



READY &
WILLING

SELENA BLAKE

bestselling author of the
Stormy Weather series

READY & WILLING
By Selena Blake

"Ava," he pulled her to a stop. He felt like such an ass. She'd opened up to him. Showed a different side of herself. Shared herself. Been honest about her desires. And he'd squashed all that...just so he could keep his neat and tidy life in safe compartments. Which was ironic, considering that what he wanted to do with her was far from neat and tidy.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said, keeping his voice soft.

"You didn't," she said nonchalantly. But the words were too automatic. Too quick. She paused and glanced away. "You were being honest and I can appreciate that," she amended.

She thought he was being honest? Far from it, beautiful. Honest was wanting to press her up against the side of the house, letting his hands and lips investigate everything his eyes could see.

"Then why won't you look at me?" He gripped her upper arms and squeezed gently.

"Because--" she cried, her gaze snapping to his. An electric current zapped between them, heating him from head to toe.

"Because..." he prompted, a heartbeat away from kissing her into oblivion.

Eyes pleading, she said, "if I look at you, I'll want to kiss you. And if I kiss you, I won't be able to stop."

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Dedication

First, to Karen, Jodie, Janet, Reagan, and Melissa for your help getting this baby ready for the masses.

Also, to my faithful readers who stuck with me long enough to see this project finished. You guys rock!

And, to Kaden and Ava. Two star crossed lovers blabbing in my head, your story is written so you can stop talking now.

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Seduced by a Cajun Werewolf (previously titled Bound & Determined)

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Chapter One

Kaden Black glanced out at the crowd filling the pews on both sides of the church aisle. The big day was finally here.

The tie around his neck seemed tighter than necessary and he resisted the urge to tug on it. The first notes of Canon in D filled the expansive space distracting him from the silken fabric that reminded him too much of a trap set to ensnare an unsuspecting wolf.

A heavy floral scent tickled his nose as the rear doors opened and a tiny girl dressed in a fluffy pink gown marched forward with a look of concentration on her little cherub face. Golden blonde hair peeked out from beneath a wreath of miniature daisies. She tossed fists full what looked like pastel confetti along the aisle as she weaved her way toward the alter. Behind her, a parade of bridesmaids in a sea of black and white filed down the petal strewn path.

Though he noticed each of them, his gaze locked on the last woman in the line. Ava Garnier. Big sister to the bride, Brianna, Ava didn't even spare him a glance. On the outside she looked happy enough but Kaden could read the look in those warm brown eyes.

Ava was the middle child to the Alphas of the WhitePaw Pack. He knew it wasn't easy on her to be in the middle of the chaos, much less the daughter of the Pack Leader. Standards were set higher on her and the pressure was on. The last time they'd talked she'd made no bones about letting him know she intended to be the next Alpha. It seemed like she did everything in her life to get her father's attention, win his approval.

Kaden's style was more take charge and make people listen.

As she took her place across from him, her eyes surveyed the room and her smile kicked up a notch. But was it for show or true pleasure?

Next to him, Bryan sucked in a breath and five hundred pairs of eyes turned to the bride. She had Ava's warm eyes and chestnut hair. But she was shorter, her beauty more subdued. Her dress was long, white and simple. And though she was smiling in his direction, Kaden knew she only had eyes for her groom.

Kaden got the sudden yearning to have a woman smile at him like that. Like he was her whole world and she couldn't wait to spend every moment, asleep or awake, by his side.

As Brianna made her way to Bryan's side, Kaden saw the look of supreme pride on her father's face. Phillip Garnier was a smart man. Strong and fair. And it was obvious he was pleased with the match being made as he placed his daughter's hand in that of the man who would legally become her husband. The wolf who was already her mate.

Ava took the bouquet from Brianna and passed it, along with her own, to the next maid in the line. Then she crouched down to adjust her sister's gown. As her gaze shifted upward toward the veil she caught Kaden staring at her. Her lip started to curl upward in a snarl but she quickly pinned a happy smile on her face. This was no time to show her discontent.

Just because he was the Beta of the pack didn't mean he was going to become the Alpha in a week's time. Her father had been murmuring about stepping down, passing over the reins of the Pack for months now. Ava was more than ready to take his place.

With her eldest sisters married off, and now her younger sister, Ava was the perfect choice. She'd proven that she was smart, driven, determined and detail oriented. She'd need to be all those things to keep WhitePaw Pack going strong. She was strong when she needed to be and never showed her weakness.

Sighing, she took her place next to the bride once again. Kaden Black had always been a weakness. Her biggest weakness actually. Tall, broad, and uber gorgeous – he was a major distraction. Not to mention arrogant and irritatingly charming when he wanted to be. Not her type...she liked her men straight talking.

And gorgeous, a little voice whispered. Looks incredible in a tuxedo...

Over the years she'd stolen glances, but told herself she was just curious about the Beta of her pack. It was natural to wonder. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that her interest had gone past curiosity a while ago.

Until he'd started vying for the top slot. Now the only emotion she felt toward him was annoyance.

Kaden watched Bryan pull his bride into his arms. No one in the crowd seemed surprised at the long passionate kiss. But nevertheless, the organ started up a minute later and the couple separated just long enough to be announced as husband and wife.

He let his eyes shift past them toward the maid of honor. Her gaze met his briefly before she looked away. What was she thinking about right now? Did she wish this was her wedding? He followed her gaze.

No. Probably not. She was looking at her father. Once again, seeking his approval. The urge to shake her, to make her see him instead, gripped

him. But he brushed the thought away and concentrated on the bride and groom.

They seemed to float down the aisle, arm in arm, laughing and waving. Kaden felt a twinge of loss. His friendship with Bryan would be forever changed. He had a mate to take care of now. And though Kaden had told himself that everything would be fine, would continue on as normal, heck Kaden himself had introduced Bryan and Brianna, he realized now that nothing would be the same again.

He supposed he'd always have a confidant in Bryan, but he'd lost his drinking buddy.

When Ava stepped forward and gave him a sharp glance he stepped down onto the aisle and offered her his arm. Now was no time to get sappy. He had to be on the top of his game. It was rare that he had competition from anyone. Not in brute strength, or cunning, or position within the Pack. That Ava seemed determined to pass him for the Head Honcho's job was...new. Surprising. But not the least bit disturbing. In fact he thought he might enjoy pushing her buttons since he was positive that the position was safely his.

He hadn't been subtle about his expectations. Full Moon was coming up and Phillip had called a Pack meeting. That could only mean one thing...he was going to pass the reins to Kaden.

Ava carefully tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, just as they'd practiced the evening before. Only this time she had a smile on her face that made his gut tighten.

It was a show, he was certain of it. His sixth sense could feel the tension radiating through her. She grinned at her parents, made eye contact with a few of the people in the crowd, but she held herself rigid. And her hand barely touched his arm.

Was she still upset because he was determined to take her father's place? He'd thought her anger would have diminished by now, but this was just a new facet of her that he needed to learn. It also meant he had to keep his cool...while making her lose hers.

Kaden was ready to be Alpha. He'd been doing battle all his life to become Beta of the pack. He'd proven that he was strong, smart, capable, ready and willing to defend the pack. He knew all the pack laws and all the pack members. Yes, his resume was looking stellar.

“You’re not going to be Alpha,” the woman at his side said through her faux smile.

It was almost like she could read his mind. He wished for a moment that he could read hers.

Instead, he ducked his head closer, catching her subtle honey-vanilla fragrance. “I’d say it’s a done deal, sweetheart.”

Those warm brown eyes flashed up at him with flecks of golden fire. Why had he never noticed their exquisite color before? They were like cinnamon and amber. “The deal is hardly done. Why would my father hand over the leadership of the pack to an outsider?”

The last word hung in the air between them. Kaden didn’t feel like an outsider. He hadn’t for a long time. WhitePaw was his home. He had friends, a nice house, and a good job in the city. And he was Beta of the pack, a position he took seriously.

“Especially since he has offspring reading and willing to do the job.”

With the processional gathering in the lobby of the church, the photographer began organizing people for the photos. Kaden quickly steered Ava into a nearby room.

“What—”

He cut off her words. “Ready and willing, huh?”

Ava stared up at the insanely handsome werewolf as her stomach fluttered like a wounded butterfly. Her reaction to him was nothing new. But the intensity of it was.

How did he manage to make three little words sound so naughty? And why couldn’t she seem to remember that he was the enemy?

She couldn’t, wouldn’t, tell him just how ready and willing she was when it came to him. How she’d fantasized about kissing him more often than was decent. Or how she daydreamed of running her fingers through his sexy almost-shoulder-length-but-not-quite golden, brown hair.

No. She could never tell him those things...at least not until she’d secured her spot as Alpha.

“I come from a long line of WhitePaw leaders—”

“What about your brother?”

“Gregory? What about him?”

“You don’t think he’d be interested in the top spot? He is male, after all.”

“That’s irrelevant,” she said as her temper spiked. “I need to get back to the wedding.” Flustered, she ducked around him. Two steps away from the door, he caught her by the arm and turned her back toward him. Why did those warm, strong fingers on her arm have to feel so good? Inside she whimpered at the delicious touch, brief as it was. And why couldn’t she stop herself from thinking about those same warm, strong fingers sliding up her arm to cup her head and run through her hair, knocking the bobby pins aside...

“I think it’s entirely relevant,” he murmured.

“Gregory doesn’t want to lead. Besides, I’m older. And I have more experience.”

His head jerked back slightly as he scoffed. “You really think Phillip is going to name someone Alpha whose experience is organizing parties and Pack meetings?”

Her hand arced through the air before the last word had left his lips. Pride bruised and anger simmering, she saw red. Wanted blood. His blood. But his reflexes were faster and he caught her hand before it connected with his cheek.

Before she could react, he’d backed her up until her shoulders were flat against the door. His big body crowded her, pinned her there as he stared down at her like a wolf who had just spotted his dinner.

With his hand tight around her wrist, holding it beside her head against the polished wood, a mild panic crept through her. She brought her other hand up to push against the solid wall of his chest, needing to get away from him, but he easily caught that one too.

Chapter Two

Kaden took a moment to enjoy the lush curves cradling his body. Ava might be athletic and lean but she was, at the same time, soft and feminine. Her scent, unique and warm, swirled around him, filling his head until he felt drunk. Her breathing quickened and he wondered, again, what she was thinking.

Her eyes went wide. Why was she so anxious? Surely she'd felt this thing sizzling between them. Their squabbles seemed like a prelude now. Foreplay that brought them to this point. And with her pinned like this,

right where he wanted her...no that wasn't entirely true. The desk behind him would be promising. So would the floor. Or a bed. Or a couch. Or... Okay, so he wanted her everywhere.

The realization shocked him a little. While he'd enjoyed his share of exploits with beautiful women and wolves alike; she, the woman whose fiery brown gaze was locked with his, was Ava Garnier. Daughter of his Alpha.

His gaze dropped to her lips. Shiny and petal pink. Sensuous. Kissable. Parted the tiniest bit. What would they look like when she sighed up at him? Somehow he knew that she wouldn't be a silent lover. She would be an active participant, vocal and perhaps a little demanding. He'd never known her to be silent about anything and docile was not a word in her vocabulary.

But as much as he was dying to kiss her, he knew he shouldn't. Not only would he mess up her lip gloss, he needed to play it slow. Needed to rein in his baser urges. He couldn't afford to lose his head right now. Ava was just cagey enough to use it to her advantage.

If anything he needed to put her off her cool. Keep her at a disadvantage.

"Ava, are you in there?" Brianna's voice came through the door.

Ava stilled, held her breath. Her sister couldn't know she was in here with Kaden. She'd make more of it than it was.

His hips were pressed against hers and she felt miles of rock hard muscles. The leap to intimacy wouldn't be that hard to jump, for her sister's mind or anyone else. She started to push him away but he'd already backed up several steps.

Cool air replaced the warmth his big body had provided and for the briefest of instants, she wished he hadn't moved. But that was crazy, hungry-hormone talk. She couldn't trust Kaden Black any farther than she could throw him. Even with her strength as a werewolf, that wasn't very far.

A cocky smile curved his lips and she went on instant alert. The doorknob next to her twisted and shook. But it didn't open.

When had he locked it?

He picked up one of the spare vases that hadn't been needed for the wedding and her eyes went wide. What was he going to do with that? She started toward him but his whispered words stopped her.

“Since you obviously don't want your sister to know what's going on between us, you should probably hurl this against the door after I leave,” he said smoothly.

Damn, his mind worked fast. He had a plan and everything. Industrious...that's what he was. Ava felt like she was stuck in a cloud, unable to think clearly.

He leaned close and she braced herself for his kiss. “Make it believable,” he said in that quiet, self-assured voice that turned her inside out. Then he brushed his lips against her cheek and started for the door.

Chapter Three

Kaden's self-assurance grated on her nerves. So cocky. So freaking confident. So-- He was pushing her over the edge, on purpose. Right before he closed the door behind him, he gave her a knowing smile.

Her arm pulled back like a baseball pitcher on a mound and then she let the vase fly. So the major leagues wouldn't be calling but the glass shattered with satisfying noise. There was no 'making it believable.'

“Go to hell, Kaden Black.” Then she dropped to the floor and gave a sigh of frustration and waited for her sister to find her.

Kaden knew when a woman wanted him. There was a subtle shift in her scent...almost as if she were a ripening berry. Her heart beat faster, her breath caught in the back of her throat, and often, her eyes went wide and expressive.

Thus was the case with the petite redhead in front of him now. She held a flute of champagne close to her breasts and gazed up at him with big blue eyes. Eyes that hadn't strayed from him in the last five minutes.

He, however, was on the lookout for a certain Shewolf. He'd left Ava standing in the little side room at the church, wide eyed over thirty minutes ago...but his thoughts hadn't drifted away from her since then. Her heartbeat had picked up when he'd trapped her against the door. She might be a predator, but the way she'd wiggled against him reminded him of a bunny in a trap.

The crash of the vase against the door and her shout of anger had been unmistakable. Believable. Maybe too believable.

Her sister had rushed in, full length wedding gown, and all.

Kaden was almost sure Ava had no idea how much she turned him on. Not that he liked his women defenseless and scared. Ava was never defenseless. He'd been on the wounded end of her rapier tongue more than once in the past few weeks.

And he couldn't remember ever seeing her scared. Quite the opposite in fact. She'd always been brave and ballsy. She'd step right into the middle of a fight.

No, her wiggling had excited him because he could hear her breath catch, could see the pulse dancing at the base of her neck. And he'd known exactly what those little signals meant. She'd been uncomfortable...not because she was scared or hurting, but because she'd been defenseless to deny her desire for him.

And she knew that he knew it. He couldn't wait to see what she'd do next. Too bad Ava wasn't the one staring up at him right now with lust in her eyes.

"They make such a lovely couple," the redhead gushed. He followed her gaze to Brianna and Bryan and murmured his agreement. The bridal couple made the rounds at their elaborate reception, looking happy and effortless. The ocean breeze blew softly through the crowd and the pounding of the waves against the cliffs provided a nice background for the orchestra. Kaden hadn't felt this relaxed in a long while. For a moment he was able to forget work, turf wars, and Pack politics.

But at the same time, unease clawed at the nape of his neck. He was sure he had the Alpha spot in the Pack. He sure as hell wanted it. Had worked for it. So why did he feel like he was stealing candy from a baby?

"There he is. Kaden, I'd like you to meet Walter Andersen," Phillip's voice cut into his thoughts. Kaden extended his hand to Phillip and then other man he recognized as the Alpha of one of the Oregon packs. "Kaden is my right hand man. Smart as a whip and cagey as a lion."

"Thanks for the endorsement." Kaden smiled. Man it felt great to hear those words. To feel appreciated and respected...after where he'd come from, nowhere, and done to get here. Some days, like today, he could just howl at the moon.

The petite woman at his side gently squeezed his arm and he remembered his manners. Now was not the time to make a bad impression. Especially in front of his Alpha. He searched his memory for her name. Shirley. "This is Shirley," he said making the introduction.

"Phillip's told me lots of great things about you," Walter said with an appraising look. With any luck, he'd would be using his caginess and smarts to lead the pack for the foreseeable future, he wanted to say but thought better of it.

"That's always good to hear," he said as music drifted across the yard.

"Well, we won't keep you. I think they're about to start the dancing." Phillip still had that ecstatic father of the bride look about him. Kaden couldn't imagine having Phillip as a father-in-law. It was enough that the older man was leader of the Pack, but marrying into the family? Not that it mattered; Kaden had plenty on his plate without thinking about gaining in-laws.

"Have a good evening," he said politely.

"Dancing sounds good," Shirley said as soon as Phillip and Walter were out of earshot.

"Yes, it does." He let his gaze roam over the assembled crowd as Brianna and Bryan took center stage. High above the party sat the Garnier house. The sprawling estate over looked acres of lush gardens and a long strip of beautiful coastline. Kaden had purchased his property farther down the beach, and while it too had a great view, it was nothing like this.

He remembered the first time he'd seen the rolling estate. Phillip had led him to the back patio and Kaden had surveyed the land, the glistening pool, heard the roar of the ocean. He'd coveted it in the same instant. Wanted a big beautiful property of his own. A place to relax and recoup. A place to raise a family of his own when the time came.

That had been years ago. Over time he'd spent more time here on the compound...often bumping into Ava. Why had it taken him so damn long to open his eyes and see her? Really see her?

Ava smiled as Bryan swept Brianna into his arms. They made a beautiful couple. So at ease with each other, so comfortable in each other's arms, and so much in love. She was wondering what their children would look like when a waiter stopped in front of her. He held a gleaming silver tray of crystal flutes.

She murmured her thanks and took a long sip of champagne. The bubbles tap danced across her tongue and gave her brain a little jolt. As she lowered the glass from her lips, she caught sight of Kaden.

Her heartbeat, which had just returned to normal ten minutes ago, stopped and then jump started like an old car on a winter morning. She knew better than to let her feelings get out of control. Not to mention, she was old enough to know that messing with a man right now would ruin her chances of becoming Alpha. She had to make her father see her as a leader.

Kaden, on the other hand, didn't seem to feel that way. The redhead at his side stared up at him dreamily and he returned her smile.

Ava felt a quick jab of jealousy and had a brief, but intense, mental image of ripping the other woman's hair out. And him...he'd been pressed up against her not half an hour ago. Obviously she was just a conquest to him. Or worse, he was just trying to confuse her so she wouldn't be at her best at the Pack meeting next week.

She fumed silently as she finished off her drink. Needing more of a buzz, she reached for another flute as another waiter walked by.

"Friend of the bride or the groom?"

She turned to see a handsome, black haired man at her elbow. He smiled down at her and her mood lightened just a little.

"Sister of the bride."

He took a sip from his own flute and then gave her a slow once-over. Ava was actually surprised that her blood didn't start to boil right then and there. She did a quick survey of her own. He was supermodel gorgeous, the tuxedo clung to his tall frame. And the lust filled looks he was shooting her way...suddenly she believed in spontaneous combustion.

Quickly she reminded herself about the no men policy. At least until she was Alpha. But a girl could look right? And hey, if it was good enough for Kaden...

"Cousin of the groom," he said and then after a brief pause, continued, "distant...distant cousin of the groom."

She couldn't help but laugh as she stuck out her hand.

"Ava Garnier."

"Alain Harper."

"Nice to meet you Alain." Her gaze flickered over to Kaden as the music died. Carrottop was still glued to his side. Didn't she know what a

player he was? Ava tried to justify her feelings to herself, tried to tell herself he was just a jerk but history and a healthy dose of lust made her want to snarl at the other woman. A new song came on, slow and soothing, but the wolf inside of her wanted a fight.

Even as she tried to tell herself that Kaden was not worth competing over.

“Would you care to dance?” Alain asked, his deep voice shocking her from her murderous thoughts. She glanced out over the dance floor to see several other couples joining her sister and brother-in-law. Which meant she'd missed their first dance. She'd been too busy fuming over an idiot male and she'd missed their first dance.

Annoyed with herself, she nodded to Alain. They set down their glasses and stepped onto the polished black and white checkered floor. Alain pulled her closer, one hand at her waist, the other dwarfing her hand. He was warm and smelled of cologne.

She closed her eyes briefly and imagined that she was dancing with Kaden... That his scent filled her lungs, his hands held her close.

But that was just crazy.

Alain was good looking. Seemed nice enough. Charming too. She should try to make more of an effort. If she was going to be Alpha, she needed to stop letting her emotions rule her.

Over his shoulder she saw her parents. Her father was an incredible leader. Strong, proud, protective of the pack. And her mother was always there at his side to keep things running smoothly, to smooth ruffled feathers or fur, as the case would be. Years together and they were still blissfully happy. It was rare. It was impressive to see a couple who fit so flawlessly together, who needed each other equally.

She and her siblings were blessed to know that kind of love, to have such an example set for them. And for the most part, her sisters...three of the four, anyway, had found their own match made in tail-twitching heaven.

Alain's hand at her back made her wonder if she'd ever find her own match. Did she want a match? Part of her did. She'd always longed to have what her parents had. That closeness. Someone to depend on. But the men she met weren't terribly dependable. And the human men...she'd never met one strong enough to interest her. Maybe she was old fashioned, but breeding was important. Especially to continue the Pack.

A faster song with a stronger beat came on and she saw her parents step to the side of the floor. Alain didn't give her a chance to excuse herself. Instead, he expertly spun her. His movements were strong and sure and she found it easy to follow his lead.

"You're a great dancer," she said when she was once again in his arms.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you."

She tried to keep up the small talk. Honestly she did. And Alain made it easy on her. He had a ready answer and plenty of questions. But she got the feeling that he really didn't want to talk.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Kaden swirling his dance partner around and around. She couldn't help but admire his graceful movements, the way he was completely focused on the woman in his arms, his quick steps. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind she wondered where he'd learned to dance like that. What it would feel like to be that woman, to be at his complete command.

When the music shifted to a tango Alain pulled her solidly against his chest, his hand high and firm against her back. And the small talk died. She was happy because she couldn't seem to summon anything more than polite interest in the conversation. And he deserved better than that. More than a silent partner to lead around the floor.

But he didn't seem to mind her silence as he moved her across the floor with an effortless grace all his own. His muscles were coiled as if he were ready to fight, rippling beneath her fingers. As he dipped her she saw Kaden again. Carrottop slithered down his front in an almost indecent way. Then he hooked his hands under her arms and pulled her back up and spun her around. Show off.

Alain must have noticed the scandalous moves himself because he pulled her hips close and slid a rock hard thigh between hers. Pivot after pivot proved that Alain had studied with a master. It was hard to keep up when her inner thighs were protesting every step. But the reminder that Kaden seemed to have no such impairment forced her on.

