back office, adding to the growing tension. "What's going on?"

Isaiah was still trying to process the fact that the woman he lusted after was a female werewolf, and a beautiful one at that. She was also coming into heat. There was no mistaking that enticing spicy perfume. No wonder he was attracted to her.

What was even more surprising was that she wasn't the only werewolf here. They all were. The odor from all the human patrons, the liquor and the food had masked their scent. Now that they were the only ones left, there was no disguising it.

It was crazy to see a group of werewolves living in a city surrounded by the myriad sights and sounds which assailed their senses daily. Bounty hunters frequented the cities for supplies and new recruits. Not to mention that vampires, witches and demons preferred to live in the city. And while the different species weren't exactly at war, they weren't sending each other Christmas cards either.

Around him several of the males began to growl. As if drawn by the tension, a lean red-haired male pushed through the kitchen door, wiping his hand on a white towel as he came. The sleeveless shirt he was wearing displayed an array of tattoos running up and down his muscular arms. With the trio of gold hoops in both ears and his eyebrow piercing, he looked like trouble. He was followed by the slender, curly-haired female Isaiah had seen waiting tables earlier in the evening.

Meredith held up her hand. "Enough."

Several of the males shot her a glare, but subsided. Isaiah was surprised at how all the males deferred to her. She was obviously the alpha female of this little pack. But where was the alpha male?

The thought of another male having the right to put his hands on her made Isaiah see red. A low, menacing growl came from deep in his chest. The younger woman took a step toward the red-haired male. He wrapped his arm around her protectively.

The tension in the room grew until it was so thick it was almost impossible to breathe. He didn't give a damn. He wasn't leaving. Not until he talked to Meredith.

The woman in question stepped forward and placed her hands on her hips. She exuded confidence, which was sexy as hell and turned him on even more. "Don't think you can come in here and threaten my family, wolf." She spat the last as though it were a bad word.

Having her so near, he could see the smoothness of her skin and smell her delicious scent. Unable to resist, he lowered his head and sniffed the curve of her neck. She smelled like something rare and exotic, a

combination of musk, cinnamon and heat that was intoxicating. She shivered and started to lean toward him. He wanted to howl with pleasure. But it ended far too soon for his liking when someone pulled her away.

Isaiah jerked his head up to see who had ruined the moment between him and Meredith. It was one of the younger men. He started toward him, the promise of retaliation stamped on his face, only to have Meredith step in front of him again. "He's my son."

That brought Isaiah up cold. If there was one thing he could understand, it was wanting to protect family. He addressed the younger man directly, looking over Meredith's head. "I mean her no harm."

"What about the rest of them? Why are you here? Who sent you?"

Meredith was still in front of him demanding answers.

He sighed and rolled his head to work out some of the kinks in his neck. "No one sent me. I didn't come here to find any of you. I was just wandering the streets, heard a woman singing and came in."

"I don't believe you," said the man Meredith had called her son.

"Michael," she warned, and he subsided, but not without first giving Isaiah a look that promised death if he made a move toward his mother. Isaiah could respect that.

"There's nothing for you here. You need to leave." Isaiah understood her wanting to protect the pack, but he was curious why Meredith was in such a hurry to get rid of him when he obviously meant no harm.

"I'm not sure we should let him leave." The bouncer from the door spoke up. "What if he's working with the hunters?"

The menacing growl that came from Isaiah was impossible to suppress. "I kill hunters, pup, and anyone who works with them."

"So you say," the other male who'd worked behind the bar countered.

"Are you questioning my word?" He'd never had anyone do such a thing. He was a Striker. Their loyalty and honesty was above reproach.

"Enough." Meredith tapped the toe of her high-heeled shoe on the wooden floor. It drew his gaze down over her long, shapely legs and back up again. "No one is going to hurt anyone. And you're leaving."

It was time to regroup. Things were too volatile with so many males in the mix. They were on a short leash at the moment, but Isaiah had no doubt all the males would swing into action in the blink of an eye if they thought it was necessary. He didn't want to be put in a position of having to hurt them. That certainly wouldn't go over well with Meredith. The last thing he wanted was to antagonize her any more than he already had.

