



FERAL

Midlife

WOLF

MARKED OVER FORTY

MEG RIPLEY

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SHIFTER NATION

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Chapter 1

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FERAL MIDLIFE WOLF

“THIS HAS GOT TO BE THE MOST EPIC NEW YEAR’S EVE PARTY Toby’s ever thrown. I mean, really. Don’t you think?” The young woman’s garish ring sparkled in the dim light as she tossed back another shot.

Tammy couldn’t remember her name. Katie? Kailey? Something like that. She glanced around, wondering where her new boyfriend, Justin, had gone. “Well, this is the first time I’ve been to one of Toby’s parties,” she admitted.

“Girl!” Katie grabbed her wrist and shook it. “You’re in for such a treat! Things get so wild! And it’ll only be crazier tonight with this storm coming in. Three inches of snow! Wow!”

“Three *feet*, actually,” Tammy corrected her. It was a hell of a lot for western Oregon, more than Tammy could ever remember seeing at once. She’d thought Justin’s friend, Toby, was just being safe by suggesting everyone stay for the weekend since the roads would be terrible up there at the Morwood packhouse château in the Cascade Mountains. According to Katie, it was also an excuse to get a little extra wild as they rang in the new year.

“Three feet?” Katie asked. “It’s a good thing I don’t have three feet. I don’t think Christian Louboutin designs heels for

three-legged women!” She laughed far harder than was necessary.

“Uh, I think I’m going to go find some snacks,” Tammy muttered. She didn’t know this Katie woman at all, or who Christian Louboutin was, for that matter. She peeked down at her old, practical duck boots. When was the last time she wore heels, anyway?

Justin had barely made any introductions since they’d arrived, doing little more than waving Tammy over to the corner of the massive, open floor plan living room before disappearing with some of his packmates.

“Isn’t that a fun word? *S n a c k s s s s s*?” Katie drew out the sounds and then giggled again. Instead of staying over by the wall, she followed Tammy to one of the tables laid out with food.

“Here, have one of these.” Tammy stuffed a pig in a blanket in her hand. Maybe the carbs in the puff pastry and the protein in the mini hot dog would help keep Katie from feeling like complete dogshit in the morning. At the very least, it would give Tammy a moment of silence as she ate it.

Katie gobbled it up but decided to wash it down with another glass of champagne. “Who did you say you’re here with?”

“Justin. Justin Maynard.” She’d just started dating him about a month ago, and things had begun to look more hopeful as the holidays progressed. Tammy had looked forward to the party, to having someone to kiss at midnight for the first time in years. It even sounded kind of romantic to be snowed in up in the Cascades, like something out of a movie. It would be a hell of a lot better if they were actually spending time together,

though. But these were his packmates. She couldn't blame him for wanting to visit.

Katie bobbed her head as she filled a bowl with chips and sloppily drizzled nacho cheese over the top of it. "Which one is he again?"

"Tall. Sandy blond hair. He's wearing a blue shirt." Not that it would do any good to describe him to Katie. She seemed incapable of seeing more than a foot in front of her face, but Tammy didn't have anyone else to talk to. "I'm gonna go find him. It's almost midnight."

"Midnight! Woo!" Katie wobbled along behind her in her black stilettos. "It's so exciting! I'm going to do all the things this year!"

"Mhmm." Tammy glanced into the dining room. The big table had been cleared off for some sort of elaborate card game, but she didn't see Justin.

"I'll go to St. Barts, Monaco, the Maldives... Oh, and I'm going to get a new tattoo. Want to see the one on my back?" Katie shoved her bowl of chips at Tammy so she could lift up her shirt, not seeming to care who saw what.

"I see," Tammy assured her as she handed the bowl back. "I'm going to look out in the garage."

"Then I'm going to quit drinking," Katie promised. "I mean, I don't really drink that much. I just like a good glass of wine every now and then, you know?"

"Sure." Tammy peeked out in the garage. Several guys were admiring Toby's latest sports car, but still no Justin.

"What are your resolutions?" Katie asked as they went back inside.

“Well, the first one is to find my boyfriend.” She paused in the living room when she saw a man who looked relatively sober. “Excuse me, do you know where Justin is?”

He squinted at her uncertainly. “I thought he went upstairs.”

“Okay, thanks.” Tammy thought she might finally leave Katie in the dust as she headed to the second floor, but she teetered up the stairs after her. Tammy checked her phone. Only a couple of minutes until midnight.

“Who are we looking for again?” Katie asked around a mouthful of nachos and peeked into a bedroom along with Tammy.

“Waldo,” Tammy muttered.

“Who?”

“Justin. My boyfriend. Tall. Blue shirt.” She looked into the next bedroom. Some of the guests had migrated to the rooms up there. People danced, talked, or made out in the corners. Where the hell had he gone?

“Ten!” someone shouted.

Shit.

“Blue shirt?” Katie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Nine!”

Tammy checked through several more rooms. How big was this place, anyway? The countdown went on around her, and at this point, she wouldn't have anyone to kiss but Katie.

“Is that him?” Katie tugged on Tammy's sleeve and pointed.

“Oh!” Tammy rushed over to the bathroom across the hall. The door was slightly ajar, but she could just see the back of his head. There were only a few seconds left, but it’d be just enough time to grab him and plant one on him.

“Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!”

Tammy flung the bathroom door all the way open right at midnight. She froze when she saw that Justin wasn’t the only one in there. His pants were around his ankles, and some woman sat on the counter with her arms around him, the skirt of her sequined dress hiked up around her waist.

Katie slammed into Tammy’s back. “Oops! Sorry.” She crunched her chips in Tammy’s ear.

Tammy hardly heard her, though. She was too busy staring. She wanted to believe this was someone else, someone who just looked like him, but the sleeve of his shirt had lifted to reveal the bad tattoo of a tribal wolf he’d gotten when he was eighteen.

“Some privacy, please?!” the woman shrieked as she kicked the door shut, but Justin never missed a beat.

Stumbling backward, filled with a mixture of shock and rage, Tammy felt a burst of fur explode along the back of her neck, her chest, and arms.

“Hehe. Nice sweater,” Katie laughed, pointing at the tufts of fur peeking out from Tammy’s V-neck. “Wait, where are we going?”

“*We* aren’t going anywhere.” She gritted her teeth and brought her wolf under control as she thundered back toward the stairs. She’d have to let her inner beast out some other time, but right now, she just had to get the hell out of there. “I’m leaving.”

“But the party’s just getting started!” Katie insisted, slipping a little on the carpeted stairs as she followed Katie back down to the first floor. “Wait, is there another party to go to?”

“No.” Tammy flung the closet open by the front door and grabbed her coat. She found Justin’s parka and dug in the pocket, yanking out his keys. The dumb little wolf skull that hung from them popped off and bounced along the floor, and she left it there. “There’s no other party, Katie. I’m going home. Have fun for me, okay?” Tammy turned toward the door but then looked back. “Thanks for keeping me company.”

“Let’s do it again!” Katie enthused. “Happy New Year!”

Not happy for *her*, Tammy knew as she stomped out into the night. Snow flew down around her, the flakes already gathering on the ground and turning white under the porch light. Cold wind whistled through the knit of her V-neck sweater, but her anger made her too hot to care.

It was easy to find Justin’s car where he’d left it alongside the long and curving driveway. The bright yellow sports car was his prized possession, something he’d bragged about endlessly on their dates. “It really takes a man’s driving knowledge to handle it. It’s not the kind of machine you can just give anyone the keys to,” he’d told her.

“Fucking bastard.” She kicked the tire for good measure before opening the door and chucking her coat onto the passenger seat. The damn thing was so low to the ground that she practically fell into the driver’s seat. She wedged her curves in behind the wheel and fired up the engine. It purred under the hood as the headlights came up, highlighting the increasing snowfall.

Tammy reached for the gearshift and spotted orange goop dotting her sleeve. She craned around, seeing that Katie had spilled nacho cheese all over her. “Great.” But a vengeful smile flitted across her face as she remembered she was sitting on Justin’s precious leather seat. Tammy squirmed back and forth, embedding the nacho cheese into the upholstery.

It only did so much to satisfy her, though. She angrily tapped at the touchscreen, pulling up the GPS. *No signal.*

“Of course fucking not.” But she wasn’t going to stay there another second. Tammy was rusty on a stick shift, but all she had to do was head downhill. She’d find a highway and then get a signal again. She roared off into the night.

Snow accumulated on the windshield quickly. She tried several wrong knobs and levers before she found the wipers. They cleared the view, but the snow just started piling up again. Tammy turned up the speed on the wipers, cursing the weather. She cursed this stupid car. She cursed Justin for being such a prick.

Most of all, she cursed herself. “That’s what you get, Tammy. You opened your heart again, thinking it might finally be time to find someone.” She corrected her steering as she discovered the curve she’d headed into was sharper than she’d realized. “Justin seemed nice enough. You thought it might be fun to have a little weekend escape in the mountains, but you didn’t realize some little bimbo would be a part of it!”

The tires slid beneath her. Tammy slowed down, but the visibility was getting worse. She just had to get out of these fucking mountains and back to Eugene. It was only thirty minutes away, so it shouldn’t be that bad. The headlights picked up a stop sign, and Tammy screeched to a halt just in front of it. This weather was terrible and even worse with such

an impractical car, but what could she do? She'd never be able to get back up to the packhouse, even if she wanted to. She leaned forward and squinted, spotting a sign. *West Cascades Scenic Byway*. Good. The road would just get better from there, and she'd be home in no time. She turned right and hit the gas.

The ass end of the car slid out onto the road. The lights swung over toward the trees, but Tammy managed to straighten the vehicle out in the lane. Tears slid down her face, and she wiped them away with her left sleeve, the one that didn't have nacho cheese all over it. What a mess. "Forty-five years old, and I get ditched at a party," she grumbled. "Un-fucking-believable."

The snow that hit the road was melting but quickly refreezing into ice. The car slid to the right, skimming along the guardrail, and Tammy quickly jerked the wheel to the left. The car glided back up onto the road, but the tires slipped, sending her into a tailspin. The world was a blur around her, merely flashes of snow and darkness. She pulled on the wheel but had no control. Slamming to a halt, the airbag exploded in her face, and the world went black.

Silence descended for what only felt like a few seconds, then Tammy began to regain consciousness. Pain sparked through her body as she tried to open her eyes. Something crackled, and she jerked her head up. Was the car on fire?

"Easy there," a deep voice murmured as a shadow appeared above her. "You've injured yourself and need to take it slow."

"Huh?" She wasn't sitting in the car at all. She was lying down. Tammy blinked, trying to bring the face above her into focus.

“You were in a car accident,” the voice continued. It was gruff but pleasant, slowly pulling her mind out of the fuzziness.

Tammy’s head spun as she tried to understand her surroundings. The ceiling over her was low and dark, constructed of timbers instead of drywall. A lamp illuminated the room from somewhere behind her, not some gaudy contemporary fixture hanging from the ceiling. This wasn’t the Morwood packhouse.

Her heart surged as she remembered the icy road.

“Stay calm,” the voice insisted. “You wrecked your car, and I think you’ve got a concussion. You’re in my cabin now. It’s all right.”

He spoke to her like she was a wild animal, although she felt like one right now. “It wasn’t my car.” That was probably the least relevant thing to say, yet she was desperate to make it clear that the yellow monstrosity didn’t belong to her.

“Then someone’s not going to be very happy,” the stranger replied, “but we can talk about that later.”

Her vision cleared the rest of the way, and she managed to focus. The shadow above her coalesced into a man with dark brown hair streaked with gray. Piercing green eyes watched her carefully above high cheekbones. He almost looked familiar. “Do I know you?”

“I doubt it.” He turned away, and there was a shift in the surface beneath her as he got up.

Tammy turned her head to watch him as he picked up a kettle and poured the hot water into a mug. He was tall and broad, making the cabin around them seem even smaller than

it was. His movements were calm and sure, but his eyes darted back to her for a fraction of a second and looked away.

That sensation of familiarity still moved within her. Tammy's head hurt like hell. Her brain spun uselessly, snagging at facts and then letting them go again. Every joint in her body ached like someone had thrown her down a set of concrete stairs, yet she felt a strange surge of energy from deep within her wolf. It pulled, tugging her toward this man.

Tammy understood very little right now, but she finally realized why this man was so familiar. She didn't recognize him and was sure she'd never met him in passing before.

But he was her mate.

“I JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

“Lay back down,” Carter commanded, though his back was turned as he worked in the kitchen. “Your body has been under a lot of stress, and you’re only going to make it worse if you sit up. It takes more energy than it seems.”

There was a pause and then a shifting of the upholstery on the couch as she did as he asked. “But how did I get here? I only remember bits and pieces, and I’m confused. And I don’t know who you are.”

Carter saw that his stew was simmering and ladled some into a bowl. He turned back toward the living room and scooted a small table close to the couch, adjusting it so it was even with the cushions before he put the bowl down and set a spoon beside it. “I’ll talk if you eat.”

She looked dubiously at the bowl but propped herself up on one elbow and picked up the spoon.

He turned the armchair to face her and sat. Juniper saw his movement and left her warm spot by the fire to shove her head up under his hand, and Carter stroked her fur gently. “My name is Carter, and I’m a Ranger for the Willamette National

Forest. This is Juniper, and the one still snoring by the fire is Maple.”

The woman turned her head slightly and smiled at the dog.

“I think that takes care of introductions, unless you remember who you are.” It was hard to make conversation with a strange she-wolf in his cabin. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time anyone other than Larry was in his cabin. He felt something tugging and pulling at him and glanced up through the window. The clouds were still too thick to let the moon or stars peek through, and snow continued accumulating flake by flake against the glass.

“Oh. Tammy. Tammy Bridges.” She brushed her hair out of her face and scooped up another spoonful of the stew. “This is delicious. Did you make this? Because it sure as hell doesn’t taste like it came from a can.”

“I did,” Carter confirmed, finding an odd pleasure in knowing she enjoyed it when it really didn’t matter. She’d only be there until the storm passed, then he’d never see her again. That was how it should be, especially for her sake.

“I’ve never had beef that tasted quite like this,” Tammy went on.

Carter shifted in his chair. “That’s because it’s elk.”

Her pale blue eyes shot up to meet his. “Where do you get elk?”

“I hunted it,” he answered gruffly, not wanting to go into exactly where and how he got the meat or seasoned it. His wolf was behaving strangely. He should still have a few more nights before it became an issue, but having her right there in front of him made him feel exposed. He decided to steer the conversation back to the first questions she’d asked because

they were easier to answer. “I was out gathering firewood when I heard the crash. We get a few wrecks on the roadways out here this time of year, and I know it can be a while before anyone else happens to come along, so I went down the hill to investigate. It wasn’t too hard to find that bright yellow car, even in the middle of the night, although I’m not sure you can call it a car anymore.”

Tammy’s face showed something between remorse and delight. “Is it that bad?”

“Destined for the scrapyards,” Carter confirmed. This woman had to be close to his age, certainly old enough to know better than to go flying through snowy mountains in a rear-wheel drive vehicle that looked like it would slide sideways at the mere thought of a drizzle. His heart had wrenched inside his chest the moment he saw the wreckage, knowing for sure he’d be radioing in for help. His wolf had also reacted, but he knew what to chalk that up to. The time was getting close, and any extra excitement usually made things worse.

He cleared his throat and hoped he could keep the damn beast tempered for the moment. At least the dogs were acting normally, which was a good sign. They always started fussing over him when they knew things were about to change. “You were lucky you survived, and I think your injuries won’t require anything more than a bit of rest. What are you doing up here in the mountains, anyway?”

“I was at a party,” Tammy said slowly, sliding the spoon around in the dregs of gravy. “A New Year’s Eve party. It was at this big place that belongs to a guy named Toby Morwood.”

“Mmph. I’ve heard of it.” There was something he didn’t like about it, although Carter hadn’t quite managed to put his

finger on it. Nothing could be likable about anyone who'd spend all the money it must've taken to build that ridiculous house up there. Even Juniper and Maple didn't like being anywhere near the place, so Carter knew it wasn't just his antisocial ways. He was already starting to think it'd been a mistake to bring Tammy there, and it would be an even bigger mistake if she fraternized with the likes of Toby Morwood. "Do you know the Morwoods well?"

"No." Tammy set the spoon down and pressed her hand to her forehead. "I was up there with my boyfriend, actually. He knows them."

A streak of bitterness made its way through his chest. Carter scratched Juniper behind the ears, focusing on the feeling of her thick, brown fur. "So I need to get you back over to the château."

"Oh, hell no." Tammy situated herself so she was fully reclined on the couch again and looked up at him. "I know I must be a terrible inconvenience to you, but that's the absolute last place I want to go."

It was none of his business. She was injured, and he was doing his duty in helping her. He'd get her on her way as soon as possible, and they didn't need to stay up all night playing Twenty Questions. Still, he found himself incredibly curious about what she'd been doing up there. "What happened?" He needed to gather more information on the Morwoods; that was all. It was his job to know about everything happening in the backcountry.

"Well, I'm an idiot," she said, one corner of her mouth curving up weakly. "Justin wanted me to go to this party. I was already having a bad time, but then I caught him with another woman at midnight. So I took his car and got the hell out of

there. I knew the roads would be bad, but I didn't realize they'd be quite so awful."

"I see." His emotions were rising like a boiling bubble within him. Carter was relieved that she wasn't associated with the Morwoods and was a victim of circumstance more than anything. He also wanted to destroy this Justin guy, whom he'd never met or even heard of. His right hand curled into a fist at the thought of what he'd done to Tammy, but why should it bother him so much? People were shitty to each other all the time. He forced his hand open and laid it on the arm of the chair.

"Oh, hi there." Tammy smiled as Maple approached and set her chin on the couch cushion. The border collie mix wagged her tail. "Can I pet you?"

"She's friendly enough, despite what she's been through."

Tammy's fingers slid through Maple's thick, fluffy fur. "What happened?"

He shouldn't be so willing to blather on about his life, especially when there was so little to share. "Sometimes assholes think they're doing their pets a favor by abandoning them in the woods as if domesticated dogs have any hope of actually surviving on their own. That's how I ended up with both of these girls, actually. Juniper was caught in an illegal trap. Maple had been wandering long enough that her coat was nothing but a huge mat of knots. They were pretty leery of people for a while, but they've warmed up."

"Poor baby," Tammy cooed as Maple pushed her chin up further on the couch, the better to soak up all the loving from this stranger. "Who could do such a thing to you? And your fur is so soft and beautiful now."

Carter watched her long fingers rake through Maple's coat. He noticed the sparkly little earrings she'd worn to the party. When she adjusted the blanket, her perfume lifted to his nostrils. Tammy's voice, sweet and gentle as she doted on the dog, played like an old song in his ears. He blinked, realizing he was doing nothing but sitting there and staring at her.

He put his hands on his knees and stood. "I'd offer to drive you home, but the roads will be even worse than they were an hour ago. I've got four-wheel drive, but that doesn't help much when there's no visibility. You're welcome to stay here tonight."

Tammy's hand paused on Maple's head. Her mouth worked a bit before she finally replied. "I really don't want to intrude. I've already been enough trouble."

Carter wasn't sure exactly what it was, but he definitely wouldn't call it trouble. "It's really the only safe option."

She nodded and then cringed at the pain it caused. "I suppose you're right. I should call my daughters. They already knew I wouldn't be home tonight, but I should let them know what's going on. Wait, I don't know where my cell is."

"Right here." He'd found it on the crumpled dashboard when he'd pulled Tammy out from behind the wheel. Carter took it off the end table and handed it to her. "You probably won't get a signal, though."

"Oh." She frowned at the screen. "No, you're right."

"I've got a landline, and you're welcome to use it." He padded over to the kitchen area and returned with a cordless phone. "I'll give you a little privacy."

"Thank you." She looked tired as she accepted the handset, but he also saw the true appreciation in her eyes.

Carter turned away from her with difficulty. What was it about this woman that was triggering him so much? He clenched his teeth as he moved past the bathroom to the only bedroom in the small cabin. It would make sense if he felt edgy about having someone else there. After all, he spent the vast majority of his time completely alone. In that case, getting away from her—even if only to the next room—should make things better, but it didn't. In fact, as he flicked back the covers and stripped the sheets from the bed, he was pretty sure it was only making things worse.

Juniper nosed her way into the room, leaving the door open so Carter could hear Tammy's conversation.

"No, I'm fine. Really. No other cars were involved, and I'm safe and taken care of. I just wanted to let you know. Did you girls have a good time ringing in the New Year?"

Carter pressed his hand to the door to shut it. He looked down at Juniper. "You know there's no room for you in here if I'm trying to make the bed."

The dog wagged her tail and narrowed her soft brown eyes.

As if he could say no to her. Carter stepped over her to get a clean set of sheets from the wardrobe. Tammy had been through a hell of a night, yet it sounded like she was more concerned about her daughters. The dogs liked her, so it was a pretty safe bet that she was a decent person. He still couldn't see the moon, but he checked the Willamette State Park calendar that always hung by his bedside. There were still a few days left, so his wolf had no reason to act this way. He tucked the fitted sheet around the corners of the bed, stepping over the dog several more times.

Carter snapped open the flat sheet and flicked it into the air. The realization hit him as the fabric floated down onto the mattress. “Unless...” He turned to Juniper, but those chocolate eyes didn’t have any answers for him.

He had them all himself, though he’d been denying it. When he’d heard the crash, he’d gone in precisely the right direction. His instincts had led him straight to her. He hadn’t given a second thought to bringing her to the cabin, even though he wasn’t exactly in the habit of entertaining. And though it truly was the practical decision, it was no wonder he’d asked her to stay the night.

Tammy was his mate.

Carter stuffed the pillows into fresh cases. Mate or not, he couldn’t have her there for long. He’d have to get her on the road and back home. It couldn’t happen that night, but soon. His wolf, who hadn’t behaved at all that night, retaliated at the idea of her leaving the cabin. She was there—right there!—and it wanted her to stay. Well, Carter fought the damn beast often enough, and he’d deal with it when the time came to drive out of the mountains and back to civilization. Right now, he just had to get through the night. He returned to the wardrobe before stepping back into the living room with Juniper at his heels.

Maple, meanwhile, still sat dutifully next to their guest, gazing lovingly up at her.

“Thank you,” Tammy said, handing the phone back to Carter, “for everything, really. I’ve gotten myself into some interesting jams before, but never one quite like this.”

“It’s nothing.” He couldn’t let her stay there, nor could he take her home first thing in the morning if she was still injured. It didn’t feel right, and conflict swept through him

once again. Her wolf was just beneath the surface. He'd sensed it the moment he'd come upon the car crash. She'd been unconscious at the time, so there'd been few options, but there was a chance it might work now. "I know for people like us, the fastest way to heal is to shift."

"Oh." She gave several quick blinks and a small laugh. "I can't believe that didn't even occur to me. I'll step outside and see what I can do."

"No," he snapped quickly, reaching out his hand to stop her, even though she hadn't yet managed to come off the couch. "It's freezing out there, for one thing. You've also had a good whack to the head, which means you don't need to be walking around outside. I know this isn't exactly a grand château, but I think there's enough room to try inside."

She'd pushed herself to a seated position and now frowned at the floor.

"I promise, you can't hurt anything," Carter reassured her. Even if she knocked over a lamp and smashed it into pieces, knowing that she'd made the change and healed herself would make him feel much better. It would mean he could take her down the mountain the moment the weather calmed down, and then he'd be in the clear.

"All right." Tammy scooted to the edge of the couch. She teetered as she stood.

Carter instantly dashed forward to take her hands, and his wolf howled in pleasure. The bastard had been hard at work on him this evening, that was for sure. "Deep breaths." He wasn't sure if he was talking to her or himself.

But Tammy pulled air in through her nose and closed her eyes as she let it out through her mouth. It was a technique

used by shifters to help bring their creature to the surface, a way to make their human form relax enough to be pushed aside.

Still holding her hands, Carter waited. He could feel her wolf trying to emerge, but it seemed uncertain.

Her breath was warm on his chest as she let it out again. Tammy's brow creased, and then she smoothed it out as she tried once more.

It was in there, just as he knew it'd been when he'd come upon the wreck. It lifted once again, and as the wolf grew closer, his own responded. It reached out for hers, connecting, urging. Carter knew that when she let the shift completely take over, he might not be able to help himself. Fear pulsed in his stomach. Would he be dangerous? There were much greater concerns than knocking over a lamp, after all. His breath shook as he suppressed his wolf.

Tammy's eyes blazed open and locked on his. She felt it, too. That bond was there, one created before either of them had walked the earth. It was the reunion of two souls that had once been one. Carter's heart thundered, and his wolf seethed. He felt the familiar prickle on the back of his neck as his fur threatened just beneath the surface of his skin.

"I can't," she said breathlessly, pulling her gaze away from him. "I'm sorry. I don't exactly let my wolf come out to play all that often."

His throat was tight, and his tongue felt as though it'd folded in on itself. They'd been so close to something so big, yet they had their own reasons for not letting it happen. "That's okay," he finally said, realizing he was still holding onto her hands. "I made the bed with fresh sheets for you and

laid out some of my sweats if you want something more comfortable to sleep in. Maybe you can try again tomorrow.”

“Sure. Thank you.” She stepped toward the short hallway that led to the bathroom and bedroom. Maple stood, stretched, and followed her.

Carter remained in the living room, his wolf boiling. How could he have her right there in his own bed and not be doing a damn thing about it? The beast was angry but not as violent as it would get in a few days. It summoned images of just what Tammy must look like, her blonde hair splayed out on the pillow, her face turned toward the moonlight shining through the window. The fantasy went further, delving into just how good it would feel to slip beneath the covers with her, to feel her curves warm and soft against him. Selene, help him. It was almost too much to bear.

He gave Juniper a good scratch behind the ears while he made up the couch for sleeping. Whatever it was that had been all over Tammy’s sweater was now smeared on the throw blanket he’d always kept there, so he tossed the blanket into the hamper. Switching off the lights, he had only the fire to see by. Juniper stretched out in front of the couch, hoping for any pets she might be able to steal if his hand fell from the cushion. Carter pulled up the blanket that had covered Tammy up until a moment ago, one that wasn’t affected by the mysterious orange goo, and a waft of her perfume tantalized his nose.

She was his mate. After all these years, she’d finally come into his life. Carter had all but given up at this point. It wasn’t like he spent time in town, and the perfect woman wouldn’t just show up on his doorstep. Tammy might not’ve been on his doorstep, but it was close enough. She was right there, but he

couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't trust himself. Not now, not ever.

Carter obliged Juniper and rubbed her ears again, trying not to think about the fact that Tammy was wearing his clothes and sleeping in his bed. It was useless, so he watched the fire burn down to coals.

TAMMY'S CONSCIOUSNESS SLOWLY PULLED ITSELF FROM THE depths of sleep. She rolled over, pulling the covers up around her shoulders and reveling in just how comfortable she was. Her mind searched for information. What day was it? What was she supposed to be doing that day?

As her elbow brushed against a bruise on her rib, it all came back in a rush. The party. The car. The hulking man who'd brought her up to his cabin. She snapped her eyes open. Yes, that was all just as real as it'd seemed at the time. The room was small, offering just enough space for the large bed, a dresser, and a wardrobe with a narrow, u-shaped path to navigate from one side to the other.

Sitting up, her screaming headache reminded her to move slowly. Tammy gently swung her legs off the side of the bed, got a feel for her balance, and looked out the window. The mounds of white that greeted her were highlighted by the morning sunlight, though they remained soft and blue where the sun hadn't yet driven away the shadows of the thick trees surrounding the cabin. Ice crusted the branches, adding an extra element of fantasy to the picture. Tammy swiped fog from the glass and continued to look, a smile of pleasure on her face. This was more snow than she'd ever seen in her life!

Unfortunately, that snow was responsible for her wreck the night before. She checked her phone, surprised to find she had one bar's worth of a signal. Tammy fired off a quick message to Justin. *Cool party. By the way, your car is wrecked on the side of the road, just like our relationship.* Let him wake up to that. If he texted her back, Tammy had already resolved not to reply. There was very little she wanted to say to him, even if he'd been banging another woman in the bathroom at a party. Pigs like him simply weren't worth the waste of breath.

She turned as the door opened to reveal a long muzzle and a pair of curious and demanding eyes. Maple was staring at her. The open door brought the scent of coffee and bacon into the room and a bit of clattering from the kitchen.

"Is it your job to herd me to breakfast?" Tammy asked the dog quietly, giving her a pet before she headed into the kitchen.

Even in the daylight, and even when she wasn't suffering from all the confusion a car accident could cause, Carter was a huge guy. He somehow moved stealthily through the small kitchen as he grabbed a bowl from a cabinet and rinsed a dish. Every motion was planned and efficient. As he turned to flip the bacon, he caught a glimpse of her in his peripheral vision. "Morning," he mumbled without turning his head any further. "I see Maple found you."

"She had such an intense look on her face that I figured I'd better do as she said. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. Just have a seat. You still need your rest." He made a quick gesture toward the small kitchen table.

Tammy lowered herself onto the brown and yellow floral upholstery that told her this table and chairs had probably been around as long as she had. Maple, apparently not satisfied that

Tammy had come to the kitchen instead of the couch, came and sat next to her on the floor. Tammy absently stroked the border collie's fur as she looked around. The main area of the cabin served as a living room, kitchen, dining room, and den. The cozy feeling she'd noted the night before wasn't driven away by the light of day. In fact, seeing the unique structure of the home and how he'd managed to pack it with everything he could need, Tammy thought it felt even more comfortable than before.