She mentally snarled at herself for even thinking of him. If she had half a brain she'd stop thinking about him and concentrate on keeping up with her own partner. And then securing her place as the leader of the Pack. Her father had never been one to hand out freebies.

Alain dipped her again and her spine folded back as she neared the floor. His hands were big, strong, and the wide lunge of his legs held her immobile precious inches from the ground. The look on his face was utter concentration.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ava saw a blur of white. She craned her neck to see where Brianna was running off to. Her sister didn't look happy as she disappeared behind the screened off area that was acting as a kitchen for the caterers.

"Would you excuse me?" she asked as Alain pulled her upright again. "I need to check in with the bride," she explained quickly and turned away.

But his hand at her wrist, so gentle and yet firm, stopped her. "Only if you'll save me another dance." He gave her a cocky half smile and let her go.

Why couldn't there be a spark between them? She smiled up at him and gave him a brief nod before she turned again and headed after her sister.

"It's ruined," her sister's tearful voice met Ava's ears. She turned the corner and found Brianna, hands pressed against her cheeks, staring in horror.

Then she saw the cake. The bottom layer of the dreamy white confection looked as though someone had dropped a baseball in it. Or through it.

The cake had been the one thing Brianna had asked for. Not millions of flowers or an elaborate setting. Just an out-of-this-world cake. Their parents had been happy to order the five towering layers of frosting coated perfection. Each pure white layer was separated by a thick layer of roses. And Ava had to admit that it was stunning. And if the hole exposing the deliciousness beneath was any indication, it would taste yummy too.

But right now Brianna was crying and Ava didn't really care how the bottom of the cake had been destroyed. No one was doing anything to fix the problem. And where was the wedding planner?

Ava went straight into crisis mode and wrapped her arms around her sobbing sister.

"What happened?" The rich chocolaty voice Ava knew so well asked from just over her shoulder. Her insides melted just a tiny bit.

"It's ruined," Brianna said between sobs.

“No, not ruined. Just not fit for pictures. You,” Ava said to the waiter hovering on the far side of the cake, watching Brianna as if she were a train wreck. “Help remove the bottom two layers.” She turned to Kaden. “Help him and don't let them screw it up again. We'll be out of layers soon,” she said hoping to lighten the mood.

“But--” Brianna blubbered.

Kaden handed Ava a crisp handkerchief and wordlessly stepped toward the cake. He studied it closely and then started issuing orders to the waiter. Her stomach did a little flip flop. Admiration and pleasure swirled inside her and she knew he'd fix the problem.

“Kaden's going to take care of it,” she told Brianna as she blotted away her tears. “We'll have a four layer cake and it will look beautiful. I promise.”

She led her sister away from the cake. “Let's rejoin the party and find that handsome husband of yours.” That made Brianna smile just a little and Ava sighed with relief. Crisis averted.

The doting groom was looking for his bride and Ava gladly passed her sister off into his care. The rest of the party seemed to be going smoothly. Guests were dancing, talking, laughing. She snagged herself an hors d'oeuvre and popped it into her mouth.

Minus the cake incident everything seemed to be going great. So why did she feel so rotten? She didn't particularly feel like making small talk with anyone and though she knew she should say hello to all the family friends, she just couldn't get her feet to move. As it was, they were protesting the four inch heels that had looked so sexy in the box.

A few more hors d'oeuvres and a glass of champagne later she decided that if she hadn't been the maid of honor, she would've snuck off somewhere to be alone. Alain was dancing with Carrotop and Ava's sisters were all dancing with their beaus. She knew she could have asked any of the eligible males...but she didn't want to give them the wrong idea. And there was the whole aching ankles thing.

For the first time in a long time she felt like an outsider and it was a wholly uncomfortable feeling. Not only was she standing on the edge of the terrace looking in, she was considering making her get away. And that seemed frighteningly like licking her wounds.

Chapter Four

"Penny for your thoughts."

An unexpected, but not all together unwelcome, shiver of excitement washed over Ava's shoulders and down her spine. She turned from the ocean and found Kaden watching her closely. She feared those dark eyes of his saw too much.

"Just a penny?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Your thoughts are worth more? They must be deep." He looked so relaxed, so sure of himself. Was he really as confident as he acted?

"At least a dollar," she quipped, suddenly feeling the need to keep her guard up around him. It was far too easy to fall under his spell. It had happened before, not that he'd noticed, and she'd vowed not to let it happen again.

The arrogant wolf pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and tugged a crisp dollar bill from the shiny silver money-clip. He held it out to her, a dark eyebrow raised in challenge.

She snatched the dollar from his hand, folded it neatly into fourths and then tucked it into her cleavage. She felt very take-that for a whole half a second before he groaned. Then a strong hand gripped her elbow and he led her down the stone stairs to the garden below.

"You're going to get into trouble showing off like that." He kept walking, leading her further away from the reception.

"When I show off Kaden, you'll know it," she assured him in the same low tone.

He stopped and looked down at her. "Is that a promise, beautiful?"

She narrowed her eyes and jerked her arm from his grasp. "Stop trying to butter me up."

"Is that what I'm doing?" He faced her then and she felt her cheeks heat under his gaze. The man was too potent for his own good.

"Did you save the cake?"

He nodded. "Disaster averted."

She studied him closely and noticed a fleck of white frosting at the corner of his mouth. "Couldn't keep your fingers out of it, huh?" She reached up and wiped the icing away with her thumb.

At the same moment they both realized what she'd done and for three heartbeats neither of them moved. Her palm rested against his cheek. His skin was hot, with the tiniest hint of stubble scraping her skin.

Then his hand closed over hers, holding her hostage.

"Kaden..." she said in warning. This wasn't a good idea.

He seemed to read her mind as he cocked his head and studied her.

"Why not?" he whispered.

"You know why not. We both want the same thing."

"Do we? I hope so. I want you flat on your back with your legs wrapped around my waist."

Her heart stuttered at his words. His gaze raked over her from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head. The slow perusal along with the lustful look in his eyes was almost her undoing.

Barely able to breathe around the tightness in her chest she managed a shake of her head. "That's not what I mean. We both want the Alpha spot when my father retires."

"Are we back to that?" he murmured, then set his mouth in a grim line.

"I just think we should keep our eye on the prize."

"I have my eye on the prize." His words hung in the air and for a moment, something in his eyes maybe, made her wonder if he was still talking about the Alpha position. Her heart fluttered.

She pulled her hand back and held it to her chest as a lusty heat suffused her skin. He – no. She wouldn't think it. Wouldn't explore it. Not now. No matter how much she wanted to.

Ava started to step around him but he snaked a hand around her waist and pulled her back to him. "Let's forget about being Alpha. Just for today." Something in the quiet words pleaded with her. Her gaze swerved to his.

He looked sincere. But could she trust him? Did she dare let her guard down around him? He was smart enough to know that an off balance opponent was easier to subvert. It could all be a trick.

On the other hand, there was nothing to say that she couldn't enjoy the rest of her afternoon with him and keep her guard firmly in place. As the Alpha of WhitePaw she'd have to endure a variety of situations without giving away her true thoughts. She could look at this as good practice.

He bent his knees to look her in the eye, obviously awaiting her answer.

She nibbled the inside of her lip and nodded once.

She couldn't be sure, but he seemed to sigh with relief.

"You still haven't told me what you were thinking about earlier. I didn't get my dollar worth," he said with a smile.

Back to his charming self. How did he expect her to think, to form a coherent sentence, when his arms was draped so intimately around her middle? And why did she enjoy it so much?

Only...she knew why. But she'd reflect on that later.

"I was just thinking how everything is changing. Three out of four sisters are married. Dad's talking retirement. I expect nieces and nephews any day now."

Kaden smiled. Did he have to be so gorgeous? She dropped her gaze to his chest and studied a pearlescent button.

"The nature of life. Things change. The question is, how will you handle those changes?"

She looked bewildered again. Kaden wished he could erase the shadows from her eyes. He liked it when she smiled and was at ease. Obviously she wasn't as happy as she wanted everyone to believe. But he didn't want to dwell on that right now.

"Let's get back to the party. I'm craving," he looked at her lips, "something sweet." He kept his hand at the small of her back as he turned toward the house. She smiled up at him as if she found him amusing. He didn't find anything amusing about how badly he wanted her.

Her smile widened into a grin when they reached the edge of the dance floor.

"Not a moment too soon," he murmured in her ear.

On the other side of the floor Brianna and Bryan stood next to the cake, posing for pictures, knife in hand.

"Cut the cake, already," Kaden called and the crowd laughed. Bryan grinned at him and then kissed Brianna's shoulder.

"You're incorrigible," Ava said, but her words held no heat.

"I'm hungry."

Their gazes locked for a hot moment before she turned back to the festivities. He sighed. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to spend time with her. Every second he touched her, looked at her, hell...even thought

about Ava Garnier was a losing battle. Each second made him want another one. And another. Pretty soon those seconds would turn into minutes then hours and if he wasn't careful days.

But he couldn't extract his hand from where it touched her back. The connection pleased the animal inside him too much.

Chapter Five

Ava waved to her sister and watched the happy couple depart. As soon as they were out of sight she made her way back to the reception area and collapsed into a chair. With a reverent she kicked off the high heels and put her feet up on the next chair over. This wedding business was hard work. Tiring. Emotional.

She didn't have time to be tired. Or emotional. She'd just rest for five minutes and then see what needed attending to.

Just five minutes.

"You look beat," Alain said, approaching slowly. He smiled down at her and while he was easy on the eyes, he wasn't who she'd been secretly hoping to encounter.

"I feel beat."

"How about a foot massage?"

She looked down at her feet, slightly swollen with red stripes criss-crossing back and forth over the top thanks to hours in those stupid strappy heels. How did super models do it?

"Really?" was all she could think of to say as her disappointment waned and pleasure took over. "That would be divine."

She lifted her feet as he pulled back the chair and folded his tall frame into it. She was momentarily distracted by how perfectly his clothes fit. No man had the right to look so yummy after such a long, sweltering affair.

Day. Not affair - long day.

His hands cupped her heels, big, warm, and curiously soft. Not like Kaden's. Kaden worked with his hands and a girl could tell. But as Alain began a slow massage from heel to toe of her left foot, Ava forgot all about that Kaden fella.

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard," Alain admonished quietly. He seemed genuinely concerned.

"Someone's got to," Ava quipped, as she had so many times. Taking on responsibility was what she wanted. When she was Alpha she'd have loads of responsibilities, so she just needed to get used to it. And buy some stylish but comfy sneakers. She mentally added the note to her to do list.

"Perhaps you should learn to delegate," he said as she tried to calculate how many items were on her to do list.

She's lost count lately. Delegate? Who had time to delegate? Especially when things didn't get done right. No, it was easier to do it herself.

Except, she'd delegated cake saving duties to Kaden. And that'd worked out well.

"I do when I need to."

Doggoneit. Couldn't she go for five minutes without thinking his name?

Alain switched to her other foot and Ava's eyes rolled back in her head. "Mmm...you're very good at that."

"My mother had circulation problems."

His mother? Werewolves didn't have circulation problems...

"My adoptive mother," Alain corrected softly.

"Ahh. That explains it then. Practice makes per –" he hit a spot mid foot that melted every nerve ending in her leg, "--fect."

Holy bones that felt good. Really, really good. If he didn't stop she might start drooling at any moment. And that would be sooo embarrassing.

Kaden paused beside one of the porch pillars and took in the cozy scene. An irrational possessiveness swept through him, which was crazy since he had no claim on Ava. Except for the fact that he suddenly wanted to claim her in every way possible.

Sucking in a rueful breath he turned on his heel and headed for his car. He had an Alphaship to claim.

Which means you don't have time to fawn over a Shewolf who doesn't want you in the least.

Chapter Six

Ava strode off the elevator at precisely nine o'clock the next morning. A Styrofoam cup in each hand, she marched down the hall toward her

father's office ready to demand the Alphaship. She wasn't going to let her attraction (and how crazy was that?) to Kaden distract her from her goal.

Shoulders back, chin up, she stepped through the open door and smiled at the handsome man behind the mammoth mahogany desk. She wanted to be a good leader like him. Firm and yet, fair.

"I figured I might see you here."

Ava whirled around at the sound of Kaden's voice. He strode into the room, looking ridiculously handsome in a soft grey polo, dark jeans, and – was he wearing loafers? Dang, she was a sucker for men in loafers. She darted a glance to her father and then back at Kaden as he sauntered toward her.

She met his gaze head-on. No backing down Ava. Do not melt at his feet. Wipe that smug look right off his face.

"GQ called. They want their wardrobe back." Damn, she'd almost said they want their model back.

He stared at her for a long moment and the room was absolutely silent. Then, a-not-so-subtle-and-very-sexy grin stretched his lips. "I'm pleased you noticed."

She rolled her eyes, at herself as much as at him. Did he have to be so lickable?

Belatedly, she noticed that he too held two Styrofoam cups. He had the nerve to wink at her before strolling by and placing one on her father's desk.

"Sir," he said with a nod.

"Kaden," her father said, returning the nod.

The stench of coffee hung heavy in the air. With a smirk, she placed the cup in her right hand on her father's desk. "Your tea, daddy. Mom said you left in a hurry this morning."

Sending Kaden a take-that grin, she tossed his offering in the trash.

"Coffee has too much caffeine in it. Tea is much healthier. Daddy's doctor told him to switch last week," she directed at Kaden, settling a hip against her father's desk.

She settled a hip against the desk, and he couldn't help but notice the way the material of her skirt pulled tight around her legs. Kaden wasn't deterred by Ava's possessiveness. Her sharp mind and aggression made her an interesting adversary. And he understood where she was coming from. At least, he thought he did.

She was her father's daughter. And even though the position usually traveled from father to son, she was the next oldest in line and the only one of Phillip's children interested in leading the pack. What Kaden didn't understand was why Ava thought she was the woman for the job.

Without softening the grin he knew unnerved her so much he nodded. "Dually noted."

Her cheeks turned a little pink and he could swear that her breath caught the slightest bit. But she didn't avert her gaze, and she didn't back down.

Once again, he found himself wondering if she would be this take charge in bed. Would her passion fight with his or compliment it?

"When you kids are done pissing on my desk, there's work to be done."

Phillip's deep voice had Ava dropping her foot to the floor and standing at attention.

"Of course, sir," Kaden said. Obviously Ava hadn't been invited to a meeting. She was here to plead her case. The way she stared down at her old man, surprise making her eyes huge, almost made Kaden laugh. But he turned a serious glance to Phillip.

"You mentioned something about trouble at the ranch." He didn't give Ava any time to get a word in and he could tell by the set of her jaw that it annoyed her. She was used to being heard by daddy dearest.

"The human hands all have a bug. They're locked in the bunkhouse puking their guts out."

"Lovely," he and Ava said at the same time.

Phillip glanced between the two of them as if they were a puzzle he was trying to figure out.

Though he didn't say anything directly, Kaden could sense Phillip's irritation with humans' weaknesses. Especially when they were being paid to get the job done. But Kaden wasn't going to be the one to remind him that it wasn't their fault that they'd gotten sick.

"Wesley needs all the help he can get out there. Round up some of the fellas and see what you can do to help out."

Kaden nodded.

"I'll go with you. I can help."

He was so concentrated on the task at hand and who he would call, he almost missed Ava's declaration.

Phillip's eyebrows inched upward almost comically. "You'll help?" he asked the question that was on Kaden's mind.

The next one was "help how?" but Kaden remained silent.

"I imagine Wesley's at his wits end trying to take care of the ranch and two dozen sick cowboys. They probably haven't had a decent meal in days."

Her delivery was so calm, so rational. Something inside him sparked, but he didn't want to figure out what it was. Right now he had damage control to do. He could not be stuck in a car with this woman for an hour and a half.

"You sure you want to be out in the boonies, away from the mall and civilization?" Kaden asked, hoping against hope that his point would send her scurrying in the other direction like a field mouse.

Unfortunately, a mischievous and somewhat placating look crossed her beautiful face.

"It might be nice to stretch my legs."

"I might not be back for days. Or a week or more." Did he sound as desperate as he thought he did?

Her smile wasn't exactly triumphant, but it dazzled him nevertheless. "Then I'll pack an overnight bag," she said simply, as if it was all settled.

Kaden wanted to argue.

"Bye Daddy." She turned and sauntered out of her father's office. At the door, she paused and looked over her shoulder. She stared right at Kaden, not sparing her father a glance. "I'll expect you at my apartment in, say, an hour?"

Thoroughly defeated, and receiving no back up from Phillip, Kaden nodded. "Sure."

She flashed him another grin before striding down the hall, taking all the oxygen with her. The darker side of him demanded he go after her and settle their battle of wills. A few mind numbing kisses...

"Watch her back, Kaden. The cowboys might be human, but they're not exactly civilized," Phillip said, dismissing him.

"Yes, sir."

Kaden found Phillip's statement humorous. Werewolves weren't exactly civilized either. No matter how much they'd progressed over the years. If Phillip thought differently, he was mistaken.

Pack members might live in nice traditional houses and wear human clothing, but that's where the civility stopped. Underneath his clothes lurked a dangerous warrior, a beast that could kill a man in one second flat, a predator that would stalk his prey...and lick her from head to toe.

Chapter Seven

Kaden strode up to Ava's door, still wondering how he'd been out maneuvered. She wasn't like most women he knew. Take away the mall, nail salons and Starbucks and they were outta there.

No, she was different, alright. She was determined, persistent. And while he was used to the tenaciousness that most Shewolves exhibited when it came to things like sex, he wasn't used to waging war with a woman.

Ava wanted to look good in front of her father, but that was no surprise. For as long as he'd known her, she'd been trying to win Phillip's approval.

Not two seconds after he'd knocked, she opened the door. Her delicious scent swirled around him and he once again noticed how lovely her eyes were. But then he let his gaze drop to the delicate plaid shirt hugging her breasts. Pearlescent buttons strained to hold her cleavage in check.

Okay, so it wasn't that tight, in the scheme of things, but it was certainly revealing enough to give him all sorts of naughty ideas. Especially the little V that revealed the swell of her breasts - dear God - it made him swallow.

Knowing he was oogling her and would likely get caught doing so, he continued his evaluation. It wasn't that her shorts were that short. No. It was the way they molded to her thighs.

"Glad you could make it," she murmured in that pleased yet slightly sarcastic way she had. Very briefly, he noticed the overnight bag behind her.

Please don't turn -

Around...the thought died as she turned and picked up the duffle bag, giving him a fine view of her backside. The way the denim hugged those twin globes of perfection... Fuck. He was royally screwed. So much

for telling himself to keep his mind on the job at hand. Even his thoughts were disgustingly poetic.

As if to piss him off even more, she wore cowboy – cowgirl? – boots. Heaven help him. There would be no rest for him on this trip. He'd be slinging sick cowboys off her left and right...not to mention the aching hard-on in his jeans. He gave a few more mental curses for good measure.

Wordlessly, he took the bag from her, and headed back to his truck. He heard the lock click behind him as he hoisted her gear into the truck bed. Yet another difference to catalog. She traveled light.

"Rick and the other guys are already on the way," he told her as she approached. As much as he tried not to notice the little details about her, he couldn't help but appreciate the way her hair shimmered in the morning sunlight. Averting his gaze, he glanced over at her sports car. Not red, like he would have expected. No, he'd been surprised when she'd chosen a blue green color that reminded him of her eyes. Not that he'd ever mentioned that.

"Excellent. We can stop by a grocery store on the way."

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the bed of his truck. "Why?"

"So I can get ingredients for dinner," she said, as though it were obvious.

He was quickly coming to realize that nothing was obvious where Ana Garnier was concerned. From a distance he'd thought he had her all figured out. Like one of those photographs that was actually made up of hundreds or thousands of smaller photographs. You didn't really see the full picture until you looked closer...at the details.

"You cook?" That was news to him.

She made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. Then the corner of her luscious mouth turned up in a way he was finding irresistible. She probably did it on purpose...

"You'll just have to wait and see."

She circled the truck and he was right behind her. Something in her eyes said she was out to cause trouble. Hell, she could be dressed in a paper sack and she'd still be a distraction. He didn't have time for distractions.

"You don't have to do this. I'll tell your dad that something more important came up."

She pursed her lips for a moment as she stared up at him. Why did he feel like he'd just kicked a puppy?

"If you don't want to ride with me, just say so, Kaden. I can take my car."

He looked over at the convertible. Such a guy magnet. On one hand, he didn't want to spend time alone with her.

Liar.

On the other, he didn't want her to be able to drive into a ditch or get herself into some other sort of trouble. Phillip would kick his ass.

"Just get in the truck."

Eyebrow raised in censure, she opened the passenger door. He was prepared to give her a boost, no matter the cost to his libido, but with effortless grace she hopped up onto the step and swung herself into the cab. The click of her seatbelt was like the final nail in the coffin. They were stuck together. For better or worse.

Kaden hadn't said a word since they'd left the grocery store an hour ago. Ava didn't mind the silence but couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking about. She knew that he wasn't as unaffected as he wanted to seem. His heartbeat hadn't slowed since he'd shown up on her doorstep, not that he'd ever admit it. Even now she could hear the accelerated thump-thump-thump over the sound of the road.

He'd seemed genuinely surprised when she'd pulled out reusable bags and insulated grocery bags. He hadn't uttered more than a few words the entire time they'd been in the store, but she'd felt his gaze on her constantly. At the checkout counter, he'd paid before she had a chance to get her wallet out and reached for the bags. For a man who didn't seem to want her company he had sure been in a hurry to get her back to the truck.

Luckily, she had a few tricks up her sleeve, so long as she could keep a level head. For now, all she could do was stare out the window. California was a beautiful place. And with Kaden at the wheel, she got to enjoy the scenery going by. Rolling hills. Farms. Vineyards. Picturesque towns.

Before she knew it, they were turning down a gravel drive and passing under a tall sign with River Fork Ranch proudly displayed in wrought iron. The iconic sweep coming off the H gave the sign an elegant,

yet rustic flare and hinted at the beautiful river cutting across the property. Her father had bought the place years ago, as a source of income. Cattle, milk, grains, and hay were all produced on the 25,000 acre farm.

Cattle grazed in the fields, unaware of the distress in the bunk house. In the distance, she saw a man on a four wheeler riding the fence line. When they finally pulled up in front of the barn, she saw Rick and a bunch of other guys from the WhitePaw pack heading inside. Wesley, tall and dark haired, strode next to them.