"I want to talk to you. Two minutes," he added before she could protest. "Alone."

Predictably enough, the males protested, but in the end Meredith was alpha and the rest of them headed toward the kitchen.

"I'll only be on the other side of the door," Michael warned.

Isaiah inclined his head in understanding.

Meredith waited until they were all gone before turning back to him. “We’re alone. What do you want?”

He shifted until they were so close they were almost touching. He could feel the heat from her skin, see the way her pupils dilated and the pulse in her neck beat faster. There was a slight hitch in her breathing as he invaded her space.

They weren’t touching, not quite. He raised his hand and lightly brushed the curve of her cheek with the back of his knuckles. She sucked in a breath and the movement had her breasts touching his chest. Even through the layers of their clothing, he could feel the hard tips of her nipples.

Need roared through him. Raw desire pumped through his veins. He wanted Meredith more than he’d wanted anything in his life, as though she was somehow necessary to him.

He leaned down, his lips practically caressing hers as he answered her question. “You, Meredith. I want you.”

She thought she had a life—until being hunted shows her she's never really lived.

Savage Transformation

© 2010 Lexxie Couper

Savage Australia, Book 2

Jacqueline Huddart has spent her entire adult life on the run. Not from the law, or even a jealous lover. From herself—and what she is. That strategy works for her until a funeral demands she return to home ground, and her best friend disappears. Finding Delainie means Jackie must confront the truth...and accept the help of a mysterious, sexy-as-sin Texan.

Marshall Rourke isn't the only one flying under the radar. He's on an off-the-grid quest to track down a rogue ex-partner who hunts paranormal beings for the joy of the kill. Convincing the unexpectedly feisty Jackie to trust him isn't easy, but there's no better way to lure the hunter into the open than to dangle as unique a target as Jackie—the last Tasmanian Tiger shifter in existence.

Trouble is, Marshall hadn't counted on Jackie's brutal right cross. Or the fact that her simmering sexuality calls to his inner wolf on every imaginable level. And that the killer is about to use their desire to add them both to his trophy case...

Warning: This title contains the following: explicit sex out in the bush, wild shifter sex in an abandoned shack, passionate sex in a hotel shower. Plus a Texan hero with a very big secret, an Australian heroine with an even bigger one, a significant amount of violence and as always, Australian sarcasm.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Savage Transformation:

Her thylacine growled, surging though her being with rapid ease. Snatching back control had been hard. She'd shoved the need to transform down into the pit of her existence and half-walked, half-ran down the hotel's stairs into the car park, scanning the area for any sign of Delanie.

And now here she was, walking around her best friend's car, breathing shallow for fear of losing herself to her inner animal when she knew she should be breathing deep to detect any hint of Delanie's location.

Then stop being a chicken shit and do it.

Coming to a standstill, wishing—again—she had her gun, Jackie closed her eyes and pulled in a long, slow breath.

There! Delanie.

Faint, almost dispersed to nothing, but there. To her right. Delanie's scent tinged with...

She turned, lifting her head slightly and pulling in another breath.

Her heart clenched. Fear. Delanie's scent was tinged with fear. The acrid kind of a sudden fright.

God, what is going on?

Following the scent, the thylacine inside her itching for release, she moved through the car park. Clapped-out combi-vans stood beside shiny hybrids. Dented station wagons shared the asphalt with lovingly looked-after sedans. Each waited for their owners to return, the setting sun casting their paintwork in a fiery orange glow.

Jackie pulled in another breath, tasting the air. Del had been here.

She narrowed her eyes, approaching a low red convertible. Heat rolled from it in unpleasant waves, the stench of burning motor oil almost choking her. Reaching out, she placed her right palm on the car's hood. Hot. Hot enough to tell her the engine had only recently been running.

She took another breath, separating the car's fumes from the delicate scent of her best friend. Delanie's scent grew stronger here. More concentrated.

Jackie's chest squeezed tight. It wasn't just Del's scent that was more potent here. Her fear tainted the air like a thick mist.

Damnit, Del. What's going on?