"That's her herding eye."

"Hm?"

"The way Maple was looking at you," he explained, still without pausing his kitchen work. "Herding breeds use that intense stare to get you to do what they want."

"She sure knows what she's doing," Tammy laughed, impressed at the sweet, intelligent dog. She glanced around, trying to take it all in. Most of what she saw was practical and functional, like the mason jars full of beans and rice on a shelf. Canned goods were lined up below them. The furniture all looked like it'd come from a thrift store, with nothing really matching but everything in good condition and serving a purpose. She admired the gleaming wood of a side table, and her eyes lifted to the framed picture on top of it.

Tammy squinted, and then she got up. Three young men stood, beaming at the camera, each holding several fish on a stringer. A boat could be seen floating on a lake in the background. The man on the right had to be Carter. He was much younger, no gray in his dark hair yet, but there was no mistaking those high cheekbones and bright green eyes. Tammy smiled a little at seeing this first sign of any sentimentality from this gruff stranger. Then she studied the

man in the middle. Again, he was much younger, but he was very familiar. “Who’s this guy? He looks like Declan Ridgefield from that band Wildwood.”

Carter glanced over his shoulder just long enough to see what she was looking at, then returned to the stove. “It is. He’s my brother.”

“No way!” Tammy squealed. “I just went to see them play last month when they came back to Eugene for Christmas. They’re so good! And what about this other guy? Is he a brother, too?” She tapped the glass on the frame, studying the slightly shorter man on the left. He looked to be younger than the other two.

“Yeah, but he’s no longer with us,” Carter grunted as he used a pair of tongs to pull the bacon from the pan.

“Oh.” That little nugget of information brought her excitement to a quick halt, and she stepped away from the side table. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He turned and brought two plates to the table, followed by two bowls and two cups. “I never thought to ask if you were allergic to anything.”

Tammy eyed the plates of fried eggs and bacon, the bowls of oatmeal topped with pecans and dried fruit, and the steaming mugs of coffee. “No, this is wonderful. Thank you.” She was desperately curious about that other brother, but Carter didn’t seem like he wanted to get into it. Tammy let it go, but she studied Carter as he ate. He’d been kind enough to bring her there, to tend her wounds and ensure she didn’t freeze to death. He’d even given her his own clothes and bed to sleep in. He’d been a bit gruff before, but now he was even more distant as he sat across from her. Still, she knew what her wolf felt.

“So, how long have you been a Ranger?” she asked. Tammy wondered if the bacon was made from elk like his stew had been. Could you even get bacon from an elk? She had no clue.

“A long time, about twenty years at this point.” His shoulders seemed to relax slightly.

Tammy smiled. “I guess there’s no point in asking if you like it if you’ve stayed that long.”

A hint of a smile played on his lips, but he straightened it out quickly. “Well enough. It’s mostly solitary work, but I like that. What about you? What do you do?”

She sensed he was only asking because he wanted to turn the conversation away from himself, but at least he wasn’t as aloof as he’d been when she’d first come to the kitchen. “I’m a teller at Eugene Bank and Trust.”

“That doesn’t sound too fun.”

Tammy laughed again. “No one can accuse you of being indirect. It’s not that bad, really. Customers do get pretty upset sometimes. Even when they’re the ones who’ve made a mistake in balancing their checkbook, they act like we’re messing with their money. We can always get them set straight, though. What about you? What kinds of things do you do as a Ranger?”

He rolled a shoulder as he used the side of his fork to cut into his egg, sending the runny yellow center oozing out onto the plate. “Mostly, I patrol the more remote areas of the forest, checking for anyone or anything that shouldn’t be there. Every now and then, there are search and rescue missions.”

“Right.” She took a long sip of coffee. He’d served it black, which wasn’t usually her preference, but it was hot and

strong. Kind of like him. “Like that damsel in distress you pulled out of a wrecked car last night?”

His eyes met hers across the table. “Right. Just like that.”

She didn’t remember those moments but knew how significant they were. The decisions they’d each made the night before had laid down the foundation for everything that was happening now. “I was very lucky to have crashed so close to where you live.”

“Lucky?” He lifted his brow over his mug. “I’m not sure if that’s exactly what I’d call it.”

“Hmm.” She thought about his clothes around her, clothes that had once been around his body. Her wolf stirred and her skin tingled, the delicious food he’d served her now fading into the background. “I suppose you could also call it fate.”

His chest moved quickly under his shirt, showing his change in breath. “Yes.” His voice was rough, but not the same kind of rough it’d been before. He’d put down his cup, but his fingers were still wrapped tightly around the handle. “It’s brought us together in an interesting way.”

This was crazy. She was sitting in a stranger’s cabin in the middle of the woods. It defied all logic, but Tammy didn’t give a shit about logic right now. She only cared about the way it made her feel to be around him. He hadn’t even touched her except to get her out of the weather and keep her from falling, yet she couldn’t remember the last time she was so aroused that even her toes got hot. “I guess that means it’s up to us to decide what to do about it.”

A loud knock on the door made them both jump. Carter’s coffee sloshed over the side of his mug, and he cursed under his breath as he got up to answer it.

“Got the whole thing done,” the visitor was saying as he stomped the snow off his boots on the rubber mat by the door. He removed a furry cap to reveal a head of long white hair fastened back in a braid. The bit of his t-shirt that showed at the top of his coat was several brilliant shades of tie-dye. “That rusty old plow has seen better days, but she still knows how to do her job when I put her on the back of the truck. I’m surprised you didn’t hear me—oh.” He stopped as he realized the two men weren’t the only ones in the room. “Well, no wonder you didn’t hear me if you’ve got company as pretty as this. That would get any man distracted.”

“Larry, this is Tammy,” Carter said bluntly. “She wrecked her car on the curve last night, and I brought her up here. Tammy, this is Larry. He lives on the next ridge.”

“Very nice to meet you, Tammy.” Larry bobbed his head appreciatively at Tammy before turning back to Carter. “Shit. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with a woman at your place before.”

Carter made a deep grumbling noise in his throat. “Thank you for plowing the driveway, Larry. I appreciate it. How are the roads out there?”

The old man had a playful spark in his deep brown eyes. He knew just as well as Tammy did that Carter was embarrassed. “Terrible, to be honest. The county hasn’t even dared to come through yet. They’ve got more important business where things are more populated. That was part of why I stopped in, actually. Roads won’t be cleared until tomorrow at best, so I figured I’d see if you need anything.”

“Um, no.” Carter ran a hand through his hair, causing the greying strands to rumple. “I think I’m good. How about you? Would you like a cup of coffee or anything?”

Larry shook his head. “Oh, no. I wouldn’t dream of interrupting when you have company. This snow is something else, though. You know, there’s only one other time I’ve seen it like this.”

Behind him, Carter rolled his eyes. He also moved into the kitchen, fetched a mug off a hook, and poured Larry a cup of coffee.

Meanwhile, Larry had pulled up a seat at the table and was talking eagerly to Tammy. “I’ll bet you’re too young to remember the storm of ’69.”

Tammy suppressed a smile. She didn’t know this eccentric old coot, but she liked him. She also couldn’t say she minded being referred to as young. Being forty-five years old and smack in the middle of perimenopause, she really only thought of herself as young at heart. “No, but my parents told me about it.”

“Well, I sure do.” Larry nodded as he accepted the mug from Carter. “I was just a young guy in my twenties at the time. I was in the prime of my life. We had this fantastic little group of folks living up here with Mother Earth, not entirely unlike those who went to Yosemite Valley at the time. It was all just this idealistic thing we were doing, getting away from the city and the grind, you know?”

Carter went back to his breakfast. He looked like he’d heard this story more than a few times.

“I think I’ve heard of that,” Tammy replied.

“Well, you know it never really snows all that much up here. We weren’t worried about winter. We had a few things, and we had each other to keep warm.” That spark returned to Larry’s eye for a minute. He leaned toward Carter and grinned,

nudging his elbow with his own a few times for emphasis. “But then the Big Snow came. It was at least four feet deep, and it drifted up higher than my head in some places. It was absolutely beautiful. That was the first thing we noticed about it. Never had we seen Mother Nature show off her stuff quite like that.”

Tammy felt a little rude, but she went ahead and started eating as well. Carter was, and after all, he’d made this delicious meal.

“The thing is, we ran out of food and supplies much faster than we thought we would. We had one vehicle, and I volunteered to take it down the mountain. I didn’t get very far. The roads were all closed, and the plows just didn’t come through in those days like they do now. I knew I had people relying on me, so I went the rest of the way on foot.”

“But,” Tammy nearly choked on her oatmeal, “it’s a long way to any town.”

“Don’t I know it!” Larry went on to tell her all about how he’d heroically made his way for help, bringing food, fuel, and medical supplies back to his commune. “After that, I vowed I’d always be prepared for another storm like that. I wouldn’t let that happen again. I’ve got everything a person could need over at my place. I work on it all year round, preparing food and chopping wood. Isn’t that so, Carter?”

“Yep. Sure is.” Carter scraped the bottom of his bowl.

Tammy knew she should be feeling just as urgent about getting into town as Larry had back in the day, but instead, she found herself relaxing. Her girls were safe. They were at home with plenty of food and instructions not to go anywhere in this weather. Their neighbor, Mrs. Chapman, was always available to help as well. The snow would keep Tammy there for a bit

longer, but this little cabin in the woods was just the break from the real world she needed.

“I’M SORRY ABOUT THAT,” CARTER SAID AN HOUR LATER WHEN Larry had finally decided to go back to his place. “I should’ve expected him to stop in. We help each other out a lot.” As a matter of fact, Larry helped Carter out more than anyone could ever expect him to.

“That’s kind of nice, actually.” Tammy was now in the armchair in the living room. Once again, Maple was at her feet. “I’ve got good neighbors, but I doubt they’d trudge through three feet of snow and plow my driveway for me.”

“Not many people would,” Carter noted. He couldn’t keep her there much longer. Tammy looked like she was doing well. She moved less stiffly, and some of the exhaustion had lifted from her face. It was her head he was most concerned about, even though the threat of anything severe had probably passed by now. “Let’s see if we can get you to shift today.”

Tammy frowned. “Honestly, I don’t think I can. Like I said last night, I haven’t had much of an opportunity to. I’m always at work or trying to manage my household, but you don’t want to hear my excuses. It’s a little embarrassing, but I’ve kind of let my wolf fall to the wayside. I’m not so sure I can just shift at will anymore.”

“All right.” He headed over to the small closet near the front door and opened it. Most of what he had would be too big, but it’d just have to do. He pulled out a coat and boots. “I’m going to take that as a challenge.”

She stared at him. “What?”

“Let’s go outside. I think it’s safe enough at this point, and maybe being in the woods will help,” he reasoned. Carter held out the coat.

She slowly rose from the chair. “I don’t know.”

“Humor me.” Would he have made this much effort if he didn’t know she was his mate? Carter couldn’t be sure. He only knew she’d find out the truth about him if she stayed, which absolutely couldn’t happen.

When they were wrapped up against the cold weather, Carter led the way outside. The trails were obscured by the deep, fluffy snow, but he didn’t need to see the worn paths to know his way around. He was a part of the land at this point. They headed out behind the cabin, and he made sure they weren’t heading anywhere near Larry’s place. “So, why did you stop? Shifting, I mean.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It wasn’t really a conscious decision. It just sort of happened. I’ve been busy, and it’s harder when you live downtown.”

An option Carter hadn’t had for a long time, although he wasn’t sure he’d take it if he did. “Maybe it’ll be like riding a bike.”

Tammy slipped, and she reached out to steady herself on his arm. “And when was the last time you rode a bike?”

“Fair enough.” He liked the way her hand felt on his arm, even through her gloves and the several layers he wore. She

was relying on him, which satisfied a deep, primal urge inside him. He had a few other primal urges when it came to Tammy, but he'd managed to keep them at bay so far.

He came to a halt where the trees were thick and the sloping ground rose up around them. There was very little chance of being seen, even if the weather was perfect. "How about this?"

Her eyes were the same shade of blue that the snow took on where the sun didn't reach it. "I'll try, but I'm telling you right now that it won't work."

But Carter felt differently. He had no good reason to feel that way. His soul knew her, but not as a person. If she'd sworn she was so out of touch with her wolf that she couldn't summon it, he should believe her. The only thing was, he'd sensed it in her. He'd felt it, and he could guarantee it was much closer than she realized. Hell, it couldn't be buried too far if she understood they were mates.

And she certainly did. The two of them had nearly come out and said it out loud to each other right before Larry arrived, addressing the elephant in the room. Well, one of them. There was another one, but Tammy didn't know about it. She did sense, however, that deep pull between them just as he did. They couldn't pretend it didn't exist. Regardless of what fate had set in motion for them, though, he had to get her out of there.

She let out a frustrated huff. "It's not working. I'm really sorry."

"Don't be." The last thing he wanted her to be was sorry. "Do you have any triggers?"

Tammy tipped her head. "Triggers?"

“Anything that brings it out or used to bring it out. Like getting mad or something.” He was pretty sure his trigger was just existence at this point, but others found it harder to control their beasts in certain situations.

She pressed her lips together. “I’ve had a few close calls when I’ve been mad, but I have to be really mad.”

He lifted his brows, feeling them rub against the inside of his hat. “Mad enough to crash an expensive sports car?”

She narrowed the corners of her eyes, but she was smiling. “Maybe something along those lines, yeah.”

“Well, I don’t have anything like that around here. All I’ve got is a bunch of snow.” He took several steps backward before he bent and scooped up a handful of the white fluffy stuff. As he suspected it would, it compacted perfectly in his hands.

She saw what he was doing. “Oh, no, you don’t.”

The snowball whacked into the side of her leg, right on target. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Are you kidding me?” Tammy was still a little unsteady on her feet, but not so much that she couldn’t snag a handful of snow and pack it tight. She tossed it.

A quick sidestep from Carter and her efforts disappeared into the snow just to the left of him. “Missed.”

“I wouldn’t have!” she insisted as she made another one.

Carter was doing the same, moving away from her as he did so. “I’m not so sure about that.” He splatted another one right on the sleeve of her coat, sending flakes spraying into her face.

“Hey!” Tammy launched another volley, but it only caught the tip of his boot as he continued to move away from her. “That’s not fair, you know!”

“I never said it had to be,” he reminded her calmly. He had to be careful when he aimed his next attack, not wanting to hit any of her injuries. The next snowball smacked into her leg.

“Why are you so good at this?” she demanded. She hurled herself through the snow at him, having a much harder time maneuvering through the deep stuff. She tossed a half-formed snowball at him that fell far short and tried again. “And how are you getting away so fast?”

“You won’t like my answer.” He knew precisely what it was, though. His wolf was always close by, ready to come out in a split second. At times, he knew it was a hindrance, but right now, it was perfect. He didn’t have to be in wolf form to take advantage of some of the senses that came with the beast.

Tammy managed to fling one hard enough that it covered the distance, but it still didn’t hit its intended target. “Ugh! You’re such a brat!” She charged after him again.

Carter paced himself, keeping just enough distance between them so she couldn’t get to him easily, but not getting so far that he’d have to worry about her. He smiled. He could feel her wolf rising and wondered if she could. It was like being on the edge of a rollercoaster’s steep drop-off: when you know something is about to happen, but time feels suspended.

And then it all happened at once. Tammy let out a cry of frustration and shock as her body finally cooperated. She was running through the snow but fell forward as her hands turned to paws. Her back legs caught up and launched her further forward, and now the distance between them was closing as her coat erupted and her ears moved to the top of her head.

Tammy barreled into him in wolf form, her eyes still the same icy blue.

As Carter fell into the snow, he let out his own wolf. He felt the relief of his body stretching and pulling, his muscles twisting and bones snapping into a familiar place. *And you said I wasn't being fair*, he said telepathically.

You tricked me, she replied in his mind. She pushed her paws against his chest as she got back to her feet, but that playfulness was still in her eyes.

Carter popped up after her. The connection he'd felt before was wildly strong now, a pull so hard that he felt his body being propelled toward her. He held back, bracing his feet in the snow. *All I did was throw a few snowballs. I'm perfectly innocent.*

Oh, I'm sure! At least you can't do that now. She stood a couple of feet from him, looking down at the beast she hadn't seen in a long time, admiring the dark fur and strong legs.

And, Carter thought, there was plenty there to be admired. He felt his hunger for her grow as he studied the profile of her muzzle and the way her tail swished along with her thoughts. *No, but I can do this.* He shoved his shoulder into a nearby tree and sent a shower of fresh snow raining down on her fur.

Hey! She closed her eyes and shook it all out, sending it flying toward him. When she was done, she planted her feet in the snow and charged. *I'm going to get you for that!*

Carter dashed off. She was hot on his heels, now much more capable of keeping up with him. They both slipped on an incline and went sliding back down on their bellies. When he got back on his feet, he turned and nipped the tip of her tail, sending a surprised yelp up into the cold air. Tammy got him

back as she dove into a snow drift with her front paws and sent it cascading into him. They rolled and played like puppies, barely even registering the chill around them that everyone else in the area was probably worried about. For once, Carter wasn't thinking about work or gathering wood for the fire or what he would do when the moon was full. He knew Tammy wasn't worried about what would happen to that douche's car or how she would get back home. He was in her mind as she was in his, a link that could only happen when two shifters were either in the same pack or fated. He'd known, but every bit of hard evidence drilled it further into him. Tammy was *his*.

Finally, the cold air burning in their lungs and the snow balling up on the bottoms of their paws, they called a truce and came to a halt. *We'd probably better get back inside before it gets dark*, Carter suggested. Time had passed much more quickly out there than he'd anticipated, and a pang of regret zipped through him. He could spend only so much time with her, and then she'd have to go.

Yeah, you're probably right. Of course, that means I have to see if I can find my human again, she joked. *Now that I've let my wolf out, it'll probably want to stick around.*

Carter, looking at her natural, raw beauty, couldn't see a single bad thing about that.

As they approached the house, she paused. Carter kept his wolf form just in case she needed any reassurance, and he waited as she took a few breaths. As she let the air out of her lungs, her human reemerged. She looked like a wholly different creature, but she didn't feel like one in his mind. "Holy shit, it's cold out here!" she complained with a laugh. "I kind of forgot about it with all that fur."

Carter had made the quick shift back himself. “It’s pretty handy this time of year.” He opened the door and stepped back to let her in first. The warmth of the cabin wrapped pleasantly around him, but Carter wasn’t cold. He’d been warmed from a place within.

“You’re right.” She sat to unlace the huge, clunky boots he’d loaned her. “I could just shift and run back into town, regardless of the roads.”

He knew she was kidding, but the idea of her leaving made his wolf rebel once again. The damn thing needed to behave! He couldn’t entirely blame it, not just at the thought of being far from her. Even a wolf could encounter plenty of dangers along the way, and a stab of fear pierced through him. It reminded him that the reason he’d had her shift in the first place was to make sure she was well enough to go home when the time was right. “How are you feeling? How’s your head?”

“Oh.” She paused as one boot thudded to the floor. “I completely forgot about it, so I guess that answers your question.”

“Yeah, I’d say so.” He felt a smile lift his cheeks once again as he stripped off his gloves and coat, and it wasn’t the first one of the day. He was actually happy. Even with his secret hanging heavy on his shoulders, his heart was light and he felt excited about the world. When was the last time that had happened? Long enough ago that he wasn’t sure it counted anymore. “I’d probably better get some dinner figured out.”

Hearing the word, the dogs quickly followed him toward the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’ll get something for you ladies in a minute,” he chuckled. Even the dogs seemed to be a little happier since Tammy’s arrival.

“Let me help,” Tammy insisted. “I can make a pretty good chicken Florentine.”

Carter glanced doubtfully in the fridge. “What kind of ingredients do you need for that?”

“Well, spinach,” she began.

“Nope.” Carter shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t even have the chicken.”

Tammy laughed. “Is it all just elk and potatoes?”

“Hey, now,” he retorted, pointing to the jars on the shelf, “I’ve got rice and beans, too!”

She touched his arm as she moved past him and looked in the cabinets. “All right. I can leave dinner to you. How about I make something for dessert? Chocolate cake, maybe? I’ve been working on my ganache.”

“Ganache?” Carter had no idea what that was. “The closest thing I usually have to dessert is canned fruit.”

“Not exactly a fan of Food Network, huh?” she joked as she closed the cabinet door. “All right. I can just sit with a glass of wine and watch you work. After the breakfast you made earlier, it’s pretty clear you don’t need my help anyway. What? What’s that smirk for?”

Closing the fridge, Carter bent down and retrieved a large stoneware jug. “I don’t have wine, but Larry always brings over some of his moonshine.”

“Oh, my,” Tammy laughed. “I’m sure whatever Larry’s been drinking is some pretty strong stuff!”

“He’s a character,” Carter agreed, pouring a small amount for each of them. “He’s harmless, though, and he’s a good guy.”

“I don’t doubt that at all,” Tammy said as she accepted her glass and sniffed it. “I liked him right away. He’s just a bit... out there. I guess that’s what happens to you when you’ve lived out in the wilderness for so long. Wait. I mean—”

“No, it’s fine.” He hadn’t even touched the alcohol yet, but Carter felt like he’d already had a few drinks. Everything was bright and shiny, and he couldn’t stop smiling. Even his wolf was fairly content. “It really does change you.”

Taking a cautious sip, Tammy squinted her eyes and coughed. “Holy shit! I think this stuff just might change me. I’m not sure into what, though!”

They laughed and chatted while Carter cooked, a cozy scene that was so pleasant he could be dreaming. Yes, being up there had changed him, but he’d changed even before that. Tammy didn’t know, of course. He didn’t want her to. But did she have any idea just how much *she* was changing him?

“THEY’RE GREAT GIRLS.” TAMMY SLICED HER FORK THROUGH a soft, buttery potato. “Gabrielle is fifteen, and she’s finally coming into herself. She says she’s not an artist, but it’s obvious that she is. She thinks I only say that because I’m her mom and *have* to tell her she’s talented.”

“What kind of art?” Carter asked.

She liked that he seemed genuinely interested. Justin had met the girls briefly but never really asked about them. “You name it. She’s done some beautiful paintings and pencil sketches, and I envy her skills when it comes to makeup and hair. I never looked that pretty in high school.”

He gave her an assessing look from across the table. “I doubt that.”

“I was very awkward,” she countered, “but unfortunately, kids will find a reason to be mean, no matter what. Some of those girls are absolutely awful to her, and I know it’s just because she’s got a lot going for her. They’re jealous.”

Carter tipped his head thoughtfully. “She’s right. That *is* just what a mom would say.”

“But it’s true!” Tammy insisted with a smile. “She’s got a few solid friends who really have her back, though. I think

she'll be okay.”

“And the other one?” Carter asked.

Tammy felt like she was living in some sort of fantasy land. She'd eaten such delicious food, played in the snow, tried some super strong moonshine, and now a man was actually interested in her life. The fact that she'd shifted meant she felt good inside and out, and her cheeks were starting to hurt from smiling so much. “Trinity's seventeen. For the first three years of high school, she didn't seem to care about planning for college. I worried that she wouldn't even go. All of a sudden, she decided she wants to be a music teacher. She's been in the band since fifth grade and plays several instruments. She's submitted her college applications and has been looking for scholarships. I'm so excited to see where she goes.”

“Again, just what a mom would say,” Carter said with a smile. He paused for a moment. “And what about their father? Where's he in the picture?”

“He's not. Paul passed away a few years ago.”

“I'm sorry.” His voice was deep and rough, carrying pain and sympathy with it.

Tammy shook her head. “Thank you. Though Paul and I were never fated, we got along well enough. But really, my biggest sadness was seeing my girls grieve the loss of their father. Children aren't easy, even under the best of circumstances. At this point, at least I can say they're turning out all right.”

His eyes were steady on her now, and he was no longer eating. “It sounds like it.”

Tammy felt the heaviness in the air. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be such a downer.”

“No,” he insisted. “It’s part of your life. It can’t always be sunshine and roses, right?”

“Very true,” she agreed. There was also the simple fact that Carter was so easy to talk to. Tammy never really brought up Paul if she could avoid it, but she wanted to turn herself inside out and let him know everything about her. She’d never experienced that fated connection before and finally understood why other shifters always went on about it. “What about you? I’ve been assuming you’re single since I don’t see any fluffy rugs or fancy towels that no one’s allowed to use.”

He shook his head and looked down at his plate, but his eyes were seeing something else. “There was someone a long time ago. Like your husband, it wasn’t fated. It was something that just happened. She’s not with us anymore, either.”

“Oh.” Tammy sensed the turmoil within him and knew there had to be much more to that story. If she was fair, there was probably a lot more to what had happened between herself and Paul, though she usually chose to just gloss over it. Carter was getting distant again, more like the way he’d been when she’d first woken up there. Tammy found that she liked it much better the other way, the way they were during their snowball fight or when he got that slight flush of pink in his cheeks when he was embarrassed.

Clearly, he didn’t want to dive into it any further, and she couldn’t blame him. “Well, aren’t we just a lively bunch? Why don’t I clear away these dishes, and then we can pick a new topic. Maybe your lack of dessert options around here. I could sure go for a peach cobbler right now.”

Carter sank back in his seat slightly. “Peach cobbler. I haven’t had it in a long time, but I used to love it.”

“I was never one for cooking when I was younger,” Tammy said as she stood and grabbed her plate as well as his. “My mom and grandma both thought it was something I should learn from the moment I could hold a wooden spoon, but I really wasn’t interested until I had my girls. Then I thought I had to be the best chef in the world.”

“I can’t let you clean up by yourself,” Carter insisted, following her to the sink.

She moved over so he couldn’t get to the faucet. “You did all the cooking yourself.”

“That’s different. It’s my house.” He reached around her and grabbed a rag, his arm brushing against hers as he dampened it before taking it over to wipe the table off. “Tell me more about this peach cobbler.”

She rinsed the plates before filling the sink, seeing that he didn’t have a dishwasher. “It’s my great-grandmother’s recipe. I figured it was like any other cobbler recipe, but then I misplaced it and had to use one I found online. It was terrible, and that’s when I knew for sure that my ancestors were a lot smarter than me.”

His laugh was a deep vibrato as he came back to the sink. “Did she make it with fresh peaches?”

“Absolutely.” Tammy didn’t usually enjoy washing dishes, although she did like having a clean sink at the end of the night. She felt like she was getting much more out of the bargain with a handsome man standing beside her. “My girls love it, too.”

“And do they like to cook?”

She shook her head. “That’s my epic failure as a mother. They’re perfectly capable of following a recipe, but there’s

usually no end of eye-rolling when they have to do so much as stick a pizza in the oven. They tell me everything tastes better when I make it. I know they're manipulating me, but it's flattering enough that I let it happen."

"Generous of you," he murmured, putting a pan in the soapy water. "Hey. You're shivering."

"I'm fine. Maple was warming my feet under the table while we ate. I'm sure the hot water will do the job, too."

"We were outside for quite a while," Carter said, drying off his hands. "You were already injured. Even with shifting, you must've been more susceptible to a chill than I realized."

She stiffened as his hand swept up under the tail of her shirt and pressed against the small of her back. It was warm and comfortable as he touched her skin, the callouses making pleasurable little scratches.

"Sorry," he said as he jerked his hand back out. "Your skin is cold, though. We really need to get you warmed up."

Tammy rinsed a plate and set it on the drying rack. "I've had good food, moonshine, and I'm wearing your sweats. Is there really anything else I can do?" She looked up at him, happy to continue their jovial teasing, but his eyes were dark and serious, sending a tremor of excitement down her spine.

"The best way to get rid of a chill is body heat." He was facing her now, his breath shallow. Soap bubbles popped in the sink. A few flakes of snow, whipped up by the wind, tinkled against the window. The moment of silence between them hung like a heavy curtain that neither one of them quite knew what to do with, and then Carter turned toward the stove. "Hot cocoa works pretty well, too."

Without thinking, Tammy reached out and laid her hand on his arm. “I like the first option better.”

Carter turned slowly back to her. “Tammy, you don’t know what you’re getting into with me.”

“Maybe not.” She hardly knew him. The practical, grown-up side of her, the part that had to be a responsible parent and good role model, knew that. But the other side of her, the one that wished she had more chances to do something a little wild, the side that was thrilled she’d found her wolf again, was ready to throw caution to the wind. “I’m willing to find out.”

He took another step, closing the small distance between them. Carter’s hand found her hip, and his thumb made small, urgent circles. “You don’t understand what you do to me.”

“Oh, but I do,” she insisted, tipping her head up and daring him to come up with another argument. The two of them had been dancing around this for over a day, though they both knew exactly what was happening. She put her hand on his chest and slowly spread her fingers. They pulsed to the rhythm of his heartbeat. “It works both ways, you know. I can feel it, too.”

His other hand wrapped around her waist and pulled her close. His eyes traveled down to her lips, hungry for much more than dinner. “Are you sure?”

Her wolf hovered just below the surface of her skin. It’d been sleeping for a long time, but it was fully awake now. It reached out to Carter, desiring, wanting, needing. He was in a separate body, yet he was a part of her. “Aren’t you?”

In reply, Carter covered her mouth with his. He grazed his lips hard against hers, consuming her right from the start. His

hands roved down, gripping her backside and pressing her body harder against him.