A cloud of dust blew by as Kaden parked the truck. Wesley turned toward them and lifted a hand in greeting. Her silent companion was out of the truck, circling to her door as she unlatched it. Not wanting to hear his lecture, she jumped down from the truck and brushed by the sexy wolf.

"Wesley...it's been a while." She gave the ranch foreman a quick hug and stepped back. As usual, the hair on the back of her neck was standing on end. Kaden was probably glaring a hole in her back, but she wasn't going to change her behavior to suit him. Contrary to his belief, her being here and the Alpha position had nothing to do with her reasons for coming to the ranch.

She'd known Wesley most of her life and she hated to see anyone sick or in pain.

"Sorry I couldn't make it to the wedding yesterday," he said in that slow, smooth way of his.

"Put us to work, Wes," Kaden said, forgoing pleasantries.

Wesley merely raised an eyebrow.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure Mom will show you pictures next time you're at the house," Ava said. "I'm gonna go put the groceries away." She backed away from the two men.

Kaden shook his dark head and started for the barn, tension radiating from him. He'd need to calm himself down so he wouldn't spook the animals, but she wasn't going to be the one to tell him that.

She watched him as he walked away. No matter how many times she told herself to keep her mind on the goal, she kept getting distracted. The way his jeans clung to his thighs and hugged his ass, it was no wonder she couldn't keep her mind off him. And if she were honest, her mind wasn't the only thing she wanted on him.

It'd take a miracle at this point to erase the imprint of tight denim encasing two of the longest, strongest legs this side of the Mississippi from her mind.

Darn. She needed a cold shower.

Chapter Eight

Kaden was the first of the men to enter the kitchen that night. Even with her back to the door she knew it was him by the way the room suddenly filled with heat and tension. His scent had a new facet she wasn't used to: sweat and hay. Something inside her quivered but she kept slicing thick hunks of bread.

"Smells good."

If she could just stay focused on the task at hand...

"You should let me take all this over to the bunk house," he said, the words soft and sure. He'd moved closer. The tiny hairs at the nape of her neck stood on end, ready and alert.

"So you can take credit for all my hard work," she quipped. "I don't think so."

With the last of the bread sliced, she tossed the pieces into a large basket and covered it with a dish towel.

She'd be lying if she said his nearness didn't affect her. Being so close, so alone together in the quiet of the kitchen...it was almost...domestic. And she was wolf enough to admit that she liked domestic...

"I don't care who gets credit for making dinner, I just don't want you struttin' around all those men in those short shorts."

Hours ago, she'd felt his gaze on her legs the moment after she'd opened her door. It seemed like a week since they'd left her place. She'd felt his disapproval then, could still feel it now.

It was just like Kaden to go all protective on her. With her father as the Alpha, ever-vigilant-alpha-tendencies were nothing new.

But where Kaden was concerned, the protective growl was almost charming. Not that she'd ever tell him that. Plus, she was fairly sure he wasn't feeling protective so much as he didn't want anything to happen that he'd have to answer to her father about.

"Jealous?" She turned then, the basket in her arms.

Oh my. His dark eyes glittered dangerously and his stance was both predatory and frustrated. Dusty hands hooked over lean hips and a sprig of straw stuck out of his hair.

Shifting the basket to one hip, she reached up and plucked out the hay. His hand wrapped around her wrist and held tight. She wasn't scared of him or the harsh line of his lips. If anything she wanted to kiss that firm mouth until he smiled.

And that was exactly the reason that she twisted away from his grasp, letting the hay fall to the floor before she shoved the basket of bread into his hands. No men. Absolutely no men until she was Alpha. Four more days. She could last.

Right?

"Take that to the bunk house."

"You didn't say please," he replied, mischief softening his handsome face.

She raised an eyebrow and put a hand on her hip. "Do you want dinner or not, cowboy?"

He chuckled as he left the spacious kitchen.

Men. Wolves.

She turned back to the stove and reached for the lid to the large chili pot. She'd made a hearty chili, equal parts veggie and meat. The other pot held chicken noodle soup. That'd been an adventure. She'd never made it from scratch before. But cooking always soothed her. And she definitely liked to nibble as she cooked.

"Wow, Ava. That smells great." She glanced over her shoulder to see Wes hang his hat on a hook by the back door.

"That's what Kaden said."

"That man's got a thorn in his paw the size of Kansas."

"Oh really?" Why did that news make her want to sooth him? She should be finding a way to use it as an advantage. As Alpha, she'd finally have respect among the pack and be more than a pretty face. She'd be more than Phillip Garnier's daughter.

"I understand why even if he doesn't."

While she was trying to figure out what he meant by that, he lifted the lid to the chili pot and inhaled deeply, then gave a masculine sigh of appreciation.

"Need any help?" he asked without missing a beat.

What did Wesley understand that Kaden didn't? She frowned.

"I take it I shouldn't have said anything," Wesley said.

"I have no earthly idea what you mean. But yes, you can help. Will you take the chili over to the bunk house? I'll bring the soup."

"Soup and chili? Woo-wee. The fellas are gonna be too fat and spoiled to go back to work once they get better. They'll be hell to live with."

Wesley's light-hearted banter pulled her from her thoughts and she grinned. "Put the lid back and go. I'm sure they're hungry." Men always were, in her experience. At least the male of her species.

She shoved her hands into oven mitts and lifted the large pot of chicken soup. She sensed Wesley wanted to say something, or offer to help but he dutifully headed for the back door, chili pot in hand.

Outside, the beauty of the ranch wrapped around her like a warm blanket. So different from the coast and such a slower pace. She lifted her face to the sun, enjoying the momentary reprieve from pack life.

But she shouldn't want a reprieve. She wanted to be the leader. She wanted to lead them forward into the next century. In her opinion, more packs needed a woman's touch.

"Let me help you with that." She didn't immediately recognize the masculine voice, but a second later Alain fell into step beside her. What was he doing here?

"Wes, have you met--"

"We have," he cut in, nodding at Alain.

Yesterday she'd thought the man to her right supermodel gorgeous, today he looked like an actor straight off the set of a western. Completely at ease with his surroundings and playing the part of a cowboy. His tall lean body did wonders for the work shirt and tight jeans. Dust covered him in a fine powder. So he could get his hands dirty too...

"It's hot," she told him, not breaking her stride toward the adjacent bunk house.

As-easy-as-you-please he plucked a pair of leather gloves from his back pocket, donned them, and took the pot from her. A girl could get used to that.

Chapter Nine

Kaden had never seen so much misery in one place. Coughing. Wheezing. He curled his lip. Sneezing.

A small man leaned out of his bed and threw up into the nearby trashcan. Kaden looked away and continued ladling out bowls of chili.

He noticed a shift in the room and glanced up to see Ava walking through the door. Every particle in the room surged toward her as if she were the strongest magnet on earth.

Alain Harper was on her heels, another pot in his hands. Kaden blew out a breath and reined in his jealousy. The other wolf had offered to help out around the ranch while he was in town but Kaden didn't get the sense that he was so interested in 'helping out' as he was nailing the Alpha's daughter.

"Well hello there," one of the cowboys said, leaning up on an elbow, his gaze locked on her long, toned legs.

Hadn't Kaden predicted this? His temper spiked but Ava simply smiled at the cowboy and gave a brief 'hello.'

A dozen sets of bare wood bunks flanked the walls. Sick as they were, the men took notice of the beautiful woman making her way across the room. Their eyes followed her, gazing at the short shorts and her melt-in-your-mouth curves. Fuck.

She didn't even pause when she reached the table where he stood. No, she ignored him and picked up two spoons, slipped them into two bowls and then took them to the nearest men.

The spell was broken. Someone sneezed. And another poor sap raced to the bathroom.

"Chili?" Ava asked the men. They nodded.

"What would you like to drink?" she asked.

Alain put down a pot of what smelled like chicken soup on the table and gave Kaden a quick nod.

"She's something, isn't she?" Alain asked, his eyes on the only woman in the room.

"She's a pain in the ass."

Alain's eyebrows shot up but he didn't say a word. Kaden put the ladle back into the pot as he watched the interaction a few feet away. The man on the bunk asked for water. The tall blond leaning against the wall asked for the same, but as Ava turned away he muttered something about 'a damn invasion.'

Kaden had known there would be nervousness among the hands with a group of help coming in. He was prepared for it. But he hadn't prepared for them looking at Ava as an outsider.

Ava paused, her gaze flicking up to meet Kaden's. Her amber colored eyes darkened and her chest rose slowly as she took a deep breath. Oh shit. One eye brow rose and her jaw hardened. Shoulders back she pivoted on her left heel. The room went silent again, waiting. He couldn't be sure, but he thought everyone was holding their breath.

She stepped toe to toe with the cowboy who probably outweighed her by at least fifty pounds.

"Buck, isn't it?" she asked but didn't wait for confirmation. "You know, being sick doesn't give you an excuse for being an ungrateful asshole." She plucked the bowl from his hands and turned away.

The cowboy started to reach for her. "You bitc--"

Kaden was around the table and reaching for the bastard even as Ava turned back and planted a palm in the center of the man's chest. Kaden pulled to a stop, his heart thundering in his chest. The beast inside him demanded blood. No one disrespected his woman.

Whoa. What--? He put his hands on his hips and tightened the leash on his inner wolf.

"You don't know how right you are," Ava whispered back, her tone fierce. The man's eyebrows jumped up his forehead and his lips parted. "Don't make me kick your ass in front of all your friends."

There was a lengthy pause, just long enough for Kaden to relax a fraction. But then the man's forehead creased and his brows drew together. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Buck demanded, matching her tone. The dumb jerk even had the nerve to sneer at her.

Alain stepped forward, but Kaden held up an arm to hold him back. If anyone was going to kick that cowboy's ass to the next county and back it was going to be Kaden.

"Shut up, Buck," his bunkmate said, standing.

"Oh, I do apologize." Ava shifted the bowl of chili to her left hand. The fact that she was no longer touching the son of a bitch soothed Kaden's beast ever so slightly. His shoulders dropped a fraction. "I'm Ava Garnier."

"Garnier?" Buck actually sputtered.

Kaden could see her cheeks crease as she smiled. Though the man probably couldn't tell Ava was trembling, Kaden didn't miss the minute

movements or the way her energy seemed to zing away from her. From temper or nerves, he wasn't sure. She seemed absolutely sure of herself. A spitfire Shewolf if he'd ever seen one.

"You know, the boss's daughter?" she asked in a teasing tone that caught Kaden off guard. How could she be so calm? Why wasn't he more calm? It wasn't like him to get riled so easily. He noted the almost imperceptible cock of her head. "I think we should start over. Don't you?"

The blond man stood motionless. He looked so shocked Kaden wasn't even sure the SOB was still breathing. Finally, he gulped and nodded.

Ava stuck out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Buck. I'm Ava Garnier. What would you like to drink this evening?"

Oh, she was good. Damn good. Her voice was sweeter than honey and he had no doubt that every man in the damn bunk house was as equally impressed with her as he was.

"Water'd be fine."

She handed back the bowl of chili. "Enjoy your dinner."

Chapter Ten

After all the men had been fed, Ava excused herself and headed for the barn. What had she been thinking? Someone was bound to tell her father how she'd handled herself. While he wouldn't have handled himself any differently, he'd always demanded she keep her cool. Ironic, given her species.

After petting the horses she settled herself on a bale of hay just outside the barn door and looked out at the rolling hills. She'd thought the ocean was peaceful, but here, everything was still. The endless expanse begged her to shift and barrel across it as fast as her paws would carry her.

She was so tempted.

As she was taking off her apron, her cellphone buzzed in her pocket. She sighed. Please don't let it be her father.

Brianna's number flashed on the screen. "Bri? Why are you calling me from your honeymoon?"

This made it official. Her sister was a loon. And she meant that in the most loving way possible. What kind of crazy woman called home from her honeymoon?

"Don't worry, I made Bryan pass out--"

"Bri!"

"But I wanted to check on you," Brianna said without missing a beat. "You seemed a little...ruffled yesterday at the wedding and--"

"I'm fine. Honest."

"You're worried about the Alphaship, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. You know Daddy's announcement came as a surprise." She and her siblings had been shocked to put it mildly. Her father was too young to consider retirement.

A barn cat rubbed against her legs and she reached down to scratch beneath its chin.

"Whatever happens, happens, Ava. You're going to have to learn to be happy either way."

Learn to be happy? She'd been so focused on learning the business side of things, helping her father with the books, giving him any investment tips she came across that she hadn't for a moment considered that she wouldn't be the next Alpha.

Sweat dotted her forehead. "I--"

"You're really that sure of yourself?"

There was doubt in her sister's voice and damn did it hurt. The cat hopped up in her lap but she no longer had the energy to pet it.

"Do you know something I don't?" Had her father already made his choice? Had he chosen Kaden?

If Kaden became the Alpha of WhitePaw, where did that leave her? She'd gone straight from school to helping her mother with social functions and helping her father in anything he required. She didn't have a full time job like some of the other pack members. And despite her father's best efforts there was still a fairly strong gender divide within their species.

At the end of the day males were just stronger. And in a culture where strong won, the weak were submissive.

Like hell Ava would submit to anyone.

"No. I haven't heard anything. I just want you to be prepared. You're my sister and I love you."

"You're my little sister. I'm supposed to be worrying about you," Ava pointed out. The cat nudged her chin with its head.

"I have Bryan to worry about me now. Who else is going to worry about you?"

A twig snapped and the cat bolted. On alert, Ava paused and jerked her head to the right. Kaden lifted his hand in greeting.

“Bri, I’ve gotta go.”

“Okay. Take care of yourself. Say hello to Kaden for me and Bryan.”

Ava rolled her eyes and disconnected the call. How did Brianna know that Kaden was with her? Was she that obvious?

Instead of approaching he turned and looked out at the scenery. He didn’t say a word. Rather he seemed to enjoy the silence. It was killing her.

He tucked his hands into his back pockets. The man had no right to look so at ease, so lickable. It took all her willpower to stay seated rather than stalk over to him and pull him down for a kiss. The hay would be oh so soft and--

He’s the enemy. Until Friday night, he was the enemy. Remember that, Ava.

No one believes you’ll make a good Alpha. Not even your family.

Grinding her jaws together she turned back to the view. But who was she kidding. He was far better on the eyes.

“Just spit it out, Kaden. I screwed up and you’re going to run and tell my dad how I didn’t hold my tongue.” Though she thought she’d held on to her temper reasonably well. She’d give herself a pat on the back for that later.

“Down, Shewolf. I’m not telling your father anything.”

Ava frowned.

“But I practically assaulted an employee. A human employee.” Humans were totally off limits. That’d always been the rule in the Garnier household.

At that, Kaden came over and sat down next to her, his back against the hay bale. “If that was assault, I’m Santa Claus.”

“You don’t have to be so flip.” Her temper started to run away with her again. It was just like a man to brush off her worries.

He reached around with his left hand and covered her hands. “I’m not being flip, Ava. I’m just saying that if you consider that assault then what I wanted to do to him would be classified as murder.”

He sounded deadly serious and possessive. His words sank in.

“Oh.”

She loved how warm and reassuring his hand felt around her own. Just like she had loved the feel of his lips against her cheek yesterday.

Had that really been yesterday? Brianna's wedding already seemed ages ago. And yet, after months of planning, she could hardly believe the day had come and gone.

"For what it's worth, I thought you handled yourself very well."

Was he for real?

But as he squeezed her hand, she realized he was real. And he was here. All those years day dreaming about him, watching him from afar, she'd been a girl. Adolescent in a woman's body. Confused by warring hormones and a wolf's desire to find a mate.

Now she couldn't blame her feelings on youth. She was an adult. And she really wanted to kiss him.

He let her hands go and turned back to the landscape.

Ava took a shuddering breath and blinked back the sudden rush of tears. What the hell was wrong with her? Why was she so emotional?

Staring up at the sky she tried to imagine her life on Saturday if her father declared Kaden the new Alpha of WhitePaw pack. She'd get up just like any other day, but then what?

"This is going to cost me two dollars isn't it?" His rich chocolaty voice seduced her. So much so that she forgot to answer his question.

He pulled out his wallet and handed over two dollar bills. She stared at them for a long moment.

"What?"

"What are you thinking about so hard?"

"Oh."

He dropped the bills in her lap and put his wallet away, his shoulder grazing her bare leg. Did he have to smell so good? Even after a day's work, handing out a dozen bowls of chili, his scent made her insides clench.

She picked them up and studied them. "Have you ever wanted something so much that you can't imagine your life without it?"

He glanced over his shoulder and stared up at her for a good half minute. His gaze took in every detail of her face and her heart started to pound. She held her breath as she waited for his answer. "Yes."

What was it that he wanted so badly? The Alphaship? If that was...what were they going to do? She liked Kaden enough to want him to get whatever he wanted, but she'd been preparing for this position her whole adult life.

"Brianna asked me what I'd do if Father doesn't name me Alpha. I'd never asked myself that question." She pursed her lips together feeling more shaken than ever. She never let herself focus on failure. In fact, she rarely had a backup plan.

"You're sure of yourself, I'll give you that," Kaden said, looking back over the rolling hills.

"I have to be. No one else is." Again her eyes smarted. She was not going to be a weepy female, she was not. She'd reserve her tears for babies and sad movies and love stories that took her breath away. But not self-pity.

She sat up a little straighter and folded the bills into fourths. Kaden watched her tuck them into her bra. This time he didn't groan; he ground his teeth together and looked away.

Propping his arms on his knees, he fiddled with a piece of yellow straw. "I know where you're coming from."

She knew that Kaden had been orphaned when he was young. At least, that's what her father had called it. But Ava understood that his parents had split and left him all alone. And from there, he hadn't had it easy.

"You must think I'm a spoiled brat." She would if she were in his shoes. Her parents had given her everything she'd ever wanted or needed. She'd had a full childhood. Vacations. A new car at sixteen. Endless trips to the wilderness to stay connected to her roots.

"The thought has crossed my mind a time or two."

She huffed out a rueful sigh. "Don't sugar coat it on my account," she teased.

"That was years ago. Even at seventeen you thought you knew best."

Ava crossed her arms over her chest. "Excuse me?"

"You're still trying to please him." The straw spun between his fingers like a helicopter blade.

"Of course I am."

"But you never take any pleasure for yourself."

"Kicking your beta butt at your own game will be pleasure enough in my book."

Flustered more than ever before, she stood and headed for the trees in the distance. Of course she wanted to please her father. She'd been

trying her whole life to make him happy. To hear more than a 'Thanks, Ava.'

She wanted a "great job, Ava. I couldn't have done it without you." She wanted his respect and admiration. She wanted his trust that she could lead the pack well into the future.

"So you've been thinking about my butt..."

Kaden rushed to keep up with her. He'd known his comments were going to touch a nerve but some things needed to be said. And he might as well get them out of the way.

A blush crept into her cheeks but she didn't so much as pause. She simply glared over at him and kept stalking toward the horizon.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"I'm," she stressed the word, "going for a run."

"I'm right behind you," he said, loving the way her brown eyes flashed at him. Her chestnut locks turned gold in the fading light.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Your father--"

She cut him off. "Let me guess. He told you to take care of me. I'm not a baby and I don't need a baby sitter."

He pulled her to a stop. "If something happens to you he'll have my ass and be both know it looks good right where it is."

"You can handle yourself." She jerked out of his grasp and stormed away.

Frustrating woman. Her hips swayed seductively. Sexy, frustrating woman.

"You know, despite what everyone thinks about me, I can take care of myself."

"Prove it."

She turned abruptly, her mouth slightly agape as she lowered her head and glared at him. A challenge if he'd ever seen one. Her nostrils even flared but she didn't stop moving backwards.

Damn she was beautiful. Spirited. Her angry march made her hair shimmer like fire.

Then, without breaking her stride, she turned and took off at a dead run. Her muscles contorted, her nails grew, her fingers withdrew and a glossy coat of fur sprouted from her creamy skin. She leapt forward,

soaring through the air gracefully, shedding the short shorts and skimpy top. By the time she landed she was all wolf.

One gorgeous Shewolf running hell dead for the horizon.

Kaden glanced back to make sure no one was around before shifting himself. He raced after her, his paws tearing over the ground. Tail up, tongue out he chased her.

Faster.

Her body stretched endlessly, each movement graceful and strong. Head down, neck long, tail pointed, she darted to the bottom of the hill and then started the next climb.

His muscles tensed for a burst of speed.

Catch.

Damn it felt good to run. Flat out. Wind in his fur. Dirt between his toes. He let out a happy yip. Up and down she ran. Farther and farther from the house. She kept going. Staying just ahead of him. Just out of his reach.

Take.

As they zipped by another grove of Oak trees, she glanced back at him. He could swear she was smiling. He yipped again and she gave a bark of her own.

Want.

When he came to the top of the next hill he saw the river in the valley below. He didn't know where her next burst of speed came from but she gathered her haunches beneath her and galloped down the hill.

Where had a city girl learned to run like that? He knew at this point, she shouldn't surprise him.

At the bottom she raced over the earth, tail winding around like a propeller. Then, without hesitation she jumped into the water. Droplets sparkled in the fading light. As he neared she stalked back and forth, muscles coiled.

He stopped along the shore and watched her march back and forth, her gaze locked on something in the water. She lifted her front left paw, held it just above the water line. Her tail pointed straight back, providing balance.

What on earth?

She leaned forward, slipped her paw gently into the water and then - she pounced.

Her muzzle disappeared beneath the water for an instant at most. Then she pulled back, a fish wiggling between her teeth.

Kaden sat down, his tongue dangling from his mouth. He was impressed by her stamina. And the predator that lurked beneath the surface...a predator she'd never let him see before.

She placed the fish at his feet and walked away.

He looked down at the silver scaled creature feeling something akin to awe sweep through him. There wasn't a spec of blood on the fish. He looked over to see her lapping at the water's edge.

A full out run for twenty minutes and she had enough energy left to catch a fish and not injure it? He was going to have to eat his words. She'd definitely proved her point.

Taking pity on the writhing creature, he gently picked it up and carried it back to the water. That had to earn him a few Karma points.

With cold water rushing over his feet he looked back at the beautiful silver haired Shewolf laying beneath a tree. She stared right back.

Not for the first time he wanted to know what she was thinking. Her lean body shook as she panted. Why was he so mesmerized? He'd seen Shewolves in true form before.

But he hadn't chased them across a hundred acres. Hadn't watched the way their bodies ate up the earth, stretching to perfection.

She tipped her head back, flattened her ears and let out a soulful howl. Startled, he cocked his head to the right. She looked at him, her tongue hanging out. The way her jowls tugged back, he was certain she was smiling.

She howled again.

Mate.