She took another breath. There was more on the air than Delanie's fear-laced scent. There was something else, something she couldn't put her finger on. A scent that wasn't a scent.

That doesn't make sense, Huddart.

No, it didn't, but she didn't know how else to explain it. There was a void to the air, as if something had erased the particles of which it was comprised. Removed them from existence.

Her pulse quickened. Removing something from a crime scene—and worryingly, this is exactly what this seemed to be—meant Delanie wasn't just missing. She was...

"Taken," she whispered.

Her stomach rolled and she ran her stare over the red convertible. She could do one of two things. She could call the local police force and report Delanie as missing, and aid them in finding her by following standard police procedure. Or she could track Del herself. Alone.

She straightened, removing her hand from the car and turning into the gentle breeze at her back.

It blew against her face, barely strong enough to move the strands of her hair. Closing her eyes, she drew in another breath, through her mouth as well this time, tasting Delanie on the air. No, it wasn't just on the air. It was on the ground as well. Whoever had taken Del had left a scent trail on the road.

On purpose?

The question slipped through Jackie's mind, making her already fast pulse thump faster. Who would do that? Who would take her best friend and leave a scent trail?

She ground her teeth. No one. She was being dramatic. Ridiculous. She had to stop standing here wasting time with stupid notions of malevolent intentions and find Delanie. Find her and then teach the bastard who took her what happens to those who mess with a cop's best friend.

Heart racing, she began running, nose into the breeze, Del's scent flowing into her body.

Four blocks passed. Five. Six. The houses flanking her became light industrial buildings and warehouses. And still, Delanie's scent pulled her forward. Faster. Her inner animal ached for release. Hungered to track, to run...

She ran, her blood roaring in her ears, and skidded to a halt, heels digging into the now gravel road when a man stepped toward her from behind a big black van. A tall man with impossibly broad shoulders and narrow lean hips.

The very man she'd caught looking at her inside the airport terminal yesterday. The same man who'd driven away from the airport car park in a black Audi an hour later.

The same man she'd seen standing under a snow gum at Pyengana's cemetery.

Cold fury ripped through her. "You've been following me." She bunched her fists by her side and took a step closer to him, fixing him with an unwavering glare. "What the hell have you done with Delanie?"

A tiny dimple creased his left cheek beside lips curled into a small grin, giving Jackie the impression he knew a secret he found entirely humorous. Dark honey-blond hair fell over his forehead in a tousled mess, brushing straight eyebrows a shade darker. "I have, Detective Huddart. But I'm afraid I haven't taken your friend."

He studied her from behind impenetrable black sunglasses, the intensity of his unseen but wholly felt inspection making Jackie want to shiver.

And smash her fist against his far too square jaw.

"I've seen you three times in the last twenty four hours and now my best friend is missing." Her heart thumped hard in her throat. "That's not coincidence. Who are you and how the hell do you know who I am?"

She could hear her control cracking, hear the violence of her animal's soul cutting each word she said, but she didn't care. He—whoever he was—had the advantage over her. She didn't like that. Not as a cop. Not as an animal. She didn't like it at all.

He however, seemed unaffected by her obvious aggression. His lips curled into a broader grin. "Marshall Rourke, at your service."

Jackie didn't return his smile. "You're American?"

Long, straight fingers came up to tip an imaginary hat. "Texan, actually, but it's pretty much the same thing."

"Enough of the charm, Mr. Rourke." Jackie snapped. Damn, she wished she had her gun. And her badge. She'd wipe that far-too-sexy grin from his face in two seconds flat. "Time to tell me why you're following me, how you know who I am and where the hell Del—"

Her best friend's name slipped from her lips before she could stop it and she bit back a sharp curse. Damn it, cop law 101—don't give away information not already revealed. She clenched her fists, glaring at Marshall Rourke.

"I know you have no reason to trust me." He removed his dark sunglasses, and Jackie's chest squeezed. His eyes were stunning. Piercing light blue the colour of Antarctic ice. "But if you want to see Delanie McKenzie alive again, I recommend you come with me."



SAMHAIN[™]
P U B L I S H I N G