Tammy felt as much as heard his growl of desire as Carter made sure there wasn't the slightest bit of daylight between them. She readily parted her lips when she felt his doing the same, abandoning herself to the passion that surged in her body. She knew now that the cold distance he'd tried so hard to maintain at first had simply been him holding back. The flood of his desire was evident in the force of his kiss and the desperation with which he held her. The hard bulge in his jeans said quite a bit, too. Tammy skimmed her hands across his wide chest and up to the bulk of his shoulders, her palms tingling as she explored his muscles.

Carter traced his hand down the length of her thigh as he stooped slightly, bringing her knee up his leg and opening her hips to him. Tammy sighed into his mouth as she truly felt the length of his hardness now, in pure agony at knowing they still had all these layers of clothing between them. She couldn't even feel off-balance standing on one foot as she was because Carter held her so tightly and securely in his grasp. It took her a moment to register that he'd lifted her from the floor completely.

He turned and carried her down the hall to the bedroom, where she'd spent the night wrapped in his scent. Now, it was actually him there with her instead of his ghost, and her body thrilled at the prospect.

He kicked the door shut with a thump. With tiny, calculated movements, Carter let go of her just enough so she could slide down his body. Her feet were touching the floor again, but her head was floating far above the clouds as she ran her hands around his waistband and then up under his t-

shirt. His skin was warm, the scattering of hairs making her fingers tingle pleasantly. She wanted more, and she lifted his shirt over his head. As she freed him from it, Tammy looked up.

Carter's eyes were nearly black now, his pupils eclipsing the green as he looked down at her. That animal desire heated her blood another degree, and the trembling in her body was now no longer from the cold. His hands moved deftly over her body, savoring her curves while stripping away her clothes. His fingers skimmed up from her hips and along her ribs as he pulled the sweatshirt over her head. The pants came next, with an appreciation for everything from her hips, her thighs, and even down to her knees and ankles along the way. Carter let out a low growl as he saw her there in front of him, wearing nothing more than her bra and panties. With a hard grip and a movement so swift it made her dizzy, he picked her up and laid her on the bed, covering her body with his own.

The air rushed from her lungs, from hitting the mattress or her skin touching his, she didn't know. Tammy didn't care, either. Being with Carter was a heady mix of exhilaration, torture, and anticipation. She let it swim through her as she wrapped one leg around his hard thigh and arched her body up against his.

His kisses invaded her mouth once again, their tongues dancing and writhing amidst their shared breath. She clung to him, anchoring herself as he broke their liplock and dropped his kisses down the side of her neck and into the hollow of her collarbone. He flicked open the front clasp of her bra, pulling her nipple into his mouth the moment it was released and sucking hard. Tammy sank into the mattress as her breath grew shallow. She dragged her fingers through his hair and closed her eyes, feeling her body reacting to his attentions.

Her stomach quivered as Carter continued to move further down, his lips, tongue, and hands traversing its soft skin. Carter was at the end of the bed now, and he tucked his fingers inside the waistband of her panties, tracing that delicate line for a moment before he stripped them away. Tammy pushed herself up to her elbows, planning to do the same to him, but he surprised her by dipping his head and continuing his work between her legs.

Her body immediately tensed as she registered just what he was doing, but as he licked and tasted, she found that she could no longer hold herself up. Tammy fell back onto the sheets, her breath spasming and her heart ricocheting through her body. His hands claimed the backs of her knees and the tender skin on the insides of her thighs. His slick, heated tongue and the scraping stubble from his cropped beard created pure chaos inside of her, twisting, shaking, and tumbling. It layered on top of itself, building until she could no longer stand it. Just when she'd reached the pinnacle of torment, it let go in a rush of pleasure that left her crying out and gasping for breath.

Carter backed off the bed and stood while he tore off the last of his clothes. His eyes met hers as he came back onto the mattress, his gaze locked on hers like a hunter and its prey as he covered her with his body. The air crackled between them, and she reached up to touch his face. She slid her thighs up the outsides of his legs, needing him, inviting him, and gasped as he plunged into her depths.

Their hips moved in rhythm as endless shivers swept through her body. Being with Carter was new, yet so powerfully familiar. She felt that twisting tension building once again and clutched his back as it rose inside her. She pressed harder up against him, driving him on. Her head

arched back into the pillows as she felt him expanding. His breath exploded in a roar over her, and Tammy felt that release unwinding in all her muscles as his desire flooded her.

She lay next to him, staring up at the ceiling and trying to catch her breath. It was fully dark now, with only the glow of the moon reflecting off the snow and into the room. “You know, we didn’t exactly talk about whether or not I’d be staying the night again tonight.”

Carter rolled over. With one swift movement, he put his arm around her and pulled her close to his bare chest, snuggling her tight against his warm skin. His legs pressed against the backs of hers, and his beard brushed against her back as he kissed the nape of her neck. “You’re staying.”

CARTER AWOKE TO FIND TAMMY IN BED NEXT TO HIM. AFTER they'd slept together the night before and he'd pulled her close, he hadn't wanted to let go of her. In fact, he hadn't wanted to waste a single second of that time asleep. He could do that anytime. Carter had lain awake, reveling in the way her soft skin felt against his body, the gentle sound of her breathing once she'd nodded off, and how she'd snuggled harder against him in her slumber.

The previous night had been difficult, knowing she was in his bed and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. This should be easier. This should feel perfect and right, like the beginning of a whole new part of his life. His wolf was calm and peaceful for once. Carter ought to be shouting it from the ridgetops.

It couldn't be like that, though. He'd been enjoying this little interlude from his life, but it had to come to an end. Today.

He slipped out of bed, and his wolf whined in protest. He knew the beast would be even harder to deal with now. Carter glanced angrily at the calendar next to the bed as he pulled on his clothes, though he didn't need to check the date to know

the truth. Though he probably shouldn't, he let her sleep while he headed out into the main area of the cabin.

The dogs greeted him eagerly, no doubt wondering why they'd been shut out of the bedroom. He gave them their breakfast and let them out before firing up the coffee pot. Breakfast would need to be simple that morning, but he sure as shit wasn't going to skip a hot cup of coffee before he did what he had to do today. A quick radio call to the station, and he knew he had no other excuses.

“Hi.”

Carter turned. Her hair was tousled, the blonde curls completely untamed after their night of passion. The morning sun highlighted a few gray hairs that streaked through the chaos, though they were difficult to pick out against her natural color most of the time. Tammy's eyes were the color of ice, yet they created a fiery heat under his skin. She'd discovered one of his flannels in the closet and had wrapped it around her like a short robe. She couldn't possibly know how much harder she was making this.

“Morning,” he replied curtly. “I've got some coffee going, and I'll have eggs and toast ready in just a minute. It looks like the roads are clear today.”

“Oh.” She turned toward the living room window, which faced the driveway. “You can tell from all the way up here?”

“No, but I radioed the Ranger station. We're clear all the way to Eugene. We can get going right after we eat.” The longer he put off the inevitable, the harder it would be. Carter busied himself with breakfast, knowing he would only be eating because his body required it, not because he particularly wanted to. If he kept Tammy there any longer than necessary, he couldn't trust himself to do the right thing.

“Okay. Let me just go get dressed.” She turned and left.

Carter curled his hand into a fist, barely stopping himself from slamming it into the counter. How must it look to her? They’d had sex, and now he was getting rid of her as fast as possible. She would hate him for this, and there’d never be any coming back from it.

But it was just as well. Tammy would hate him anyway, given enough time, but that would be the least of any problems between them. Let her. It would keep her safe, which was the only thing he could do for her now.

The toast and eggs cooked up in a hurry. That was exactly what he’d intended, though he resented it. Carter turned and went to the bedroom to see why she hadn’t returned yet. He hoped he wouldn’t find her in there crying because then he’d completely lose his shit. He was barely holding it together as it was.

He walked in to find her in her jeans and bra, holding up the sweater she’d been wearing on the night of the accident. Her face was twisted as though she’d just squished the juiciest bug in the world, and he could see why. That orange goo had completely crusted the back of the sweater, holding it together in a wrinkled mess.

“Nacho cheese,” she explained with a sneer. “From the party.”

“Here.” Carter reached into his closet and grabbed a heather gray t-shirt that read ‘Willamette National Forest’ on the front in big green letters. “You can wear this.”

“Won’t you need it?” Her fingers curled into the soft cotton.

He tried not to watch, and he tried not to appreciate the way her bra hugged those luscious curves.

“I’ve got a ton of them.” Which was true, but he wouldn’t tell her that was the first one he’d ever gotten. Though it’d meant he’d be starting a life of solitude, Carter had been grateful for it. He’d needed the forest, and maybe he could give something back to it in the meantime. “Take the flannel, too. Breakfast is ready.”

Things were quiet at the table. He’d only had her there for a little over a full day, and already, he missed the way things had been between them. Carter frowned at his eggs and considered telling her, but it wasn’t the sort of thing you just mentioned in casual conversation. In fact, the only person he’d ever told was Larry, and that was a very long time ago when it was all still fresh.

“I’m going to get the truck warmed up, then we should be good to go.” He put his plate in the sink without bothering to wash it. He’d have plenty of time to do that when he was alone again.

When he came back in after starting the engine and clearing the windshield, he found her on the floor with Maple.

“You’re a sweetie, aren’t you? I don’t know how anyone ever abandoned you. I know I’d take you with me in a heartbeat if you didn’t already have a home.” Seeing that Maple was getting all the love, Juniper trotted over and shoved her head against Tammy’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. You’re a special girl, too.”

Even the damn dogs were crazy about her. “Truck’s ready to go.” Not that he was.

The silence was heavy in the cab of the truck. Larry had plowed the driveway, but it was still slick. He slowly made his way down, his wolf howling and raging against him as he did. She was right there beside him, within arm's reach, but the beast knew what Carter was up to. As promised, the road was clear. He turned onto it and gunned the engine.

Tammy tugged her fingers through her curls. "I didn't even think about what to do about Justin's car."

"I'd already called it in that night." New Year's Eve felt like an eternity ago. "A wrecker will come get to it when they have time, but that might be a while if they're still catching up from all the snow."

"Oh. Thanks." She chewed her lip as she stared out at the snowy woods speeding by.

Carter set the speed as high as he dared, wanting—needing—to get this drive over with as quickly as possible. He gripped the steering wheel as he fought to keep control of himself. As pleasant as his wolf had been the night prior and that morning, it was returning to its old ways fast. It was angry and vicious, and this wasn't even the worst part. Not yet.

"You should probably give me your address," he finally said. They'd reached Highway 126 now and were heading straight toward Eugene, though it'd be a while before the trees and mountains turned to homes and businesses. Just knowing what was coming didn't make this any better.

"Right." Tammy rattled it off. "It's right on the edge of Moon Mountain City Park. You can pick up I-5 in Eugene and head south, and I can guide you from there."

Damn. So she was on the edge of town, but they'd still have to go through a decent amount of civilization before they

got there. Carter took a deep breath. He hadn't planned to come out of the mountains until at least spring. He hadn't even come back for Christmas. His brother Declan had asked him to, going on about some holiday get-together. Carter knew he probably should've gone, but the drive into town wasn't exactly the problem.

He heard Tammy pull in a breath as though she were about to speak a few times, but no words followed. Eventually, she turned to him. "Did I do something wrong?"

Shit. Those blue eyes were definitely more ice than fire right now. He'd hurt her, and there hadn't been any way of avoiding it.

"I don't think I would've asked that," she continued when he didn't answer. "Not if it were twenty years ago, and maybe not even if you were someone else. But everything feels different this morning. I've reached a point in my life, especially after recent events, where I don't want to waste any time."

Pain ripped through him, but it wasn't physical. Not really. It was the ache of knowing just who and what he was. He'd been able to bear it well enough for a long time because he hadn't had to share it with anyone. Now, he was weighing Tammy down with it whether he wanted to or not. "No, you didn't. I just have to get back to work today."

"I see."

They breezed into Springfield. The congestion made him edgy, but at least no one knew him there. It was only as they closed in on Eugene that the air started to feel too thick for his lungs. Would anyone recognize him? How would he deal with that on top of everything going on with Tammy?

“Take this exit.”

He did as he was told, and a short while later, he pulled up in front of a two-story home. Even in winter, it was easy to tell that the front yard was immaculately landscaped. Deep sage green and terracotta paint gave the home the effect of being a part of the woods that butted up behind it, even as other homes in the neighborhood were within a stone’s throw. The bright red door on the cozy portico had a sign next to it that welcomed anyone who came up to knock. It was a far cry from his rough little cabin in the middle of nowhere. Carter was sure it was the sort of home most people wanted, something clean and bright, but he was getting uneasy just sitting in the driveway.

Tammy unbuckled her seatbelt before he’d even brought the truck to a complete stop. She didn’t give him the chance to do the gentlemanly thing and open her door, but he knew he couldn’t have done it, anyway. She slid out onto the concrete and turned to face him, her hair ruffling in the breeze and those eyes boring into his. “Will I see you again?”

He had no good answer to that. He couldn’t possibly tell her the truth. Either she’d think he was making something up because he didn’t *want* to see her again, or she’d finally understand the true monster he was. Both meant returning to a life of solitude, one he thought he’d accepted until she came crashing into his world.

His wolf cried out the other answer. *In my bed again tonight*. It wasn’t to be trusted, though, and he knew that.

Instead, he stared at the dashboard. “I don’t know.”

The moment the door closed, he put the truck in reverse. He backed away from the cozy house with the inviting front door and flew out of her neighborhood as quickly as the

suburban roads would allow. Carter felt the city crushing in on him as he sped through it, his panic blooming every time he was forced to stop for a red light. Only once he got back to the countryside did it begin to subside.

Plenty of other terrible thoughts and feelings waited under that panic. Carter smacked the steering wheel with the palm of his hand, hating himself for what he'd just done. There was a time in his life when he would've thought any man who treated a woman the way he just had was a complete asshole, the kind who should be called out for his behavior. He'd rescued her, helped heal her, and slept with her, but then he'd left her with nothing but a shrug as he'd driven off as fast as possible. What a fucking dick he was.

Sure, there was a reason for it. Carter knew it was no real justification.

He pulled in several deep breaths as he finally turned onto the long driveway that led up to his cabin. At least if he was home, he'd have nothing to worry about other than his survival and doing his job. The day was warming, and the traces of snow that Larry's plow had left behind were beginning to soak into the ground. The storm was melting away, right along with the daydream he'd lived with Tammy.

Carter stepped into the cabin. He went through his normal routine of taking off his boots and coat, putting them all in the spots they belonged. He couldn't afford to be messy in a limited space such as this. The dogs greeted him happily, and he tried not to let himself think they were wondering where Tammy had gone. Next to his boots was the other pair Tammy had borrowed, the snow melted off of them now. "It's just the three of us, ladies," he said to the dogs. "Just as it should be."

Moving into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, Carter glanced in the sink. He saw two mugs and plates there, whereas every other day, there'd only be one of each. Washing them quickly, he dried them and put them away. He didn't need any more reminders of what had happened.

Fresh coffee in hand, he moved into the living room. Carter was taking his regular extended weekend, as he did every month near the full moon, so he had no work to keep him occupied. But he could sit, pay some bills, and check his list to see if he needed to get anything else done. Getting his notebook from the drawer in the side table, he sat in the armchair. It faced the couch, where he spotted the rumpled throw blankets.

“Hell.” They were just blankets, ones he'd had forever. But now, they were associated with her. Carter tossed his notebook aside and scooped the offending blankets off the couch. He pressed his lips together as the faint scent of her perfume reached his nostrils, knowing he only needed to make it to the small utility room off the back of the cabin. There, he dumped them into the washing machine.

He might as well fill the whole damn thing up if he was going to run it, though. Carter stomped to the bedroom and grabbed the hamper. Inside, he found the sweats Tammy had borrowed. The rumpled sheets on the bed taunted him, reminding him of that one remarkable night. In the short time she'd stayed there, Tammy had left her imprint on everything. The cabin had been his sanctuary, but now it felt like a tomb. His wolf howled with rage and loneliness.

Giving up, Carter dropped the hamper and returned to the living room. He stoked the fire and sat in the armchair, staring

into the flames. Juniper put her head up under his hand, and Maple sat at his feet. Misery settled into his bones.

There was nothing to do now but wait for the full moon.

“WHAT’S WRONG?”

“Nothing. I’m just tired.” Tammy rubbed her eyes as she headed north toward the Whiteaker neighborhood. She was glad she’d decided to take an extra day off work, and it was easy enough to use the car accident as an excuse. She really was exhausted, but not physically.

“You know, we don’t have to go out today if you’re not up to it,” Trinity offered. “I could just take the car, and Gabby and I can go catch the sales.”

Tammy allowed herself a small smile. Trinity would take any chance she could get at having the car to herself, even if it was only for an hour or two, and even if it meant carting her younger sister around. At some point, Tammy hoped she could save up enough to help Trinity get a car of her own. For the moment, at least it meant Trinity was willing to run out and get milk and bread when they needed it. “I know, honey, but I think I need to get out of the house for a little while.”

“Then let’s stop at First Light Café. You can get some coffee. You probably need it,” Trinity reasoned as she tucked a strand of her long, dark hair behind her ear.

Gabrielle snorted in the back seat.

Tammy couldn't blame her since they both knew precisely what game Trinity was up to. Fortunately for Trinity, a big cup of coffee sounded like a great idea. "All right."

When she'd parked, Tammy glanced over at Art Styles Studio. It was evident that Zena had been working on redoing the front window display, but the lights were out, and the 'Closed' sign was on the door. Maybe she'd pop in later to see her.

The smell of coffee, eggs, and freshly baked goods greeted them as soon as they walked into First Light. Tammy had spent a good amount of time there since it was right across the street from Eugene Bank and Trust, and she liked the familiar feel of the open space and light colors.

Trinity was glancing toward the kitchen as they took a table. "Let me sit there, Gabby."

Her younger sister glowered at her, one eyebrow cocked. "Why? So you can get a better look at your boyfriend?"

"Shut up!" Trinity hissed. "Someone might hear you, and he's not my boyfriend."

"Not yet," Gabby retorted in a singsong voice.

Trinity's eyes narrowed. "I'm going to kill you when we get home."

"Just don't get any blood on the carpet, girls," Tammy replied casually as she glanced over the menu to see if anything new had been added. The sisters had been fighting from the moment Gabrielle came out of the womb, and it was something she was more than used to by now. Give them five minutes, and they'd be best friends again.

The kitchen door swung open, and out came Hunter Glenwood. He carried a bussing tray out to the tables near the

front of the café and quickly cleaned them off, pretending not to notice they were there. It was only when he turned back toward the kitchen that he happened to look directly at them. “Oh, hey, Trinity.”

Very casual. Tammy, spotting the kitchen door opening again, got out of her seat. “You girls can order whatever you want. I’m going to chat with Tiffany.” She smiled to herself as she heard Trinity giggling, and she didn’t even need to look to know that Gabby was rolling her eyes.

“Hey,” Tiffany said as she walked up. “I haven’t seen you for a few days.”

“No, you haven’t, and there’s a very good reason for that. I’ve got some stuff I really need to tell you about. Are your little ones around?” Tammy glanced into the kitchen, looking for the café owner’s twin grandchildren, Sam and Sophie. It felt like forever since Tammy’s girls had been that small, and she wouldn’t mind a glimpse at those chubby little cheeks and sweet faces.

“Actually, they’re with their mother,” Tiffany said with a broad smile.

Tammy slid onto a stool. “That sounds like good news.”

“It really is,” Tiffany agreed, patting her dark blonde bun to make sure it was still in place. “Hailey found a new therapist last month, one she really clicked with. They’ve made some huge strides with her depression, and of course, it helps that the holiday season is over. She’s all moved into my old place, and she’s taking the kids a few times a week.”

Tammy knew Tiffany was much better off without her cheating husband, who’d died in a car accident the year prior. Regardless of how their relationship was breaking down, his

death had still been incredibly hard on Hailey. “Does that mean she’ll be taking them back permanently?”

“I don’t know, but I honestly try not to speculate about it too much,” Tiffany admitted. “I’m glad to keep the twins for as long as I need to, and I don’t want to push Hailey too fast. It wouldn’t help any of us if she took them back before she was truly ready. For now, we’re just taking it day by day.”

“That’s all we can do as moms, right?” Tammy looked over her shoulder. Hunter was swiping his dark hair off his forehead while hanging on to every word Trinity said.

“Looks like my busboy and dishwasher is going to be out of commission for a while,” Tiffany laughed. “It’s pretty cute. Anyway, you said you have something to tell me. Want to come into the kitchen and have some coffee? We can chat while I work.”

Tammy followed her friend back into the kitchen and took a seat at the table where the staff took their breaks. “It’s about New Year’s Eve.”

“Oh, right! Justin was taking you up to some ritzy chateau for a party. How did it go? Did you get your midnight kiss?” Tiffany poured a mug of coffee and placed it in front of Tammy, along with a mini loaf of zucchini walnut bread and cream cheese for spreading.

“*He* did, with another woman. And then some.” Tammy cut a slice of the bread and slathered it with cream cheese.

Tiffany had turned toward a workspace where she’d been turning out cookie dough, but now she made a slow spin back to Tammy. “You’re shitting me.”

“Not in the least.” She detailed her odd journey around the Morwood pack’s chateau with a stranger named Katie

drunkenly following her around. “It was kind of like coming to a party and being asked to babysit a toddler. Don’t get me wrong. She was nice enough. In the end, she was actually much better company than Justin was. Anyway, I should’ve known better than to think there could be anything between the two of us.”

Pulling in a deep, angry breath, Tiffany shook her head. “What did he do when you caught him? I used to wonder what Marcus would’ve done if I’d actually caught him cheating before he died, if he would’ve tried to deny it or apologize or something. Not that any of it matters now, of course, but right after he passed, I spent a little time feeling angry and vengeful.”

Tammy let out a bit of a laugh around a bite of zucchini bread. “He didn’t even know. I just turned around and walked out. That’s where the vengeful part comes in, though. I took his snazzy little sports car and crashed it into the side of the mountain.”

“You *what?*” Now Tiffany whirled hard enough that her bun threatened to come loose. “Are you insane?”

“I think I might’ve been in that moment,” Tammy admitted with a smile. “I hadn’t actually meant to crash it. I just wanted to get the hell out of there and get home, but the weather was awful. I lost control.”

“Holy hell.” Tiffany’s hands were covered in the dough she’d rolled out on the counter, but they now hung at her sides. “That’s wild!”

Checking that Hunter hadn’t come back into the kitchen, Tammy leaned forward. “It gets a little wilder than that. A Ranger lived nearby, and he pulled me from the wreckage. He

brought me up to his cabin, fed me stew, and made sure I was all healed up.”

“No.” Tammy put her dough-covered hands up in the air and spread her fingers as she tried to get back to her cookies. “That’s movie stuff right there.”

Tammy tapped her finger against her chin. “Um, which of us is mated to a famous rock star? You know, Declan freaking Ridgefield?”

“Fine, fair enough. But the next thing you’ll try to tell me is that he’s hot, rugged, and the most passionate man you’ve ever been with.” Tiffany grabbed a cookie cutter from a hook on the wall.

“Precisely,” Tammy agreed.

“No fucking way!” Wiping off her hands, Tiffany grabbed her own mug and sat across from Tammy. “I’m sitting down now so I won’t pass out while you tell me the rest. It might ruin your story if you have to scrape me off the floor.”

“At least I know there are plenty of spatulas around here to do it with,” Tammy pointed out, “and I still might have to. Because now I have to tell you that he’s my mate.”

Slapping a hand on the table, Tiffany almost sent her coffee sloshing out of the mug. “What!”

“There’s more,” Tammy said calmly.

“There can’t be,” Tiffany insisted.

Tammy watched her friend carefully as she revealed the next piece of information. “Turns out he’s Declan’s brother, Carter.”

Tiffany wasn’t usually one to sit in silence. She was chatty and friendly, and Tammy knew she was the perfect person to

talk to about this situation. But now she did nothing but give several slow blinks before she finally asked, “Are you sure?”

“Very,” Tammy affirmed. “I even saw a picture of them together when they were younger and asked him.”

“I just...I don’t even know what to say. That’s crazy. Good crazy, of course. I haven’t even met Carter yet. What are the odds?”

“Right? The odds that I’d happen to be up there in the mountains that night? That I’d happen to crash that stupid car not far from his property? That I’d happen to find the most incredible man who ever existed?” She pulled in a deep breath and then let her shoulders sag. “But then I also have to wonder why he got so weird and distant when he brought me back to town yesterday.”

“Tell me.”

Tammy did, reliving the whole thing along the way. There had been a change in Carter, and it felt like a sudden one. He’d been a bit slow to warm up, but that only made sense for a man who’d spent so much of his time roaming alone in the woods. As far as she could tell, the night they’d spent together in his bed had been nothing short of magical. “He didn’t flat out say so, but I got the feeling he wasn’t sure he wanted to see me again.”

“Hm.” Tiffany got up and got herself a mini loaf of zucchini bread. “I can ask Declan about it if you’d like?”

“No,” Tammy hurriedly insisted. “I don’t want to start a junior high game of telephone or start passing notes with little checkboxes about whether or not he actually likes me. I probably just need to talk to him myself, but he was colder than all that snow when he got me back to my house.”

“Then let me tell you what little I know about Carter,” Tiffany said, taking a sip of coffee and looking up toward the ceiling thoughtfully. “He keeps to himself—which I think you already know—and Declan doesn’t talk about him much. He did tell me that things got really bad for Carter in his twenties. He had a girlfriend at the time, and I think her name was Allie. They had a baby together, Chip.”

Tammy had abandoned her zucchini bread now, hanging on to every word. She and Carter had talked a decent amount, but even a couple of days together wasn’t enough time to share everything.

“Allie’s ex-boyfriend—Dirk? Derrick? Derrick—was just livid over the whole thing. He was some narcissistic asshole who thought no woman could dare walk away from him. They hadn’t been together in a couple of years, but Derrick wouldn’t let things be. Every now and then, he’d pop up out of the woodwork and start harassing her. Carter would confront him, and the guy would leave. But then Derrick went off the deep end. He kidnapped Allie and Chip. I don’t know much about the finer details, but he ended up killing them.”

“Oh my god.” That must have been what Carter had been referring to when she’d told him about Paul. It was no wonder that he hadn’t wanted to tell her about it, since it was his own son who’d been killed. Tammy hadn’t even known the guy a week ago, but her heart hurt for him. His own child had been taken from him, and she didn’t even want to think about how hard that must have been.

“Yeah,” Tiffany agreed. “He just didn’t really want to be around anyone after that, and he went off into the mountains. Declan would love to have Carter be a part of the Glenwood pack again, but he’s not sure if that will ever happen.”

“Wow,” Tammy breathed. “I almost feel guilty finding that out from you, but I’m still glad I know. It gives me a little more perspective.”

Tiffany agreed. “That’s kind of what I was thinking. I doubt Carter talks to many folks up there. Maybe his people skills have taken a backseat if he’s got no one to talk to but the trees.”

“And his dogs,” Tammy supplied with a smile. “And then there’s this old coot that lives next door, or at least as ‘next door’ as you can get up there. His name is Larry, and he’s this old hippie who came to check in on Carter. He was something else, but he’s not exactly the kind of guy you’d have to put on all your social graces for.”

“There you go, then.” Tiffany polished off her zucchini bread and poured herself another mug of coffee. “Maybe Carter just doesn’t quite know how to handle this. Hell, plenty of us who deal with people every day still get tripped up when it comes to meeting our mates.”

“Or they just fall off a stage, right?” Tammy snorted.

Tiffany braced her forehead on her hand, but she was smiling. “I wonder how long it’ll be before I live that down.”

“You won’t,” Tammy insisted. “We’ll be sitting next to each other in the nursing home, and I’ll still be teasing you about it.”

“So I guess that means the next time I ride in your car, I’ll have to grab the steering wheel so you don’t go careening into another mountainside?” Tiffany straightened and shot her an evil grin.

Tammy put her hands in the air. “Consider the subject dropped! At least for now.”

Tiffany looked at her friend steadily across the table. “Really, though. Don’t let a misstep get in the way of your chance at fated love. We’re not kids anymore, and we deserve to be with the right people, the ones who make us happy.”

“Yeah.” Tammy took a deep breath. “I’ve been trying to convince myself of the same thing, but it’s hard. I mean, I already lost a husband. I finally decided I’d put myself out there and wound up with a prick like Justin. I don’t want to be too sensitive, but it really made me question how hard I hit my head.”

Tiffany got up, washed her hands, and retrieved her cookie cutter, pressing it into the dough at regular intervals. “If the guy is anything like Declan, then I can tell you he’s stubborn, moody, and stuck in his ways.”

“How enchanting.”

“But he’s also got an incredibly warm and generous heart, one he’s trying to protect just as hard as you’re trying to protect yours. Don’t write him off yet. That’s all I’m saying.”

Tammy nodded. Tiffany was right, but it was always easier to say than it was to do. “I won’t. I’ll figure something out.”

Hunter entered the kitchen just then, his eyes sparkling a bit too much and his smile a bit too goofy. “Hey, Tiffany. Do you have any of those new muffins yet? The blueberry lemon ones? I was just telling Trinity and Gabby about them, and I thought they might be good test subjects.”

Tiffany shared a knowing glance with Tammy. “They’re over there on the cooling rack. They can have all they want in exchange for an honest opinion.”

Looking like he’d just won the lottery, Hunter piled several on a plate before dashing back out of the kitchen. “Thanks!”

Tiffany clucked her tongue. “We should be more like them. They’re not worried about the consequences of falling in love at all.”