Chapter Eleven

The wind carried Ava's hauntingly beautiful howl downstream. Kaden trotted out of the river and stopped in front of her. She looked up at him, her brown eyes brimming with liquid heat. Her tale patted the earth a few times before she let out another howl.

Feeling freer than he had in years, he threw his head back gave a cry of his own. She rose up on all fours and moved shoulder to shoulder with him. He glanced over at her.

She nodded at something across the river. He followed her gaze and saw a large three quarter moon climbing into the evening sky. She nudged his shoulder. He leaned back and gave a playful nip.

Long ago he'd accepted the moon's magnetic qualities. He stood still for a long moment, admiring the silver orb. Ava seemed equally enthralled. But she was the first to offer up a throaty bellow of praise. Kaden joined in. For several incredible minutes they howled at the moon rising over the hills. They howled at the stars. They howled for the sheer joy of it.

Damn, it felt good to be in his true form, calling to the moon. Sharing the moment.

Ava raised a paw and gave him a shove. He pushed back and she rolled onto her side. This playful side of her was new. He pounced, wrestling, rolling.

She tried to hold his muzzle closed with her mouth but he out maneuvered her. No way was he going to play the submissive pup. She scooted away, stretched down, butt and tail in the air.

On the other paw, he wasn't above nefarious tactics. He laid down on his belly and crawled forward a few feet. When he was almost within touching distance he rolled over on his side and showed her his belly.

She bounded up and came over to investigate. Poking him with her nose, she stood over him like she'd won a prize. Staring up at her, he forgot he was playing a game. She was too lovely for his peace of mind. Lust poured through him. She must have smelled the change in his blood. Tipping her head to the right, she stared down at him.

Bending down, she nuzzled his neck and then licked his cheek.

Oh, Ava. Stop before you get us both in trouble.

In his base form his self-control sat just above zero. He held as still as possible even though every cell in his body screamed for him to take her. To nuzzle her back. To cover her body with his and give them what they both wanted.

When he didn't reciprocate her actions she backed up and sat down. He pushed to his feet and glanced up at the moon again. The sun had set and the last vapors of light lit the sky. His eyes had adjusted so easily he hadn't noticed.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, memorizing the moment. Every gurgle of the river, each blade of grass humming in the breeze, the way the moonlight gave the valley an iridescent glow. The way Ava had looked down at him...almost as if she too was memorizing their time together.

She'd posed a good question earlier. What would she do when he was named Alpha? He was coming to realize just how much of her life she'd dedicated to nabbing the position. Though it seemed like she'd always been just out of the picture, that obviously wasn't the case.

For the first time he felt a conflict of interest. His feelings for the beautiful Shewolf with the howl that would haunt his soul were at war with his knowledge that he was the wolf for the job.

Fuck.

Ava got to her feet and gave a quick yelp before heading back up the hill. Nose to the ground, she followed their path home. Concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other, she tried not to let Kaden's rejection sting.

Who was she kidding? It hurt worse than a shot in the arm. The sooner she got away from him, the -- Atop a hill she saw lights to the east. The twin golden orbs cruised over the land. She paused and turned to listen. Kaden stopped beside her.

So much for getting away from him.

She sniffed the air but didn't detect anything unusual. She didn't think Wesley would be out this late, but she'd mention it when they got back. According to the reports she'd worked on for her father, cattle theft was on the rise in California.

Kaden must have been thinking the same thing. He took off for the main house, giving a long series of loud barks, his tone urgent.

Impatient herself, she raced after him. She was counting this as her workout for the week. Maybe the month.

On the hill above the main house they slowed as if by mutual agreement. Though she knew she was in good shape, she was huffing and puffing like the Big Bad Wolf.

Kaden must have seen the gangly ranch hand at the same moment she did because he slung a leg over her shoulders and pushed her to the ground. They lay there for several agonizing moments, his elbow digging

into her back. The ranch hand lit a cigarette and took his sweet time heading back to the bunk house.

When she couldn't take it any longer, she snapped at him. He immediately shifted his weight off of her and nuzzled her cheek in apology. Her heart squeezed. Damn, he was one handsome wolf. Big, broad, perfectly shaped ears, large paws and a tail that would make any Shewolf swoon.

And to feel him against her like that...

No. She absolutely was not going to think about it. Especially not when he'd rejected her less than half an hour ago. She needed to get to Wesley. Dragging her gaze from the big wolf at her side, she surveyed the compound below.

When the coast was clear they slunk down the hill, practically tiptoeing their way back to the main house. In the cover of the back porch she peeked into the window.

Chapter Twelve

The kitchen was dark. Ava huffed out a sigh of relief.

Though werewolves were not shy when it came to nudity, her nerves were so on edge she didn't think she'd be able to control herself if she had to see Kaden in the buff. He'd made it clear he didn't want her that way. If she were brutally honest with herself, that was for the best.

Damn. Honesty hurt sometimes.

He was stronger than she was. She should thank him. Because she knew what lay beneath his fur/clothes. A perfectly sculpted specimen of werewolf. Temptation incarnate.

In her current mood, torn between lust and frustration, she'd either clock him or kiss him. Neither option suited.

Giving the yard one last glance, she shifted to her human form. Sitting with her back against the cool, rough wood siding she sucked in a steadying breath. Double damn. Shifting back burned like flame on kindling. It was as if she were folding herself into a milk jug. And her wolf didn't like being put back in the box.

At war with her more primitive side, she tipped her head back against the wall and willed her nerves to settle. Despite the cool evening

air, sweat dotted her brow. Her father promised that the change would get easier as she aged.

She rubbed a hand over the left side of her ribcage, hoping he was right about the side splitting pain.

A light went on in the house and a warm yellow glow flooded the porch. Tucking her feet beneath her, she pushed herself up just enough to peak in the window. Wesley pulled a beer from the fridge.

The energy in the air seemed to shift around her, and thicken. Without turning her head she knew that Kaden had shifted. She was not going to look at him. She was not going to --

But then the floor boards to her left creaked and her head swiveled. Oh my.

Thanks to the light pouring from the window and her heightened senses, she had no trouble seeing his knees or perfectly sculpted thighs covered in a fine dusting of dark hair...right at her eye level.

And even as she was telling herself to stop there, her gaze lifted. Oh. My.

She gulped. Liquid heat poured through her and the wolf inside her wanted to let out another howl. She bit her lips.

She was in control of her body. Her hormones. Not the other way around. Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard laughter.

So close to her goal of becoming Alpha. Of proving the naysayers wrong...she couldn't choke now. No matter how ridiculously gorgeous the man before her was. No matter how much she wanted to run her hands up those powerful thighs, past that thin arrow of hair, across those taunt abs, and lick every square inch of his incredible chest.

Friday she would be Alpha. And Saturday she'd find a man to release her pent up tension.

Frustrated with warring desires, Kaden held out his hand to the naked beauty. Somehow he managed to keep his lust in check, though she could surely see the evidence of his need.

Four more days. He could sit bare assed in the snow for four days. Had gone without food for longer than that. He would find new and

inventive ways to resist his need for the woman at his feet for four more days. He had to. His position as Alpha depended on it.

But after their tryst at the river, his will power was at an all-time low. Add to that the hurt he'd seen in her eyes and the raw desire that now filled the amber depths...

She glanced at his hand and a tiny frown curved the corner of her lips down. A long pause held them still and then, as if she'd made up her mind about something her shoulders went back and her chin tipped up a fraction. She placed her hand in his and he pulled her to her feet.

He recognized that determined tilt of her head and wanted to say something. Anything to clear the air between them. To get back to those peaceful moments during their run.

She pulled her hand from his and started past him.

"Ava," he pulled her to a stop. He felt like such an ass. She'd opened up to him. Showed a different side of herself. Shared herself. Been honest about her desires. And he'd squashed all that...just so he could keep his neat and tidy life in safe compartments. Which was ironic, considering what he wanted to do with her was far from neat and tidy.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said, keeping his voice soft.

"You didn't," she said nonchalantly. But the words were too automatic. Too quick. She paused and glanced away. "You were being honest and I can appreciate that," she amended.

She thought he was being honest? Far from it, beautiful. Honest was wanting to press her up against the side of the house, letting his hands and lips investigate everything his eyes could see.

"Then why won't you look at me?" He gripped her upper arms and squeezed gently.

"Because--" she cried, her gaze snapping to his. An electric current zapped between them, heating him from head to toe.

"Because..." he prompted, a heartbeat away from kissing her into oblivion.

Eyes pleading, she said, "if I look at you, I'll want to kiss you. And if I kiss you, I won't be able to stop."

Without giving him a moment to react to her bombshell, she pulled away from him and rushed into the house.

Chapter Thirteen

Ah hell.

Kaden's hands dropped to his sides, missing the feel of her skin against his. Crazy, but there it was.

...if I kiss you, I won't be able to stop. Her words echoed through his mind. How the hell was he supposed to resist a passion that strong for four more minutes, let alone four days?

Why did she have to go and say that? Letting his frustration get the better of him, he slammed his fist into one of the four by six beams holding up the porch roof. The wood splintered and the roof groaned as the support disintegrated.

Great. One more thing to fix tomorrow. More annoyed than before, he turned back to the window and saw Wesley looking straight at him. The other wolf glanced away and said something to Ava. At her nod, Wesley strode to the front room, that easy swagger belying the tension in his shoulders.

Kaden knew he should change into some clothes and go help the cowboy, but as he slipped into the backdoor, Ava's brown eyes met his for a millisecond and then she was off, making a beeline through the house. Her breasts bounced gently in her haste.

Torn by duty and desire, Kaden made a split second decision.

Leaving Wes to handle ranch business, he headed for Ava's bedroom.

She was just outside her door when he entered the hall. He called her name and she paused but didn't turn toward him. Now was not the time to admire the way her hair skimmed her shoulders or the way her hips flared at the waist.

Instead, he focused on the way her hands closed into fists and then opened again.

"You can't say something like that and walk away," he told her as he closed the distance between them. Not with so much left unsaid between them.

She still didn't turn to face him. Instead, she reached for the doorknob. "Yes, I can. There's nothing left to say."

"Ava..." He licked his lips, trying to decide how to make her understand.

“Just leave me alone Kaden.” With that, he found himself staring at a closed door for the second time that day.

“Ava...” He knocked.

“Go away Kaden.” Her voice was muffled.

“Come on sweetheart. Don’t you think we should talk about this?”

Man, he sounded...oh no, he wasn’t going there.

She didn’t respond. “Ava?”

“Make up your mind, Kaden.” He could tell she was standing right on the other side of the door now. Heaven help him, he could imagine the look in her eyes, the heat in her cheeks, the shape of her body. “Hot or cold? Let me know when you figure it out. Until then, there’s nothing for us to talk about.”

A growl slipped between his lips before he could stop it.

“Everything all right?”

Kaden swung toward the voice. Alain stood at the bottom of the open air staircase, his hand on the railing. Kaden didn’t like that he’d been so absorbed in Ava that he’d let anyone sneak up on him. He was losing his edge.

“Yeah. Fine.” Giving one last glance at Ava’s door, he headed back down the hall toward his room. He needed to get his head on straight. Needed some time alone...away from the bewitching Shewolf.

Ava waited until she heard his footsteps retreat before she let out the breath she’d been holding. She’d half expected him to burst through the door and make good on yesterday’s promise. And dammit if she wasn’t disappointed when he didn’t. Her eyes smarted.

How typical that he desired her but didn’t want to act on that desire. She sank down on the edge of the bed and dropped her forehead into her hands.

He filled her mind with images of them entwined together, oblivious to the world, lost in each other. And then he doused cold water on the dream.

Nevermind the fact that he was smart to keep things verbal and flirty rather than physical and -- Heat rushed through her at the thought and she sprang from the bed.

Pacing to the window and back, she told herself to be strong. The countless hours she’d spent in the gym, the late nights she’d spent helping her father, the sore feet from helping her mother host events...it’d all be

worth it. She just had to be strong. Just a few more days and her fate would be decided.

If her father named her Alpha, she'd scratch her itch and move on to more important matters. Like earning the respect of the pack.

If her father didn't name her Alpha...she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. That was all--

"Ava?"

She frowned. That wasn't Kaden. In fact, it sounded like Alain.

"Just a sec," she called.

She tugged a pair of yoga pants up over her hips and quickly tied the knot. As she stepped to the door she jerked a tank-top over her head and wiped her eyes.

"Hey," she said as she opened the door. The tall wolf gave her a grim smile which she tried, and failed, to return.

"You all right?" He glanced back down the hall, obviously having overhead her outburst.

She left the door open and retreated into the room. "Good question."

"So you and Kaden, huh?"

She turned to see him watching her carefully, his hands tucked into his back pockets. The stance only accentuated his long lean frame and the incredible muscles in his arms. Why couldn't she have met him oh say twenty years ago?

She closed her eyes for a moment, forcing herself to calm down. Then she met his gaze again. "There's no me and Kaden. We both want to be the next Alpha of WhitePaw."

"But you're a Garnier." Alain frowned, dropping his hands from his pockets. He rubbed his thumb against the inside of his forefinger over and over.

"That I am." She snuggled into the arm chair in front of the window and tucked her feet beneath her. "Doesn't matter though. The Alpha picks who succeeds him. At least in our Pack."

"Kaden is the favorite, then?"

Ava gave an inelegant half snort/half nod. "Of course. Haven't you noticed? He's the golden child." The Pack Beta. And male. All male...

Alain's eyebrows shot up at her tone.

He was still favoring his finger. "What'd you do to yourself?" she asked.

“Huh?” He glanced down at his hand. “Oh. Splinter.”

Somewhere in the house, the phone rang. For once, she didn't feel like being polite and perfect. Instead, she let it ring, dropped her feet to the floor and went into the adjoining bathroom for her toiletry bag. After retrieving her tweezers she returned. “Let me see.”

Alain dutifully uncrossed the injured arm and held out his hand to her. She took his palm in hers and aimed the silver tips at the speck of wood.

“Ava, it's your...” Kaden's voice trailed to a stop as he stopped in her doorway. She glanced up and cocked her head at him. He tucked the cordless phone against his chest. The man sure did know how to fill out a pair of jeans. She kept her expression neutral though. He couldn't know the turmoil inside her. “Isn't this quaint?” he mocked, a handsome eyebrow hitching upward.

Just like that, another bucket of cold water...right over her senses. So much for the neutral expression. She cut her eyes and gave him a glare that would incinerate a lesser man. Too bad he wasn't a mere mortal.

She gave the splinter a tug. “There. Have any splinters you need removed, Mr. Black?”

She turned back to the bathroom. “Like from your ass maybe?” Evidently Alain heard her because he chuckled softly.

“Your mother's on the phone, Miss Garnier,” Kaden called.

Ava darted back into the other room and jerked the phone from his grasp. “Mom?”

Kaden and Alain were staring at each other, electricity arcing between them. Oh brother. She made shooing motions with her hands until they'd both departed.

Her mom was saying something about her eldest sister. “Are you ready for this? How does Auntie Ava sound?”

The words sank in for a heartbeat before Ava squealed with delight. “Really?”

Footsteps thundered in the hall. “Ava?” Kaden burst through her doorway with Alain hot on his heels.

Even with the two brooding werewolves crowding her space she couldn't knock the doofy grin off her face.

Everything all right? Kaden mouthed.

“Mom, hang on.” She covered the mouthpiece with her other hand. “I’m going to be an Auntie. Alana’s pregnant.”

Kaden’s features softened and then he smiled the most beautiful smile she’d ever seen. It made her think of sunsets in his arms and tender morning wake-up kisses and babies who had his smile.

Chapter Fourteen

The phone slipped from Ava’s hand as Kaden whispered her name. She stepped forward, forgetting his earlier rejection by the river. All the jumbled emotions, the lust, the craziness ironed out and everything made sense. Him. Her. Them. The past didn’t seem as important. Neither did the future.

What happened would happen. But right now...this. Them--Alain backed out of the door leaving them alone. This moment with just the two of them, this was real.

Three strides brought him toe to toe with her. He cupped her cheek in his hand and she closed her eyes for a moment, savoring his touch.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. His voice was so tender that she opened her eyes, stared up into his gorgeous brown gaze, full of worry and remorse.

Oh, Kaden.

It took a strong man to admit when he was wrong. To apologize. To make her feel like she mattered more than anything else. He accomplished it with two words and a single touch.

"Kad--" She didn't get a chance to finish his name before he slanted his lips across hers.

Hands skimming down her back, he jerked her against him. Flush. Chest against chest. Though a sheet of tissue paper wouldn’t fit between them, she needed to be closer. Naked. Skin against skin.

All this time. All these years. Her desire had grown and now she was in his arms. Returning kiss for kiss. Smiling as he growled against her lips. Gasping when he thrust his tongue into her mouth, igniting a fire inside her.

Always the fearless leader, he backed them up until her legs hit the edge of the bed. Without severing their lips, she sank back and he

followed, his big body covering her own. Just like she'd always dreamed, he was solid. Strong. Exquisite.

"Ava...are you there? Ava?" Her mother's voice pierced through her lust.

Ava blinked.

Kaden and Alain stood on the other side of the room, eyebrows raised. She glanced down at the phone clutched in her hand.

Holy hell. That daydream had been so real. So--hot...

She swallowed, turning away from them. "Yeah," she said to her mother, then licked her lips.

Somewhere in the house, a door slammed, further pulling her from her daze. "I've gotta go Mom. Give Alana my love. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"All right. Good night."

Ava stared down at the phone in her hands. Alana was pregnant. Ava was on a wild ride down the rapids of emotion and lust. The possibility that there were poachers on the ranch-- it was all too much for one night.

"Is everything okay?" Kaden asked.

She turned toward him and found them alone together, just like in the daydream. "Fine."

Just peachy, in fact. The light hit him just right, setting off a contrast of lights and shadows, showing each muscle of his torso to the best affect. Did he have a secret life as an underwear model?

Get ahold of yourself, Ava. Forget about the runaway hormones and erotic daydreams.

Easier said than done. In that daydream, he'd been the world's most accomplished kisser. And in three easy steps she could find out if her dreams were true.

Yep. She was just freaking fabulous.

"So Alana's pregnant..."

Frustrated, sexually and otherwise, she pursed her lips and give him her best 'no-shit-Sherlock' look. Sometimes it would be so much easier to just shift and bite him in the ass.

Right now she needed something else to focus her attention on. She needed space. And since he didn't appear to be leaving any time soon...she pulled her shoulders back and brushed past him.

"I need to get some air." And time. And distance from Kaden so her emotions would balance the hell out. Damn, it sucked being a Shewolf sometimes. Torn between a beast and delicate human femininity. Damn, damn, double-damn.

Kaden was so tempted to grab her as she walked by. To run his hands over her skin, trace the thumping pulse point at her neck with his tongue, sink his fingers into her hair.

She'd been effervescent with happiness over the prospect of becoming an aunt. In all the years he'd known her, he'd never seen her smile like that. But something had erased that smile.

She'd gone into a trance, staring at him like she was watching a movie.

He knew he should let her go. Give her the space she needed. That they both needed. An Alpha didn't have the luxury of chasing tail. He had to be sensible. Put the Pack before his own needs.

He wasn't the Alpha...yet.

And Ava's scent made his blood catch fire. The warm, womanly fragrance had shifted in the last twenty four hours. He couldn't rest until he'd put his finger...or nose... on it. The wolf in him demanded he follow her and find out what had changed. One inch at a time. Clothing optional.

Who was he kidding? Clothing wouldn't be optional. He knew himself too well. Tonight he'd lay awake, obsessing over her smile and how good she smelled. Just like a ripening berry. Only stronger. And more exotic. More magnetic. More--

Oh no.

She couldn't-- He strode back down the hall and found her across the table from Wes, hands on her hips. The two of them stared down at a map.

"Here's the ranch property," Wes said, tracing an outline with his finger.

Kaden paused, inhaling deeply. No, his nose was not fooling him.

Ava leaned in for a closer look and Wes's chocolate gaze lifted. His nose started to twitch; then his nostrils flared. For a tiny moment a look of bliss softened his features. Then he shoved away from the table and took three steps back, his gaze swerving to Kaden's.

“Are you okay?” Ava asked, clearly concerned. Her slender frame skirted the table and she started to reach for Wes’ arm.

Kaden stopped the growl that simmered deep inside from escaping his lips. Wes held up a hand to the woman between them and nodded quickly.

“I’m fine. Where’d you say you guys were?” Wes shook his head, as if to clear it.

No doubt the same four words were running through the other wolf’s mind. She’s the boss’s daughter.

From this angle Kaden saw the corner of her mouth turn down before she turned back to the map. “We were about here.”

Ava braced one hand against the well-worn table-top. The yoga pants hugged her ass in a completely indecent way as she pointed to a group of green squiggly lines.

Did she have to bend over like that? She might as well wear a target with the words Do Me! written on it.

Wes sighed and backed up further, turning away from her slightly. Or the sight of that gorgeous ass, more likely.

Kaden was glad he wasn’t the only one going through a mini hell-on-earth but the thought of Ava attracting any man but him...willingly or not, made the wolf inside him snarl. She was too delicious to resist.

And you have no claim on her.

Fuck.

“I seriously doubt you could see a neighboring property from there,” Wes said as Kaden pulled his gaze away from the display of seductive curves.

The light overhead held her in its spotlight, turning her hair gold. The ultimate siren’s call... He could easily slide up behind her, brush those luscious locks aside, and leave his mark on her neck. Right there in that delicate spot between throat and shoulder, where her skin was satiny smooth and warm. Ten seconds and he could claim her for all the world to see.

Fists clenched, Kaden crossed his arms over his chest.

“Several of the guys are saddling up,” Wes told him, his voice low and rough. “We’re going to go have a look. Think you could creep back up to the ridge and keep watch.”

Kaden nodded. “No problem.”

Wesley nodded. "Got my cell number?"

Kaden pulled his cell from his pocket and they exchanged numbers.

"We'll meet back here in," Wes glanced at his watch, "two hours?"

Kaden nodded again, his gaze swerving to Ava. Her brows lifted in annoyance and he knew what she was going to say before the words even left her lips.

"What should I do?"

Wes bolted for the door, shoving a cowboy hat on his head. He didn't look directly at her. More waved in the direction of the table. "You stay here and hold down the fort."

Ava's eyes flashed. But Wes was already gone.

She started after him but Kaden put himself between her and the doorway.

"Kaden!"

"Next time, Ava."

"I don't understand why I have to stay home like a good little wifey while you guys are out tracking poachers. And don't you dare say it's because I'm a woman. I'm stronger than half the men on this ranch and you know it."

Wifey?

Color blossomed in her cheeks and he almost caved. Almost kissed her. Damn the consequences. God knew he wanted to. More than he wanted his next breath or bacon for breakfast. He wanted to forget the ranch, the Pack, and everything else so that he could do exactly what he'd wanted to do to her at the wedding.

"I know you are." She was stronger than any woman he'd ever met. Physically and mentally.

"Then why--"

"Can't you tell?"

Those amber eyes shot liquid fire up at him.

"You're in heat, Ava." Of the fifty two weeks in the year, her cycle had to be now. When they were stuck together in close quarters. When he'd finally noticed her as more than the Alpha's daughter. And everything inside of him was demanding he stake his claim. Mate with her.

Her eyebrows jerked up and her jaw dropped open.

Claim.

He licked his lips. "I need you to stay in the house. Just do that for me, okay?"

All at once the fire inside her dimmed and she looked ready to cry with frustration. No man was good with tears, least of all him. Something inside him ached at the knowledge that she was unhappy. Frustrated. Stuck inside like a dog in a kennel.

"Why?" she finally asked.

She'd given him brutal honesty an hour ago on the back porch. She deserved the truth from him now.

"Because I'm not the only male who's going to notice--"

"Kaden--" Frustration laced her tone.

"And I can't stand the thought of the other guys sniffing around you. You have no idea how good you smell, sweetheart. It's damn near impossible to resist-- Don't make me have to tear one of my friends off of you." He growled at the thought, his inner wolf buzzing with violent energy.

Her eyes widened but she didn't back down. She would never back down. He liked that. Admired it.

"I can take care of myself!" She started to brush past him again but he quickly thwarted her effort.

Hard headed, beautiful-- stubborn.

"No one touches what's mine, Ava. Got it?"

Chapter Fifteen

Kaden didn't give Ava time to respond to his declaration. He was feeling far too primal for his liking. Afraid he'd succumb to temptation; he set her away from him and reached for the doorknob. As he strode away from the house he heard her shout. But it was the way her scent, aroused and willing, lingered on his fingertips that made him smile.

He circled around to the back of the house and scanned the area for any onlookers. Coast clear, he shucked his pants and shifted back to his wolf form. The night air had cooled in the short time he'd been inside. After picking up his cell phone with his teeth, he trotted up the slope behind the ranch house, ears up. At the top of the first hill, he took a deep breath. Grass, cattle, water, birds. Nothing unusual on the air.

Slinking back to the spot where they'd first spotted the lights, he paused, belly to the ground. Ears flicking back and forth he picked up a soft, far off sound. Hoof beats. And...squeaking leather. Narrowing his gaze he watched the ridge, still beneath the moonlight.

Ava's frustration vanished the instant Kaden stepped back across the threshold and pulled her into the circle of his arms. The look in his eyes was predatory and if she'd ever had any doubt of the powerful wolf lurking beneath his skin, the notion was cleared up the instant she felt his iron grip. Solid muscle coiled beneath her palms. Her fingertips, ten small points of contact, each one a sensor to his desire.

Time and place forgotten, she stretched up to meet his lips. To show him just how much she wanted him, how much she'd always wanted him. They moved against each other, mouths exploring, hands roaming, in a singular motion of need.

For an instant, Kaden severed the kiss. Bending down, he scooped her into his arms, then ever so gently laid her on the couch. The leather was cool against her heated skin, but the look in Kaden's eyes wiped away all thoughts of catching a chill. He studied her slowly, thoroughly. His gaze swept up from her feet, over her knees, lingering so long at the apex of her eyes that she actually felt a blush climb her cheeks. Further north still...a slow, sexy smile pulled the corners of his mouth up.

Why had she been fighting this? And what the hell made her think that Kaden was a simple itch that she could scratch?

"You look good enough to eat," he murmured, staring at her lips.

Her breath caught as he settled himself next to her. Squeezed on the couch, there was no room to spare, not that she wanted any. She didn't want anything but sweat and skin separating them. He kissed her shoulder and she tipped her head away, everything inside her melting as his lips roamed over her skin. A strong hand slid beneath her shirt, splaying across her stomach.

How was it that he could make her dissolve into a bundle of desire with a simple, almost chaste touch?

“You’re thinking too much...” he whispered against her ear as his palm slid over her left breast. “Just feel...”

A fresh wave of heat raced over her skin and she turned to meet his gaze. There was plenty she wanted to feel. Sliding her hand down his chest, over the flat plain of his stomach, she smiled when he sucked in an anxious breath. His eyelids shuttered. Amazed at the power she held over him she dipped her hand lower and traced the edge of his jeans with a fingertip.

“You’re messing with fire, Ava,” he warned.

“I’m already in flames,” she told him.

He growled low in his throat and slanted his lips across hers. Entwined, he teased her nipple until it ached for his mouth. She returned his kiss, tongues mating, as she popped open the button of his jeans. He nipped her bottom lip as she slid the zipper down. Arcing into his touch, she closed her hand around his —

“Ava, wake up.” A strong hand on her shoulder shook her awake.

No. Not again.

“Come on sleeping beauty.”

She’d know that voice anywhere. Kaden gently shook her again. Her body felt like a mass of lava and frayed nerve endings. She took a deep breath and blinked up at early morning light.

He was dressed just as he’d been the night before. Shirtless. Well worn denim hugging his thighs. She licked her lips and he groaned.

Unable to stop herself, she reached for his hand and pulled him down. He didn’t protest, merely aligned his big body over hers, pressing her into the cushions. She had to kiss him. For real. Not a dream. Not a day-dream. Real, lips-against-lips, tongues mating, full-on kiss him.

Slipping her fingers through one of his belt loops she closed the distance between them. “I have to do this,” she whispered just before their lips met.

“Ava — wake up. It’s one of the mares.” An insistent hand at her hip jerked her from her dream.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

Chapter Sixteen

The fogginess of the dream made Ava blink up at the man hovering over her. Head aching, she held a hand up to her heated cheeks. Why were all the good dreams just dreams?

"Where's Wesley?" Alain asked.

The light from the kitchen silhouetted him and she scrunched her eyes closed, turning away. Who cared where Wesley was? She just wanted to go back to sleep. And finish the dream.

"Ava? Where's Wesley? There's something wrong with one of the mares." Alain shook her again. Ava knew exactly which mare Alain was talking about. Between prepping meals she'd been hanging out in the barn. Chipper was heavy with foal.

But this time, when her gaze snapped to his she saw his nose twitch. Oh hell. His gaze narrowed on her and his pupils dilated. His posture went from concerned to alert.

"Wesley's out with the others looking for poachers."

She knew the instant that the words were out of her mouth that it'd been the wrong thing to say. He shook his head as if to clear it, but when his gaze connected with hers again, she saw the fire there. The lust.

His gaze zeroed in on her lips and his fingers flexed into the sofa tissue of her hip.

Ava scooted to the end of the sofa. "Why don't you call the vet? I'll go check on the mare." She needed to get out of here and fast.

"Later."

He leaned closer and she sucked in a deep breath. She didn't want to fight him. But there was something incredibly dangerous about his slow, calculated movements. Gone was the elegant dancer, the easy-on-the-eyes-cowboy from yesterday.

In his place was a predator.

He got down on one knee, cocked his head to the right, and studied her knee as he walked his fingers across it.

"Alain..." she said in a warning voice, her abs coiled tightly. It was hard to resist him when her body was screaming a singular word: mate. That's all that mattered. Breed. Keep the species alive.

But he wasn't the man she wanted. Not really.

He'll do, the wolf whispered.

“Go call the vet. I’ll see to the mare,” she said, but the words ended up as a whisper as he leaned forward, invading her personal space. To Ava, there were few things in the world so intimate as sharing air with someone else. Right now she felt as if she were about to suffocate. Her chest was tight, her womb aching. The wolf wanted free reign; she was tired of holding back, of putting duty over desire.

The handsome man in front of her didn’t make it any easier. It was hard to resist those eyes...

She scented the change in him. Gone was the reasonable man. In his place, the animal ready to mate. He leaned closer, his lips scant inches from her throat. She tipped her head away but he wasn’t deterred. Afraid to so much as move, lest she spur his attack, she held her breath. He inhaled deeply and his palm slid down the outside of her thigh.

No one touches what’s mine, Ava. Got it? Kaden’s words rumbled through her mind and her inner wolf gave a low growl. Even to her own ears, she sounded pleased rather than fierce.

She would not give in to him, to her wolf, to the need that begged her to let go. There were some things in this life more important than mating. More important than a quick romp to scratch an itch.

Ava gave another growl, this time with a little more ferocity.

“I love it when you growl like that,” he murmured and brushed his lips against her skin.

Another time. Another place. In another lifetime she would have been on him like butter on bread. But he was the wrong wolf.

“Enough,” she snarled, planting her hands against the solid wall of his chest. But before she could shove him ass over teakettle, he jerked away and went sailing through the air.

Kaden stood over her, an impenetrable wall, looking more dangerous than she’d ever seen him. Eyes dark as night, the veins in his arms bulging, his posture erect and deadly. He glanced from her to Alain and back, nostrils flaring. She could see the wolf trying to take over. Trying to change. It wanted to fight.

Kaden’s growl was far more intimidating than hers and when he turned back to Alain, hands loose at his sides but twitching to make a fist, she realized he wasn’t just ready for a brawl. He was ready to kill.

She fully expected Alain to back down. To turn and walk away. Had she been in his position, staring down the lethal man in front of her, she

wouldn't just walk away. She'd tucked tail and run as fast as her feet could carry her. Her more sensible side told her she should do just that.

But Alain simply stared back at Kaden, his chest puffed up and ready for battle. The two men were a hair-trigger away from going were and ripping each other apart.

This was all her fault.

Standing quickly, she didn't give her equilibrium time to balance before she grabbed Kaden by the wrist and used every ounce of her strength to jerk him out the front door. They both needed some air. The world moved in slow motion as she strode across the porch and down the well-worn steps. The instant her feet hit the dirt, he dug in his heels. The halt in momentum was like a boat dropping the world's biggest anchor, spinning her around like a kite on the end of a string.

The light from the living room was just bright enough illuminate his face. The look in his eyes made her release her grasp and back up a step. He sucked in a sharp breath and his ribcage expanded.

He touched you.

Ava didn't need to hear the words to know what he was thinking. The war inside him was evident. He wanted to fuck her. And he wanted to rip Alain limb from limb. The two emotions met and clashed in his eyes. His pupils contracted and dilated, as if he couldn't decide what to do.

The hormones coursing through her made it hard to keep her wits. Never in her life had she felt a need so strong. It was like a physical weight pushing her to her knees. The wolf wanted to drop to all fours and beg him to take her. The softening she felt inside surprised her. A peace. A warmth that defied her fear from moments ago. The knowledge that he was the one. He had always been the one.

He hooked his hands over those perfectly lean hips and stared her down.

It was on the tip of her tongue to apologize.

But as his gaze zeroed in on her mouth she realized she had nothing to apologize for. She hadn't woken up that morning and decided to become irresistible to the males of their species. And she hadn't invited Alain's advances.

It wasn't her fault that poachers were likely out there stealing the Pack's cattle. Nor was it her fault that Kaden had thought it a better idea to leave her at home like a good little woman.

She so over being the good little woman.

Frowning, she glanced up to see Alain standing in the doorway and ground her jaws together. Perhaps she'd over stayed her welcome on the ranch. She didn't want them fighting over her.

"Alain said something's wrong with Chipper," she said, returning her gaze to Kaden. "I suggest one of you contact the vet while I go check on her." And as soon as she saw to Chipper she was going to call for a helicopter to come pick her up and take her home. It was past time for some distance. She needed to clear her head and convince her father to name her the Alpha. After that she'd deal with Kaden and the desire he created inside her.

Chapter Seventeen

Ava strode across the yard toward the barn, wishing she'd taken the time to put on shoes. The ground was rough and cold beneath her feet.

Why wasn't Wesley back yet? Hadn't he promised to return in two hours? She should have asked Kaden about that. She would have...if she'd been thinking clearly. If she hadn't had to stop a brawl between him and Alain.

Hopefully one of the two wolves knew what was going on with the poachers. She didn't like that the head rancher hadn't checked in. At least...she hadn't heard the phone ring.

She didn't have her watch on, so she didn't know how many hours had passed since he'd been gone, but she could tell by the scent of the early morning dew and the way the horizon was just a tiny bit brighter to the East than to the West. Morning would be here soon and with it, the harsh light of day.

Maybe she should ask Kaden or Alain to go check on Wesley and the guys. No. They knew how to do their job. And Wesley, well, he was all wolf. He'd be okay. It was the poachers she should be worried about.

Ava got as far as the barn door before a steely hand tightened around her upper arm. As a trickle of alarm shot through her, she took a deep breath, scenting the air.

There was only one man who smelled like a heady combination of wolf, brute, hay, and man.

She should have guessed it was him. But in the back of her mind, she'd been scared that Alain had come after her. Or one of the ranch hands who'd been flirting with her. Neither of those options suited. She'd have to send Alain or a cowboy packing and didn't relish another confrontation.

And she wasn't ready for a conversation with Kaden.

Not when he had her so twisted up inside. Not when she felt like she was on fire from the inside out.

"Let me go Kaden."

"We're not finished yet."

"As soon as I know Chipper is okay, I'm calling Daddy for a helicopter."

His other hand closed around her other bicep and though he didn't pull her back against him, his warmth radiated around her.

"Why?" His voice was low, and dare she hope, colored with confusion.

"I shouldn't have come here, Kaden." It'd been a tactical error on her part, thinking that she could come out here and show what she was made of. Strong and capable. Team player and all that.

Thinking that she could remain impartial to Kaden had been her biggest mistake to date. There was no ignoring him. No ignoring the way his big body called to hers. How had she ever thought she could ignore those gorgeous lips or the way they curved upward in the most spine tingling of smiles?

What had possessed her to think that she could outsmart him? Put him off his game, sweep in and finally garner the accolades she'd been hunting for her whole life?

He didn't say a word, but the careful restraint in his grip made her want to weep.

You're not a crybaby, she told herself. But that didn't change the riot of emotions and hormones pumping through her.

There'd been so many nights she'd dreamt of him, of them, meeting like this in the dark. Passion overcoming boundaries and even common sense. And somehow, somewhere in the last forty eight hours those lines had become so thoroughly blurred that she'd forgotten who they were. What they were. What they both wanted.

Out here in the wide open expanse, it was so easy to forget and just feel. Lose sight of the prize and fall for--

Why do you walk away from him? Why do you resist when this is what you both want? The wolf asked. You know he's the one.

Ava was so tired of resisting. But she couldn't take any more rejection. If only there was a way to make him lose control, lose that carefully built restraint. If he could see how good they'd be together...that's all she'd wanted.

And he'd shattered that. Twice.

But he was here now.

Alive. Warm. Strong.

God help her if she were dreaming. Again.

"You're not dreaming," he murmured, turning her toward him.

Oh heavens, she must have spoken out loud.

Ava looked the long way up to meet his gaze and felt everything soft and feminine inside her melt. Gone was the wolf hell-bent on destruction. In his place was the handsome, charming man who side-stepped her defenses so easily. Who'd made her forget how he'd carelessly broken her young heart. Who'd wounded her in the wee hours this morning.

In that moment, she couldn't think of a single reason to deny him, deny herself this pleasure. He was here and the look in his eye said he wasn't going anywhere. The hand splayed against the small of her back said he was as tired of the carousel ride as she was. The hand cupping her cheek gave her hope.

"Thank God," she whispered.

With lightning fast reflexes he jerked her against him. She didn't have a second to react or examine the way her body fit so perfectly against his before his head descended.

Heat blazed down her neck and across her shoulders until her whole body was consumed. His lips met hers with a sense of urgency that matched her own.

Tasting. Exploring. Conquering.

Then, as if she wasn't close enough, he slid his other arm around her waist, drawing her closer.

He held her prisoner against him, his naked chest rising and falling, rubbing against her hardened nipples. Tension radiated from him and she felt an answering tightness in her own body. Damn, how she wanted him. Right here. Right now.

All the fire and passion banked inside him rushed to the surface, demanding her complete submission. With one large hand pressed against the small of her back and the other splayed between her shoulder blades, he held her close, made her feel safe and cherished.

Arms around his neck, she kissed him back, realizing how inevitable this moment had been. Years of crushing on him. A few months of verbal jabs. Days of physical proximity and temptation, blotted out the past.

This was exactly what she'd been craving. Yearning for, for so very long. Like a rubber band snapping, they'd finally, furiously, come together. Found their way into each other's arms. Stopped resisting.

And now...now he held her like he'd never let her go. Kissed her like she was the only woman he'd ever wanted. She was sure that at any moment they would go up in flames.

What a way to go.

Her inner wolf let out a yelp of pleasure and he groaned low in his throat. What a delicious sound. It reached down inside of her, delighting everything that was feminine and aching to be touched. That single, deep rumble caused an ache between her legs, heavy and tight, that only he could ease.

His tongue teased the seam of her lips and she gasped. Predator that he was, he took immediate advantage, sweeping inside. Hot. Wet.

Their breath mingled and her fingers flexed into his skin. Tongues dueling, he pressed the steely length of his erection against her stomach.

Her thin tank and yoga pants did nothing to hide his desire. They were a flimsy barrier at best. A barrier she didn't want between them. She moaned as he trailed his lips down her jaw and nipped her ear. Impatient, she reached for the hem of her shirt and tugged it up as another sound joined the mix. The sound of pain.

Chipper.

"Kaden..." She sighed as his lips brushed over hers on the way to her other ear.

Duty called. It always did.

He groaned again, cupping her face between his hands.

"What the hell was that?" he whispered, tipping his forehead against hers. He wasn't talking about the mournful sound and she knew it.

She stared at his lips, wanting to kiss him again. And never stop. Dragging a ragged breath into her lungs, she met his gaze. He was breathing just as hard as she was. And she could see he was equally dazed.

"I have no idea." She'd been prepared for a dynamite kiss. Passion. Heat. But she'd never expected to feel like the last two people on earth, consumed by a fire she now feared would never be extinguished. No wonder she'd always followed his movements across the room, found him waiting for her in her dreams.

Their chemistry wouldn't be denied, no matter how much she'd tried. No matter the history between them. She hadn't thought of that day in a long time. But being with him now, wrapped in his arms, kissed into oblivion...she could almost forgive him for breaking her heart.

His thumbs stroked over her jaws, gentle yet needy.

"Me either," he mused. "But I want to do it again."

Chapter Eighteen

Heaven help her, she didn't want to stop with a kiss. She'd told him as much last night. Only then, she hadn't known just how powerful, how...mind altering those kisses could be. Her insides tingled with anticipation and moisture gathered between her thighs...ready and willing.

"We can't." The mare needed help. They needed to sort out their issues because a reaction like that could easily make them forget about anything but each other. Reluctantly, she took a step backward, deeper into the darkness of the barn.

A horse sneezed and then there was a low whiny from the end stall.

He pulled his shoulders down and back, emphasizing each perfectly toned muscle in his chest. Somehow, seeing him half naked was far more sexy than seeing him in the buff.

"Right." He cleared his throat. "The horse."

His eyes told the story. He was fighting the wolf. Fighting his lust and what nature wanted. Needed. The battle was visible in the dark depths, the pinched brows, the way he dropped his gaze to the dirt beneath their feet.

Hand at the small of her back, he ushered her down the length of the barn. One by one, the horses backed away as Kaden passed. She didn't blame them. He was all man right now, but beneath his skin lurked a

predator. They could smell it. Him. Centuries of survival instinct couldn't be ignored.

"You're making them nervous," she told him.

"What do you want me to do?" he bit out, but she knew that his terseness was caused by the ache in his pants. The unfulfilled desire coursing through his veins.

She nodded toward a pile of hay. "Feed them while I check on Chipper."

Ava could tell by the way his jaw tightened that he wasn't used to being told what to do, no matter how gently. Because of everything they'd been through, everything they'd shared, she found herself wanting to sooth him.

She placed a hand on his arm. "They'll learn to trust you. They're just like men. Feed them and they'll love you forever." Where had that come from?

She wanted to snatch the words back, but there were no take-backs in life. No matter how intimate or embarrassing an outburst might be. Straightening, she offered him her most carefree smile.

"Is that so?" he asked, his voice quiet. He was still as a fence post. Watching her. Staring at her lips.

His jaws flexed and his eyes closed for a full two seconds, then he took a measured step back, severing the connection. "You should take care of that horse."

He was right of course. But as he continued to back away from her, she felt a chill replace the fire. A void. It was more than the cool morning air and a sweatshirt wouldn't have kept her from shivering.

Rubbing her hands up and down her arms, Ava crept into Chipper's stall. The big bay mare stood by the back wall making soft grunting noises, as if each breath hurt. Ava knew that feeling, felt it each time she shifted back from her wolf form. Chipper turned toward Ava, the white star in the center of her forehead bright in the darkness.

"It's okay, pretty girl," Ava soothed. She wondered what was going on in the poor creature's mind. "You're going to be all right."

She didn't know if that was true or not, but she had to believe that years of evolution were on their side. Ava took a slow step to the right and saw evidence that the mare's water had broken.

Several long minutes passed, Chipper grunting, Ava biting her lower lip. Where the hell was Wesley? Surely he had his cell phone on even if he'd turned it to vibrate. She'd ask Kaden to call him.

As if thinking about him had conjured his presence, she heard Kaden step up to the stall, his boots crunching the hay.

"How's she doing?" He asked softly from outside the stall.

Ava glanced over her shoulder and saw him through the bars. Steady, calm, his brow pinched in concern. Thank goodness for moonlight and excellent night vision.

She kept her voice soft and monotone. "I'm not sure. She's obviously in labor but I've never delivered a foal before." And she'd never felt so helpless.

"The vet's on her way."

Chipper turned, rubbing her muzzle against Ava's arm. She reached out and ran her hand over the white star between the mare's eyes. A soft nicker filled the air and then Chipper began pawing the straw lining the stall floor.

"Call the bunkhouse and see if any of the hands have ever delivered a foal," Ava instructed, feeling out of her element. "And then call Wesley."

"On it."

Ava watched the handsome wolf walk away and lift his cell phone to his ear. Heart pounding she turned back to the big horse and ran a hand down her neck.

"We'll get through this pretty girl."

For some reason, the horses didn't seem to mind Ava's appearance in the barn each day. They never appeared nervous. Not the way they were with Kaden.

Chipper had been eager for a treat since the moment Ava had walked down the aisle with a big bag of carrots on her first visit.

The mare lowered her head and then slowly, carefully sank to her knees. She settled onto the ground with a heavy sigh.

"I wish you could tell me what you need," Ava whispered, unable to stop the anxiety seeping into her. Possible scenarios raced through her mind. Things going wrong. Chipper becoming too agitated. The foal getting hurt.