Tammy barked out a laugh. “If only it were that easy!”

THE FRONT DOOR SLAMMED. “HOLY SHIT, SOMETHING SMELLS good.”

Tammy leaned over the counter to peer through the kitchen doorway at Trinity, who’d just come in from band practice. “I know you’re seventeen, and I can fully accept that you cuss in front of your friends, but could you let your dear old mother pretend you’re an innocent little girl for just a little while longer?”

Trinity looked at Tammy flatly but didn’t argue. “Fine. But really, what smells so good?”

“Peach cobbler.” Tammy opened the oven to peek at her creation, hoping it would come out right. It’d been a while since she’d made it, but Great-Grandma’s recipe hadn’t failed her yet.

“Sweet! When is it going to be ready? I’m starving!” Trinity hung her coat on the rack and tucked her French horn case neatly underneath it.

“It’s not for us,” Gabrielle announced.

“Huh?”

“That’s not completely true,” Tammy reminded her. “I made another one for here at the house. I figured we’d want to

enjoy it, too.”

“She said it’s for a man,” Gabrielle told her sister, drawing the last syllable out.

Trinity crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, giving Tammy her best motherly look. “Young lady, are you looking for boys on the internet? Because that’s not safe!”

Her girls were sassy as hell, and Tammy could do nothing but laugh about it. “It *is* for a man,” she confirmed, “but I definitely didn’t find him on the internet. He’s the one who helped me when I had that car accident. I thought it would be a nice gesture.” Granted, there was much more to it than that, and she had a feeling her daughters suspected as much, but Tammy didn’t want to start talking about her feelings for Carter until she truly knew where she stood. It wasn’t easy to date as a single mom, and she’d promised herself she’d never drag a bunch of random men through her girls’ lives.

“You even went and bought fresh peaches,” Gabrielle said.

“Because Great-Grandma would turn over in her grave if she knew I used the canned stuff,” Tammy retorted. “How is your algebra coming along, anyway?”

“Boring as ever, but doable.” Gabby picked up her pencil and resumed her worksheet.

“It’s going to take me a while to get this out to him since he lives out in the mountains,” Tammy said as she pulled the cobbler out and put it on a trivet. She’d zip it up in her casserole carrier for the trip, and it would still be fresh and warm by the time she got it to him. “You girls make sure you get your homework done and your rooms clean.”

Trinity pulled the ice cream out of the freezer and found the scoop in the drawer, ready to serve herself a heaping bowl

of cobbler from the extra pan. “Do you think Allison can come over tomorrow night? We just got new solos for concert band, and we want to practice.”

“Of course.” It always made her heart happy when she knew Trinity was working on her music. Back when she was in high school, Tammy remembered the adults trying to keep kids from going into the arts because they’d ‘never get a job.’ It was much better, in her opinion, that Trinity followed her heart.

As she headed out of town, Tammy fiddled with the radio and adjusted her seat. She glanced at the casserole carrier next to her, making sure it wouldn’t slide off if she had to hit the brakes. While she could’ve made it in one of those cheap, disposable aluminum pans, she didn’t want to risk burning the bottom. She’d put it in one of her glass pans instead, knowing there was always a chance that Carter would decide to bring it back to her somehow.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat as doubts crept in. Carter had told her he liked peach cobbler, but what if he’d just been making conversation? Then, of course, there was the fact she was showing up unannounced. She couldn’t have called him since they hadn’t exchanged numbers, and she sure as shit wasn’t going to demand his number from Declan. There was no guarantee that Carter would be home and no surety that Tammy would be welcome. The one thing she felt fairly confident in? There probably wouldn’t be another woman there. Old Larry had told her a bit about Carter when he’d stopped by, whether he’d meant to or not.

Tammy was getting ahead of herself. All of these were valid concerns, but first, she had to actually get up to Carter’s cabin. It wasn’t like this was just some simple trip through the

suburbs, and she was fairly certain he didn't even have a sign at the end of his driveway to let anyone know what was up that narrow, curving lane through the trees.

Taking a deep breath, Tammy gave her wolf the wheel. It was the only one who was likely to find the way. How long had it been since she'd actually relied on it like this? She couldn't remember. Modern life had completely taken over, especially once she'd had her girls. Late nights soothing a crying child, early mornings trying to get them up and off to school, last minute runs to the store for a dinner ingredient she forgot or supplies for a school project that no one had told her about until it was almost too late. There simply wasn't room for a wolf amongst all of that, but Tammy knew she needed it now.

It unnerved her to bring it forward as she drove. She needed the guidance, but this would be no time to actually shift. Another car accident in the mountains wasn't exactly on her agenda for the evening. At least she was driving a much more suitable car than Justin's flashy little coupe, and the roads were still clear from the plows' efforts.

Tammy slowed as she rounded a curve. It didn't look familiar, exactly, but it *felt* familiar. She watched the trees through her headlights, finding a spot where they parted to show a narrow, rutted track. Her heart surged upward. "I'd better be right," she muttered as she turned. It wouldn't be so bad if she accidentally ran across Larry, but who else lived up there?

The sedan bounced on the driveway, something she hadn't noticed much in Carter's truck. Tammy put a hand on the casserole carrier to keep it from swan-diving into the floorboard. Her lights pointed up into the trees and the evening

sky as she climbed upward, and that surge of hope in her chest turned to tightness. It was right. She *knew* she had the right place. But something about all of this felt terribly wrong.

The land flattened, and the beams came down to show the front of Carter's cabin. Only a singular light appeared to be on inside, but his truck was there to the right of the driveway. Tammy shimmied her car behind it, glad that the ground was frozen so she couldn't get stuck in the mud. Cutting the engine, she unzipped the casserole carrier. The cobbler, covered in aluminum foil, was still nice and warm. Tammy smiled. It wouldn't be so bad, not really. It was a simple gesture, a thank you. No one could think she was overstepping for something as innocent as that, right?

Some of the snow had melted and refrozen, and her duck boots were no match for it. Tammy kept her knees straight and her steps short so she wouldn't end up on her ass covered in peach cobbler before she even got to the door. Stepping up onto the small porch, she knocked. A face popped up in the window, a narrow-muzzled one with curious eyes. She smiled at Maple and waited.

Tammy had rehearsed this conversation in her mind. It would be easy enough. She'd just be there to deliver the cobbler and say thanks. If Carter wanted anything more than that, even if he just wanted her to come in and warm her feet, it would all be up to him. Otherwise, she'd be on her way back to town because she had 'things to do.'

The door didn't open. Juniper's face popped up next to Maple's, and Tammy thought she saw their tails wagging in the dim light. They knew she was there, but apparently, Carter didn't. She knocked again.

After a few minutes, Tammy knew he must not be inside. She headed around to the left side of the cabin and peered into the woods behind it. That was the direction they'd gone when he'd taken her out to shift. She could still clearly see their bootprints from two days ago, deep in the area of snow there was no need to shovel away. Next to them were the pawprints of their wolves. He'd brought something out in her that Tammy had thought she'd almost lost. It'd helped her get past her injuries and guided her way to Carter's cabin. Now, if it could just locate the man himself, she'd really be sold on keeping this animal around.

The cobbler warmed her through the sleeves of her coat as she moved around to the right side of the cabin, in front of Carter's truck. There, she noticed multiple sets of footprints; in fact, the snow had nearly been trampled down into a pathway that led from the front of the house toward the back, ending at a rustic woodshed. The small window beside the door was illuminated, and Tammy knew she'd finally found him. She smiled to herself as she navigated the tamped pathway of snow. He would be surprised to see her if she'd found him at the cabin, but he'd be even more surprised out there. He'd be doing something ridiculously sexy like chopping wood, and he'd insist that they have to go back inside to share something sweet together. The awkwardness of the previous day would be gone between them as her fantasy carried her forward.

Tammy paused under the light that extended from the shed's roof and peered in the window, fully expecting Carter to be busy with some manly task. Instead, a ferocious lupine face with blazing yellow eyes appeared, snarling and growling, slamming its paws against the glass.

A scream ripped out of Tammy's throat and shot through the air. She stumbled backward, the cobbler flying from her

hands and shattering on the apron of concrete just in front of the shed door. Tammy covered her mouth in horror as she continued to watch the savage wolf inside the shed. Its paws scrabbled wildly at the framing around the window, the sound of its thick claws leaving deep gouges in the wood audible even from outside.

“You really shouldn’t be here right now.”

Tammy screamed again at the sudden voice behind her. She whirled, but it was only Larry. Her finger shook as she pointed to the shed. “Larry! It’s him! It’s... It’s Carter!” There was no mistaking the identity of the creature inside the shed. His other form had been burned into her mind the moment she’d seen him shift. The subtle pattern of his fur was indelible in her mind, with a blanket of soft brown over his muzzle and a dark arc of near-black on either side of his eyes. The eyes themselves, however, had changed.

Larry adjusted his gloved hands on the axe he carried. “It is.”

“But...” Her mind raced as she tried to get a grip on what was happening. Tammy looked back at the woodshed even as she took a few steps away from it. The wolf could no longer be seen through the window, but his paws now pounded angrily on the other side of the door. The dim light that shone out through the paned glass illuminated the shattered pan. Steaming hot, perfectly sliced peaches and cakelike bits of cobbler were strewn about, dotting the snow around it like a crime scene. “But why aren’t you helping him?”

“Oh, I am,” the old hippie replied calmly. He turned to a nearby stack of logs and stood one up on a wide, flat stump. With an expert swing of the axe, he split it in half. Each one

fell into the snow with a thump. “You really ought to go home. There’s nothing you can do here.”

For a man who’d been so wildly enthusiastic about his former days in a commune and preparing for any natural disaster, he was being awfully damn calm. In fact, Tammy found his calmness to be rather infuriating at the moment. Tension wound up inside her body as she heard a long and mournful howl from inside the shed, only partly muffled by the walls of the building. As she glanced back at it, she saw a heavy padlock. “Did you lock him in there? Let him out right now! Don’t you see what you’re doing to him?”

Larry readjusted the axe and took another swing at the piece of log he’d pulled back up onto the stump. “You must think I’m a nutcase...”

“At the moment, I’m starting to wonder,” she admitted as she took another step backward. An expert woodsman like him would have no trouble coming after her if he wanted to, even with all the snow and ice on the ground. He’d given her a chance to go, but she couldn’t just leave Carter behind.

“Living up here in the middle of nowhere,” Larry continued as he took another chop. He considered the piece he’d just cut and stacked it neatly in a wagon behind him before he grabbed the other, larger piece of the original log. “A man has many reasons for what he does, even if they don’t always make sense to everyone else. I knew I needed to get away from the sort of life that everyone else called civilized. It was only chaos, full of grief and regret.”

Bile rose in Tammy’s throat as she tried to get a grip on what was going on out there. What kind of freakshow had she gotten herself into? And all because of a stupid cobbler.

“It’s not so different for Carter, really, except he knows *he’s* the one who causes grief and regret. He’s the chaos.” Another chop of the axe clattered through the air. Larry straightened, his deep brown eyes meeting hers. “He’s feral, you see. This happens every full moon.”

The air was too cold and dry as it rushed into Tammy’s mouth. She stood stiffly, staring at the shed. The fierce wolf inside returned to the window, saliva dripping from its bright white teeth as it once again pounded at the window. He was completely out of control. For a moment, she’d thought he’d just been angry at being contained, and that Larry had done something awful to him. Slowly, painfully slowly, things were starting to make a little more sense.

“It’s been happening for a long time.” Larry rolled another log onto the stump. This one was much larger than the first, and he considered it for a moment. He picked up a wedge of metal and set it on top, banging it into the wood with the back of the axe. “Some things get easier with time. Take what I’m doing here, for instance. I could hardly split wood to save my life when I first came up into the mountains. I doubt most men my age would be able to do it now, but doing it every winter has made it as easy as breathing.”

He was rambling again. “But what about Carter?” she demanded. The tension and anxiety were only getting worse inside her as she listened to the feral wolf’s angry cries.

“Some things,” Larry went on, “don’t get any better with time. I had often wondered, in the first few years, if the effects of the moon might get any better as time went on. Maybe the better way to say that is that I’d hoped. It doesn’t, though. It’s the same every month.”

Tammy was beginning to realize that it wasn't tension and anxiety within her at all. It was her wolf, and it was furious. It was in pure pain. "But there's got to be something we can do!"

Larry shrugged as he stacked the newly cut firewood in the cart with the rest. "You're looking at it, kid. I keep him safe—and the world safe from him—while the moon is full. In the meantime, I take care of Juniper and Maple, and I make sure he still has plenty of firewood and supplies for when it's done. Sometimes, when you can't do anything about the present, you can only prepare for the future."

Heavy thumps pounded regularly against the shed door, making the lock rattle. This was crazy.

"That's what I can do." Larry was unperturbed by the noise. "I don't see much you can do, though."

He was right. The old man was really out there, but he was right. Tammy turned and hurried back to her car. Her fingers were cold and stiff, yet still managed to shake as she yanked open the driver's door and pressed the ignition button. She nearly hit a tree as she backed around and headed down the driveway, hardly aware enough of her driving to avoid the worst of the ruts. She only knew that she had to get out of there.

Even once she'd turned onto the smooth asphalt of the highway, Tammy felt confusion and terror boiling inside her. She'd seen Carter as a mountain man, one who appreciated solitude and nature. Now, she understood him to be a dangerous monster, one who very well might have lunged at her throat if Larry hadn't been around to keep him locked away.

"What the hell?" she said as she navigated a curve. Not even the seat warmers were fighting off the chill that'd settled

into her bones. “Haven’t I been through enough?”

She’d found her mate, a man who was kind and gentle, even if he was a little rough around the edges. But that roughness was much more than she ever could’ve anticipated. How the hell was she supposed to deal with that? Just lock him up every full moon like Larry did, and possibly risk her life in the process? Even if she could, she had her girls to consider.

Tammy clamped her teeth together and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. She packed her wolf away where it belonged. Instincts or not, fated or not, there were times when logic and reason had to prevail. She was a mother beyond anything else in life, and she’d sworn not to be one of those pathetic single parents who put their love life ahead of their children’s needs.

Tammy couldn’t trust a man like that around her daughters. The notion sliced her heart in half, but at least now she knew.

CARTER LAY ON HIS SIDE ON THE SMALL COT IN THE CORNER OF the woodshed, a nicety he'd allowed himself even though he'd often felt he didn't deserve it. He was a vile creature, a vicious wolf who couldn't be trusted. Yet now, as he panted with the pain and terror that came along with the feral state, he appreciated the bit of softness the canvas beneath him provided. The wolf let go, allowing his human form to resurface. His hearing cut out for a moment as his senses switched over, but he heard the metallic clink outside the door as he stretched his legs experimentally.

A rectangle of light bloomed on the floor as Larry opened the door. "You're bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning."

"Right." Carter groaned as he pushed himself into a seated position.

"Now, now. Don't get up on account of me." Larry brought in a tray of sliced ham, fried eggs, and a biscuit. "Just wanted to make sure you kept up your strength, although I have to say I'm impressed. I don't think I've ever seen you come out of it this easily. Keep doing things like that, and you'll have this old grizzly imagining he can cure you with his cooking."

A wry smile crossed Carter's face. "If only it were that simple."

Larry returned to the door and fetched a sling full of split firewood. He bent and threw a piece into the small iron stove in the corner. “Still, *something* must have been different. You don’t usually come out of it this quickly.”

The old man was testing him, he knew. “I remember her being here, Larry.”

“Who?” he asked innocently, busying himself with stacking the rest of the firewood on a small rack.

“Tammy was here.” He dove into his breakfast. The feral state had made him hungry, as usual, but even the distraction of food couldn’t make him forget. He’d felt something different in the air the night before. Carter hadn’t known what it was, and he hadn’t been able to wrap his mind around the subject while still in the throes of his wild side. But then she’d appeared at the window. “It was strange. Seeing her made me so desperate to get out. I know I throw my share of fits during the full moon, anyway, but it was driving me crazy to know she was so close, but I couldn’t get to her.”

“Hm. It is interesting,” Larry conceded as he straightened.

“What was she doing here, anyway?” Carter demanded.

“Well, I can’t be sure.” Larry poked at the fire until it revived, the flames reaching up to lick curiously at the fresh piece of wood. “There’s a smashed peach cobbler out there, though. It might have something to say about the matter. Smelled damn good, too.”

So she’d come back up there with food, perhaps as a peace offering or to gauge exactly where the two of them were. He’d brought her back into town, but he’d never imagined she’d actually come back and find him. When he’d polished off a slice of ham, Carter bent forward and braced his head on his

hand. “I can’t believe she saw me like that! I was trying so hard to make sure it didn’t happen.”

“You and me, Carter, we came up here to get away from the world. For different reasons, sure, but the effect is the same. The truth is, though, we can’t hide forever. And you sure can’t hide something when you’ve found your mate.”

Carter brought his head up sharply. “I didn’t say she was my mate.”

The old grizzly let out a smug harumph. “As if you’d have to! I might be old, and there might be some mornings when I can’t quite remember what day of the week it is, but I know fate when I see it.”

“Well, fine.” There was no point in arguing, especially when he knew the truth. Larry was one of the few people in the world who knew about his feral side, and he’d faithfully locked him up every month as he’d asked. Carter would only insult him by trying to say he was wrong, and the old bear shifter deserved better than that. “Now I’ve just got to figure out what I’m going to do about it.”

Larry scratched his stubbly chin. “Women like chocolate and flowers and such, but I’m not sure those will help you out of this pickle. It’s been a long time since I was in a gift shop, but I’m fairly certain they won’t have any cards that say, ‘Thinking of you. I’m sorry you saw my feral side, but I promise I won’t tear your throat out.’ Jewelry, maybe?”

Carter pushed himself up off the bed. He found his shirt where he’d hung it on a hook behind the door. “You do a lot of good things, Larry, but your advice isn’t always sound.”

“Doesn’t need to be,” the older man said with a smile. “I know you’re just going to do whatever you want, anyway.” He

waved and cackled to himself as he walked home over the ridge.

As he went into the cabin to see the dogs, Carter racked his brain. Flowers, cards, and jewelry weren't going to solve the problem, not by a long shot. He'd resigned himself to thinking he might never see Tammy again when he'd brought her back to her house. He'd been wrong, and now his wolf was more adamant than ever about her. Feral or not, he'd found his mate. He had to do something. His heart rate sped up as he grabbed his keys, but it would only get worse if he waited.

He didn't make it a habit to go into town unless he absolutely had to, and there he was, entering Eugene for the second time in just a few days. The GPS on his truck—which he rarely used out in the remote mountains—allowed him to find his destination easily, even if he was constantly watching to see if anyone around recognized him. His wolf was on edge, especially so soon after the full moon, but it was a risk he would have to take.

The square brick building of Eugene Bank and Trust came into view on his left. He parked across the street and sat in the truck, watching it for a while. Several cars were pulled up close to the building, and two more were in the drive-thru. The parking toward the rear was probably for employees, but Carter had no way of knowing if Tammy would be there. He didn't think to ask Larry what kind of vehicle she'd been driving, either.

He hesitated only slightly as he crossed the street. It was too soon. He should give her time to calm down before he went to talk to her. But if he waited, it only allowed her more time to think he was some sort of monstrosity. Which he was. Damn. The whole thing felt impossible, but he had to try.

Carter stepped into the lobby. Several doors on the left wall opened up into offices, and a kiosk in front of them invited him to add himself to the waiting list. Skirting the thing, he saw the teller line off to the right.

Tammy was in her teller window, but her shoulder was to him as she spoke to another teller. She bit her lip as she studied a withdrawal slip. “No, tell him we’re going to have to see his ID.”

The younger woman rolled her eyes. “I already did once, and he threw a fit. He said he’s been banking here for years, and we should all know who he is by now.’

“I’ll take care of him.” Tammy strolled over to the drive-through window and pushed a button. “Hello, Mr. Fitzgerald. I’m sorry for any confusion, but we do need your ID in order to take any money out of your account. That’s our way of protecting you.”

The man ranted at her through the mic as Carter stepped up to the window Tammy had just occupied. It irritated him to hear someone talking to her like that, but she was nonplussed.

“I understand it’s inconvenient, but we’d be putting our jobs on the line if we signed off on the withdrawal and made a mistake,” she said calmly. “I can get this taken care of for you in just a moment if you could send your driver’s license in, please.”

More squawking came from the customer as Carter waited. She wore a different sweater than the first one he’d seen her in, this time a deep cranberry. Her dress slacks hugged her curves and reminded him of just how good it’d felt to have her pulled in close against him. When she turned away from the drive-through, he spotted a silver necklace that ended in a tiny

crystal star. It was a small detail, but any little particular thing about her was enough to make him pay attention.

She froze when she saw him. Tammy blinked and swallowed. Her heel lifted as though she were about to take a step backward. Then she pasted a smile on her face and handed the withdrawal slip to the other teller. “Would you go ahead and take care of Mr. Fitzgerald? He should be sending his license in.”

The other woman eyed them curiously before stepping up to the drive-thru.

Tammy moved into her window. Her eyes met his for a moment and then focused somewhere in the middle distance. “May I help you?”

“Tammy, we need to talk.” He kept his voice low, feeling that raising it by even a decibel would make it reverberate throughout the bank. This was a private conversation, one they’d be horrified to have anyone overhear.

Her gaze returned to his face and roved over it, studying every one of his features as though she were trying to memorize them. “I don’t want to talk about this.” She, too, kept her voice low.

Carter knew she was looking for the beast she’d seen the night before, the one that had raged and howled, the one that he’d kept hidden away from the world for so long. “I know this is awkward. Believe me, it’s something I was trying to avoid. Things were awkward when I saw you last—I mean, saw you with these eyes—and that’s entirely my fault.”

The little star on her chest glittered as she pulled in a deep breath and flicked a curl out of her face. “Then that’s at least

an explanation for that. I appreciate it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really do need to get back to work.”

He was fully aware that no other customers had come up to the teller line. “Please, Tammy. I know it’s a lot. It’s all just bad timing, really. If we’d met two weeks ago, we might not even be having this conversation.”

She let out a small snort. “Quite frankly, I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. I have a feeling that if we’d met two weeks ago, it would only mean that I still wouldn’t know the truth. Now I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“I deserve that. I should’ve told you.” He curled his hand around the edge of the granite countertop, wishing the coolness of it could calm him down. Both his wolf and his human were uncomfortable there. Tammy was, too, and it was all building inside him. “I probably could’ve done quite a few things differently, but that’s exactly why I’m here.”

“But I don’t want to talk about it here.” An exasperated breath escaped her nostrils. “I’m not sure I want to talk about it at all.”

He was losing her, and quickly. “Tammy, you and I both know what’s between us.”

“Fate might get to decide that, but I get to decide what I want to do about it,” she asserted quietly. “I don’t know if I’m ready for another relationship, Carter.”

He couldn’t be sure he was, either, and it’d been decades since the last one. Carter wasn’t ready for any of this, and there didn’t seem to be a good way to handle it all. “I don’t want to pressure you into that. I just want to talk. We can go somewhere. We don’t have to do it here.” Not that he knew

where the hell to go, but he'd figure it out if she gave him the chance.

“No.” She swallowed, and her eyes glistened. “Maybe later. I don't know. I just know that I need some time. Okay?” The last word was barely above a whisper as she tried to hold herself together.

“Yeah.” Carter took a step back from the counter, though it pained him to do so. He wanted nothing more than to have Tammy by his side. He really didn't know how they'd make things work. He only knew that he wanted to. But that wasn't enough, not when he had the burden of this awful secret. “Okay.”

Without another word, he turned and walked out. Though no one in the bank was probably paying attention to him except for Tammy, he felt all their eyes on his back. He was a freak of nature, a man to be feared and avoided. How could he possibly expect her to just accept that?

The cold breeze hit him in the face when he walked out, but he barely felt it as he slowly walked across the street to his truck. Carter had taken a chance in coming there, but his efforts had been wasted. Tammy didn't want to have anything to do with him. He couldn't even blame her. He hurt everyone he got close to in one way or another. He curled his fist and nearly sent it flying into the rear door of his truck when he spotted two familiar faces on the sidewalk.

Carter had parked near a little café called First Light. He recognized the name. Declan had told him that his mate ran it, and of course, he'd invited him to come into town and try the food. A young man stood on the sidewalk near the side door of the quaint restaurant. His dark hair had grown out long in the front over dark brown eyes. He was a perfect mix of his

parents. Carter hadn't seen the boy in a very long time, and he'd changed, but there was no mistaking Max Glenwood's son, Hunter.

The other face was one he was far less pleased to see. Toby Morwood stood in front of Hunter, his hands moving excitedly through the air as he spoke. His dark blonde hair was carefully combed up and back without a strand out of place. The wool pea coat and designer shoes showed off the expensive taste he liked to flaunt, as did that oversized château of his. Every now and then, he put his hand on Hunter's shoulder to emphasize whatever it was he was saying.

Carter had only run into Toby himself once or twice, and it was just in passing. There was something he didn't like about that guy. Maybe it was because Toby had it so easy, being handed the role of Alpha from his father as well as all the wealth and prestige that went with it. There was a sense of something much darker, but he didn't have the capacity to think about it just now.

Getting behind the wheel, Carter fired up the truck and headed back toward the Cascades. He didn't step into First Light despite Declan's assurances that he'd be welcome. He didn't bother stopping at any of the places he usually went for supplies. If he needed anything, he'd figure it out later. Right now, he only wanted to get back home.

He'd still be just as miserable once he got there, but at least no one would be around to see it.

“THERE IT IS. IT’S ALWAYS IN THE PROOF WORK!” TRACY, THE operations manager, held up the offending deposit slip.

“Thank you,” Tammy said, sagging with relief. The bank had already been closed for an hour, and she should’ve already been on her way home. That couldn’t happen when her drawer was off, though, and that fucking five-dollar overage was buried all the way at the bottom of the stack of her paperwork. “I didn’t think we were ever going to find it.”

Tracy’s fingers flew over the keyboard as she adjusted things in the system. “Nah, we always find it eventually.”

Tammy put her cash drawer in its designated space in the vault so they could finish locking up for the night. “*You* always know how to, anyway. I don’t know how we’d ever manage without you. I owe you a drink or something.”

Tracy gave her a wink. “I just might take you up on that sometime! Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Half the lights were already off in the bank since all the upper management, mortgage brokers, and personal bankers had gone home. It didn’t take long to shut the rest down, set the alarm, and head out to the parking lot. Tammy grumpily swiped her hand over her face, not caring that it probably

smudged her makeup. She just wanted to get home and be done with this damn day.

Traffic had other plans. She thought she was taking the quick way home by hopping on the highway instead of threading through the side streets, but she soon found herself in a long line of brake lights. “What the hell?” She checked the maps app on her phone and saw that an accident had happened up ahead.

Great. That gave her time to think, but that wasn’t exactly what Tammy needed right now. She turned on the radio and then flicked it back off when a love song came on. “No, thank you.” Putting her elbow on the door and resting her head in her hand, she tapped her fingers with annoyance. She’d found her mate. Way back when she’d married Paul, she’d thought it was good enough. He was a decent guy, and even if they weren’t fated, they’d made it work. Tammy couldn’t regret that, especially since she got Trinity and Gabrielle out of it, but secretly, she’d always longed for that special feeling she was supposed to get with her one true mate.

Now that she’d finally found him, how could she possibly be with him? He was a beast, a feral wolf who couldn’t even trust himself and had to have his friend lock him in a goddamn woodshed. That wasn’t the kind of guy she could handle having in her life. What about her girls? Bringing any man around was risky because she wanted to set a good example for them. Someone she was fated to ought to be a no-brainer, but things were pretty complicated when it came to Carter. How could she justify having him around if he might be a danger to her girls?

Her heart had been conflicted when he’d shown up at the bank. Instinctively, her body had reacted to him. Her wolf had

known he was her mate, and it was thrilled to see him. Logically, though, she wasn't sure this could ever work. She couldn't erase what she'd seen. She could give Carter some points for being willing to talk, but she just wasn't ready. Tammy needed time to process this. These decisions couldn't be made quickly, not when they would impact her and her girls' lives.

When she finally got home and in the door, she was ready to shower and fall into bed. She heard the girls in the kitchen and walked in to find them sitting together at the table with their heads together.

"I'm pretty sure this is the one," Trinity said with certainty.

"But where are you going to put it?" Gabrielle asked. "Like, do you want it somewhere people can see it?"

"What are we talking about?" Tammy hung up her coat and purse.

"The tattoo I'm going to get." Trinity turned her phone around to show her mom the screen. "Isn't it great?"

Tammy couldn't help but frown when she saw the wolf skull. It looked familiar, and it took her a second to figure out why, but then she realized it looked just like the one that'd been on Justin's keychain. She remembered seeing it fall off and bounce on the floor just before she'd taken his car for a sledding trip through the mountains. "I'm not crazy about it."

Trinity gave her the side-eye. "You wouldn't be."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You just have no idea what's *in* right now. Hunter and a few of our other friends are getting it, too." Trinity gave her a dismissive shrug and shrunk back into her phone.

Tammy blinked her eyes rapidly, feeling her rage quickly build. “Do I need to remind you that you’re not even old enough to get a tattoo yet? You’re only seventeen.”

A disgusted sigh escaped Trinity’s lungs. “That just depends on where you go. Some places will do it.”