No. She wouldn't go there. Nature would handle things and she'd do her best to help it along.

Chipper gave a shuddering sigh, her big belly tensing.

"It sucks being a girl, doesn't it, sweetheart." She ached to pet the mare's neck. To offer some form of comfort, but didn't dare get in the way. "Men think with their penises and we have to suffer the consequences. If childbirth were easy, men could do it too."

The mare nickered softly, as if agreeing. Then she tossed her head, black mane flying. Another contraction tightened the mare's belly and Ava felt a sympathetic ache.

She was surprised how quiet her inner wolf was. If she had to put a name to it, she'd have to say peaceful. Unlike wild wolves, Ava never had to scavenge for food, so the only thing she felt toward the mare was sympathy. But she certainly didn't want horse flank for dinner.

"You're doing good, pretty girl. Your baby will be here before you know it."

Leaning to the right, she checked the foal's progress. "I can see the hooves!"

Chipper tossed her head again.

"Good job, Chipper. Thatta girl."

Several tense minutes passed. Grunt, contraction, grunt. Ava felt completely helpless. Regardless of the fact that women gave birth around the world every day, she couldn't help but worry that something was wrong. She was no vet. Her years of research, her knowledge of business, her ability to plan a flawless party, or run five miles...none of that mattered right now.

Almost as if they understood what was happening, the rest of the barn had gone quiet.

Instinct brought Ava to her knees. "Shh... I'm just going to check things out."

Chipper swung her head around toward her belly and made the most forlorn sound Ava had ever heard. Sad, pained, frustrated. There was no need for translation.

"I bet you're wishing for an epidural, huh, big girl?" Ava kept up a steady stream of chatter as she crawled toward the mare's hindquarters. It seemed to sooth the animal. Thoroughly aware of how big the horse was, how strong those long legs would be, she made more soothing sounds.

Where was Kaden? Or Wesley for that matter? The timing of his poacher hunt really sucked.

"I still see the hooves. Want some help?"

Ava's eyes went wide as the horse nodded her head up and down emphatically. "I'll take that as a yes." She leaned forward and wrapped her hands around the golf-ball-sized hooves. A gentle tug yielded no results. She pulled harder.

"There we go," she murmured as the foal's nose appeared. "Almost there momma."

The scent of horse and hay hung heavy in the air. Ava spread her legs so she could get better control. One long pull and the foal landed in her lap. She estimated that the pile of wet, slimy fur and hooves weighed around a hundred pounds.

"It's a boy," Ava murmured and the mare sneezed. "He has your star."

The baby looked up at Ava with big brown eyes and she fell instantly in love. Nose twitching, tears rolled down her cheeks. "Hello, handsome. Welcome to the world."

She gave the colt a watery smile, uncaring that she was wet and tired, filled with emotions and unquenched desires. None of that, not her past, not her current problems, mattered. Never in her twenty four years had she been witness to childbirth. And until this moment, she hadn't understood what a true miracle it was. It seemed the odds were so stacked against the baby from the instant of conception all the way to that first breath and beyond.

But nature found a way.

Completely in awe, Ava wiped the tears from her eyes.

The foal sat up as his mother stood. Very carefully, like a gentle giant, the mare stepped closer and began to clean and nuzzle the baby.

"Why don't I give you two some privacy?"

Ava couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up her throat as the newborn made his first few attempts at standing on his own four legs. Shaky, he toppled into the hay between her legs. Then, summoning his strength, he made it.

"Look at you," Ava whispered, a feeling of joy taking over. Very carefully, he picked up those miniature hooves and made his way over to his mother to nurse.

Smiling, Ava stood. Heart full of love and happiness she turned to the door and saw half a dozen smiling faces outside the stall.

Chapter Nineteen

Kaden loved the look on Ava's face. Serene. Happy. Peaceful. The tension of the night now gone, there was a breathless quality to her that he'd never seen before. Her gaze flicked to his and he saw the sheen of tears. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't touched by the whole thing. And amazed by Ava's composure...even if she had made a few biting comments about the male of the species.

He'd teased her about planning parties because that wasn't something werewolves did. Or so he'd thought. Before they'd left for the ranch he'd wondered how she was going to make herself useful. Again, she'd proven him wrong.

And today she'd proven that she was fearless.

He'd been holding his breath, sure that the mare would not welcome a werewolf into her stall, especially at such a precarious time. Kaden had been kicked enough times to know just how strong the beasts were. They might not have claws or fangs, but they had superior strength.

Once again, Ava had stepped into the middle of the battle and worked her magic. There was something soothing about her. Her voice maybe. Or perhaps her touch. Whatever it was, he'd become addicted.

"You did good, kid," Wesley said as Ava exited the stall. He and the lady vet had arrived just in time for the birth but no one had uttered a word as Ava had coaxed the foal into the world.

Ava looked a little dazed but shot Wesley a delirious smile.

The sun was just peaking above the horizon, sending a shard of light through the barn, lighting her from the back. As it had before, her dark strawberry blonde hair seemed to glow like it was on fire.

Kaden would never get tired of that sight. Not in a thousand years, not if war broke out and he had to fight for his life. Not if he was the last werewolf on earth. She would always be a bright spot on the horizon, a beacon.

Ava glanced at the lady vet who carried a long black bag. "They're all yours doc."

"I don't think they need me at all, thanks to you," the vet said and patted Ava on the back. "But I'll check them out after he's done nursing."

Ava nodded then cut a glance at Kaden.

There was straw in her hair and her shirt was wet and dirty but he didn't care. A foreign emotion drove him toward her.

He cupped her cheeks in his hands and brushed his lips across hers. "You were amazing," he whispered.

"I'm dirty."

"I don't care," he said quickly. The sound of boots against concrete told him Wesley and the others had headed for the tackroom, leaving Kaden and Ava alone.

She hooked her hands over his wrists and stared into his eyes.

He ached to pick up where they'd left off, but there was a different kind of need as well. One born of a new found respect and admiration. One that had nothing to do with mating.

"You could be covered in horse manure and I really wouldn't care."

She laughed softly. "You're crazy, Kaden Black."

Crazy about you.

Why couldn't he say the words? God knew he meant them, so why couldn't he push them past his lips? He'd been falling for her, steadily, surely.

Hell, if he were honest with himself, he'd noticed her a long time ago, as she'd begun to blossom into a woman. Then as she'd made it known she intended to be the next Alpha of WhitePaw.

Even as her tongue had been wounding his ego, he'd been enamored with her fire.

That's what she was. Pure fire. A temptation he could no longer resist.

He leaned in for another kiss but she turned her head away.

"I really need--" She paused, as if she were choosing new words.

Me.

Say you need me.

The air froze in his lungs as he waited for her to finish her sentence.

"I need to go clean up."

Disappointment flooded him. Before he could say a word, she ducked around him and started down the long corridor toward the wide double doors. He turned to watch her, hands shoved in her back pockets as she strode away, head down.

Why did he feel like he'd just been kicked by a mule?

Go after her, the wolf demanded.

But he couldn't. An invisible force held him immobile. Somehow he knew that cleaning up was just an excuse. She needed time. Space.

He needed time with her, to show her that he'd made up his mind. To settle things. To show her that he accepted, welcomed, what his wolf had known all along.

Phillip Garnier stared at the young wolf seated on the other side of the large mahogany desk. A ball of unease sat heavily in his stomach. Near as he could remember, he hadn't felt this way since the night he'd mated with Patricia.

He steeped his fingers together and tapped them against his lips. The future of the pack depended on this mission.

"They suspect nothing?" he asked.

"No."

He could only hope that it stayed that way. His daughter had the best of him and his wife-mate. His strength and conviction, Patricia's passion and femininity. Unfortunately they didn't live in a society that was ready for a young, single female wolf to lead such a large and influential pack. Lately he'd begun to wonder if he'd made a mistake in encouraging Ava...telling her to be a leader.

She was dead set and he was going to have to crush her dream...if his plan didn't succeed.

He was hard on her, but with good reason. His wife-mate didn't agree. In Patricia's opinion, he didn't offer enough praise. Hell, his father hadn't offered him much praise either. Still didn't.

"And your thoughts on who the better Alpha would be?" It was a delicate situation. Ava was his daughter. Headstrong, smart, but a daughter never the less. And while he knew that she was a strong leader and had earned the respect of the pack, it didn't matter as far as many of the males of their pack were concerned. They saw femininity as a weakness, where Phillip knew it was a strength.

The problem with Ava was she often allowed her emotions to rule her. Especially where Kaden was concerned.

Though she tried to hide it, he knew she'd had a crush on the Beta of the pack for years. She'd flat out denied her attraction more than once.

Werewolves were sexual creatures and it hadn't surprised him when she'd taken a liking to Kaden Black.

Kaden was, after all, a strong, handsome, healthy wolf who knew how to lead and protect a pack. The runt of the litter and orphaned at an early age, he'd had a hard life growing up when the west had been wild. But he hadn't let that stop him from developing a level head and a charming personality. Traits that would work wonders for the pack well into the future. That was one of the many reasons Phillip had let him into the pack.

Kaden had no problem trusting his gut, but his heart was another matter.

Lately, Ava's infatuation had turned to delusion, thanks to the fact that Kaden was Phillip's second. Ava thought that birthright meant everything. It had...hundreds of years ago.

Now the world was changing so fast. The Alpha needed to be smart - street smart and book smart. With technology making it almost impossible to remain anonymous... He sighed. Future leaders would have a battle unlike any he'd ever known.

Unable to stop himself, he'd sheltered his children from the ugliness that was the world - human and werewolf. Now Ava was set on being the next Alpha.

But Kaden was more than man enough for the job, and Phillip's own son could care less about Pack duty.

Phillip saw no easy choice.

Kaden was the strongest, most level headed wolf he knew. Ava fit in flawlessly with the human world, the perfect mix of elegance, refinement, and savage instinct.

"I say neither. You cannot select Ava without alienating Kaden and half your pack. You cannot select Kaden without losing your daughter."

"It comes down to that, doesn't it?" The exact quandary Phillip had been living with for years. The one he did not have a ready answer for. For longer than he cared to admit, he'd hoped Ava and Kaden would fall in love and work things out themselves. A strong Alpha pair would be an easy sell to the pack.

But Ava resented Kaden's presence and Kaden had never seen Ava as more than a kid sister. The fact that she was Phillip's daughter certainly didn't help matters.

“I have an alternate suggestion.”
Phillip’s brows rose. “I’m all ears.”
“Announce that there’s a third option for Alpha.”

Chapter Twenty

“I wish I could get sick just so she’d take care of me like that,” Wesley murmured before taking another sip of coffee. Kaden had secretly been thinking the same thing, but to hear the words come out of another man’s mouth made him want to lash out.

And say what exactly? Paws off, she’s mine would only lead to a discussion he wasn’t ready to have.

Fresh faced even after a long day in the kitchen, he’d watched every movement she’d made since she’d arrived with supper an hour ago. Her enchiladas were the best he’d ever eaten. The men had tried to bribe the recipe out of her but she’d remained mum. Smiling, serving, fitting so seamlessly with the ranch hands. Gently keeping them in their place.

Despite her promise to call her father and request a helicopter come pick her up, she was still here. Several times throughout the day he’d wanted to go to her, but he’d stopped himself. If she needed time, he’d give it to her, but that hadn’t stopped him from listening for the distinctive whir of helicopter blades all day long.

When had she become the incredible woman in front of him? A ready smile with an easy going nature that balanced her ability to lead and solve problems...she was so different than the spoiled little girl who’d followed him around a decade ago.

He’d written her off as the Alpha’s daughter.

Too young.

Too inexperienced.

Too much trouble.

Now he saw all of those things...and more. She was still young. Still inexperienced in the ways of the world. She’d been sheltered much of her life, even if she didn’t realize it. But she didn’t let that hold her back. Though she’d never delivered a foal before, she hadn’t hesitated to step in and do what needed to be done.

She was still trouble to his peace of mind. But to her credit she’d kept everyone on the ranch at an arm’s length.

But at the end of the day, she would always be the Alpha's daughter. That complicated things. He'd always tried to look at her as he would a kid sister, but Wes was right. She made a wolf want to fake an illness to gain her attentions. She was a helluva cook.

How had he never known that?

Sure, he'd accused her of planning parties and doing girly things, but she was more than that. More than a pretty face and a great ass. She fixed disasters, soothed ruffled feathers, delivered foals. And she did it all with grace and very little support.

That was going to change.

"Need anything else?" Ava asked stopping in front of Wesley.

If Wesley's thoughts were running along the same vein as Kaden's he wanted to ask for something that wasn't on the menu. But Wesley was a true gentleman-wolf. He gripped his mug so tightly, obviously fighting hard to resist Ava's allure, Kaden expected it to shatter any second.

"You've outdone yourself, Ava. We've got everything we need." Wes gave a friendly nod but didn't meet the Shewolf's gaze.

Speak for yourself, buddy. Kaden wanted to go back to yesterday evening and change everything that happened after they'd arrived at the river. But there was no going back.

"All right, then I'm gonna turn in. Morning comes early," she said with a smile.

How the hell had she slid so seamlessly into ranch life? She was a city girl. If a Shewolf could ever be considered a city girl. It was hard to reconcile the young girl she'd once been with the capable woman she'd become.

She tugged the ties of her apron and lifted it over her head before loosely folding it. Dammit if he wasn't losing the battle with himself. Right now he wanted her more than any job. Any position within the Pack.

That scared the hell out of him.

Was it the heat? That was certainly part of it. But if he were honest with himself, he'd wanted her before the cycle began. He would still want her after it was over.

"I'll walk you back," Kaden said, standing. He made sure to keep his hands wrapped around his mug so he wouldn't be tempted to wrap them around her waist and haul her close like he had in the wee hours of the

morning. Though that'd been almost twelve hours ago he could still feel the impression of her body against his.

The cold shower he'd taken this afternoon had done little to cool his libido. Nor had it completely wiped her scent from his memory. Her closeness now only fanned the flames.

Tucking the apron beneath her arm, she stacked two of the empty casserole dishes. Kaden caught himself admiring her backside and quickly turned for the door. Several of the men were back on the job which meant he only needed to stay another day. He prayed he could control his baser instincts for that long.

Distance wouldn't make the feelings inside him go away. He was prepared for that. They just needed to get past the full moon -- then he was going to claim his woman.

After the events of the morning, especially their kiss, Ava wasn't sure of anything. Least of all herself and her attraction to the man at her side. Attraction was supposed to be simple. Easy. Basic. You either acted on it or you didn't.

Pack business made everything so complicated.

The wolf inside of her said "screw business and take your pleasure." Life must have been so much simpler when packs had been smaller, family only, without the need for entrepreneurial skills to fund and feed everyone.

Years ago, her father had made it a goal to provide for the pack. At the time, his dedication to building businesses, using technology and developing an urban pack had been unusual. Over the years, his vision had grown. Now they owned several businesses, a cattle ranch and put away millions each year thanks to investments.

Ava wanted to see to it that his hard work and foresight hadn't been in vain.

"How's the colt?" Kaden asked as they walked back to the main house.

The sun hung low in the sky. Another ten minutes and twilight would be upon them. It was one of her favorite times of day. Something about the light made her think anything was possible.

Even becoming Alpha of her pack.

But if she became the Alpha at the end of the week, what would happen with Kaden? She'd always assumed he'd just go on being the pack Beta and maybe one day in the future he'd know she was alive.

If this morning's kiss was anything to go by he knew she was alive, all right. But that kiss had put a giant kink in everything. Not to mention her cycle. Add to that the fact she was questioning the goal she'd worked toward for almost a decade.

No wonder she was in a lousy mood.

"The vet said he's doing well." She changed direction, and headed past the barn to the far paddock where Wesley had let out Chipper and the foal.

Seeing the little colt prance around would bring a smile to her face in no time.

"Don't try to tell me you've haven't been checking on him all day," he said, his voice softer, deeper.

"Keeping tabs on me Kaden?"

He stopped and she turned to look back at him. A frown curved those kissable lips downward.

Heavens help her, she knew just how kissable those lips were. It'd be so easy to step toe-to-toe with him, slide a hand up his chest and raise her lips to his.

Woman's intuition said he wouldn't deny her. He hadn't been the one to halt progress this morning as darkness had shrouded them. What would have happened if Chipper hadn't needed her?

Scratch that...she knew what would have happened.

Nothing had changed. At least for her. Seeing him standing there, hands on his hips, covered in dust with the sun at his back made her want to drop the casserole dishes and leap into his arms. Wrap her legs around those lean hips and kiss him until they were both out of breath.

But what if he changed his mind? Not tomorrow, but six months from now. Could she survive another heartbreak?

Could she resist?

Damn his animal magnetism. Damn her hormones.

Chapter Twenty One

Ava closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Don't look at him. With the way she was feeling right now he'd be able to see everything she was feeling.

If he didn't feel the same...no. She couldn't go there.

He'd apologized. At least he had in her daydream...

He'd kissed her.

He'd turned her life upside down and inside out.

If only she could trust him again. If only there weren't so many 'if onlys' between them.

Continuing to the paddock, she inhaled the dry evening air. She sat the pans on a hay bale and searched the grassy expanse for the equines. The colt was much more surefooted than he had been in the minutes after his birth. He trotted around, testing his legs, tail in the air, never far from his mother.

Chipper kept a watchful eye on her son as she grazed. She didn't look like she'd given birth twelve hours earlier. Nature was amazing.

Kaden took a spot at the rail to Ava's right. He laced his fingers and watched the pair.

"Helicopter busy?" he asked.

"I didn't call for it." She'd reached for her phone twice, put it back both times. This morning she'd been desperate for distance and at the same time, hadn't wanted to leave Kaden. For the first time, he seemed to really see her. Pay attention to her.

That kiss had terrified her just as much as it had excited her. She'd never expected such profound feelings, such a connection. Pleasure yes. But like he'd completed her, like her life was suddenly whole...no.

For her heart's sake, she needed to know he saw a future for them.

Despite her heartache and resolution to abstain from men, she couldn't seem to control the wolf inside her, the voice that demanded she get as close to the handsome Beta as she could. She couldn't squelch the hope that if she stayed by his side, if she stuck it out, that he would finally see what he'd been missing. That he would finally see her as more than a kid sister or a quick roll in the hay.

"Why not? You seemed ready to high tail it out of here this morning."

"I made enough casseroles to get the men through the week." It sounded like a plausible reason why she'd spent the day in the kitchen, rather than calling for the helicopter. Reasonable, but it wasn't the truth.

She hadn't stayed out of duty, for the sick ranch hands, or even to impress her father.

There was a pause before he spoke again. "You know that many of the guys are well enough now..."

She nodded. They wouldn't need to stay at the ranch much longer.

"A part of me thinks that they got better so they'd have a shot with you."

His rueful smile made her insides melt. There it was. The reason she'd stayed.

The reason she hadn't fought the wolf. She'd wanted to bask in Kaden's smile. Somewhere in the last seventy two hours, she'd stopped worrying about the full moon and what her father would say. She no longer needed his approval. Now she craved Kaden's.

She'd stayed for a chance at a future. A different future perhaps than the one she'd been working toward. But one that her heart desired.

Ava gave a terse laugh. "They'd never have a shot with me."

"Why not?" Was it her imagination or did he lean closer? Though he didn't look at her, she sensed all of his attention turned her way.

Because they're not you.

"I don't date humans. You know that." She'd never met a human male that could keep up with her physically, and the animalistic side of her nature could accept nothing less. Even a handsome, strong man was weaker than she was. And breeding was important. More so for an Alpha. Strong, true-blood werewolves were a must.

"To my knowledge you've never dated anyone."

She turned toward him, eyebrow raised in question. "Why Kaden, I didn't know you were paying attention." That thought stroked her ego and a thrill of desire made her breath catch.

Damn he was handsome. He cut her a look. Totally, completely, grade A gorgeous.

And, she realized in that moment, why she had never dated anyone else, never really looked at another man from the time she was old enough to look. Even after Kaden had crushed her fragile teenage heart.

If she couldn't have him, she didn't want anyone else.

"Why did I never see you?" he murmured. Shaking his head, he turned and studied her for a long moment. What did he see when he looked at her?

The spoiled daughter of the Alpha? The woman who set his blood on fire? The Shewolf he couldn't live without? Or an itch he needed to scratch?

His expression thoughtful, he returned his gaze to the pasture again. "I always knew you were around...but..."

"Don't beat yourself up Kaden. I'm a kid sister," she said, her tone sharper than she'd intended. She still remembered the way he'd told her father that the Alpha had nothing to worry about. "She's like my kid sister. Nothing more."

"In the past maybe," Kaden said fiercely. Whether he remembered his past words and realized she'd overheard him that day, she couldn't be sure. She couldn't decide if she wanted to press him, to find out, or not.

"But right now it's taking every bit of will power I have left not to strip you down and take you against this fence."

His words caused a flush of heat to spread like wildfire over her skin.

Her heart needed a little more assurance... "That's just the heat talking."

His reaction to her cycle, she meant. The hormones, the pheromones...thousands of years of mother nature conspiring for procreation.

"And Sunday, at the wedding? Your cycle hadn't begun then."

"I'm starting to think you're deliberately trying to keep me off kilter, Mr. Black," she teased. It was working. She'd been off kilter since she'd looked up from arranging Brianna's train and locked gazes with him.

Faster than she could blink, he pulled her against him, the hard ridge of his erection squeezed between them. A startled gasp left her lips an instant before he captured them with his own.

"Is that deliberate enough for you?" he whispered.

"Kaden--" She pushed at his chest but he didn't let her go. So she closed her eyes and turned her head away from his kiss. "Stop...we need to talk."

Don't stop! What was she saying?

"Why, Ava? Give me one good reason."

"You know the reason." If she gave herself to him and he changed his mind again... It would destroy her this time. If he swept them away with

pleasure now but decided six months from now that he'd made a mistake...

He sighed, the movement caused his chest to rub against the hardened tips of her nipples. "Because of the Alphaship..." There was an intense pause. "Always the fucking Alphaship."

That wasn't really the reason. Not anymore. But she'd let him think that because the alternative meant putting everything on the line once and for all. She licked her lips and gave a single nod.

"What if neither of us were to become the Alpha? What if your father weren't stepping down. What then?"

"Kaden--" She knew what he was asking...

"What if he declares Warrior Rights?"

A shiver of panic raced down her spine.

She'd never considered that. Hadn't heard of any Alphaship being decided by a fight to see who was strongest...not in the last hundred years. But it was a possibility. It was still part of pack law.