“Well, they’re not the places you should be going.” Tammy had a small tattoo of a heart on her ankle, something she’d had done in her early twenties on a whim. It wasn’t like she’d never been to a tattoo parlor or was thoroughly against them. She certainly knew some were better than others, and if a shop was willing to break the law, there was no guarantee they were doing everything else they were supposed to, either. “Just wait until you’re eighteen, and I’ll help you find a reputable shop.”

Her oldest daughter shot out of her chair. “I’m so sick and tired of you treating me like a baby!”

This was the last thing she needed today. “I don’t think I would’ve asked a baby to throw a frozen lasagna in the oven so dinner wouldn’t have to wait until eight o’clock. What I *do* see is a seventeen-year-old girl throwing an absolute tantrum over something that doesn’t really matter right now and no dinner in the oven. If you want me to treat you like an adult, I suggest you start acting like one.”

Another hateful sigh hissed from Trinity’s mouth. “Whatever.” She marched to the coat rack and took hers down.

“Don’t *whatever* me! Where are you going?” Tammy demanded. She was used to her girls giving her some sass, but to just get up and leave the house after an argument was unacceptable.

“I’m late for work,” Trinity snarled.

Tammy had a feeling she wasn't even scheduled to work that night. She wasn't sure that was a hill she wanted to die on, though, and she tried to calm her anger. "Fine. How is your scholarship application coming along, by the way?"

"God! When are you going to stop nagging me about that?" Trinity adjusted her coat with a yank.

"Probably when you get it done." This girl had tons of opportunities in front of her, and all she had to do was take advantage of them. "You were all excited about it last week. You said you had it in the bag."

"Sure, but then what?" Trinity stuffed her cell phone into her pocket and snagged her keys from the hook. "Everyone acts like college is so damn important, like you can't be anyone in life without that stupid diploma. But then what? You study hard, waste all that time and money, and then get stuck in some dead-end job like yours? We're wolves. We're meant to do more important things than push pieces of paper around for a living."

"Hey, now." Tammy gritted her teeth together. She was happy to let her girls question things to a degree. It seemed important to let them understand why things should be a certain way instead of just insisting that they do what they were told because she said so. But this was going way too far. "Let me just remind you that my job is what pays for everything around here."

"Right," Trinity scoffed. "Dad's life insurance paid the house off."

"Yes, and thank goodness it did. Our lives would be a lot harder otherwise. But we have a roof over our heads, food in the fridge, and clothes on our backs. There's plenty to be grateful for." Tammy worked hard, but she knew she'd never

be one of those people that made tons of money. That was fine, as long as the girls were taken care of. Apparently, according to Trinity, that wasn't enough.

“Go ahead and think that if it helps you sleep at night, but Hunter and I have much bigger plans. A lot of our friends do, too.” Trinity turned and stormed out of the house.

Waiting until she'd heard the car pull out of the driveway, Tammy took several deep breaths before she turned to Gabrielle. “What has gotten into her?”

Gabby, looking torn, just shrugged. “If we're not having lasagna, can I put a cheese pizza in?”

Tammy let out a resigned sigh, feeling like a complete failure of a mother. Her oldest suddenly hated her, and her youngest was having frozen pizza again. “That would be fine, honey.”

“Yes!” Gabrielle clearly didn't mind as she rushed to the freezer.

Could this day have been any shittier? Tammy went up to her bedroom and changed out of her work clothes, preferring to be in the comfort of sweats and a long-sleeved T-shirt instead of slick work trousers, shapewear, and a cardigan. Even with her most comfortable sweats on, she was boiling over with frustration. She picked up the phone.

“Hey,” Tiffany said. “What's up?”

“I just need another mom to talk to,” Tammy grouched as she fished around in her drawer for a pair of fuzzy socks. “I think Trinity has completely lost her mind.”

“She's, what, seventeen?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, yes. I remember that age,” Tiffany replied with a light laugh. “It’s terrible. Hailey was a pretty good kid, but it was like she couldn’t figure out who she was from day to day. If something bad had happened, she would come home and want to curl up next to me on the couch, and she’d tell me how much she loved me. If I didn’t let her go hang out with her boyfriend the next day until she cleaned her room, I was the Wicked Witch of the West.”

Tammy checked the mini-fridge in her room and found some mini bottles of sparkling wine stashed away. “Yep, that’s pretty much it. She got all weird with me because she thinks she should get a tattoo that Hunter and their friends are all getting before she’s even old enough. I don’t understand. I give her a lot of freedom and some leeway on her curfew. I don’t ask her for very much except a few small chores around the house and to at least get decent grades. She’s got the whole world in her hands.”

“I wish I knew how to explain it,” Tiffany sympathized. “Come to think of it, I need to call my mom and ask her if I behaved that way when I was that age. I have a horrible feeling she’ll tell me I did.”

“I don’t know if I should be comforted by that or not,” Tammy admitted. If this was just a phase, it wasn’t anything personal. Trinity was still the same sweet girl she’d raised, and Tammy hadn’t actually done anything wrong. On the other hand, that also meant there probably wasn’t much she could do about it other than wait. That didn’t sit well with her. “I just don’t feel like I know what to do or say. I didn’t even bat an eye when she told me she and Hunter were officially dating, because he seemed like a good kid. It’s just that the stuff I’m hearing out of Trinity lately makes me think he’s not a good influence.”

“Hm...” Tiffany trailed off a minute while she thought. “You know, that makes me wonder.”

“What?” Tammy took a sip of the wine, cold and refreshing in her throat. She’d have to find something to eat later. She wasn’t really into cheese pizza, especially at an age when she had to be thinking about her cholesterol, but this might just be one of those fuck-it nights.

“Well, you mentioned Hunter,” Tiffany began. “He’s been working for me for several months now, and he’s started to act up quite a bit lately. He’d always shown up early and was eager to help in any way he could. Even if something wasn’t technically his job, he’d jump in and do whatever needed to be done. In fact, when I was really struggling the most with the twins, he was the brightest spot of my day. He’d play with them, and he’d even make sure they stayed away from anything that might hurt them. Hunter was so much more aware than I’d expect a young man of his age to be.”

That all seemed to track with what Tammy had known about him, and it was one of the reasons she hadn’t questioned Trinity too much about her relationship with him. “And now?”

“Pretty much the exact opposite, and unfortunately, more of what I’d expect from a kid his age. He shows up late with a lame excuse, and a couple of times, he hasn’t shown up at all. He does his job halfheartedly. He’s supposed to primarily be the busboy and dishwasher, but he doesn’t keep up with the tables and leaves the dishes dirty. And that attitude! It’s just such a drastic switch.”

“Hm.” Tammy didn’t like the sound of this, even though she wasn’t sure what it all meant. She took another swig of wine, wishing it would help. No bottle held any sort of magical parenting potion, though.

“I mentioned this to Declan,” Tiffany continued. “He said Max and Sarah were concerned about Hunter, as were some of the other Glenwoods. Putting it all together from everyone’s perspectives has the whole pack pretty concerned. Since our Alpha, Rex, doesn’t have any blood children, Hunter is currently the next in line for Alpha as the beta’s son. They’re planning to have a special meeting about it tomorrow night.”

Catching her reflection in the mirror over the dresser, Tammy realized her mouth was hanging open. “Wow. That’s pretty serious.”

“Yeah. You should come, too.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tammy hedged. The Glenwoods were allies with her pack, the Greenlocks, but she didn’t really get involved with pack business. “I don’t want to butt in on another pack’s meeting.”

“No, I think it might really help,” Tiffany urged. “They’ve got to figure out what’s going on with Hunter, and it sounds like Trinity has some similar stuff going on. You could help them when it comes to Hunter, and it also might help you figure out what to do about Trinity. I’ll be there, too.”

“Okay. Yeah.” Tammy knew her friend was right. Talking to Trinity obviously wasn’t going to work. If she went to the meeting, she could find a whole group of parents who were there and willing to help. “I’ll do that.”

“Great. Oh, hang on, sweets. Gramma’s on the phone. Yes, I’ll get you a snack.” This last part was slightly muffled as Tiffany turned away to talk to one of the twins. “Sorry, Tammy. I’ve got to get going. The meeting is at eight tomorrow.”

“I’ll see you then.” Tammy hung up. She wasn’t sure where any of this would lead, and it made her nervous. At least the one thing she could be sure of was that Carter wouldn’t be there. It sounded like he hadn’t been involved with his pack in a long time.

“Damn it.” Tammy realized she hadn’t even had a chance to say anything to Tiffany about what she knew about Carter now or his visit to the bank. Well, her daughter had to come first. She’d deal with Carter some other time, if she decided to at all.

“UGH. I FEEL WEIRD ABOUT THIS,” TAMMY ADMITTED. SHE’D happened to pull into the Glenwoods’ driveway right behind Tiffany and her mate Declan, something she was rather grateful for at the moment. “It almost feels like I’m going behind my daughter’s back by coming here to talk about her.”

“It takes a village, no matter how old the children are,” Tiffany reminded her. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without the help of my pack when it came to Hailey and the twins. The Glenwoods have also been amazing, and I think it’s best if we all count on each other.”

“You’re right.” Tammy knew she was, and no one should be forced to figure it all out on their own.

Tiffany led the way inside, with Declan bringing up the rear. Tammy goggled as she stepped into the packhouse. The hardwood floors, fine trim, and artwork were very different from what could be found at the Greenlocks’ place. Their new Alpha, Tim, had been struggling to put the pack back together after a period of terrible leadership, and the Glenwoods had been helping. These things took time, though, and a fancy place to meet wasn’t a priority when they were basically starting over. They headed into a large conference room in a

walkout basement with a row of doors and windows that faced the back.

“Rex, this is Tammy, who I told you about on the phone,” Tiffany said, making the introductions. “She’s Trinity’s mom.”

The Glenwood Alpha held out his large hand, his blue eyes calm and steady. “Thank you for coming. Tiffany explained the situation to me. We all might be able to help each other with this.”

“I hope so. I’m a bit concerned about my daughter.” A surge of worry ran through her stomach.

Rex nodded gravely. “At least we know we’re getting a start. I’ve kept this meeting relatively small since I didn’t think it required the whole pack. Let’s make sure you know everyone.” He took over the introductions from Tiffany, making the rounds through the room before they all took a seat at one of the long tables. Tammy already knew the beta, Max, and his mate, Sarah, through Tiffany, and she was welcomed by the rest of the Glenwood pack leadership.

“I’m glad to have all of you here,” Rex began. He glanced around and turned to his mate. “Lori, wasn’t Bennett coming today?”

“He said he got caught up with work,” the pack Luna explained. “He was very sorry, though, and said he’ll help in any way he can.”

“All right. Anyway, thank you again for coming. As you all know at this point, we’ve been seeing some odd behavior from Max and Sarah’s son, Hunter. While we’re concerned about any of the youth within the pack, we’re particularly concerned about Hunter for two reasons. The first is that he’s currently next in line to become Alpha. Second, this behavior

seems to be a bit more extreme than what we've usually seen from kids his age."

Lori nodded. "I think it makes sense if we just start by talking about anything we've seen in him that seems unusual. Maybe we can figure out where to go from there."

Dawn, sister to Rex, Brody, and Max, lifted a finger. "I just want to say that if we feel this is an issue that needs to be dealt with outside the pack—something we need professional help for—I have a lot of great connections through the hospital. It wouldn't be strange for a kid his age to need to talk to someone, especially if he's feeling the burden of knowing what the pack expects of him someday."

"I know that isn't always easy to deal with, even if it's something you want," Rex agreed.

"I'd be happy to set him up with someone if I thought it would change things," Sarah said sadly. "It's like he's a completely different person. For one thing, he'd been so excited about pursuing environmental studies at the university. It was the only thing he'd talk about for a long time, except for the occasional girl. Now, his grades are slipping, and he's missing classes."

"There's a lot of time we can't account for as well." Max, Hunter's father, reached over and took his mate's hand. "He's old enough now that we don't have to know where he is every second, but we still expect him to tell us where he's going and when he expects to be back. That's just common courtesy, really. But now he disappears for long stretches of time. When we ask him about it, he just says he was out with his friends."

"But it's never the friends we know of," Sarah added, squeezing her mate's fingers. "His old friends have told us they haven't seen him in quite some time."

Brody was sketching something on a small, square piece of paper. He didn't look up as he spoke. "I think it's normal for everyone to go through different phases in life and to have different interests, but it does seem odd that it's changing all at once for Hunter. He hasn't been coming to any of the pack's training sessions. He always used to look forward to them, and he and Conner had a fun little rivalry between them. Hunter completely stopped coming, though. When I asked him why, he only told me he was busy."

"I'd like to tell you he's busy with work," Tiffany said, "but I'm afraid I can't."

As Tiffany launched into Hunter's lack of effort at work, Tammy noticed exactly what it was Brody had been drawing. It was a perfect likeness of Hunter, smiling up from the piece of paper. She could see now that he had his dad's dark hair and his mother's features. He was a perfect mix of the two of them. Tammy had often looked for herself in Trinity, but she couldn't always see it. Gabrielle favored her a bit more. It didn't matter, but it was just one of those silly things parents did. She loved her girls so much and wanted them to be safe and happy. If she could get Trinity to see that, now or at some point in the future, then maybe everything would be okay.

"He always had a much better work ethic than that." This came from Jimmy, the retired Alpha who sat down at the end of the table with his mate, Joan. "Hunter used to come out and help me in the garage sometimes. The boy didn't know a darn thing about cars when he first started, but he learned. He's always been so bright and outgoing. He was a little odd when he last came out to see me in the garage, though. It was just about a week or two ago."

“Really?” Sarah glanced at Max and then back at Jimmy. “No offense, but I thought Hunter’s interest in the environment had turned him off of muscle cars.”

“You’re not wrong there,” Jimmy replied. “He wanted to talk about the future of the pack. I was pretty proud of that at first, and I was happy to talk to my grandson about my time as Alpha. But then he started talking about how all the Alphas had been doing it wrong. He said we shouldn’t keep our packs separate and that merging them would unlock the true potential of all the shifters in the area. It struck me as a bit strange, and I reminded him that we often make alliances where it’s appropriate, but he seemed to be talking about something entirely different than that. I should’ve said something earlier, but at the time, I thought it was just a kid trying to come up with his own ideas about the whole thing, hoping to show that he was a bit more grown-up than we all thought.”

“Hm.” Rex ran his finger over his upper lip, thinking. “It’s one thing to get lazy or lash out, but Hunter and I have talked a lot about the Glenwood pack philosophy. It’s important to work with others via the alliances you mentioned, but a pack that’s too big simply can’t be run efficiently. Tammy, tell us a bit about what you’ve seen.”

She felt her cheeks flush when everyone turned to her, but Tammy knew this was important. Her wolf squirmed inside her, suddenly restless and uneasy. Tiffany was right there next to her. She wasn’t in danger of any kind, but her wolf sensed something. Tammy brushed it aside. “It’s difficult to say when it comes to teenagers. I think most of us know they’re not easy. Usually, though, if Trinity and I argue about something, I know all I have to do is give it some time. Once we’ve both cooled off, we can go on like the whole thing never happened.

She was very angry with me last night when I tried to remind her of her responsibilities, and she made some weird comments. She still wouldn't even look at me this morning. Trinity hasn't been going to the extremes you've just mentioned, but there have definitely been some changes. I admit, I wondered if it had something to do with Hunter, even though I know he's a good kid."

"They must be getting this from somewhere," Joan mused, absently fingering the deep purple crystal that hung at her neck.

"I think I might know where."

They all turned as someone came down the stairs into the conference room. Tammy's heart and wolf surged when she saw it was Carter. Knowing he was so distanced from the Glenwoods, he'd been the last person she'd expect to show up.

The Ranger paused at the bottom of the steps, his eyes resting on Tammy for a long moment.

"Carter." Declan was on his feet and moved quickly to put an arm around his brother.

"I didn't know I'd be walking into a meeting today. I just had some news to share so I thought I'd stop by."

"Well, it's good to see you here," Declan replied. "This is my mate, Tiffany, that I told you about on the phone. And this is her friend, Tammy."

Those green eyes hadn't budged. "We've met," he replied gruffly.

"Oh." Declan was clearly surprised, but he saved his questions for later.

Once Tiffany had given Carter a polite hello, she turned to Tammy and waggled her eyebrows.

Rex stood and reached out to shake Carter's hand. "It's been a long time. There's nothing I'd like more than to sit and catch up, but it sounds like you know something about what's going on with Hunter. Please, have a seat."

Looking uncomfortable, Carter took the only free chair left at the table. It just so happened to be right across from Tammy. He gave her another sharp look, no doubt wondering just why she was at a Glenwood meeting and how this would go with the two of them in the same room. Then he turned back to Rex. "First of all, I was in town a couple of days ago."

"You were?" Declan interjected.

The two men gave each other a look that said they would talk about this later, amongst other things.

"I happened to see Hunter at the time. He was across the street, and I didn't bother him. It's been a long time since I'd seen him, and I figured he probably wouldn't know who I was. What really stood out to me, though, was that he was speaking with Toby Morwood."

Rex's brows went up. "He's been the Morwood Alpha for a short while now. I've reached out to him a couple of times to schedule a meeting just to touch base and see where our packs stood with each other. Standard procedure, really, but he hasn't returned any of my calls. It seems odd that he'd be getting in touch with Hunter directly, but then again, I think they might be closer in age."

Carter answered with a gruff noise of acknowledgment. "The Morwoods have a pretty big place up in the Cascades not too far from me. Toby invites all sorts of people up there, and

they stumble all over themselves to be near him. Every now and then, when I've had to help a stranded or lost motorist, they start rambling to me about how awesome Toby Morwood is and how much he knows. They talk about him like he's some sort of god."

Max shifted in his chair. "That's a bit disturbing. Tammy, have you heard your daughter talk about this guy?"

Tammy swallowed. "She hasn't mentioned a Toby." There was a time when she was certain Trinity would've told her, at least in passing, but not now.

"For a long time, I've felt like something's been going on at his place, but I don't know what," Carter continued.

His face was taut, as though it pained him to sit there and speak in front of the group. Tammy felt her wolf being tugged toward him, wanting to comfort him in some way. She gripped the edges of her chair.

"I couldn't really put my finger on it, but there's never been anything obvious. It's a feeling, really. My dogs won't go anywhere near the Morwood property, and once I realized that, I started paying more attention. I've hardly seen any wildlife nearby, save for the occasional bird flying over. Some of the trees have begun to die off, but not from any disease that I'm aware of." Carter paused for a second, considering what he was about to say. "When I've been anywhere near the property line, I come back with headaches. I usually have nightmares for the next few nights."

"Black magic," Joan murmured. She threaded her fingers through a wooden bracelet on her wrist. "I was friends with Toby's father, Walt. Like myself, he was a witch, and he was only ever interested in white magic. I have to wonder if his son

might've inherited his talent but was drawn to something darker.”

“Magic?” Tammy whispered. She'd imagined plenty of terrible things possibly impacting Trinity, and every kind of public service announcement she'd ever seen had gone through her head. Never, though, had she thought to blame any sort of magic.

“I think we need to bring Hunter and Trinity here to the packhouse. Dawn, Lori, and I can get together and see if we can find out anything else,” Joan suggested.

“Let's take a quick break,” Rex replied. “I think we could all use a moment to think. I'm also going to check in with Bennett and Kane to see if they've heard or come across anything about the Morwoods lately. Their detective skills might help.”

Lori pointed to another table near the windows. “I put out coffee and snacks. Everyone, please help yourselves.”

Tammy wasn't sure she needed caffeine, given that her brain was already in high gear, but hot coffee was always so soothing. Her wolf was relentlessly tormenting her, knowing Carter was so close, so she could use a little comforting at the moment. She poured herself a cup and gripped it with both hands as she stared out the window into the night.

Joan appeared at her elbow, her hazel eyes intense. “Could I talk to you for a moment?”

Tammy didn't know the older woman, and she was surprised she'd want to talk, but she had a good vibe that Tammy liked. “Sure.”

They stepped out onto the porch. It was chilly, but it afforded them the privacy that Joan seemed to want. Her

sandalwood perfume wafted over Tammy as she pulled her close. “I know a lot’s going on with the kids, and it’s very important, but there’s something else I feel I have to talk to you about. There’s something between you and Carter, isn’t there?”

Tammy took half a step back, surprised that anyone could tell. “Yes.”

The older woman nodded sagely. “I thought so. My intuition is strong, and it tends to pick up on these things. I wanted to make sure you understand, however, that Carter is feral.”

“I know.” Tammy swallowed, remembering the way Carter had looked when she’d seen him in the woodshed. It’d been terrifying, sad, and heartbreaking all at once. “I don’t really know what that will mean for us, though. It’s a lot to process, and I’m not sure I’m ready. Right now, I just want to make sure Trinity and Hunter are all right.”

“Of course,” Joan assured her gently. “Watching our children grow up is like watching a piece of our hearts just get up and walk away. It’s not easy, but don’t forget that you have to think about what’s best for you and your mate, too.”

Tammy shook her head. “That’s just the thing. I’m not sure those two parts of my life can mix at the moment. I don’t mean to say anything negative about someone who’s part of your pack, but Carter could be dangerous. Not on purpose, of course, but it just doesn’t make sense to add that in on top of everything else I’m dealing with.”

“A good mate is hard to find. The problem with Carter is that he needs one in order to unlock the good mate in himself.” Joan laughed lightly. “I’m sorry. I’m being too cryptic. What I’m trying to say is that Carter could be a wonderful asset to

you if his feral state could be cured. I suspect that having his true mate by his side just might do the trick.”

“Hm.” Tammy thought about that for a minute. She decided she could trust Joan since everyone else there obviously did. “But I stayed with him for a couple of days, and he still changed when the moon was full.”

“Things are never as simple as we’d like them to be, are they? It would take more than just spending time together. As the pack oracle, I’ve always seen him needing a fully committed relationship, one that includes marking. While the majority of packs these days see it as outdated and primitive, we’ve maintained that custom, and it’s just as much a part of Carter as it is the rest of us Glenwoods. He might not have been an active part of the pack for a while, but generations of tradition are still within him.”

“I didn’t realize.” In fact, it wasn’t something Tammy had even given much thought to. She knew Tiffany had been marked, and they’d talked about it a bit, but Tammy hadn’t had any reason to keep that sort of thing on her mind. Marking? Carter would have to actually bite her? That meant she’d also have to trust him enough to do so without going too far. In that light, it was a symbol of ultimate trust. But he was feral. Could that ever happen?

Her phone jangled in her pocket, distracting her from her thoughts. Tammy pulled it out, intending to dismiss the call so she wouldn’t interrupt what was happening at the Glenwood place, but she saw who it was. “I’m sorry. My youngest is calling me.”

“Of course.” Joan didn’t hesitate to wave Tammy’s attention back to her phone and turned to go back inside. “You go right ahead, and we can talk later.”

“Hey, honey.”

“Mom!” Gabrielle’s voice exploded through the phone. “Hunter came to the house with a few older guys, and they were talking to Trinity in the living room. I asked who they were, but Hunter snapped and asked what I was doing there. Trinity told me to go to my room, and I did, but I was listening. I couldn’t hear everything, but it sounded like they were talking about having some ritual in the mountains.”

“What?” Tammy gripped the phone harder. “Just stay in your room, and I’ll handle it when I get home.”

“But they already left!” Gabrielle screeched.

Tammy felt just as wound up as Gabby sounded, but didn’t want Gabby to know that. “You just stay put. I’m going to take care of this.”

Tammy went back inside and straight over to Rex and Max, where they stood near the fireplace. “My other daughter just called. She told me Hunter and Trinity took off for the mountains with some older guys. I don’t know any other details beyond that.”

“But we can guess,” Rex filled in. “Whatever’s going on up there isn’t good.”

“I’ll go find them,” Carter volunteered. “They don’t need to spend any more time up there with Morwood than they might have already.”

“I’m coming with you.” Tammy spoke the words without thinking about them.

When those green eyes landed on her, she felt the weight of them. There was a palpable distance between them, just as there had been when he’d first rescued her from the crash. They didn’t quite know how to act around each other. “There’s

no need,” Carter said after half a beat. “I know the area well. I’ll find them quickly and get them back here.”

“She’s my daughter,” Tammy insisted. “I’m going.”

CARTER LAID HIS FOOT HEAVILY ON THE ACCELERATOR. HE didn't like to be one of those people who decided they didn't have to follow the law just because they worked for the government, but this was one time he was happy to take the risk. His gut told him Morwood was more than just a bad influence, though Carter didn't completely understand how or why yet. He knew nothing about black magic. That was up to Joan and the other witches in the pack. He just wanted to get these two kids to safety.

He checked traffic and easily passed a minivan. His wolf was mostly pleased, knowing that Tammy was right there in his truck with him. She was within arm's reach. It would take little more than a simple gesture to reach across the center console and lay his hand on her thigh. Given how she'd reacted when he'd come into the bank, though, Carter knew it wasn't a good idea.

He wasn't sure having her there was a good idea at all. That was exactly why his wolf was still a bit bothered, even if it was enjoying her proximity. There was no telling what might happen, and it could be dangerous. It went against all of his shifter instincts to put his mate at any sort of risk.

“Is Gabrielle okay?” He’d seen how shaken she’d been when she returned to the meeting room.

Tammy nodded. “She’s freaked out. Her best friend’s mom offered to pick her up and have her stay there, so I said yes. It’s probably better for her not to be alone.”

Carter thought that was better for Tammy, too. “You’re clear on the plan?” he asked, hoping to keep that thick silence from settling between them again.

She’d been going back and forth between looking at the window and down at her phone. Tammy turned slightly toward him but kept her gaze straight through the windshield. “I do, but I wish I had more of a role to play.”

“I understand,” he hesitated. No one knew exactly what was happening, but her daughter was involved. “For the moment, though, we have to think of this more as reconnaissance than anything. My position as a Ranger will make it easy enough to just go up to the château without being too suspicious. I’ll explain that some hikers have gone missing and might be in the area and ask if they’ve seen anyone. This sort of thing happens all the time up in the Cascades, so it’s not unusual. I’ll get a chance to take a peek inside their packhouse, and now that we got a description from Max, we’ll also see if Hunter’s vehicle is in the driveway. We need knowledge before we take any sort of action.”

“I get that, but I don’t like my part. Just sitting in the truck doesn’t seem very helpful.” She looked down at her phone again.

He adjusted his grip on the wheel, though he hardly needed to pay attention to his driving. He knew the way well. “If she’s in a bad situation, she needs someone here she trusts.”

Tammy fiddled with her seatbelt. “I know.”

“And don’t forget the rest of the Glenwoods will be coming if they don’t hear from us in a reasonable amount of time.” He was trying to reassure her, but it wasn’t working. Carter should’ve just insisted on leaving her behind. Then he wouldn’t have to know how much she was fretting, and she wouldn’t be stuck in a truck with someone she was terrified of. “I’m surprised you were willing to come along.”

Tammy made a noise in her throat. “I can’t just sit around and twiddle my thumbs when something is happening with my daughter.”

He let the silence sink between them again for a moment, but he didn’t like it. “I meant that you were willing to specifically come with *me*.”

“Oh.” She glanced at him and then away, and he knew she was thinking about the horrid beast she’d seen in his woodshed. How could she not? “Sometimes, as a parent, you have to do what you have to do. But when I saw you in that shed, I thought you were trapped. I saw a scared creature trying to get out. Larry told me it was what you wanted to make sure you didn’t hurt anyone, but I’d thought you were the one being hurt.”

It was more credit than he’d been allowing himself, and Carter realized he was drifting toward the yellow line. He corrected his steering.

Tammy sighed. “I guess what I’m saying is that, for the moment, I can only go with the evidence I have. That evidence says you haven’t hurt me yet, plus I can’t just leave my little girl to her own devices.”

Maybe he shouldn't, but Carter found more hope in that speech than he had when he'd gone to talk to her at the bank. For however brief the moment was, her first instinct hadn't been to run screaming for the safety of civilization. He wanted to cling to that but heard the other part loud and clear. He hadn't hurt her. *Yet.* Tammy didn't quite believe that he wouldn't. Neither did Carter, which put them on fairly even ground.

A few wild flakes of snow dusted across the windshield, and he turned the wipers on. He would do everything he could to help both Hunter and Trinity. That meant he was helping Tammy, too, but he had no delusions of winning her over with his actions. He was just going to do the right thing, and he'd still be feral when it was all over with.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Anything was better than being left to his own thoughts. “Sure.”

“Rex had mentioned a couple of people he could call for some advice, something about detective skills. Are these guys anyone we can rely on if we need some sort of backup?”

He forced the knots out of his shoulders. “Kane is a police officer, and a good one, last I knew. I heard Bennett isn't on the force anymore, but he was a detective. It's possible they might be of some help if the issues with Morwood have been officially reported. I have a feeling this Toby kid is smarter than that, though.”

“Oh.” She twitched her nose and let out a long breath. “Can I ask you something else?”

If the question was as easy as the last one, then some of the tension between them might go away. “Yeah.”

“How did you become feral?” She turned to look at him fully now, though she’d obviously been avoiding it for a while. “I’m not trying to be rude, but it’s not something I know anything about. I’m...curious.”

He could meet her gaze only for a second. Carter told himself it was because he had to keep his eyes on the road, but he knew it was more than that. He didn’t talk about this stuff. He didn’t have to. Larry knew, and he was the only one ever around to witness it. Declan knew, of course, but he’d respected Carter’s wishes and stayed away.

Could he really tell her? It was time to find out.

“It was a long time ago.” And truly, there were some months when it felt like he’d been suffering this punishment for an eternity. “I was in my twenties. I had a girlfriend at the time. We weren’t fated, but we had a lot of fun together. We ended up having a son. Chip wasn’t planned, but we were both the kind of people who could just roll with the punches. Allie and I were pretty happy.”

Tammy listened quietly, not showing any reaction so far.

“I’ll try to keep this simple.” Both because he didn’t like talking about it and because it didn’t feel right to talk about past relationships in front of his mate. “Her ex-boyfriend didn’t appreciate that she’d moved on with her life. He kidnapped her. Chip was just a baby, and he was with Allie at the time, so he ended up being part of the incident as well. I don’t know what this guy thought he’d achieve, but I guess he realized it wasn’t working. He killed both of them.”

“I’m really sorry, Carter.”

He felt the sympathy in her voice drip over his heart. It was comforting in a way he hadn’t expected, and he knew it

was genuine. But there was much more to the story. “I was distraught. I went nuts. I was so full of rage and grief that I hardly knew how to handle myself and completely lost control. I got through it the first time, although I don’t remember much of it. No one realized what was happening, and it was just chalked up to grief.”

Holy hell. It’d been forever since all those demons had come out to play. “Then it happened again a month later. That was how we figured out this wasn’t just a one-time thing, and that also made us realize that the full moon triggered it. I shifted unwillingly, and I was completely feral. I was with my family, and my brothers tried to restrain me. They were more worried about me hurting myself than anyone else, but all I knew was anger and pain. Do you remember Jace, my younger brother you saw in the photo?”

“Of course,” she replied quietly.

“He was a typical kid brother. He always thought he had something to prove, that he had to keep up with Declan and me in some way. Jace was there when I went through that shift. He basically jumped on me to try to hold me back, to help me get control. He was even talking to me, trying to get me to calm down.” Carter’s memories from that day were spotty, but he could still hear Jace’s voice, reminding him that they were all there for him and would make sure everything was okay. “I didn’t really understand what was happening. I threw him off of me because the feral part of me that had taken over only saw him as a threat. He hit his head on the stone fireplace and passed away instantly.”

A sharp inhale of breath had him looking over at her. Carter saw the horror in her eyes and felt his wolf withdraw.

It'd been reaching out to her the entire time. It wanted her. But now even it understood what she must think of him.

“It was an accident.” His headlights picked out the trees in the dark, but they blurred as the truck sped further into the wilderness. “That was the only thing anyone wanted to say to me afterward. I knew that. I knew I never would've done anything like that on purpose, but that was part of the problem. If I couldn't control myself, if I couldn't make my own decisions, then I couldn't be around anyone. Joan was able to restrain me with her magic during the next shift, but that wasn't the right solution.”

“So you went into the mountains,” Tammy supplied. “That seems like a cold and lonely place for someone who's already suffered so much.”

“But I *caused* suffering,” Carter reminded her. “I couldn't just allow that to happen again, and I didn't want anyone to have to deal with me.”

“What about Larry?”

Carter pulled in a deep breath and sighed. “Larry was an unexpected blessing. I didn't want him to have to do anything for me, either, but he's got what my grandmother would call a servant's heart. He truly wanted to help once he understood, and he's never made me feel bad about it. He even jokes about it with me, parodying Robert Frost and saying good chains make good neighbors.”

She let out a small, halfhearted laugh. “Carter, I really am sorry you've had to go through all that.”

“Don't be,” he insisted. His wolf twisted and writhed within him. Letting her in on all that was harder than he'd imagined. Carter had no way of knowing if she could ever

truly be his mate, not in the way most people envisioned that sort of relationship, but at least he'd told her. No one could say he hadn't been honest or that he'd tried to hide it all away from the one person who should understand him better than anyone. "I don't want you to be sorry for me. I just want you to know." He slowed the truck and turned. "There's no more time to talk about it now. We're here."

TAMMY'S GUTS FELT LIKE THE TWISTED METAL OF JUSTIN'S wrecked sportscar from this emotional onslaught. Her daughter could be in danger. She was back at the packhouse where that awful New Year's Eve party happened, and to top it all off, she'd just heard that incredibly heartbreaking story from Carter.

She already knew his girlfriend and son had died. Tiffany had told her that part, but hearing it straight from his lips was even sadder. Carter had attempted to gloss over the details and just tell her the basics of the story, but he couldn't edit out his feelings behind it. She'd felt his anger and pain as though it had happened to her, and it wasn't just the grief of losing those two. Now, Tammy understood Carter had lost so much more. His girlfriend. His son. His brother. The trust of everyone he'd ever known, including himself. From the short time she'd spent with him at his cabin, it was obvious Carter was a part of the woods, but now she knew it wasn't just because of his love for the rural countryside. He'd punished himself and was continuing to do so.

The driveway to the Morwood château was smooth and wide, especially compared to the rutted lane in front of Carter's place, but it brought her no comfort as they pulled up

in front of the massive house. Tammy hadn't even paid much attention to what it'd looked like when she'd been there with Justin, but it was certainly nothing to sneeze at. Brilliant lights illuminated the front of the home, highlighting the wrought iron railing, large windows, and expensive, snow-capped landscaping. It was out of place there in the middle of nowhere, but Tammy knew it was meant to stand out. Her eyes roved around and landed on a small truck on the side of the driveway. "I think that's Hunter's."

Carter leaned over a bit to check the license plate. "Yep. It matches what Max told me. They're here."

"I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse." That seemed to be the case with a lot of things lately. At least they knew the kids were there, but that meant they were also hanging out with this rich weirdo and god knew who else. Tammy didn't quite understand the guy's motivation or what he was trying to do with Hunter and Trinity. She only knew she wanted to get Trinity home and safe.

Pulling over, Carter put the truck in park. "I'm going to the front door. You stay here."

It was what they'd talked about doing several times now, and she didn't like it any more than she had the last time. Her daughter had to be in there, and every motherly instinct told her to march straight through that door and make her come home. She was up against something much bigger than typical teen problems, though. "All right."

She cracked the window as Carter went up to the front of the house and rang the bell. He waited patiently for someone to come to the door. He'd claimed that being a Ranger would give him some reason to be there, but what if the Morwoods decided not to answer? Tammy thought about poor drunk

Katie, who'd followed her around at that party. She'd been just as vulnerable as Trinity despite being much older.

The front door cracked open, but Tammy couldn't hear what the person said. She couldn't see them, either.

"I'm Ranger Ridgefield with the Willamette National Forest," Carter said, putting on his version of a customer service voice. It was brighter and more open than his normal tone, but it still carried authority. Tammy knew it wouldn't work at the bank, with customers who were very touchy about what happened to their pennies, but she thought it might be perfect for this situation. "I've received a report of a couple of hikers who are up in this area, and I was wondering if anyone here might have seen them."

Another muffled reply came from within.

"Are you the one in charge here? I'd like to speak to the homeowner, please." Carter's demand was polite but firm.

While he waited, Tammy looked around. She didn't know exactly what she was looking for, only that she had to do something to help her daughter. This was her baby girl, the one who'd made her a mother. She'd changed Tammy's entire life, and she couldn't imagine what it would be like without her. Who was this Morwood character, anyway? Tammy had gotten a glimpse of him at that party, but it wasn't like they'd been officially introduced. That was just one of many red flags she should've paid more attention to when it came to Justin, but all of that was behind her now.

And then there was that mention of black magic. Tammy knew magic was real. She didn't know anyone who knew how to manipulate the forces of nature personally, but she'd heard that some shifters inherited the ability. Still, it'd never been something she'd given much thought to. Her life had been a

cycle of paying bills, grocery shopping, working, schlepping her daughters wherever they needed to go, and watching chefs battle on Food Network. At first, it was scary enough to think someone might be convincing Trinity and Hunter to think differently, but now she knew the influence was stronger than that.

A flick of shadow in the darkness on the west side of the building caught her eye. Tammy zeroed in on it as her heart rate ticked up. Someone else was out there, moving quickly through the darkness. The shadow had emerged from the square glow of a window and dropped to the ground. It paused, moving first one way and then another. Carter had no idea. Were they being ambushed?

The shadows parted just enough as the figure moved, and she caught a glimpse of the person's face. Her heart rate rose even further as she clambered over the seat and slipped out the driver's side door, trying to stay out of the sight of Carter and the front door of the house. Her duck boots crunched in the snow as she hurried away from the truck and toward the shadows. "Trinity!" she hissed.

"Mom?"

Tammy stopped. Trinity was going to be pissed that Tammy had followed her all the way up there, and she was going to eat her sister alive for ratting her out. Well, that was fine. She could just go right ahead and be mad because Tammy knew this was the right thing to do. She let her daughter make her own choices whenever she could, but this time, she had to step in. "It's me," she confirmed in a whisper. "Look, I know—"

"Mom, I'm so glad you're here!" Trinity's arms closed around her neck.

“It’s okay, honey.” Tammy held her close, feeling her daughter shaking. She had a feeling it wasn’t from the cold, either. “I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s going to be okay.”

“I can’t believe you’re really here!” Trinity’s fingers clutched the material of Tammy’s jacket.

This was just like when she would have nightmares as a little girl, except the nightmares seemed far more real right now. “My friend Carter, the one who lives up here in the mountains, brought me. We can just get in the truck and go. Where’s Hunter?”

Trinity shook her head, her tears hot against Tammy’s neck. “I don’t know, and I don’t know what’s going on, either. I’m so scared.”

“It’ll be all right.” Tammy stroked Trinity’s long, dark hair, hoping she sounded more convincing than she felt. Would it really? How long would the others wait before they came? Would they even need them to come, or could Carter extract Hunter from whoever he spoke to at the front door? There were too many variables right now. “Just tell me what’s happening.”

Swiping a hand across her nose, Trinity took a shaking breath. “Hunter and I came up here with this Toby guy he’s been hanging out with. I’d met him a couple of times, and he seemed really cool, so I thought it’d be fun. But Hunter is in deep with these guys.”

Tammy glanced back at the truck. Carter hadn’t returned to it yet, which meant he was still trying to get information from someone at the door. She wished she had some way of letting him know that she at least had Trinity. For the moment, it

made sense to get whatever information she could herself. “What do you mean, sweetie?”

“I don’t know.” Trinity took another sniffling breath. “This pack is freaky. They’re like a cult or something. When we got here, I started to get a bad feeling about it all, but I felt stuck, you know?”

“Yes, I know.” She knew that feeling far too well since she’d felt stuck in that damn house herself not so long ago. “What happened?”

“They started talking about some crazy stuff about all the local packs, and Hunter kept talking like he was going to become Alpha right away. Everyone was drinking and smoking and acting weird. Hunter snapped at me when I questioned him, and he’s not like that, Mom. He had this completely different look in his eyes like he wasn’t even the same person anymore. I just...I didn’t feel safe.”

“So you were leaving?” This whole thing was awful, but at least she knew Trinity was strong enough to get herself out of a bad situation.

“Yeah, but when I told Hunter I wanted to go home, he said we couldn’t. He said we had to stay and we wouldn’t leave until he was ready. I saw the look on Toby’s face, and I just got this horrible feeling that he wouldn’t let me leave, either. So I snuck out the bathroom window.”

“Okay.” Anger bubbled through her veins. How dare Hunter or anyone else try to tell Trinity what to do? It was hard enough to raise girls, knowing that the risk to them was so great every time they went out in public. Now, she hadn’t even been able to trust someone she’d become close to, someone who ought to be an upstanding wolf considering the position he stood to inherit. But Tammy reminded herself that

both Trinity *and* Hunter had been acting strangely, and there was probably more going on there than either one of them understood at the moment. “Let’s just get over to the truck, and—”

“Look, the window is open.”

The harsh but familiar voice cut through the night air. Tammy and Trinity froze.

“Stupid bitch. Where does she think she’s going to go?”

A door opened on a nearby balcony, shedding an oblong panel of yellow light out into the night for a moment. “She couldn’t have gone far.”

He was right. There was no real place to go out there in the middle of nowhere. It was straight down the driveway, where anyone could see them, or out into the woods, where they’d be lost instantly. Tammy’s mind flipped through these options quickly before it found the one that made the most sense.

She shoved her daughter back into the shadows and ran forward, heading straight for the place where the door had opened. Tammy trusted her feet not to trip as she slapped them hard down onto the ground, calling attention to herself.

It worked, and a hand closed on her arm. “Here she is! Wait a second. Tammy?”

Tammy yanked her arm out of the man’s grip. Her skin burned where his fingers had dug so hard into her flesh. “Justin! Let go of me!”

A bright light shone on her face as her ex-boyfriend’s hand closed on her arm once again. Another hand managed to grab her other arm, and both of them were yanked behind her back. Her shoulders popped, and her arm muscles strained against the sudden movement. Justin was strong enough to keep her

wrists together with the force of just one hand. “What the hell are you doing back here?” he commanded.

“Me? Oh, I was just out for a walk, and I got a little lost. I’ll get going now, though.” Tammy tugged at his grasp, but it didn’t do her any good.

“Right,” one of the other men snarled. “You just happened to come all the way up here?”

“It’s not like the place is hard to miss with all those bright lights,” she retorted. “I thought it might be an airport or something.”

“Let’s get her inside. Toby can decide what to do with her.”

Tammy pressed her feet into the ground, digging her heels in as they tried to drag her inside. The force of just one of them was more than she could possibly fight against, and she stumbled forward. Her wolf surfaced quickly, ready to fight. That never would’ve happened before she’d met Carter, but she knew she couldn’t get away from these guys no matter what form she was in. They were shifters, too, so it was no real advantage.

They reached the stairs that led up to the balcony, which she realized must be the only entry point on that side of the house. Tammy jammed the toe of her duck boot under the bottom step. She braced the sole of the other one against the railing and shoved backward. Justin decided he wasn’t playing any games. He grabbed her around the waist and tossed her over his wide shoulder.

“Ow! Put me down, you asshole!” Her hands were free now, and she pounded against his back. The stairs were mostly

obscured in shadow, but the sensation of going up them like this was making her dizzy. She closed her eyes.

His hand clenched hard on her thigh, and he shoved her further back on his shoulder. “You really want me to let go?”

Shit. He called her bluff on that one. She kept her mouth shut while she landed a few more punches square on his spine. If they bothered him at all, he didn’t show it.

Justin brought her into the château on the second story. The lights were bright compared to the dark shadows outside, and she blinked against them. With dizzying speed, he flipped her off his shoulder and yanked her arms behind her back again. His breath was hot and fetid against the side of her face. “I suggest you behave.”

“It’s not exactly like you did,” Tammy snarled. She thought of Trinity, hoping she truly had gotten away. There was no cell signal up there, but Trinity was a smart girl. She’d find a way to get help. Maybe she’d even find Carter.

Carter. The last time she’d seen him, he was standing at the front door. He had no idea what was happening. What if they’d captured him, too? How could the two of them fight an entire pack? He’d said the other Glenwoods would come, but how long would they wait? If only she’d caught this all before it was too late.

“I’m taking her to see Toby,” Justin barked at one of the others. “You, stay with me. You, get back outside and see if you can find the girl. We can’t let her get away.”

Finally, a bit more oriented after having been thrown around, Tammy lifted a foot and smashed it down on Justin’s instep.

He grunted with pain and anger, but it didn't work in real life the same way it did on TV. He didn't crumple forward and give her a chance to shoulder him in the nose. He only shook her and twisted her arm harder. "You try one more thing like that, and I really will throw you down the stairs."

She knew he meant it. Tammy was tempted to give him more hell, but she had to keep herself alive. Whatever was happening there, she needed to find a way to stop it before it got worse. Plus, Hunter was still there. Even if he'd treated Trinity poorly, she couldn't just abandon him with these people.

Tammy glanced around as Justin roughly guided her down the hall. She'd been there before, and it wasn't all that long ago. The château had an entirely different feel than it had on the night of the party, when it'd been filled with people and music, and the alcohol had been flowing. It was nearly empty up there on the second floor now. She was no more comfortable than she'd been before, but now it was like moving through a haunted house. There was the bathroom where she'd found Justin with that other woman. This was the same carpet she'd marched down, on a mission to get the hell out of there. The bedroom doors were all shut now, and no one laughed or danced or made out. How much malice had she missed when she was there before? How much had she ignored simply because she'd wanted to have a nice New Year's Eve for a change?

Maybe she could've figured out a week ago that Toby Morwood was more than just a spoiled rich boy who wanted to show off his wealth, but there was no time to lament it all now. She had to figure out where Hunter was, and she had to find some way of telling Carter to help Trinity.

CARTER WAITED IMPATIENTLY. THE GOON WHO'D ANSWERED the door hadn't been very helpful. If he were actually there looking for hikers, he wouldn't have expected anything different. Most folks just shook their heads, claimed they'd keep an eye out, and went about their days. What Carter was actually doing there at the Morwood château, of course, was different.

He recognized Toby Morwood when he came to the door. The kid had that cocky look of someone who'd been given far more than he actually deserved in life, yet somehow convinced himself he'd worked hard for it. He wore a button-up shirt with the top few left casually open, and his cuffs turned back. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I just wanted to make sure I spoke with someone in charge," Carter said, keeping his voice steady despite the anger building inside him. This guy had done something to those kids. Carter didn't have proof, but he knew in his heart that it was true. It may have been psychological, but that could be just as damaging. "I'm looking for some hikers who've gone missing in the area."

Toby gave an easygoing shrug. "Haven't seen a thing. Most people don't understand just how dangerous these

mountains can be.”

If that was a threat, Toby would come to regret it. “That’s true, but they also might see your lights and come up here for help.”

The corner of Toby’s mouth tweaked up a little further. “Rest assured, if I see them, I’ll be sure to get them back on the right track.”

Carter eyed the inside of the house. Thick carpets, gleaming hardwood floors, and expensive furniture. It would be a lot even if it was closer to town, but all the way out there meant there was also the cost of hauling it into the mountains. This kid definitely had resources. “I see you’ve got a lot of cars in the driveway. I thought you might be having a party.”

“Nope. But with a place this big, it’s not like I live here alone.” Toby made a vague gesture to encompass the entire property.

He was good at evading. Carter had to give him that, even though Morwood didn’t deserve any points. “Would you mind if I had a look around the property? You know, just in case someone has come in along the backside of the house or anything?”

Toby lifted his brows and pursed his lips. “I’m afraid I really can’t agree to that. You might trip and fall on some of the landscaping. I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

Another veiled threat. Carter’s wolf was already on alert, and now it was escalating. This guy was absolutely hiding something. Whatever he had going on with Hunter and Trinity was likely just the tip of the iceberg. “You’re welcome to come with me and make sure I don’t step on anything I shouldn’t.”

That smile thinned, and his eyes narrowed slightly with irritation. “I don’t think you heard me the first time, you see—”

“Don’t let him in here!” a voice yelled.

Carter’s eyes shot to the wide staircase. Two men stood at the top, one on either side of Tammy. Her hair was mussed, and her boots were muddy. Her face was red and defiant, and she held her chin high as she glared at the men.

Carter’s world tipped on its side. He’d left her in the truck, where she was supposed to be safe. Now, she was right there in the middle of everything. He didn’t know what happened, but his wolf was quickly going insane in the fraction of a second it took to register that the enemy had her.

Tammy’s look changed as she turned and looked down at Carter. “They’ve got Hunter here somewhe—”

“Shut up!” The man on the right struck a quick backhand across her face.

Tammy stumbled backward, but her captors held her in place. She recovered and spit blood at the one who’d just hurt her. “Fuck you!”

Carter shoved Toby aside and raced through the door. He found himself in a room lit by a circle of black candles, which cast an eery glow over a set of strange symbols on the floor. His wolf broke through in an instant, his paws hitting the slate tile as he shot forward. Ringing filled his ears for a moment as his hearing shifted from that of a human to that of a wolf. He picked up her heartbeat, the angry words of the Morwoods, and his own thundering gait as he raced up the stairs. His thick fur was too hot for him, and saliva dripped down his teeth. These assholes had his mate. She was in danger, and he sure as

shit wouldn't put up with it. He opened his jaws as he flew up the last few stairs.

His paws slammed into the one who'd slapped her, pinning him to the floor. The other man began to shift but didn't finish before Carter's teeth clamped around his hand. Blood gushed into his mouth as the man's hand tore open, and his screams echoed through the large space of the house. Carter made one final crunch on his opponent's wrist, leaving him writhing in agony before he finished the job, snapping his neck in his jaws.

He turned to Tammy, finding her in her wolf form. It was a welcome surprise, but she still wasn't strong enough. The other wolf was on top of her, his jaws covering her throat. Tammy made an easy target for these guys, and her jaws opened and closed helplessly.

The upstairs carpet gave him a good grip as he charged forward, bashing his shoulder into the Morwood wolf and sending him flying into the opposite wall.

Behind you!

Carter heard Tammy's warning just in time to see Toby shift into a huge wolf, deep black with yellow eyes. He bounded up the stairs, his teeth white against his dark fur. Waiting until the giant wolf lunged, Carter pounced.

He crashed into Toby's dark underbelly, meeting midair at the top of the stairs, and the inertia carried them backward. The air left Carter's lungs as they fell to the stairs below them, tumbling, snapping, and snarling all the way down. Crashing into the slate tile at the bottom, they slid across it and up to the front door's threshold.

Carter scrambled to his feet. He'd succeeded in getting Toby away from Tammy, but now he'd left her unprotected. He turned to look for her. He had to get her out of there. Toby's hot jaws clamped around the back of his neck, and Carter's paws left the ground as the bigger wolf tossed him outside into the snow.

The cold, fluffy stuff didn't provide much of a landing. Carter sucked air into his uncooperative lungs as something thundered through the ground all around him. He got to his feet just in time to see familiar wolves streaming out of the woods. Rex, Brody, and Max were a gruesome trio as they barreled toward Toby, who stood proudly in the doorway. Caleb and Sean, who he hadn't seen in ages, were right on their tails, along with another male wolf that Carter didn't know. He could only assume it was Gage, Dawn's mate, whom he'd just met at the packhouse. Joan and Jimmy were at the edge of the clearing in front of the house, and several more wolves flanked them. Carter didn't recognize them at all. He hadn't been a part of the pack for a long time, but these felt even more distant than any of the Glenwoods.

Their side wasn't the only one rallying their numbers. Wolves came storming out through windows and doors to join the battle. The Morwoods were everywhere and had the advantage of being on their home territory. One of them came straight for Carter, his head low and his teeth bared. Carter braced himself for the impact.

Tammy! He reached for her with his mind, but when there was no answer, something clicked inside him, something that felt damn familiar. The moon wasn't full, but right now, it didn't need to be for his feral side to make an appearance. His mate was in trouble. Wolves came at him from all sides, focusing in on him. Carter had no doubt this was at Toby's

order. Let them come. Let them make that choice, and let them suffer the consequences.

His vision sharpened as he snapped his jaws into another wolf's throat, spraying blood over the white snow. Carter heard every cry of pain around him. He felt every footstep that landed, and every thud as a body was slammed into the ground. He bit and clawed without discretion, letting that innermost part of himself finally run free. The beast that had been bound and chained, the animal that had run off into the mountains, the creature who had kept himself alone for so long and was done with hiding. He chomped into the flesh of his enemies, casting their whimpering bodies aside as he looked for his next opponent. Carter felt a new rush of adrenaline with each wolf that came at him, foolishly thinking it was stronger than the last and could take him down. Their blood mingled in his mouth and hissed in the snow.

He only held one small part of his mind in check. He knew this feeling. Not just the feeling of being feral and locked away, but feral and allowed around others. It was so like that day with Jace. As Carter's shoulder smacked upward into the jaw of a Morwood, he could still hear the crash of his brother hitting the stone fireplace and the confused screams that followed. His heart dipped when he realized just what he'd done. Carter wouldn't let himself cross that line again. He refused.

He had to find Tammy. He searched for her with his mind as dazzling balls of light exploded overhead. He turned just long enough to see Joan and Dawn, their hands in the air and their chins lifted as they sent their spells toward the house.

Where are the kids?

Declan. The rest of the pack wasn't in his head. He'd grown too distant from them over the years as he'd separated himself, but his brother was still there. Carter pounced on a Morwood wolf who tried to escape and bent his tail until it gave a satisfactory crack. *I don't know. I haven't seen them or Tammy.* And it worried the hell out of him that he hadn't. He'd tear every last one of them limb from limb if they did anything to his mate.

The witches were moving up behind the Glenwood wolves as they progressed through the throng of Morwoods, casting spells and leaving the air smelling of ozone.

We've brought some Greenlocks with us, Declan explained as he jumped into the fray next to his brother. Blood coated his chest. *Our numbers are pretty good, but they just keep coming.*

That explained some of the wolves fighting on their side that he didn't know. That was good, but this battle was far from over. *I've got to get back inside and see if Tammy is still there.* His mind reached out for her.

I'm here!

Carter turned to see her racing around from the side of the house. Wind streaked through her fur, and her tail stood out straight behind her. She dodged to the side just in time to miss an attack from the enemy, leaving the Morwood wolf sliding in the snow. It jumped to its feet and was on her trail, nipping at the air just behind her.

The joy at hearing her in his head was quickly replaced by pure rage. Carter ran straight for Tammy, pushing his feet into the ground and leaping over her to land on the offending wolf. It fell with a whine, its bones crunching under Carter's jaws. *You've got to get out of here.*

No. Tammy stayed at his side as he returned to Declan. I came here to help. I can't just leave.

I don't want you to get hurt. He knew she was fighting as hard as she could. He'd seen her spit in that guy's face inside and knew she was doing her best. But she wasn't trained. Carter might never be able to have her as his mate, not truly, not with this monster that lived inside him, but it would be so much worse if something happened to her.

I'll be fine.

Sending another wolf running off with its tail between its legs, Carter took a second to catch his breath. He turned to Tammy, knowing he was more than just a man who'd shifted into a wolf. *I don't want you to see me like this.*

Those icy blue eyes stood out even in the dim light as they bored into his. *I already have, Carter.*

But you can't stay here, he insisted.

She backed out of the way as some of the Glenwoods came charging through. *Hunter needs us. I haven't seen him. Trinity got out of the house earlier. I know she's safe for now, but she won't be for long if any of us gives up.*

Carter let out a growl of frustration. His wolf was going crazy with thoughts of anything happening to her, but it truly didn't want her to leave, either. As they fought off the enemy, he focused on the way it felt to have her right there next to him, both of them fighting for the same cause. It seemed that no matter the situation, he could neither have her with him nor be away from her.

Toby's coming! Declan warned.

The Glenwood brothers had been going after the big wolf, and it was a challenge even for all three of them. He'd slipped

away and was coming at them, his eyes wild. His paws left bloody footprints in the snow as he charged straight for Carter, and his growl thundered through the air.

Carter was ready for him, and he'd give the bastard everything he deserved. If it meant he had to lay down his life to make sure everyone else was safe, then so be it. Bracing himself, he waited.

Toby leaped, but his paws never came back down to touch the ground. Brilliant white fire encapsulated him, sizzling along his fur. The witches had him, their hands out as they cast their energy at him all at once. His eyes were still wide but with fear now instead of anger. The light was almost too bright to look at, but Carter refused to be caught off guard in case he managed to get away. Toby writhed and growled, still fighting. His body shook and spasmed as the intense light increased, pulsing through his body as though searching for something. Toby's eyes met Carter's, but he was no longer truly seeing. In one final burst of light, he exploded into a million bits of ash that sizzled as they fell onto the snow.

He didn't quite understand how they'd done it, but the witches had taken him out. That was one less wolf he'd have to fight. Carter turned, ready for the next attack, but it didn't come. The remaining Morwoods were backing toward the house, their heads tucked down and their tails curled underneath them. As they shifted back into their human forms, they exchanged confused looks.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Who are all these wolves?”

“What are we doing?”

More people poured out of the house. They rushed to their friends and loved ones, checking on and helping them. They avoided the Glenwoods and their allies and acted as though they'd just awoken from a bad dream.

“Dad?” Hunter stumbled out onto the walkway, rubbing a hand over his face.

Max rushed forward and held his son, tears leaking down his cheeks. Sarah was right behind him. The talking would probably all come later, but right now, they just held each other.

TAMMY HEARD NOTHING BUT HER OWN BREATH FOR A MOMENT as everything grew still and the battle came to a crashing halt. The cold air burned her lungs, though she hadn't noticed it until now. Staying alive had been much more important.

She looked at Carter. He stood next to her, still in his wolf form as she was. His shoulders were hunched and his hackles were raised, still on high alert and waiting for something else to pop up. He was still that feral wolf, the same one she'd seen before, the one she'd been terrified of, yet she'd put all of her trust in him as they'd fought together. She searched her mind, feeling there was something she ought to be saying, but the whole world felt overwhelming right now.

A figure emerged from the woods off to her left. Tammy let her wolf go, surprised to find just how cold it was out there as she hurried over. "Trinity! Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Trinity held her arms crossed over her chest, and she shivered in the cold. "I ran out into the woods."

"Good girl." Tammy tucked a strand of her daughter's hair behind her ear just as she always used to when she was little. She never could tame that hair, but now Trinity wore it like a wavy mane that didn't need to be tamed. "I'm sorry I pushed you, but I was hoping you understood why."

Trinity laid her head on Tammy's shoulder and nodded. "I thought they had you. I really wasn't sure what to do. I thought I should start heading out of the mountains, that I might be able to find help somewhere, but then all these other wolves came rushing in. I wasn't sure who they were, so I just tucked in against a log and stayed hidden."