And yet, she'd been so certain that her father would name her Alpha. Her. A woman. This week was showing just how silly that idea had been.

Sure, she was capable. She could survive on her own just like any wolf. She was fast, had incredible endurance, and she was strong for a woman. She also prided herself on her intellect and attention to detail. All fine qualities for an Alpha, but she would never win a head-to-head battle with Kaden. And brute strength would always be a consideration in the naming of an Alpha. She'd been silly to believe that heritage would change that.

"You hadn't considered that, had you?" he murmured against her temple.

Damn him. Damn the whole situation. Why did he have to hold her like it was the most natural thing in the world? And why did his touch make her want to say to hell with everything else?

"No."

"He wouldn't do it you know."

She pulled back to stare up at him, searching those familiar eyes. "How can you be sure?" One thing she knew about her father is that he played by his own rules. He might do it just to test her.

"Because he couldn't risk losing his daughter."

He was probably right. She knew her father loved her, even if she had to work hard to win his praise. The elusive pat on the back.

“And,” Kaden continued, “he knows I wouldn’t fight you anyway.”

Chapter Twenty Two

So that was the answer. If she wanted to win, she just needed to declare Warrior Rights and the position would be hers. Had Kaden told her that on purpose? To see what she’d do? To see how badly she wanted the top spot?

Something in her soured at the idea that Kaden would let her win so easily. That’s essentially what he’d told her. He wouldn’t fight her wolf-to-wolf, so if she wanted to be Alpha of WhitePaw all she had to do was declare Warrior Rights.

The woman in her wanted to know why he wouldn’t fight her. Wanted desperately to know if his reasoning had to do with more than the fact she was female.

Just ask him, the wolf snapped. Ask him if he meant what he said.

“Ava,” he whispered, cupped her cheek in his hand.

Dare she hope that he cared for her? That he was serious about claiming her?

He stared down at her, those gorgeous dark eyes searching hers and years of hope, lust, and yearning bubbled to the surface.

Yes. She dared.

Slowly, she slid her right hand up the hard plane of his chest and hooked around the back of his neck. His gaze turned expectant, the desire there barely banked beneath dark, thick lashes. She felt a tingle of anticipation deep inside. Excitement zinged downward, ricocheting between her ribs to settle between her thighs.

She realized that he was waiting for her to make a move. The ball was firmly in her court. All she had to do was pick it up and serve.

His fingers flexed into the flesh over her hips, a silent prod. She needed no urging, but his impatience made the corners of her lips curve upward. He growled: low, completely primitive, animalistic. The sound wove around her like a python around its kill.

The sun picked that moment to dip below the horizon, she was sure of it. Firmly, happily ensconced in his arms, she stretched upward, her

gaze focusing on his lips as twilight embraced them. So kissable. So firm and warm and made to drive a woman out of her mind.

She licked her lips.

"Stop teasing me," he ground out, jerking her hips against the steel-hard length of his cock.

"I didn't mean to," she whispered.

"Prove it." His dark gaze dropped from hers and focused on her lips, everything in him throwing down the challenge. It was the most potent look she'd ever seen. Each fleck of gold in his gaze mirroring the fire in her womb.

If she'd been in her true form, her tail would be twitching. Hell, he made her want to roll over and show her belly.

That was the hell of it. She'd never been submissive. Not as the middle child. Certainly not when it came to her baser urges. But with Kaden...his strength, his raw, undeniable masculinity made her feel feminine and far more supple. More agreeable. Like she could relax and let him take the reins.

"How?" she asked, the word sounding like a sigh. With her head tipped back, there couldn't have been more than two inches between them.

"Kiss me," he ordered, his voice deep, velvety, delicious.

She wanted to, badly. Needed to feel his lips against hers, nothing separating them, share the same air...

They were already to the point of no return, weren't they? Stretching up, she closed the space a quarter of an inch.

"This is crazy," she whispered, her gaze flicking from his eyes to his lips and back again. Even knowing that he might change his mind, that she might be hurt in the end, she was... in too deep.

He leaned closer. "I'm not feeling particularly sane."

She licked her lips. One inch. In fact, she could probably reach out with the tip of her tongue and lick him. "I told you, once--"

He cut her off, "You start, you won't be able to stop." His fingers flexed into her hips again, urging her silently. "Sweetheart, I'm bettin' on it," he drawled.

He felt so good, pressed against her, hard where she was soft. And his scent...so purely male: sandalwood, hay, and coffee. When had coffee become an aphrodisiac?

Pressing her fingertips into the solid wall of his chest, she closed the distance and sealed her lips against his. He groaned immediately and his hands tightened on her hips.

They moved against each other, kissing, caressing, a slow, sensual dance. His lips parted and his tongue darted out. She opened her mouth, sucking him inside. The hard length of his cock nestled closer, burrowing against her belly. If she'd ever had any doubt about his size and masculinity, it was cleared up now. His hardness created a resounding desire between her legs. She needed him inside her.

Their tongues parried back and forth, tasting, dancing. His teeth grazed her gently, and she felt desire shoot straight down to her womb.

So good. She'd known it would be. Breathless, she wrapped her other arm around his shoulders. He turned them, hands guiding her, knees bumping together. And then he pressed her against the fence. Her breasts flattened against his chest as he closed the distance.

A strong thigh slid between her legs, brushing her clit. She tore her lips from his.

"Kaden!"

"Shh..." He trailed his lips down the edge of her jaw, delighting each nerve ending along the way. So solid. So strong. Whiskers scraped against her cheek as he nipped her earlobe.

"Oh--"

"Bend your knees," he murmured.

The next thing she knew, they were laying in the tall grass, him over her, his hand between her thighs. He lifted his lips from the side of her neck as he jerked the hem of her tank-top up, revealing her breasts.

"As sexy as this is, it's in my way," he muttered.

She couldn't agree more. Finally...finally she would know his possession. Thank her lucky stars that she wore a front clasp bra. He made quick work of dispensing it.

Ava ran her fingers through his hair and Kaden felt like his whole life had been leading up to this moment. He was about to have his heart's desire. Smoothing his hands over her luscious tits, he licked his lips in anticipation. Hard pink tips, perfect creamy skin. Though he'd seen her naked, somehow, this felt like the first time.

Ducking his head, he caught one of the pebbled peaks in his mouth. Her skin was like warm velvet beneath his tongue. He moaned in ecstasy.

Ava shifted against him, beneath him. Her eagerness pleased him, but so did the quiet way she laid there and let him devour her.

Some Shewolves fought for the upper hand, didn't care for foreplay. Ava arched her back and gave a breathless sigh. Oh yes, she was enjoying this...just as much as he was.

As he moved to her other nipple, he slid his hand into her shorts. Trim curls led the way to decadence. He slipped a finger between her pussy lips, slippery cream easing the way. Her thighs fell open and another rush of moisture coated his finger.

His gut tightened. He couldn't wait to taste her, for her juices to cover his tongue.

Giving her clit a quick brush with his thumb, he let her nipple pop from his mouth. She gave an unhappy cry and tightened her grip on his shoulders.

He laughed softly and trailed his lips down her stomach. "It's all right, baby."

Shifting so that he was kneeling between her thighs, he slipped off her shorts. Her golden eyes glowed up at him, so full of passion and life. So this was what he'd been missing.

He laid down in the tall grass, his erection a painful reminder that he had to take things slow. Ava Garnier deserved seduction and all the pleasure he could provide. He inhaled deeply, taking in her musky scent. It went straight to his head, making him harder.

Mate.

Her cycle made her impossible to resist, but somehow, he had to restrain himself from taking her fully. If he could just keep his cock to the ground...

Her hands thrust through his hair as he dipped his head and took his first taste. Warm, wet, delicious...just how a pussy should be.

He slid one hand up to play with her breasts while the other spread her silky lower lips. He used the broad flat of his tongue, gave a long, slow, thorough lick to collect her cream. Pink, dewy perfection, that's what she was.

She cried out as he took her clit between his lips and slowly sucked on it. His name on her lips, floating on a passionate sigh, was a sound he could get used to. Her thighs closed around his ears and her hands pulled

him, none too gently, into her. She thrust her hips, her pussy, onto his tongue.

He groaned as he lapped her cream. Her thighs loosened a fraction, trembling around him. Throaty moans joined in as he gently squeezed her right nipple. Her hips bucked.

So responsive. Slipping a finger into her slick channel, he used the tip of his tongue on her clit. Teasing, up and down, fast strokes that would build her orgasm.

“Kaden!”

Her inner muscles rippled around his finger. He lifted his head, smiling. “Shh...do you want the whole bunk house to come watch?”

Her body tightened around him and her head popped up. Her gaze met his, urgent and wild. To his surprise, the flesh around his finger dampened and pulsed as she let out a breathy gasp. She released her grip on his hair and cupped her breasts.

“Hurry,” she whispered fiercely, her head dropping back.

He laced his fingers with hers, feeling completely connected, and then stared up the length of her body as he used his tongue to torment her.

His cock ached to sink into her. To feel the silky smooth glide as he found his release deep in her sweet body.

Fuck.

He couldn't give in to the wolf's demands. Not today. Not yet. He had to win her first. Convince her that she belonged to him. With him.

And there it was. The quickening of her pulse thundered in his ears, there was a delicate but needy catch in her breath, and her silky skin began to tighten. She was his for the taking. A heartbeat away from coming.

Her fingers gripped his as she let out a shuddering sigh. The sound drove him crazy. He wanted to lose control along with her. He wanted to feel the exquisite sensations that made his body forget to breath because it was so swamped with pleasure.

Mate.

Not today. Not without protection.

Moisture flooded his tongue as she squealed. He hadn't thought her capable of such a sound. He would have smiled if his tongue weren't sweeping up and down, gathering every drop.

His balls drew tight. Grasshoppers. Groceries. Glue.

Get control of yourself, wolf. You're too old, too experienced to shoot off in your pants.

Besides, he wanted to save it. For her.

Chapter Twenty Three

The buzzing sound from down by her feet killed the last of the exquisite high. Holy Moly. She'd never felt so energized and yet so at peace all at the same time. When the buzzing sound broke through the silence a second time, Ava huffed out a sigh and reached down to grab her phone.

Now she had proof that Kaden's talented tongue could be used for more than talking. A smile on her lips, she sat up and crossed her legs.

"Hello?"

Kaden sat up behind her, curling an arm around her waist. He kissed her naked shoulder. Who knew the man was a cuddler? She laced her fingers with his, resting their hands on her stomach.

"Ava? Are you okay? You sound out of breath," Brianna said, her voice colored with concern and confusion.

If only you knew, sis.

A half second later, her sister's voice sank through Ava's lust. "Brianna?" Where was she calling from? Ava didn't recognize the number. "Why are you calling me again? Do I need to explain how a honeymoon is supposed to work?" Ava hated the idea that her little sister felt the need to check up on her.

Unless... "Is everything okay?"

"We're fine."

Ava got a sinking feeling. Everything wasn't okay... Brianna didn't sound like her normal bubbly self.

"What is it?"

"Ava, it's Bryan. Is Kaden with you?" The sinking feeling turned to a ball of dread. Taking a steadying breath, she hit the speaker phone button.

"I'm here," Kaden said.

For as long as she lived, Ava would never get used to the way Kaden's voice made her go all soft and gooey inside. She was barely down from the high of her recent orgasm and already his voice, his touch had her yearning for another.

Greedy much?

"I take it you haven't heard the news." Bryan's words were like ice water.

Ava glanced over her shoulder at Kaden. He brushed his lips across hers briefly. Despite the joy she felt being so close to him, her stomach twisted.

"What news?" Kaden asked, completely calm.

"Ava's father has announced a new Alpha candidate."

The phone slipped from her fingers into her lap. Frantically, she reached for it. Kaden cupped her hand in his and together, they stared at the screen.

"Who?" Ava asked.

"Alain somebody."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Kaden roared.

"You know him?" her sister asked, sounding surprised by his outburst.

Ava ignored her sister's question and instead asked one of her own. "Are you sure?"

"That's what I heard," Bryan said. "What's going on, K? I thought you and Ava were battling it out."

Ava shot Kaden a questioning glance. He'd been talking about her? About their competition for Alpha?

"Bryan, we've got to go," Kaden said. "I'll call you later. Give Brianna our love." He hit the disconnect button and stood up quickly.

He tossed her clothes into her lap and plucked the cell phone from her hand. Feeling like the world had just fallen out of orbit, she wrestled with her bra. Kaden held out his hand to her, his dark gaze frighteningly stormy.

"I can't believe it," she muttered, sliding her palm against his. Effortlessly, he pulled her to her feet. She stepped into her shorts, straightened her shirt and they took off for the house.

"I should have decked that guy when I had the chance."

"I can't believe I danced with him at my sister's wedding."

Kaden was several steps ahead of her and he whirled around. "I couldn't agree with you more."

"Don't you dare put this on me, Kaden Black." She stepped toe to toe with him.

The hand he'd used to point at her slid ever so slowly around her waist. "I just meant that...you should have been dancing with me." He pulled her forward a single step. "You should have been dancing with me." His voice was lethally quiet and it turned her insides to mush again.

He was right. But she couldn't resist reminding him, "if I recall correctly you were dancing with Carrotop."

"Jealous?"

They'd come too far for her to fudge the truth now.

"Of course I was."

His eyes widened briefly. Was he surprised she'd admitted the truth? She'd been ready to rip every red hair from the woman's head. The wolf inside her gave a delighted growl at the very idea.

He glanced at her lips. "Dancing with her was a mistake. It won't happen again."

Oh hell. A wolf who admitted his mistakes? Maybe the world was coming to an end. If that was the case, then she shouldn't hold back on the urge to kiss him.

But before she could lift her lips to his, he stepped back, pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. "Wesley," he said a few seconds later.

Heading back to the ranch house, he laced his fingers with hers. There was a momentary pause. "That's good news." His frown softened. "Thanks Wes. Ava and I need to head back to the coast for Pack business. Will you be all right?"

Another pause.

"Okay. Take care."

"What'd he say?" Ava asked the instant he disconnected the call.

"They caught the poachers."

"That's great."

"He said I can go back to the coast, but the men will revolt if you don't stay on as the cook."

Despite her anxiety over Alain and the latest twist in the fight for the Alpha position, she smiled. It was nice to be appreciated. And she was glad that Wesley and his men had the poachers in hand.

Hopefully they'd deal with them in such a way that no one else would consider stealing Garnier property.

"Is Alain with him?" she asked.

Kaden shook his head. "He left this morning. I thought you knew..."

After the night they'd had, she hadn't kept up with anyone else. Certainly not Alain. She had a feeling if she'd shown the slightest hint of interest in Alain after the way Kaden had reacted last night, there would have been serious bloodshed.

But knowing now that her father considered him for the Alpha spot drove home the fact that he'd only been using her. Getting close to her because she was the daughter of the Alpha.

"Which probably means he's back on the coast." Ava shoved both hands through her hair. That slimy, no good, gorgeous freaking werewolf.

A glance at Kaden told her that his temper was getting the better of him too. After everything she'd done, after all her hard work for the pack, she was not about to let some punk she'd only known for a week sweep in and woo her father.

"We've got to get back there." Her finger sliced through the air, pointed in the general direction of the coast. "That's our position!"

Thoroughly fired up, she started for the ranch house again and she'd only taken a handful of steps before he caught the back of her shorts, stopping her. The maneuver pulled the material taut against her clit and she moaned as she fell back against him.

"Our position?" he murmured into her hair.

The way he said the two words sounded so intimate, like they were a couple. The Alpha couple.

The Alpha Couple.

What would it be like to wake up next to this man for the next...forever?

To be mated to him?

To trust and support him?

To lead with him?

To have children with him?

That was a question she'd pondered a lot during her youthful crush. But somehow, in all that time, she'd never thought of them leading the pack together.

He squeezed her gently, obviously awaiting her answer.

"You know what I mean," she said quickly. "Yours. Mine. One of ours. It certainly shouldn't go to some outsider we've only known for a week."

No matter how handsome and well-bred the other wolf was, she and Kaden had worked hard for this pack. By birth, the position should have been hers. And through hard work and utter loyalty, the Alphaship should have been Kaden's.

Unable to help herself she shimmied her backside against his erection, eliciting the groan she loved so much.

"Ava, stop it," he ground out.

"Sorry."

"I'll make you sorry, sweetheart." He gave the back of her shorts another tug. The pressure brought another way of pleasure.

"Kaden..."

He let her go.

"We don't have time for this, no matter how much we might wish otherwise. Let's go pack up and keep our hands to ourselves."

Easier said than done.

They packed liked they had tigers on their heels. Bags in hand, Ava met Kaden in the entry way. Without even trying, he drew her like a sliver of metal to a magnet. Even though time was of the essence, her more primitive side wanted to finish what they'd started. Her cycle made her more sensitive than usual to scents and sounds. He was obviously keeping a tight rein on himself. But she could still hear the quick thump-thump-thump of his pulse. The quickening in his breath when she stepped toe to toe with him.

She needed another kiss, to tide her. As far as she knew, he hadn't even come. Did they have time to--

"No touching..."

His words were like ice water, but the heat in his gaze, the barely banked desire warmed her again.

She gave a single nod and reached for the door handle. Business first, pleasure second.

He shouldered her luggage and headed for the truck. She couldn't help but admire his ass as he made his way across the porch and down the steps.

Pleasure first, the wolf growled.

Straightening her spine, she pulled the door closed and started after him.

“They should have plenty to eat.” She’d left the refrigerator full of casseroles, chili and stew.

Kaden gave her a funny look as she hopped up in the truck.

“What?” Why was he frowning like that, as if she were a puzzle he couldn’t figure out.

He opened his mouth but snapped his lips shut again. Shaking his head he said, “it’s nothing.”

He shut the door and trotted around the front of the truck. The sooner they got back, the sooner they could get to the bottom of everything.

They had to get to the bottom of it. She wasn’t just going to step aside and let an outsider take over her pack.

She’d been born and raised in WhitePaw and she had the white socks to prove it. There had to be some mistake. Some misinformation on Bryan’s part. A miscommunication. But Ava knew one thing for sure, she would fight for what was hers.

The beast inside her surged forward, ready to do battle. There was no soothing the Shewolf. She wanted blood. And if for some stuck-in-a-Twilight-episode reason this wasn’t all some bad dream, she’d spill blood if necessary.

Ava buckled her seatbelt and took a long, deep breath, exhaling slowly through the mouth. That didn’t help much.

“What the hell is my father thinking?” Her jaws ground together as Kaden whipped the truck onto the long dirt drive out to the main road. “I still don’t agree with the whole ‘you can’t be alpha because you’re female’ bit. I understand it, but I don’t like it. But he has you. You were born to be the Alpha of WhitePaw. Why would he pick someone else? Why would he even consider it?”

Though darkness was coming quick and the cab was cast in shadows, she saw Kaden’s head whip around. “I’m no longer considered an outsider and now I was born to be Alpha,” he echoed her words. “Do you have a fever?”

He reached over and held the back of his hand to her forehead.

The innocent touch thrilled her...made her want more, less innocent touching. The kind that involved kissing and no clothes, her on all fours and him driving them to the brink of pleasure and beyond.

“What about the no touching rule?”

“Screw the no touching rule,” he said, his voice low and lethal.

The possessiveness made her wet.

She unhooked her seatbelt and slid across the bench seat. “You’re right,” she whispered as her thigh touched his. “Screw it.”

He threw his head back and howled. It felt good, damn good, to be snuggled up against him. Almost as if she was made for this spot. With his arm around her shoulders, she soaked up his heat and fought the urge to crawl up in his lap, straddle his thighs.

“You make it hard to concentrate on the road.”

Feeling a little daring, she slid her hand along his crotch.

“Something’s hard.”

“Ava...” he growled in warning.

“Yes?” She batted her eyelashes up at him for good measure.

Pleasure first.

“Move your hand.”

The corners of her lips curved upwards. She’d never felt so powerful. So frisky. Maybe it was the cycle. Maybe not.

She pushed her hand lower. “Like this?” she asked innocently.

From the corner of her eye she saw his hand tighten on the steering wheel.

“Remove your hand.” He stressed the first word.

Night was almost upon them. The few cars passing in the opposite direction had on their headlights so she could see just how hard he was grinding his jaws together.

“You know I had a crush on you when I was younger,” she confessed, not moving her hand an inch.

“You’ve got to work on your timing, sweetheart.”

The endearment rippled through her. She stretched up so she could brush her lips against the strong line of his jaw.

“I used to think you were the hottest wolf in the Pack.” Oh to be sixteen again, just becoming a woman. Some days she missed being that young. That carefree.

“And now?”

“Now I know you’re the hottest wolf in the Pack.” She laughed.

“Seriously, Ava. Move your hand. You’re making Mr. Happy ten shades of blue.”

Did she dare? A thrill shot through her. She'd never done anything so naughty. Speeding down the road, snuggling beneath Kaden Black's arm was not the only memory she wanted when she was older, looking back on her youth. Just like the blissful memories of that first summer she'd really noticed the gorgeous man at her side, she wanted heat, passion and sex that she could reminisce on.

"I can fix that," she murmured, giving him a slow caress through his jeans. "And you did say to screw the no touching rule."

"Ava..."

"I think you deserve some payback. Perhaps you should put both hands on the wheel."

Emboldened, she grabbed the tab of his zipper and pulled down slowly enough to torture a saint.

The growl that rumbled from his chest made her smile. It was her turn to drive him wild. She twisted on the seat, driving her fingers into the opening. Hot. Long. Thick. She pulled his cock out, inspecting it in the dim, passing light.

Despite his protests, he slid forward on the seat giving her better access.

Mate, her wolf whispered.

Trailing a fingertip up the underside of his penis, she was rewarded with a deep, masculine groan.

"You're messing with fire, sweetheart."

"I'm already on fire."

Wrapping her hand around the steely length, she gave him several slow strokes. She'd known he was big, but she hadn't expected the skin on his shaft to be so velvety smooth. Crisp hair tickled the back of her hand as she caressed him. Up and down. Fast then slow.

Careful not to bump the steering wheel, she scooted back and then, bracing a hand on his thigh, leaned forward.

Kaden sucked in a breath. She wasn't going to-- Holy fuck. He licked his lips and tightened his hands on the wheel. Sweat beaded on his brow. She smelled too good. Felt too good. And heavens help him, her breath was fanning across the head of his dick.

Fuck.

Her hand around the base of his cock, held him at attention. His gut tightened as she leaned closer. The first touch of her tongue was tentative.

But it was enough to shatter his concentration. How the hell did she expect him to focus on the road when--when her lips moved over his dick like it was a lolly pop?