"You did the right thing, honey. This wasn't a battle you could fight." In fact, it wasn't a battle Tammy had been qualified for herself, but she'd done it anyway. That was just what mothers had to do sometimes. An extra chill ran down her spine as she remembered the coldness in the eyes of the Morwoods who'd captured her. If things had happened differently, she and Trinity might not be standing there talking right now. "And I'm proud of you for being able to shift. I know that's not something we've done much of lately, but it was good to hear you in my head and know you were all right."

Straightening and wiping a hand across her face, Trinity gave her mother a shy smile. "Well, Hunter and I had been shifting quite a bit whenever we'd hung out, so I had some practice."

"Good for you." Would she have felt the same about it if she hadn't just rediscovered her own wolf thanks to Carter? Tammy wasn't sure, but she was genuinely glad Trinity was exploring both sides of herself.

Trinity pulled in a deep, shuddering breath as she looked around at the remains of the battle. "Mom, I'm really sorry about all of this. It's all my fault."

"No, it isn't," Tammy insisted quickly.

"But it is," Trinity replied. "I don't really know what came over me. I was having such a good time hanging out with

Hunter and wanted to impress him. He wanted to hang out with Toby, who showed us this amazing life we could have if we just listened to him. I didn't really understand much because it was about pack politics and business. It wasn't the sort of thing I'm into."

Tammy smiled as she rubbed a hand over her daughter's back. No, Trinity wouldn't care for that sort of thing. Even at this young age, it was certain she was on a much different path with her love of music and children.

"Hunter was really into it," Trinity continued, "so I just sort of went along. I don't even really understand what happened here tonight, but I know it wouldn't have happened if I'd done something differently."

"Don't blame yourself for the actions of others." Joan had walked up to them, and she beamed softly at Trinity. "Toby Morwood was taking advantage of people and knew how to do it exceptionally well. I'm Hunter's grandmother, by the way. Joan Glenwood."

"Hi," Trinity said feebly.

Joan's eyes were gentle as she explained. "What I've gathered from my guides is that Toby Morwood was trying to manipulate the up-and-coming leading members of the surrounding packs. He tracked down their future Alphas and other potentially influential members, thinking that if he got into their heads while they were still young and vulnerable, he could manipulate entire packs without having to take over them by force or even create alliances."

"I guess he was damn good at it," Trinity replied bitterly as a tear rolled down her cheek in the tracks that already showed red there.

The older woman frowned. “Somewhat, probably, but he also used dark magic. I believe he cast a spell on those he was most interested in to control their minds. None of us Glenwoods could even reach out to Hunter telepathically while we were here tonight, so Toby had him completely blocked off from those he knew and loved. He hasn’t been himself recently, and it was through no fault of his own.”

Trinity’s shoulders sagged. “So that was why he got so angry with me when I wanted to leave tonight. He snapped at me, and I just had this horrible feeling that I was never going to get out of here alive.”

“That’s right,” Joan agreed. “Toby must not have seen the need to cast the spell on you since you were already so devoted to Hunter. Dark magic is a terrible thing, and it’s strong. It had permeated Toby so thoroughly that nothing else was left of him. Otherwise, he might still be here with us.”

That explained that strange, bright spectacle of the black wolf disintegrating into nothingness. Joan and the other witches had turned their white magic on him. It was enough to overcome the darkness, but that was all there was of the man. “And what about the spells he cast?” Tammy asked.

“They’re all broken now that Toby Morwood is gone,” Joan affirmed.

For the first time, Trinity looked hopeful. “So, is Hunter okay?”

“Yes. He’s over there with his parents. You should probably go say hi,” Joan said with a wink. “I think he’ll be happy to see you.”

Tammy watched as Trinity raced over. Hunter had been speaking seriously with his parents, but his face crumpled

when he saw her. He pulled Trinity close, burying his face in her hair and wetting it with his tears. Tammy couldn't hear what he said, but she had a good idea of the basic gist.

“The two of them have something very special,” Joan noted with that knowing smile of hers. “This has been a traumatic day for them, but they're young enough to get past it. Sometimes events like this can even help bring two people together.”

“That's true.” Tammy couldn't doubt that her sweet little girl was growing up. She had to learn some painful lessons, and Tammy didn't like to see her go through them, but it was just part of life.

Joan moved off to check on some of the injured. Tammy knew she should be doing something, but she wasn't sure how to help. All of the Glenwoods seemed to know their roles. Joan and Dawn were helping to heal those who had trouble doing it themselves, either because they were too injured to shift or because their wounds were so deep. Max and Sarah were speaking with Hunter and Trinity to figure out who else Toby might have taken advantage of so their packs could be contacted.

Though Rex already had plenty on his shoulders with his own pack, he was trying to help the Morwoods piece themselves back together. His brother Brody stood at his side as they spoke to an older man in the Morwood pack.

“Poor old Walt would've been devastated to see this,” the man said, shaking his head as he looked around. “He worked hard to build up the name and reputation of our pack, and he wanted to create a great legacy to leave his son. It wasn't just the money, either. It was a sense of caring for those who

needed help and always being available in an emergency. Toby took it all for granted, though, and look where that got him.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” Rex replied compassionately. “Toby was a part of your pack and your family, even if he went down the wrong path in recent years. Can you tell me who the beta is or if anyone else would’ve stood to become Alpha next?”

A wry smile crossed the older man’s face. “At one point, I could’ve told you. But Toby should’ve been the CEO of some cold corporation instead of the Alpha of a pack. He kicked out anyone who didn’t agree with him or serve him, and he kept all of his yes-men close. Oh, and then there were all those kids he brought in from the other packs. I knew what he was doing, but to say anything would mean death or exile. I suppose for that reason, I can’t be all that sad to know that Toby is no longer with us. I think I’m mourning for what should’ve been.”

Rex rested his hand on the man’s shoulder. “That’s understandable. I know things look bleak right now, but we can help rebuild the Morwood pack.”

“Really? You’d do that?”

Brody grinned. “Of course. We’ve got a bit of experience with it, too.”

“Let’s make sure everyone here is safe and accounted for,” Rex began. “Some of my members are already working on that. When everything has calmed down, we can help organize a vote to create structure within your pack again.”

Tammy was impressed. These people had threatened the Glenwoods, and it was even worse because they’d endangered someone so young. It was clear that most of them had been

under Toby's spell, but even with that as an excuse, Tammy knew plenty of people wouldn't be willing to forgive so easily. Rex, Brody, and the others were caring for the Morwoods as though they were their own.

"I haven't been involved in the pack for a long time, but I'd say a new alliance is forming." Footsteps sounded on Tammy's right. She turned to find Carter there, looking down at her. He was trying to keep that mask on his face, the one she'd seen several times now when he wanted to keep himself distant from people.

With the way her wolf reacted every time he was around, though, Tammy wasn't entirely sure how much distance was feasible.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

For the first time, Tammy actually paid attention to how her body felt. She'd been more concerned about her daughter than her own safety. "I'm a bit sore and bruised, but other than that, I think I'm fine."

"Good." His brows drew together, and his gaze was fixed hard on her. "We were lucky that the others came when they did. These guys weren't going to just shake their fingers at us for trespassing and send us on our way."

"No," she agreed, once again remembering the fear that'd trembled through her when she'd been captured. "They would've had Trinity, otherwise. It was better that it was me."

A hint of a smile played across his lips. "Do you think she would've spit in that guy's face the way you did?"

Tammy smiled, too, with only a hint of the pain from Justin's backhanded slap still running through her mouth. The wound had healed thanks to her shift, a side benefit she hadn't

even considered when her wolf had come out of her. With Justin now dead, it was the last time he'd hurt anyone. "I like to think so, if she's listened to her mother at all through the years. She's got some fire in her."

"So do you." For just a moment, Carter's face was soft. His hand twitched, and Tammy thought he might reach out and touch her. But then he curled his hand into a fist and kept it at his side. That stony look fell over his features once again. His voice was tight when he spoke. "I should apologize."

"For what?" Tammy studied him, baffled.

A heavy breath escaped his mouth and sent steam rising into the air. Carter pressed his lips together as he looked off toward the trees for a moment. Tammy was noticing that was a habit of his when he was thinking. He'd been running to the woods for so long that they'd become a part of him.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like that," he said. "Everyone here shifted into their wolves to fight, which only makes sense. I did the same, but it wasn't as simple for me as it was for the rest. I was damn near feral, and it makes me wonder if I can actually separate that part from my wolf even if the moon isn't full."

"But it wasn't like that when you shifted before," she pointed out softly. He was trying to keep himself closed off from her, but he couldn't. Not completely. Her wolf knew him. It sensed him and understood him, even when she wasn't entirely aware of it on a conscious level. "When we were behind your cabin."

He shook his head and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "That was different."

“Was it?” she challenged. “Or was this time different? You want to stand there and tell me you were a monster. I saw what you did, though. You were passionate.”

“I fought to kill,” he interjected.

“You fought for a purpose,” she corrected. “Morwoods were everywhere, and for a bit, it was hard to tell who the enemy even was. We were far outnumbered when it was just the two of us here. Even once the others arrived, we didn’t stand much chance. I don’t think things would’ve gone in our favor if it weren’t for you.”

His jaw hardened. “You’re only seeing it the way you want to, not the way it really happened.”

“No?” She took a step closer, knowing that it made him uncomfortable. Carter wanted to pull away from her, and there sure as hell had been times she’d wanted to pull away from him. But Tammy knew she’d never fully disentangle herself from Carter, even if they couldn’t be together. “Are you seriously going to tell me I didn’t see a man who instantly volunteered to come up here and find these kids the second he found out they might be in trouble?”

“I know the area,” he grunted.

“That didn’t mean you had to go alone, but you would’ve if I hadn’t insisted on coming along,” she quickly countered. “I might not be a trained fighter, and I might not know these woods, but I do know that one man against an entire pack makes for odds that even you can’t beat.”

He shook his head again. “Don’t try to label me as a hero, Tammy.”

“I can if I want to,” she insisted. Her eyes burned with tears of gratitude, fear, anger, and love. This whole week had

been an emotional rollercoaster, and she was continuously being whipped around a new corner. “You already said I’m just seeing the things I want to, so I’ll tell you exactly what that is. I see someone who volunteered his skills and knowledge to save my daughter. I see someone who further endangered his life to save me, just because I didn’t see any way to get Trinity to safety without risking myself. I see someone who didn’t care about the odds, danger, or logic of it all because he just jumped in and did what needed to be done.”

A growl of frustration echoed in his throat. “Don’t be a fool, Tammy. I’m dangerous, and I’ve already proven that time and again. Both in the past and here today. I don’t want credit I don’t deserve.”

Her heart was ripping in half. She knew he was like this because of all the pain he’d suffered, and she knew he would only continue to suffer. She wanted to fix it, to make it better somehow, but no number of words would change his mind. Tammy had completely shut him down when he’d tried to talk to her about his condition before, but now he was shutting her down. They couldn’t seem to get on the same page, and everything just felt so damn complicated.

“You should at least take the credit you do deserve,” she managed, “and I’m grateful for what you did.” There was so much more she knew she should say, but it wouldn’t help. Tammy could stand there and tell him how integral he was to their success that day, and how her daughter might not have been okay if he hadn’t been so willing to jump into the fray, but none of that would actually change who he was inside. There was no getting around the fact that he was feral, and the two of them would continue to battle over that in one way or another.

“Hey, Mom?” Trinity came over, eyeing Carter for a brief moment. “Um, his parents are going to stay here and sort things out, but Hunter and I are worn out. We’re ready to go back to town. Can we ride with you and leave Hunter’s truck for his parents to take later?”

“Of course.” Tammy sensed the unfinished business between herself and Carter like a palpable force, but it was nothing that could be resolved that night. “I’ll figure something out.”

Carter caught Tammy’s eyes. “Take my truck. The keys are still in it.”

Damn him. He didn’t want her to give him any credit for his good deeds, yet there he was doing another one. “I don’t want to leave you here without it.”

“I’ll be fine,” Carter insisted. “It’s not like I live very far from here, anyway.” He moved off toward his brother.

“Okay, then.” Tammy rubbed a hand over her forehead, hoping to smooth out the deep wrinkles she could feel settling there. She slowly turned toward Carter’s truck. How long had it actually been since she sat in the passenger seat and waited for him to go to the Morwoods’ door? It couldn’t have been more than a few hours, yet it felt like an eternity. A lot had changed since then, but some things hadn’t.

“Carter.” She heard Declan’s voice behind her as she trudged away, her feet heavy. “I’ve tried not to bother you about it for a while, but we’d all love for you to return to the pack.”

There was that sigh that was also half a growl from Carter, a noise Tammy felt she was starting to know well. “That’s nice of you, Dec, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Tammy dug her teeth into her bottom lip. If Carter was so determined to keep punishing himself for something that happened twenty years ago, it shouldn't be any of her business. He was a grown man, and he was going to do what he wanted.

Trinity and Hunter joined her as she reached the truck. Tammy fired up the engine and adjusted the seat, which had been pushed far back to account for the size of its usual driver. She backed around slowly, feeling awkward in the big vehicle. "I know there's no signal up here, but keep checking for me. We need to call Gabby as soon as we can. She's probably freaking out right now, wondering what's going on."

"Okay. Do you think we can stop and get something to eat?" Trinity asked. "I think that burger place is still open, and Gabby really likes their fries. Plus, I'm starving."

"Sure. Hunter, you're welcome to stay at our place until your parents get home."

"Thanks."

For the second time in the span of a week, Tammy drove someone else's vehicle down the Morwood driveway and out of the mountains. So much had happened, and she was exhausted. She knew, though, that even once they got back home and she could put her head on the pillow, she wouldn't fall asleep. Her mind would be spinning, going back over the events of the evening and trying to find some even ground to land on. She couldn't look forward to any real rest, but she was glad to be going home.

Adjusting the side view mirror, she couldn't help but feel she'd left something behind.

CARTER PUT ANOTHER LOG ON THE FIRE. A NEW COLD FRONT was on its way in, but it wasn't bringing any snow with it this time. It certainly wouldn't be bringing a gorgeous woman into his life the way it had last time. Fate had been cruel to him. After all these years alone, he'd gone long past the point of hope. If his mate had been out there, he knew he'd never meet her. How could he when he lived a life of isolation? That was just the way it needed to be, too.

Or at least that was what he'd thought.

"Get down from there, Maple," he scolded gently. The dog had jumped up on the couch and propped her feet on the back of it, looking out the front window. It was a habit she'd picked up recently, one that sent a roil of regret through Carter's stomach. "She's not coming, and I think it's about time we both got used to that."

The dog gave him a baleful look over her shoulder before turning back to the window.

"Fine. You go right ahead if it makes you feel better. As for me, I'm just going back to the way things used to be. We were fine." Carter headed toward the kitchen. It was time to make dinner, even though he didn't feel hungry.

Juniper followed him. She pushed her head forward on her neck as she looked up at him, emphasizing the whites that showed under the deep brown of her eyes.

“We were,” Carter insisted. “We *are*. We’ve got a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs. We’ve even got all the firewood we could ever need to keep us warm. Those are the basic things in life, and you can’t go around demanding a soulmate to go along with it.”

Maple hopped down from the couch and came into the kitchen to see what was going on. Now, they both watched him as he moved back and forth between the fridge and the sink, not really doing anything at all to prepare a meal.

“I could go find her,” he admitted. “I could talk to her and apologize to her for being such a grumpy ass, but it just wouldn’t be right.” He thought about the way she’d spoken to him after the battle. She’d been angry and sassy, and it’d stirred things within him. Tammy claimed he’d acted the right way and done all the right things, but it was only because she didn’t understand. Not really.

He stared at the boxes of pasta in the cabinet, but he wasn’t really seeing them. “It’s these damn wolves. The connection between us is making her think my feral state isn’t so bad. I ought to be glad, considering she wouldn’t even talk to me a few days ago once she understood the truth.” In the moment, he’d thought it was because he was feral. It had to be a factor, of course. But now he wondered if it wasn’t just as much about the fact he hadn’t told her.

“Well, there you go, then,” he reasoned as he moved to the next cabinet, full of canned vegetables. “The last guy she tried to date lied to her and cheated on her. If I had this big nasty secret and didn’t tell her, even though it was obvious that we

were fated, then I'm no better. That's all the proof anyone should need that we shouldn't be together."

He hated the words as soon as they came out of his mouth. He hated the situation, and he hated the idea of not living the rest of his life with her. Carter shut the cabinet door and leaned against the counter. Both dogs were still watching him. "Fine. I want her. I want to have her here. Actually, I don't even care where we are. I want to be with her. She's the first person who's been able to see past what I am and see who I'd actually like to be. But what kind of life would I be asking her to live? I don't have any better solution to my problem than having Larry lock me in the shed. That's not a very fair thing to ask her to put up with, mate or not. I'm just going to give up."

Maple pricked up her ears. Juniper tipped her head to the side. Both of them held their tails straight up in the air.

"I didn't think it was *that* good of an idea," Carter replied, but then he realized they really weren't listening to him at all anymore. They turned and ran for the front of the cabin, and both of them jumped on the couch to look out the window.

Standing behind them, Carter understood why. A truck was coming up the driveway. *His* truck. And Tammy was at the wheel. His stomach did a somersault. "Don't get too excited," he said, both to himself and the dogs. "She had to bring the truck back, anyway."

Despite his own words, his wolf was going nuts. If it could get out and separate from him, it would be acting just like Maple and Juniper were right now. Their tongues lolled and their tails wagged. They fought to get to the door first, even as Carter reached over them for the handle. He opened the door and let them out.

Tammy parked the truck and shut off the engine. She sat there for a few seconds before she opened the door. Being much shorter than Carter, she stuck her feet out and slid to the ground. Juniper and Maple were right there waiting for her, but they didn't jump. They escorted her back to the door, one on each side of her, looking incredibly proud of themselves.

Carter stood on the threshold. "You didn't have to do that. I could've come into town to get the truck."

She smiled at him, and his stomach was now training for the next Olympics. "You were nice enough to let me use it. I thought I should at least prove I could bring it back in one piece."

"I guess that means your driving record is improving." He didn't want to be so happy she was there, not when he knew he'd have to send her away again.

"It also gave me a chance to give you this." Tammy held up a small aluminum tray with a foil lid. "I would've put it in something nicer, but my other dish got broken."

"So I heard." He held the door open, and the dogs ushered her in. "I'm sorry about that, by the way. You didn't have to make another one. I'm not sure I deserve it."

She took the liberty of setting the pan on the kitchen counter. The dogs trotted over and put their noses in the air. "Well, that's something I'd like to talk to you about if you've got some time."

He had about three weeks until the next full moon. "I've got a minute."

"I've been thinking a lot over the last few days." She set her purse on a chair before reaching down to give each dog a pet on the head. "As a mom of teenagers, I know things can be

wild. But what happened yesterday was beyond the scope of anything I'd ever imagined. It was hard to see the dangers of the real world catching up with Trinity."

"I know." He'd felt the pain and worry in Tammy as though it were his own while they'd fought the Morwoods. It'd fueled him even more to win the fight.

"It made me think a lot about how precious life is, and how we only get so many chances to live it the way we want to. Carter, I was frustrated with you yesterday. I said things I meant but didn't say them the *way* I meant to. I don't want to argue with you or try to convince you of anything. I just want you to know how I feel." She took a step toward him.

His wolf cried out for her. She was so close. He could grab her by those deliciously curvy hips and press his lips to hers in half a second. It would make him happy in the moment, but it would only make it hurt all the more later. "All right." He couldn't be with her. He couldn't give her the life she deserved, but at least he could give her a few minutes.

Tammy swallowed. "You really were the first person to volunteer to go find Trinity. I know the rest of the Glenwoods and even some of the Greenlocks were willing to jump in to do what was needed. I know they put their lives on the line, but it touched me that you would offer to do such a thing. And it wasn't like this was something you did just to be polite, some obligation to fulfill. You really meant it. I could tell by the way you fought."

Carter turned away from her and stared into the flames of the fireplace. "I'm embarrassed about that. Even though the full moon had passed, I was out of control. I just couldn't stand the idea of anyone hurting you or the people you loved. I wish it was something I could handle differently." In fact, he'd

been surprised he was actually able to transition smoothly back into his human form once he was sure the battle was over.

Her boot sounded on the hardwood floor as she took another step toward him. “Carter, I’ve waited my whole life for someone who cared deeply enough about me to lose control.”

“No, you haven’t.” He turned, wishing they’d had this conversation somewhere else, in some bigger space where he didn’t feel so close to her. “It’s a romantic notion, Tammy, but it’s not real.”

“I think it is,” she insisted, “and it’s not an opportunity that I want to throw away just because it might not be easy.”

He let out a short, harsh laugh. “We’re just arguing in circles, Tammy. We’re not going to get around the truth of what I am and what that means. I’m dangerous.”

“Not all the time.” She moved in front of him now, her body perilously close to his as she reached up and cupped her hand along his bearded jaw.

Carter closed his eyes and leaned into it. This was pure torture, yet he couldn’t stop himself. It was so tempting to just go along with whatever she said so he might feel her touch again.

“Besides,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper now, “I’ve been told there’s something that might help.”

He slid his hand up over hers and opened his eyes. Carter couldn’t let hope live within him, not after all this time, yet he felt it like a bubble in his chest. “What’s that?”

She licked her lips, the movement a small one that drew his entire attention for a moment. “Me.”

His spine trembled. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t really understand exactly how or why it might work, either,” she admitted with a shy laugh. “Maybe finally being together would balance something out. It’s not like there’s ever been a scientific explanation about the fated connection. Joan said it would have to be a truly committed relationship, though. It’s not like we can just say we’re together. You’d have to mark me.”

He stared at her blankly, his mind trying to wrap around this.

“I’m your fated, Carter, and I might be what you need to balance out that feral wolf,” she insisted. “I think this is worth trying.”

“I see.” His wolf teeth threatened just inside his gums at the mere thought of marking her. “That’s remained a tradition in the Glenwood pack, even though I know a lot of others have let it die out. If I remember correctly, it’s not something the Greenlocks usually do.”

Tammy let her hand drift down so that it rested on his chest, just over his heart. “No, but it’s not really about packs or traditions, as far as I’m concerned. It’s about us.”

She said she’d waited her whole life for someone to care so deeply about her, but Carter knew now that he wasn’t the only one. Tammy was willing to go to great lengths on the mere possibility that it might cure him. It moved him, and he knew she could feel the fluttering of his heart against her palm. “What if I hurt you?”

“You won’t,” she encouraged. “You haven’t yet.”

“Well, what if it doesn’t work? I don’t want you to be stuck with me.”

“Then we’ll figure it out, one way or another,” she insisted, curling her fingers slightly against his chest. “Plenty of things in my life haven’t been guaranteed, and I’ve gone for them anyway with far less on the line. This means a lot to me, Carter. *You* mean a lot to me. I want to do this. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He’d been resisting thus far, but now he pulled her in tight. He kissed her deeply, absorbing her scent, her taste, and her feel. He gripped her hips and pulled her against him as though he’d never have the chance again. Her closeness and willingness to do such a thing for him made his entire body quiver. He trailed his kisses down along the curve of her jaw and neck, landing some just above the collar of her sweater, not far from where the marking they’d just spoken of would happen. “You think about it and let me know when you’re ready.”

“Now.” Her warm breath curled past his cheek.

Carter pulled back, losing himself in her eyes. “Are you sure? I want you to think about it. I want you to know.”

“I do know, Carter. I just told you.” She kissed him again. “I’ve thought about it all I need to, and I don’t want to wait any longer.”

He almost asked her again, wanting to be absolutely sure this was what she wanted, but he could ask her a hundred times and still be in disbelief that she was willing to make this sacrifice for him. Besides, her eyes told him everything he needed to know. Tammy was sassy and could throw some jokes around, but that didn’t mean she was the kind to decide on anything lightly.

If any doubt remained in him, she erased it as she crossed her arms, grabbed the hem of her sweater, and lifted it over her head, leaving her exposed for what was to come.

Carter pulled her close against his body, the only place he ever wanted her to be. He'd thought of a mate as someone to love and be with, someone to care for, but he'd never realized until now just how deep that bond truly went. He kissed her, then braced her jaw delicately in his hand as she tipped her head to the side. His focus lasered in on that gentle curve between her neck and shoulder, a place that now enticed him even more than the generous globes of her breasts that now pressed against his chest. Her arms wrapped around his torso as he dipped his head and kissed that spot. "It's probably going to hurt."

She held him tighter. "Not as much as it would hurt to be without you."

His fangs, sharp and ready, pierced through his gums. Carter inhaled as he opened his mouth and let the points rest against her delicate skin. He'd always imagined it had to be hard on the woman, but he'd never realized until now just how difficult it was for him to purposely hurt someone he loved so much. This could be the key to their future together, though, so he gently clamped his jaws down.

Regret and pure joy mixed in his chest as he kept his teeth buried in her, making sure the mark took. Tammy clung to him, her breath deep and even after her initial gasp of pain. When he was sure, he let go and kissed the wound he'd just created.

He didn't know what she was doing as she reached up until he felt her wipe the tear from his eye. Despite the fresh injury, Tammy was smiling. She pulled him down toward her in a long kiss, her lips and tongue reminding him that the best was yet to come.

His body happened to agree, according to the sudden tightness in his jeans. Carter felt her in his bloodstream and all the way down to the marrow of his bones as he took her by the hips and wrapped his hands around them to enjoy the luxurious curves of her backside. Roving upward, he explored the lines of her back and entwined his fingers in her hair.

Showing no sign that the bite mark had hampered her in any way, Tammy attacked the buttons of his shirt, flicking them open blindly as she continued to kiss him. She forced him to take his hands off her long enough so she could whisk the sleeves off his arms and fling the garment to the floor.

It was difficult to focus on what he was trying to do as Tammy's hands ran over his body, magically making a strained sweetness burst in his skin as she spread her palms across his chest, pressed her fingers into the firm muscles of his arms, and then swept back up to brace against either side of his neck. All of those distractions couldn't completely pull him away, though. Carter stepped out of his shoes and heard her doing the same, cueing him to find the button of her jeans. A quick twist of his fingers had it open, and he slowly slid down her zipper. There was nothing Carter wanted more than to see that beautiful body of hers again, and the remainder of her clothes were still standing in the way of that. Still, he couldn't help but let his hands linger just inside her waistband, holding her hips and feeling the warmth of her skin radiating against him.

She called the bluff on his patience when she pulled away his jeans and boxers to take a hold of his thick manhood. Her grip was purposeful, her long, powerful strokes making him pause as all the blood rushed from his head and left him dizzy. Her thumb rubbed enticingly against just the right spot, and the way her fingers curled around his shaft left no doubt as to where her mind was now.

No longer hindered by their clothes, Carter was prepared to take her to the bedroom. Tammy had other plans, and she pushed him back so that he sat on the couch. Carter knew he could easily get to his feet, throw her over his shoulder, and take her anywhere he wanted, but it was a turn-on to see her take charge like that. It was even more of a turn-on when she got to her knees in front of the couch and took him into her mouth. The wet heat of her tongue as it traced figures on his hardness set fire to the underside of his skin. His vision blurred and his fingers curled. His heart hammered inside his chest, and he ground his teeth together. Yes, she was definitely the one in control right now.

Just when he thought he couldn't take another second, Tammy rose. She straddled his hips, and he held onto hers as she lowered herself onto him. As incredible as her mouth felt, this was where he really belonged.

Bracing herself on his shoulders, Tammy ground against him. She let her head fall back as he brought his hands up to cup the weight of her breasts, his thumbs grazing her nipples until they were firm peaks. The setting sun streamed in through the window, the golden rays tangling in her pale hair and blushing across her cheeks. She was a vision of strength, beauty, and love.

She let out a gasp of breath as her brows drew together, and Carter could feel her tightening and rippling around him. It was exquisite, and he pumped his hips against her as he felt her building higher and higher. Carter rose with her, and the two of them continued to ascend until there was no further to go. Carter felt himself fall over the edge, reveling in the fall, but the true joy was in seeing Tammy, her head thrown back, her lips parted, and pure pleasure moving across her face.

He pulled her down so that she lay on top of him as they recovered. “Now, we just have to wait and see if it worked.”

“No, we don’t.” She sat up and looked into his eyes. “Everything’s going to be just fine. Better than fine, actually.” Tammy rested her forehead against his.

She was his mate as decreed by fate, but now they were truly a part of each other. Their bodies, souls, and wolves were bound with a connection so strong that he actually believed her.

EPILOGUE

“DO YOU THINK THE GIRLS ARE HAPPY HERE?”

Tammy smiled to herself as she climbed up into the bed of the truck to hand boxes down to Carter. Right away, he'd proven he was willing to risk his life for their safety. That had been a huge start, but as their relationship progressed, he'd also made it evident that he was just as committed to them as a natural father would be. She picked up a box of books and handed it to him. “Considering the way they've been raving over their bedrooms, I'm going to say yes. Trinity already decided that she's going to commute to college instead of living in one of the dorms, and Gabby has planned about ten different sleepovers now that she has more space.”

Carter laughed, a sound Tammy was starting to get used to. He put the box of books in the garage and returned to the tailgate for the next one. “I'm glad. I know we stayed right on the edge of town so they wouldn't have to change schools, but I still wasn't sure how they'd feel about it. How about you?”

“Me?” Tammy found another carton of books and was glad for the built-in shelving on either side of the fireplace in their new home. “I helped pick the place out, so of course I'm happy. The drive to work isn't even all that much longer.”

“No.” Carter took the carton from her, but he rested it on the edge of the tailgate as he reached up and cupped his hand on her calf. “I mean, are you happy?”

She bent and kissed him, still feeling that little thrill of excitement when their lips met. “I’m here with you, aren’t I? I’ve got you and the girls. I can’t imagine needing anything else.” As he carried the carton away and she reached for the next one, Tammy knew it really was true. She felt a deep sense of contentment, a comfortable feeling all the way down in her soul that she’d never experienced before. The only thing that bothered her about it was that she’d spent her life searching for it and had only found it now.

“Let’s get the last of the furniture figured out before we bring the rest of this inside,” Carter suggested once the truck had been emptied. “Then we won’t be stepping around all the small things while we try to figure out where the couch will go.”

“Nope, just the dogs,” Tammy said with a laugh as Maple and Juniper shot past her and into the kitchen door. “I think they’re just as excited about the new place as the girls are.”

“I was worried about them,” Carter admitted. “We’ve got a decent amount of land here for being on the edge of town, but they’re not used to having neighbors so close. They don’t seem to mind the yard so far, though.”

“It definitely helps,” Tammy agreed as they moved into the living room. What they called the yard was actually several acres that’d been fenced in just before the land gave way to the woods. “And did I tell you where I found Juniper last night when I got up to go to the bathroom?”

“No.” Carter took one end of the couch while she took the other, and they scooted it back along the wall. “Where?”

“Curled up in Gabby’s bed.” Despite the heavy couch, Tammy was grinning. “She wagged her tail like crazy when she saw me, but she wasn’t about to get up. I thought it was adorable.”

Carter gave a grunt of laughter. “All this time, I thought they were my dogs. It turns out Juniper belongs to Gabby, and Maple belongs to you. I guess that means it’s time to get two more so Trinity and I don’t feel left out.”

“Don’t you dare!” Tammy dusted off her hands and put the end table in place next to the couch. “She’s busy finishing up her senior year, and then college is coming up. And every spare second beyond that is spent with Hunter.”

Just as Joan had predicted, the wild predicament they’d gotten into with Toby Morwood had brought the two young lovebirds closer together. They often talked for hours into the night, whether on the phone or in person. Tammy had overheard a few of those conversations, and she was proud to know that they’d both spent a lot of time diving into what had happened and how they each felt about it. They were stronger for the experience, and Tammy suspected they wouldn’t be getting into any predicaments like that again.

Lifting a lamp from one of the boxes that had made it into the house from their last trip, Carter dusted off the shade and put it on the end table. “It makes me wonder if Trinity might end up as the next Glenwood Luna someday. Wouldn’t that be wild?”

“Crazier things have happened.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek before he had a chance to straighten up. “Speaking of the Glenwoods, what time is the meeting tomorrow? I can’t remember.”

“Seven.” Carter smirked. “I don’t have any choice but to remember. Declan is so excited about me returning to the pack that it’s all he ever talks about. I told him it’s really not that big of a deal, but he thinks otherwise.”

“He’s missed you.” Tammy flipped through a box of framed photos, most of them depicting Trinity and Gabrielle through the years.

Digging through a nearby tool bag for some nails and a hammer, Carter began hanging the photos. “I admit I spent a long time away from everyone. There’s no denying that, but Declan was out on the road with his band for years. It’s not like he was sitting here waiting for me up until recently.”

“Still, it’s nice that the two of you get to spend time together again.” Tammy knew it was going to take some time for Carter to really get used to being around people on a regular basis. “Life has changed for you quite a bit, and I’m sure he doesn’t expect you to just make a complete one-eighty in the span of a few months.”

Carter held several nails in the corner of his mouth and spoke around them. “You don’t think so? He’s been trying to book me for an interview on his podcast!”

“Okay, that does make him seem a bit desperate. He means well, at least. We should invite him and Tiffany over for dinner once we get settled in. That might appease him.” She liked the idea of having a little dinner party in their new place, even though she hadn’t yet decided which kitchen cabinet the plates would go in.

“You should invite Zena, too,” Carter suggested.

“That’s a good idea.” As she backed up to see if she liked where the frames were hung, she admired her mate. Carter was

a big, burly guy, the kind who looked like he wouldn't be afraid of anything. Life had dealt him some heavy blows, and she'd worried how he'd do once he was no longer living in his cabin up in the mountains. They'd kept the place, planning to use it for weekend getaways, but it was still an adjustment for him. If he suggested inviting an extra person to dinner, she knew things were on the right track.

Through the open window, she heard gravel crunching and an engine grinding loudly. "It sounds like someone's here."

"Sounds like Larry." Carter led the way back through the house and out through the garage just as an old blue truck pulled up in the driveway. "You're a little far out from your usual territory," he called to his friend.

Larry slammed the truck door and grinned. He carried two small brown paper bags in his hands. "Don't I know it! Figured it was worth making the trip to come see the new place and make sure it was up to par. Looks pretty good from what I can see."

"Come on in," Carter suggested. "We'll give you the grand tour."

"I don't know," the old hippie said with a wink as they walked through the garage. "You've got more space here than you did in that old woodshed. It might be more comfortable, but do you think it'll be strong enough to hold you?"

Carter smiled as he held open the door to the house. "Don't worry, man. We've done all of this with some pretty careful timing. I've successfully made it through the last several full moons, and Tammy hasn't even had to lock me in the bathroom."

Larry chuckled. "I guess that means now she only has to tie you up for the fun of it."

All three of them laughed at that one, but Tammy figured it was time to change the subject. "We've got all the living space down here, and all the bedrooms are upstairs. The girls just love their new rooms."

"Where are they?" Larry asked. "I brought a housewarming present for each of them."

"Gabby is staying overnight with a friend, and Trinity is on a date with Hunter," Carter explained.

Larry handed over the paper bags. "I'll just leave this with you, then. They're some old incense burners I've been hanging onto for a few decades. I know how those kinds of things come back around, so I thought they might like them."

"That's very kind of you." As they showed Larry the house, he regaled them with all the news from up in the mountains. "You should see what a change there's been with those Morwoods. That older gentleman they voted in as the new Alpha, Bruce, has been putting in a lot of work to get them all straightened out again."

Larry insisted on pitching in and helping with some boxes and furniture. The old man had a surprising amount of energy and strength, and by the time he left a couple of hours later, Tammy was exhausted. "I think I need a break. Want a beer?"

"You read my mind." Carter grabbed two from the fridge and led the way out onto the back patio. They had a few outdoor chairs they'd brought over from Tammy's place, but he leaned against the rail as he looked out into the night sky.

Tammy stepped up next to him, enjoying how it felt to have him standing so close. She found so much comfort and

happiness in him, to a degree she hadn't even realized was possible. "You know, we've talked about whether or not the girls are happy and whether or not I'm happy, but we haven't talked about you."

He looked down at her. "Are you worried about that?"

"I just think you deserve to find as much happiness as the rest of us have, but I think you've had to make more changes than anyone else." The house had been perfect for them in many ways. Tammy and Carter still worked the same jobs, and the girls still went to the same school. But she hadn't wanted Carter to feel like a wild animal who was suddenly expected to be domesticated.

"Am I happy?" He asked the question of himself as he gripped the railing and leaned back. The moon was nearly full above them, illuminating the expansive land they'd bought. "I definitely wasn't, not so long ago. The moon ruled my life for a couple of days a month, and the threat of it ruled all the other days. I resented that moon for a long time, but I can't now. Not when it seems like it brought the two of us together. I know I wouldn't be the man I am now if it weren't for you."

"It's kind of funny, really." She took a long sip of her beer.

"What's that?"

"Well, I tamed the wolf in you, and you brought out the wolf in me. I'd let myself get so disconnected from it, and I think I was really missing out. I guess we've just brought out the best in each other."

Carter gently pressed his lips to her forehead. "Yes, we have. And yes, I'm happy. Very happy."

"Good." She put her beer down on the railing. It had sounded like the perfect thing after a long day of work, but

now Tammy realized there was something even better they could be doing. “Think we should go explore those sides of ourselves right now?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have you seen that big walnut tree out by the pond? It looks like it had an old tire swing on it at one point.”

She hadn’t spent as much time exploring the land as Carter had, but the tree he spoke of was hard to miss. It had to be one of the oldest trees on the land, and its branches hung out over the water. “I know the one.”

“Last one there has to take all the moving boxes to the recycling drop-off!” Carter dashed past her and down the deck stairs, his feet turning to paws before he even reached the grass.

“Hey! That’s not fair!” Tammy raced after him, stumbling and laughing as she shifted on the fly. The grass was cool under their paws as they raced across the yard and into their future.

THE END

If you enjoyed Carter and Tammy’s story, read on for a preview of Bennett and Stephanie’s story, *Vigilante Midlife Wolf!*

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SIGN ME UP

BENNETT

“Easy there, Sherlock,” Stephanie crooned to the hound at the end of her leash. The dog was constantly watching the trees on either side of them, his eyes wide and his ears perked in case something jumped out at them. He calmed only slightly at her words. “You’re all right. That’s a good boy.”

“I’m surprised it’s taking him this long to get used to the leash work,” her daughter Annie commented, “especially with all these other dogs around to let him know it’s okay.”

Stephanie smiled down at the dog, who’d paused and turned his cocoa eyes to her, asking if he was still a good boy and doing everything right. The poor thing needed so much reassurance, and she was happy to give it to him. It was just a shame that no one had been willing to do so in the first place. “He’ll get it. He’s been through some rough times, and it takes some rescues longer than others to be convinced that nothing bad will happen to them ever again. We don’t even know the extent of what Sherlock has been through.”

Annie nodded. “Being stuck in that cage all overgrown with weeds had to be bad enough.”

“I can’t argue with that.” Stephanie frowned, easily remembering when she’d been called out to a foreclosed home. The mortgage holder had already tried animal control,

but the officer was busy. Somehow, Dr. Stephanie Caldwell had been next on the list. It wasn't the kind of thing she normally did, but her intuition had told her to go. She'd found Sherlock hunkered in the back corner of an outdoor pen, barely even visible through the thick weeds that'd grown inside it over the summer. The only reason anyone had even known a dog was present was through its mournful howls. "Out there howling like the hound of the Baskervilles, poor thing. I doubt he was ever out on a leash during that time. Or if he was, only bad things happened."

Her daughter let out a long sigh.

"What's the matter?"

Annie stooped to pick a burr off Jacques, the little chihuahua she was walking. Penelope, the pit bull mix, took great interest and nosed her hand. She smiled and scratched her between the ears. "It's just that I've been doubting the whole vet school thing."

Stephanie raised an eyebrow. "How come?"

"Well, dogs like these, for instance. They needed help and homes. Now, they have good vet care, plenty of healthy food, and reliable shelter. I'm happy to see they're taken care of, but I know there will always be more."

"Veterinary work isn't necessarily rescue work," Stephanie pointed out. "I know the two are often intertwined, and I've certainly allowed that to happen in my practice, but you have the privilege of choosing what to do with your career. You can move to Beverly Hills and do nothing but give acupuncture to celebrity dogs if you'd like."

Annie wrinkled her nose. "Yeah right, Mom. You know I'd never do that."

No, she probably wouldn't. Annie had always been the kind of kid who'd rather roll in the mud than put on makeup, and that hadn't changed much as she'd gotten older. She was strong and practical and had always seemed to know what she wanted. That made it all the more surprising that she was questioning herself now. "My point is, you have to do what makes you happy. I've always been proud of you for choosing the veterinary path, but my concern has been that you don't do it just because you think you have to."

"I'm not. It's just always felt like this thing that I need to do. Tons of animals out there need help in one way or another, and I want to help them. I'm just overwhelmed, I guess."

"Mm, it'll do that to you." Annie would be finishing her vet tech degree that year and moving on to veterinary school. That would be a lot, but it wouldn't be the end of it. Stephanie had spent so many days with sick pets, gone to bed completely exhausted, and then dragged herself back up the next day. It was once she'd combined traditional medicine with naturopathic therapies that things had started to feel better for her, more relaxed. It was the path she was destined to find, and Annie would need to find that, too. "Keep your head up, kiddo. You're smart, and you've been doing great in school. Whatever you decide to do, you'll be awesome at it."

Annie gave her a small smile. "Yeah, that's what Dad said, too. We went out to lunch yesterday, and—whoa! What has gotten into you guys? Easy, easy!" She tightened her grip on the two leashes in her hand. Little Jacques didn't take much to restrain, but Penelope had pulled her leash to the end and was straining against her harness.

Sherlock was freaking out in his own way. His nose was in the air, and his tail stood straight. Instead of trying to run

forward, he was backing up, trying to get away from whatever it was that had spooked him so much. Stephanie put her hand on his back and took a deep breath, trying to tap into his feelings. “He’s really scared. Do you see anything up ahead?”

“Here.” Brave as ever, Annie handed over her two leashes and moved forward.

They’d gone walking in those woods dozens of times, if not more. The most they’d ever encountered were squirrels and other hikers. Stephanie knew she had no real reason to worry, but for once, she questioned her daughter’s grit. With three trembling dogs, she waited.

“Um, Mom?”

“Yeah?”

Annie reappeared from around the bend. “You’re not going to believe this because I’m not sure I do, but there’s a wolf up here.”

“What?” A tremor of energy shot through Stephanie. She loved wolves, and though they were in the area, seeing one out and about was rare.

“I’m not sure it’s alive, though,” Annie explained, looking over her shoulder. “I’m going to see if it has a heartbeat.”

“Be careful!” The mother in her could override anything else, including the veterinarian and animal lover. This was her daughter, and if anything happened to her, she’d never forgive herself. Inside, she was now just as edgy as the dogs.

Annie returned a moment later, shaking her head. “I think it’s gone.”

“Let me have a look.” Putting the dogs in her daughter’s care, Stephanie headed forward. Her hiking boots were solid

against the firm ground, and she felt a cool breeze toying with the strands of hair that'd come loose from her long braid. It pushed her forward on the trail, towards what she couldn't be entirely sure.

The wolf lay on the side of the path, its jaw slack and eyes closed. It certainly didn't look like it had any life left in it, but she had to be sure. Slowly, carefully, Stephanie approached. She murmured to the creature as she did so, making it aware of her, even if only on a subconscious level. Kneeling, she pressed her hand gently to the animal's chest.

She felt nothing.

Worry jolted through her, and she slid her hand up until it rested just inside the wolf's armpit, right where its front leg met its body. She closed her eyes and focused, tuning out the chirping birds and the rustling leaves. There. It was slight, but it was there. Stephanie thought she sensed something else, perhaps a mental message somehow making its way through despite the wolf's pitiful state.

Stephanie opened her eyes and pulled back. She could see no visible injuries on the wolf, but perhaps they were internal. She had two options, and she already knew which one she would take as she returned to Annie. "It's alive, but barely. I'm taking it to the office. Let's go put the dogs in the cab of the truck, and we'll load him in the back."

Annie turned immediately back toward the parking lot. Sherlock was more than happy to head back in that direction, even if Jacques and Penelope were much more interested in what lay ahead of them on the path. "Shouldn't we call animal control or something?"

That had been the other option, and it was one Stephanie had quickly ruled out. "There's only so much they can do, and

they're often backed up as it is. By the time someone gets out here, he might be gone." Reaching the truck, Stephanie pulled a small tarp out of the back while Annie loaded the dogs into the cab. She couldn't remember exactly why she had it back there with her other supplies, but she was glad she did.

"Holy shit," Annie whispered with excitement a few minutes later as they carefully grabbed the wolf's paws and slid him onto a tarp. "This is incredible!"

Stephanie smiled to herself. Annie might occasionally doubt her future as a vet, but Stephanie never would. That thrill would keep her going, and she'd find more of them.

The wolf was heavy as they carried it out to the truck. She knew they shouldn't be doing this. They should probably do exactly as Annie had suggested and call the proper authorities. But something inside her argued quickly against the notion. *She* had to do something. There was a reason they'd happened to come out there on the same day the wolf had. Her heart thundered in her throat as they carefully slid the tarp into the bed of the truck and she closed the back of the camper shell.

The drive to the office felt much longer than it actually was, as Stephanie took care not to brake or accelerate too hard.

"Mom?"

"Hm?" Stephanie frowned as she took a curve in the road that led them back into town, hoping they didn't encounter too many stoplights.

"Let's say this wolf is all right, that you're able to fix whatever's wrong with him."

"That's the idea," Stephanie replied.

"Well, then what? I mean, you can't just have a wolf running around your office. It might be dangerous."

Yes. A wolf certainly should be considered dangerous, especially one that was cornered in an exam room. If he'd been healthy and on his feet when they'd encountered him out in the woods, he would've likely just run away. He couldn't exactly do that, though, and Stephanie had caught sight of those gleaming white teeth. "I'll figure it out. He's certainly no threat right now."

Stephanie backed up to the rear entrance of the building. Hoping no one was watching them, she unlocked the back door, and the two women carried the wolf inside on the tarp. "Let's put him in exam room five. It's the biggest one."

The table in there had been specially ordered to accommodate bigger dogs, but she never expected to use it for a wolf. He made even the oversized table look small by comparison.

"What do you need me to do?"

Stephanie could hear the dogs barking from the truck. "Go ahead and take those guys back to your place. I'm going to get started here. I'll call you if I need anything."

Annie hesitated in the exam room doorway. "Are you sure?"

Looking at the beast, there were a lot of things Stephanie didn't know. She didn't know what had possessed her to bring a wild animal into her clinic, even if it was closed for the day. She didn't know what she'd do with him if she could save his life, nor did she know exactly how she'd get him back out to the woods. All she knew was that she had to try. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Once alone, Stephanie easily fell back into her training and moved through the process one step at a time. With the luxury

of a stethoscope this time, she checked his heart rate and other vitals. He definitely wasn't doing well, but she had yet to find a cause. A quick x-ray didn't reveal much, except for some old wounds that'd healed long ago. She pulled a couple vials of blood to be run through the lab. With every step, she watched for any signs that he might regain consciousness. Though hope thrilled in her that he might, it tangled with fear.

She laid her hand on his fur, feeling the density of it. It was so thick that it practically pushed back against the palm of her hand. Stephanie once again dared to close her eyes as she sought a link with the animal's thoughts. She'd known for quite some time that she could reach animals on a psychic level, and she let her mind seek out a connection. It'd always been easier with some animals than others, but she found something right away: flashes of fear and pain. Underneath was something else, something strong that she couldn't identify. She hadn't felt anything like it in a long time.

"Something is blocked off in you," she whispered as she moved over to the drawers on the side of the room. "I don't know what it is. I'll be honest. I'm not even entirely sure of what will help, but we're going to give this a try. It's worked for lots of other ailments in cats and dogs. People, too, though I can't help but think animals are more open to it since no one has told them otherwise."

Moving around to the other side of the table, she knew she could give the wolf a stimulant to increase his heart rate and try to wake him, but it would likely cause him pain or make him agitated. Acupuncture was the best route, and it was one she was confident in. With expert ease and care, she parted the thick fur and inserted the tiny needles. They would open the wolf's meridians and restore the flow of qi, encouraging his body to heal itself.

It took far less time than she'd imagined. His paw twitched, then his muzzle, showing off those incredibly sharp teeth. The fur along his back rippled as the muscles beneath spasmed.

Stephanie took her stethoscope off her neck and checked his heart rate. Not only was it back, but it was thrumming quickly. "What's going on with you?" she whispered.

The wolf's body exploded with movement. His legs jerked and stretched, lengthening before her very eyes. His fur sank into his skin, leaving only a head of dark hair. A soft crack sounded through the room as the wolf's muzzle shrank and squeezed, its tail disappearing at the same time.

Stephanie leapt back. She hit a cart of supplies, sending numerous items clattering to the floor. Something glass broke, but she didn't look for it. She pressed back further until she ran into the wall of the exam room and had no other place to go. Her mind refused to understand what she was seeing. It was a nightmare. Horror rippled beneath her skin as she watched the wolf transform into a man.

No, not just any man. Terrified, she took in the dark hair over the strong brows. The square jaw and the wide shoulders. A rush of attraction funneled through her chest despite her panic as the nightmare became more and more real.

She recognized him. She *knew* him. One moment, she'd had a wolf on the exam table. Now, somehow, in some way that extended past the far reaches of her imagination, it was Bennett Westbrook, her high school sweetheart.

Vigilante Midlife Wolf will be out soon!

Join my Insiders newsletter for updates on when it will be published [HERE](#).

PREVIEW OF FORBIDDEN MIDLIFE MATE

MARKED OVER FORTY

Have you read the first book in the Marked Over Forty series? Read on for a preview of Rex and Lori's story, *Forbidden Midlife Mate*.

“HAPPY FREAKING NEW YEAR TO ME,” LORI JENSEN muttered, poking at the touchscreen of her new fitness tracker. She’d just gotten it, and even though everyone made them sound so easy to use, she hadn’t quite figured the thing out yet. At forty-eight, she was experiencing the joys of perimenopause, and her doctor had pushed her to start moving more to ease her symptoms. Exercise wouldn’t stop her hot flashes, but she’d hoped it would at least get her energy and mood back on track. She couldn’t use the excuse of being a busy mom anymore now that Conner was in college.

“Oh, hell. Jogging is still good for me even if the damn thing doesn’t keep track of it.” Slamming her car door and making sure she had her keys tucked in her pocket, Lori got started.

Eugene was new to her, and not a city she’d picked for herself. It was... *different*, that was for sure. Everyone seemed to be outside all the time, and she couldn’t blame them, with the mild winter weather and all. It felt odd to be outdoors in January without a heavy parka, a hat, and thick gloves, but she had to remind herself she wasn’t in Chinook, Montana anymore.

She wasn't the only one out for a jog that day. The wide gravel paths were bustling with people. Parents walked with their small children, who dragged them off to a nearby playground. A bicyclist or two rode by, and Lori picked up her pace. She was tired, but that wasn't going to stop her. She could do this.

“Excuse us!”

Lori bolted to the right as a group of fit young college girls came darting past. While Lori had donned her sweats and a dingy old bra, these girls were slim and lithe in their stylish athletic wear, showing off their perfect shapes in their clingy leggings, form-fitting sports bras, and cropped hoodies. Their ponytails wagged as they passed by, mocking Lori for going so slow.

She snorted to herself, remembering how she, too, had once been young and lithe, thinking she'd remain that way forever. “Enjoy it while it lasts, ladies. Gravity's a bitch.”

A loud beep had her looking down at her fitness tracker. It was finally working, or at least she was pretty sure it was. She had no clue what all the numbers and symbols meant, but it was obviously doing something. Good. She was really doing this. Not just the jog, but everything. This was the start of a whole new life for Lori, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Her muscles burned, reminding her that all the years of running the saloon with Chuck hadn't been the same as getting proper exercise every day, even though she'd spent most of her shifts entirely on her feet. Of course, she probably wouldn't have had to bust her ass so much if Chuck had bothered to do his job.

It was supposed to be fifty-fifty when they'd first opened The Wagon Wheel. It had always been Chuck's dream, but he'd never had the money. Lori had just been given a small inheritance from a great-uncle, but the fact that the man she'd loved wanted her to be involved in his business had been sweet and flattering. They'd bought the cheapest old building in Chinook and transformed it from a sad little wreck on the outskirts of town to a hopping saloon everyone clambered to on the weekends. Even the weekdays weren't too dull once Lori had talked Chuck into doing theme nights and serving better food. People were bored in their little town, so they loved the chance to see their friends over a beer while playing darts. They loved it even more when there were holiday parties, charity events, and pool tournaments.

But as hard as she'd worked, nothing was quite good enough for Chuck. Lori thought she'd made him happy, but she knew she was wrong when he ran off with the hostess.

Lori had let her mind completely wander, and with a jolt, she realized she'd gone way further than she'd ever thought she would. She glanced at the tracker on her wrist, wondering if she really had gone over a mile. That would explain why her lungs burned. Lori slowed to a brisk walk. She could feel her heart thumping, but it wasn't setting her device off, so it couldn't have been too bad.

Lori grinned. This really was a whole new start for her. This wasn't the kind of thing she would've done if she'd stayed back in Chinook, listening to all the locals whisper behind their hands about how Chuck had run off, thinking she didn't hear them. She'd never been happier about moving away because the last thing she wanted was for anyone to think she was doing this just to get back at Chuck. It didn't

have a damn thing to do with him, nor did anything else in her life. She was finally *free*.

A black shape fluttered in front of her. Lori turned to follow it, spotting the raven just as it landed in the grass on the other side of the path. It cocked its head to the side, studying her.

“Well, hello.” She paused, knowing she couldn’t stay still for too long and lose her momentum, but it had so much personality. “You look like you’re trying to tell me something.”

It opened its thick black beak and let out a jittering call before moving a few steps away from her.

“Oh, it’s okay. I’m not trying to hurt you. I’ve always liked animals. I mean, it’s not like I have any pets right now. I just moved here, and my landlord doesn’t allow them.”

Another cry issued from the raven’s throat just before it flew into the air, swooped between a few trees, and settled into a low branch.

“I wish I knew what you were saying.” But something inside her knew the bird wanted her to follow it. Lori had always felt animals knew far more than people, and she’d been looking for signs to let her know she was heading in the right direction by moving out to Eugene. Perhaps the raven was telling her just that.

When she reached the base of the tree, the raven swept off for another one.

The trail was getting narrower. Lori realized she hadn’t seen any joggers or cyclists for a while, and the trees were thicker there. Fear began to bloom in her chest, thinking perhaps she’d wandered too far, but she dismissed it. What’s

the worst thing that could happen by getting in touch with nature a little?

“Caw!” the raven insisted.

“All right, all right! What’s so important?” Lori laughed. She left the trail behind as she followed the raven up the hill, wondering what Conner would say when she told him the story. He’d probably shake his head and ask her not to repeat it in front of his football buddies. The raven led her all the way up the hill, insistent as ever until they reached the top.

Then it was silent.

“You finally ran out of things to say?” she asked.

But the bird wasn’t looking at her anymore. It peered down the other side of the hill, its head twitching a little to one side.

Lori looked, wondering if the raven had spotted its next snack. When she turned, she realized the two of them weren’t alone. A group of people had gathered near the base of the hill on the other side. There had to be at least twenty of them. They sat around and spoke in hushed tones so Lori didn’t hear anything they were saying. Given where she was in the country, Lori figured it was a hippie gathering or something. She wasn’t going to bother them, but something caught her eye just as she started to turn away.

Looking back, Lori realized a dog was moving toward the group. No, not a dog. A *wolf*. It trotted up from the thicker part of the woods beyond the hill, its eyes yellow and determined. Her heart lurched in her chest. It was beautiful, the kind of thing she’d love to see up close, but it was coming right at them. Lori sucked in a breath to yell at the group, to tell them to get out of there.

But one of the men turned toward the wolf, then became one himself.

Lori blinked. That wasn't right. She hadn't just seen that. She glanced down at her fitness tracker, wondering if she'd overdone it and was now hallucinating. Leaning against the nearest tree for balance, Lori looked back down the hill. The man who'd been there a moment ago was gone, just as she thought, and now there were two wolves. They weren't sneaking up on the people, though. They were right there in the midst of them.

It couldn't be right, but the rest began to transform. Their faces stretched into long muzzles as their heads writhed on their shoulders. They fell forward onto all fours as thick gray fur sprouted on their bodies. Her gut twisted, but she couldn't look away. She caught glimpses of them between various forms of human and beast.

A scream ripped through the air. When the wolves all looked in her direction, she knew it was coming from her.

Lori froze, watching in horror as the pack of wolves raced up the hill. Their claws dug into the soft earth as they bounded for her, a stream of fur that moved and ran around each other without the least bit of trouble. They were gaining on her, and quickly.

“Holy shit!” Sucking in a breath, Lori scrambled back down the hill. It was steeper than she remembered it being on the way up. Her shins screamed at her to slow down. She wasn't used to all this exercise. But her brain sent an extra flood of adrenaline through her system, and she would deal with the aches and pains later.

Lori flung herself down the hill, then hit flatter land and barreled back toward the trail. She only had to get there, then

someone would come along. Someone would've heard her screams and was probably on their way. Right?

She could hear the wolves, their panting breaths becoming louder by the second. She knew they had to be gaining on her, and her spine tingled in terrible anticipation. But she had to keep going. She wasn't going to give up.

Her toe caught on a root, and she pitched forward. The raven called once more as the world went black.

LORI SLOWLY OPENED HER EYES. She felt as though she'd been swimming in a deep black void for hours, and it hurt to let even the slightest bit of light in. Squinting against the painful light, Lori tried to turn her head to the side, but it hurt too much.

"Hey, there. Are you with us?" a deep voice asked. It was rough but kind, and it sounded like it was coming from the other end of a tunnel.

She moved her mouth, trying to answer, but she didn't know how. Her mind groped around for thoughts and found none. "What... what happened?" she croaked.

"You hit your head, but you're all right now. Just take it easy." It was that same voice again, but this time it was closer.

She opened her eyes and looked up to see a rugged, handsome face. Piercing blue eyes stared down into hers, his brows wrinkled in concern. She didn't recognize him, but something within her told her she knew him.

"There you are," he said gently as she started to come to a little more. "You'll be fine."

Lori wasn't entirely sure she agreed with him.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steamy shifter romance author Meg Ripley is a Seattle native who's relocated to New England. She can often be found whipping up her next tale curled up in a local coffee house with a cappuccino and her laptop.

To keep up to date with her latest releases, sign up for her newsletter [HERE](#). You'll also receive a copy of the prequel to the Fated Over Forty series, *Alpha's Midlife Baby*.

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