Not to mention the fact that he was already at the edge of his control thanks to days of intense attraction, her cycle calling to his inner wolf, and the foreplay in the field. Now that he'd tasted her...

"Ava...stop." He never should have called off the no touching rule. She lifted her head just a fraction.

"Not a chance, wolf."

Where was this brashness coming from? And why did he like it so much?

Her tongue swirled around the crown of his cock before engulfing him in the sweet wet heat. He slowed down and turned on the cruise control. Hands locked on the wheel he forced his eyes to the road, no easy task when her ministrations made him want to close his eyes with ecstasy.

When her hand slid lower and cupped his balls he looked for the nearest exit.

"This is torture."

Her head popped up like a gopher. A car passed in the opposite direction, lighting up her alarmed expression. He thanked his lucky stars that his truck was tall and the cover of night was deep. There was little chance anyone could see just how worked up she had him.

"I'm doing it wrong?"

"No," he said. "You're doing it right." Completely right.

"Then why is it torture?"

Fuck.

Her words hung in the air as he pulled over onto a dirt road. The tires stuttered on the gravel and he threw the truck into park.

"Because," he turned toward her, "when I'm driving I can't touch you." He reached for her, cupping her cheeks in his hands, pulling her up to meet his lips.

"Because your mouth feels so fucking good on my cock but I'm willing to bet not as good as your pussy will." He let his gaze dip down to her lips, remembering the sounds she'd made as he'd made her come.

"And finally, because I can't pull you over here and satisfy us both. Not completely. Not the way that we're meant to."

She didn't argue with that. They both knew that if he came inside of her she'd get pregnant. What he didn't know was how she felt about that. There'd been a moment after she'd found out her sister was pregnant that everything about her, everything in him, had changed. In that instant he'd imagined Ava, round and glowing, plump with his baby.

The knowledge didn't dampen his libido. Not one little bit. Less than a week ago, she'd told him to go to hell...he'd been there ever since. And it was only getting hotter.

Mate.

"There's more than one way to make a man come, Kaden." She leaned forward again. This time she brushed her lips across his before reaching for his cock.

He threaded his fingers through her hair, guiding her mouth over him. Damn, if this wasn't the most uncomfortable and yet delicious position he'd ever been in. Unable to do more with his hands, unable to really thrust his hips like he wanted to. He was her prisoner.

His head fell back as she applied suction. Oh, hell yes. So damn good.

His left hand squeezed the handle on the door. The plastic caved beneath his grip. His balls tightened and he had just enough space to jerk his hips up a fraction of an inch. That fraction sank him deeper into the hot, wet recess of her mouth. Her lips tightened around him, as did her fingers.

This was not how he'd wanted to come.

So...horny-teenager-in-the-back-of-a-car-unable-to-control-himself.

But he was too far gone. So close. Ecstasy rising.

Her luscious mouth sank down until the tip of his cock touched the soft palate at the back of her throat.

He tightened his hold on her hair, holding her steady as his come rushed up from his balls.

With a guttural cry, he released his load. Her tongue worked against his cock in smooth, even strokes. Her lips made a tight seal around the head as she milked every drop.

Heart pounding out a rapid thump-thump-thump in his chest, he tipped his head to the right. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. With her hair disheveled like that he thought her the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Mused, seductive, sassy.

Unable to resist, he leaned across the seat, wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. The problem of course was

that he didn't want to stop with a kiss. And her hands...when they touched him, trailed across his chest, cupped his balls, made it even harder to resist pulling her into his lap for round two.

"We can't," he murmured. He knew he had to be strong.

She bit his bottom lip softly. And when she looked at him, so sure, so confident, so on fire, he knew he was in trouble.

Kaden leaned back and reached for the air conditioner. Ava reached for his cock.

Need.

"Ava--" He stopped her hand.

Her inner wolf was having none of that. Pleasure. First. She scrambled to her knees and unbuttoned her shorts.

Mate.

Mindless with desire, she jerked down the zipper and started to push the thin denim material over her hips.

Cursing, Kaden bolted from the truck.

Chapter Twenty Four

What the--

He was around the hood in three seconds flat. Smart man. They needed more room. Why be cramped in a cabin when they had the whole bed of the truck? Or even better... that huge pasture outside the window.

He wrenched the passenger door open. Before she knew what was happening, he wrapped a strong arm beneath her legs and scooped her out of the cab. The maneuver was so smooth she couldn't help but wonder if he'd had a lot of practice.

When he stepped to the back door, she forgot her curiosity and smiled. He made quick work of opening the door.

"You've got to keep your hands to yourself, sweetheart." He dumped her, rather unceremoniously on the seat and reached for the seatbelt. Why did she need a seat belt?

"Kaden, what--"

The sound of the belt running out of the reel halted her words.

"Sit straight."

"I'm not a dog," she said, even though his commanding tone turned her on even more than she already was.

He raised an eyebrow as if to say you're a wolf. Instead, he said, "you're a temptress. It's time to buckle up."

Sighing, she dropped her feet to the floor. He reached across her lap and strapped her in. Damn he smelled good. She reached for him. He met her half way, pulling her flush against him.

Yes!

The drive to mate was so strong that she didn't care where they did it so long as they got it on. Every second that ticked by increased the yearning inside of her. He was like the world's strongest sweet tooth craving and the only thing that would quench it was his skin on hers, moving against each other, completing each other.

"I'm reinstating the no touching rule."

He reached for his belt and the air in her lungs stalled. Whipping the strip of leather from his belt loops, he stepped forward.

"Starting now."

Breasts aching, thighs slick with her own cream, through the haze of her lust she knew he was right. The cycle had her. Hormones were driving her out of her mind. She wanted his cock deep inside her, thrusting until they both passed out.

He reached for her hand.

"What are you doing?" She swallowed.

"Tying you up so you'll keep your hands to yourself."

Her jaw dropped open but she recovered quickly, snatching her hand back. But he was faster. He already had the belt looped like a lasso and he moved with a speed that left her breathless with envy. Her hands were pressed together almost as if in prayer, and bound with the soft strip of leather, warm from his body.

"Kaden, this isn't funny."

"I couldn't agree more." He leaned closer, a hand cupping her cheek. She rubbed against it.

"I want you, Ava. Don't think for a second that I don't. And it's not just because of your cycle. But we've got to get back to the pack and settle this. And I need to drive without distractions."

"It's not as if you're going to kill us," she ground out, frustrated. He could flip the truck until it disintegrated around them and it wouldn't stop her need for him. Her chest rose and fell as she dragged in one breath after another.

“No.” He shook his head. “But we might hurt someone else.”

Even through the haze she knew he was right. Sighing, she nodded. Seat-belted and bound. She hadn’t seen that one coming. Kinky, her wolf growled, not the least bit disturbed.

She trusted Kaden. Trusted him to take care of her and pleasure her. Who would have thought that she, Ava Garnier, would submit to a man?

He brushed his lips across hers. “When this is all over and one of us is named Alpha, my first order of business will be driving you wild with pleasure.” Oh he’d already done that earlier. Which was all the more reason to say to hell with the Alphaship and that silly no touching rule, rip each other’s clothes off and mate like they were the last two werewolves on earth.

“Promise?” she whispered, her voice husky.

“Shewolf,” he said, thrusting his fingers through her hair and tipping her chin up. “I’m going to fuck you until you pass out.”

He slanted his lips across hers, his tongue thrusting inside her mouth.

As promises went, that was enough to make her tingle with anticipation and cream her panties. She ached to hold his face between her hands, but she had to settle for kissing him back. Using her tongue to caress him.

Severing the kiss, he started to close the door but he leaned back in and kissed her again. “Thanks for the blow job.”

For the second time that night, Ava’s jaw hung open. Emotions battled with the hormones raging inside of her. Annoyance, desire, frustration, desire, exacerbation and more desire.

Halfway back to her parents’ house, her anger was simmering. They hadn’t said a word to each other which left plenty of time to get riled about the latest turn of events. Once her libido cooled off a bit. After all the time she and Kaden had put into the pack... Surely this was a mistake. A bluff. Something. Anything but the truth.

She never should have come this week. If she’d stayed home, she...no. She’d wanted to show her father, once again, how she was a team player. Responsible. Capable. Versatile.

And besides, she could never regret the time at the ranch. Not after everything that had happened with Kaden.

Which just made her all the more upset. For him.

"I get that I'm not the perfect candidate," she said when she couldn't keep silent for another second. "For starters, I have a vagina--"

The right-side tires dropped off the shoulder. Screaming, she reached for the door-handle.

"Sorry," Kaden grit out, steering the big truck back onto the pavement. "You're right about that though."

In the rearview mirror, he cut her a look that made heat rise in her cheeks.

"Kaden!" She was being serious, trying desperately to curb the lust and he -- he was just a horny werewolf. She couldn't win.

"Sorry, sweetheart. You can't go talking about your womanly bits, especially womanly bits I sampled less than two hours ago, and expect me to keep my mind, and tires, out of the gutter."

He gave her a feral grin that made her insides tighten. Her pulse picked up just like it had when her orgasm had raced through her. She wanted to feel that way again. Needed to feel his hands, his lips, his tongue on her...in her.

"You were saying?"

"I'm a woman. Feminism obviously hasn't hit our kind yet. It didn't help that I spent the week in the kitchen rather than out doing hard labor with the men."

"You would have raised too many eyebrows lifting more haybales than the human next to you." He raised his eyebrows as he stated the obvious.

He was right. Again.

"I like cooking. Don't get me wrong--"

"And you're a damn good cook."

"I just wonder what it's going to take before men in our pack accept a woman as Alpha."

"I think you're looking at it the wrong way."

She didn't see how that was likely but said "explain it to me."

"First of all, you're battling centuries of tradition and nature. It's not that the men of our pack think you're inferior to them, they look at the leaders of other packs. Men. Strong men who'd have no qualm in taking your head.

"If you look at it that way, fear drives them. It's not that you're not a good leader, the question for them is can you provide the protection the pack needs?"

"Get real Kaden. We haven't had a turf war since before I was born." He glanced back briefly.

Why didn't he agree with her? She knew of all the surrounding packs. Things were peaceful. They'd even invited the Alpha of the Oregon pack to Brianna's wedding. Space was plentiful and so was food.

"It's not just the other wolves we have to worry about."

"What do you mean?" She cocked her head. "What aren't you telling me?"

This was easily the most bizarre conversation she'd ever had. In the grip of her cycle, bound in the backseat of Kaden's truck, talking Pack business...maybe it was a nightmare. Maybe if she pinched herself, she'd wake up and be cozy in her bed.

"Wolves aren't the only species to threaten us, Ava."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Blood Tigers--"

"Are in East LA," she filled in.

"Only because I brokered a deal to keep them there." A passing car's headlights illuminated the space. Kaden looked tense. And if she had to put a name to it: anxious. It didn't make any sense. None of it did. As far as she knew, her father had brought peace to the pack and to the region.

"But I've been friends with Elizabeth McLarean for over a decade."

"This has nothing to do with your friendship," he said, glancing at her in the rear view mirror again. "The younger generation has been making trouble lately. Stealing from our stores. Harassing pack members. Picking fights."

Ava sat, completely dumbfounded, for several miles. Mute, she rolled his words around in her mind, trying to absorb them. Trying desperately to lay them out so that they made sense.

"How could I have never heard a peep about this? Not from you, not from Father, not from Elizabeth? I haven't heard the slightest murmurings--"

"You weren't supposed to know," he bit out.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Her temper shifted up a notch.

"Your father didn't want to ruin your friendship with Elizabeth over a couple of thugs."

"This doesn't sound like a couple of thugs." It sounded more like an organized group of thugs. A turf encroachment. WhitePaw Pack had been strong for so long...

"Ava..."

The way he said her name said it all. She wasn't supposed to know about the unrest. She shouldn't be asking questions. The arrangements had been made by men...firmly keeping the women out of it. To salvage their friendship or because women shouldn't be sticking their nose in pack business, she couldn't be sure.

Either way, the situation fueled a pain inside of her. Hot, deep. And then there was the regret.

To have worked so hard for so long and be told over and over "be a leader" only to be pat on the head because she wasn't a man. Regret was a bitter pill to swallow.

He'd brokered a deal. She hadn't known. Did she really know the Pack as well as she thought she did?

"So it was always you. He brought you in because I'm female and my brother is too weak to lead." Her father had told her to become a leader, but he'd never had any intention of naming her Alpha.

Kaden was right. An Alpha could only be effective if their rivals believed they were strong. Powerful. A force to be reckoned with.

She, by the virtue of being a woman, was not on their radar. Why had she never seen that before now? Had she been so insulated? She'd never thought of herself as living in an ivory tower, but how else...

No, she wouldn't go there. The past was the past. All the signs had been there, she'd just been too naive, too pampered to see them. Her eyes were open now.

"He liked my negotiating skills," Kaden said into the darkness.

Out of any other werewolf's mouth, that sentence would have had her rolling in the seat. Wolves were not known for compromise. Cool heads. Discussion.

Kaden was a shrewd negotiator. She knew that from personal experience. He usually got what he wanted. Her father would appreciate that skill set.

"He liked that I don't back down from a fight," he added. No. He might be willing to talk things out, but she'd never known him to back down. It wasn't in his nature.

"Add that to the fact that you're a natural born leader and claimed no pack as your own, you were too good to resist."

"In half an hour, I've gone from being the man born to lead WhitePaw pack to an outsider again. What's changed?" His voice was low, but she heard him over the steady hum of tires eating up the road.

"Nothing." She told the lie with ease.

But he deserved better than that. "Everything. It all makes sense now, that's all."

"You have every right to become Alpha of this pack, Ava. I've told your father as much." A vote of confidence?

She gave an un-lady like snort. "How'd that go over?"

Kaden wisely remained mute.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Let's just get back to my parents' house so I can chew a few people out."

Now there were two names at the top of her hit list, and she was going to straighten things out.

How ironic that neither name began with the letter K.

Chapter Twenty Five

Ava was ready to storm the castle but when they arrived at her parents' home, cars lined the road. Kaden stopped the big truck in the circular drive. A valet dressed in a dark suit waited next to the fountain.

"What's all this?" Kaden asked, his neck craning as he looked at the long line of cars.

"I have no idea." Her stomach was sinking like a stone. "You don't think--you don't think he'd announce something without us being here, do you? It's not even full moon yet."

"We're going to find out. Sit tight." He leaned out the window and said something to the valet. Then he was circling the truck again, reaching for her.

The chaos of the moment managed to stifle her intense attraction. Her desire to mate. The slow simmer of hurt and annoyance she'd felt the whole ride home was quickly becoming a boiling anger.

Even if she wasn't appointed Alpha, like hell she was going to let anyone other than Kaden take the spot.

He unbound her wrists and quickly unbuckled the belt. "Zip your shorts," he murmured, looking around on full alert.

After the few days away, after the conversation they'd just had, she had a new found admiration for him. Nothing to do with his looks, but who he was as a person.

Once she was composed, she took a deep, steadying breath. Kaden reached for her and wrapped his hands around her waist, easily lifting her to the ground. She braced her hands against the solid wall of his chest to steady herself. The urge to kiss him overwhelmed her.

But now wasn't the time for that. She shook her head quickly and realized too late that the fast back and forth motion did nothing to clear her head. Keeping her gaze locked on the center of his chest, she murmured her thanks.

She needed to stop touching him if they were going to make it through this evening.

"You all right?" he asked, not letting her out of his grasp. He sounded so sincere, so caring, so...unlike the wolf she was used to.

Unable to stop herself, she tipped her chin up and locked her gaze with his, licking her lips. Was she all right? Confusion was the word of the hour. Her world had turned upside down in a matter of days. And somehow, she wasn't sure how, she was at peace with that. But still, the urge to fight for what she knew was right held her firmly in its grasp.

The next few minutes would determine the rest of her life. A week ago she'd been so set on her future, so ready, so determined. In this moment, the only thing she was sure about was her desire for this man.

A couple in cocktail attire eyed them curiously as they strode by. Ava didn't recognize either of them.

Mouth set in a grim line, Kaden slid a hand to the small of her back. They were massively underdressed. "Just a second," he murmured, then reached into the bed of his truck and pulled out his bag. "Let's go."

When it came to fashion the woman and the wolf were always at war. The wolf preferred things au naturel. The woman understood the importance of being well dressed. Though the Garnier's mostly did business with their own kind, they interacted with plenty of humans. And in California, appearances counted for a lot.

She had the foreign urge to tug her shorts down as they made their way up the stone path. More chicly dressed people spilled out of the foyer.

"We should get cleaned up first," Kaden said, low enough that no one else could hear.

She glanced toward the service entrance. "My thoughts exactly."

It wouldn't do for either of them to come in looking like they'd just rolled in the hay...even if that's exactly what they'd been up to a few short hours ago.

She made a beeline for the secondary door and found it unlocked. "Come on. You can shower in my old room," she said. She crossed her fingers, hoping she'd left something suitable to wear in her closet.

They made their way up the back stairs without running into anyone. From her room, she could hear laughter and music on the terrace below. Her parents had left everything in her room just as it had been when she'd moved into her own place. Striding to the window she looked out, glad the lights were off and she was hidden in the shadows.

It was a familiar sight. A party in full swing. But normally she helped organize such events. The fact that she hadn't even known about this one created a pang of hurt in her heart. Her inner wolf snarled at the weakness.

She simply needed to march down there and set things straight. But as she spun for the door, Kaden stopped her with a single, well placed hand to the abdomen and gentle pressure.

"First things first. Go take a shower," he said, his tone authoritative. But then his gaze gentled, the slight creases around his eyes lifted as he smiled. "You smell like sex and hay."

"So do you."

He nodded toward the bathroom doorway. "I'll be right behind you."

"Really?" She certainly hoped so.

"Just go take your shower." He pulled his hand back and stepped over to close the curtains. She was entirely too tempting.

Even when simmering with anger, her passion excited him. If he had any sense at all, he'd walk out that door and go get ready in the guest room. But his common sense had taken a vacation. And he couldn't tear his gaze away from her as she walked into the bathroom, her hips swaying gently.

She turned on the light and then looked back at him over her shoulder. A come-hither glance if he'd ever seen one. She turned on the

shower and ever so slowly pulled her tank-top over her head. It dropped into a ruby red puddle on the floor.

He growled low in his throat but somehow managed to keep his feet rooted to the floor. This was going to be a long damned night.

The short shorts went next. Then her bra.

Completely naked, she reached into one of the vanity drawers. After retrieving something, she turned back to him. With one hand on her hip, the opposite knee bent, she could have been paused on a runway. But rather than prancing down the catwalk in high fashion or lingerie, she was completely, deliciously naked. He let his gaze trace over the curve of her hips, the nip of her waist, the globes of her breasts. And there, right between them she held a small, square packet.

He barely had time to recognize what it was before she flung it at him. It whirled through the air like a tiny silver Frisbee and plopped down at his feet. He stared between the packet and the gorgeous (naked) woman in the bathroom.

Kaden was many things. Cocky. Self-aware. Stubborn. But he didn't consider himself a fool. The answer to his prayers lay at his feet. All he had to do was bend over, pick up the condom, rip open the foil and sheath himself. Five seconds later, that's exactly what he did.

Ava was in the shower by the time he got there.

Years of unrequited passion drove him against her. She leapt into his arms in a single, graceful movement. Luke warm water washed over them courtesy of the opposing shower heads. Her arms and legs wrapped around him and held tight as he pushed her against the tile wall.

A part of him, the civil side, recognized that this wasn't how he'd intended their first time to be. But the more primitive side said to hell with that. He slid a hand between her thighs and found her wet and ready.

"Hurry," she moaned against his neck.

Holding her hips, he let her slide down the tiled wall a few inches and then slid his cock between her silky folds.

"Mmm..."

His thoughts exactly.

With her breasts flattened against his chest and her hips shimmying against his, he forgot the foreplay and thrust the first glorious inch into her tight, wet heat.

“Yes...” Her head dropped back against the tile. He slanted his lips across hers, kissing her like he’d been wanting to for so long.

When he let her up for air, she gazed up at him with lust filled eyes and full, well-kissed lips. He couldn’t resist kissing her again before he burrowed into her further.

“More,” she whispered.

Her breathless order pleased him. “I knew you wouldn’t be a quiet lover,” he murmured, almost more to himself, as he trailed his lips down her throat.

“Mate with me Kaden. Don’t hold back.”

When he straightened and gazed down at the beauty in his arms, her lips parted a quarter of an inch. Heat gripped the back of his neck and spread over his shoulders, down his back, like the hot water dribbling from the rain shower overhead. But this heat was different. Hotter. More intense.

Why had he denied himself of this? Of her?

No more. Never again.

He took her mouth again, caught her gasp, then swept his tongue inside to tease hers.

He laced his fingers with hers, holding them overhead, against the wall. She locked her ankles behind his back. Mouths mating, he drove himself home, sinking as far as he could into her tight channel. The tender muscles of her pussy shimmered and twisted around him, giving his cock one hell of a massage. He felt every inch of her, inhaled her delicious scent and promptly lost his control.

Three hard, deep strokes later he spilled himself inside the condom, inside her. Groaning, he pressed his cheek against hers.

Fuck. When had his control been reduced to a single thread? A thread so thin that he couldn’t hang on.

“Sorry,” he murmured.

She slid a hand around the side of his neck and cupped his jaw. Gently, she turned his face to meet her gaze. He was so handsome. Breathstealing really.

Tan. Dark, intelligent, passion filled eyes. Kissable lips.

Right now he looked forlorn, frustrated with himself. She used her other arm to pull herself up so that she could kiss the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t apologize,” she whispered. “Take what you need.” She’d already had a blissful orgasm of her own.

“I need another condom,” he said, his lips moving against her cheek. “You saw where I keep them.”

Chapter Twenty Six

Kaden growled for a moment before letting her down. “It pisses me off that you have them in the first place.”

The smile that stretched her lips made her cheeks hurt.

She let her fingernails rake down his chest as he backed away.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you that I got them with you in mind?”

He stepped back to her and kissed her. Just a short, quick peck but it spoke of need and urgency. “Don’t move,” he said against her lips.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

When he returned to the shower, sheathed in a fresh condom, she knelt on the floor. Water showered her back, heating her chilled skin. The crystal clear liquid might as well have been made of anticipation because she was soaked with that too. Bending her arms, she lifted her hips, smiling when his growl filled the air.

How did a sound make her feel so sexy? So desirable?

A stream of water ran down her spine. With a flick of her head, she flung wet swath of hair out of her face.

“Good God, woman.” His voice was so low, so gravelly she hardly recognized it.

His hands slid over her hips, squeezed, then roamed up her back. He trailed a fingertip down her spine, his touch gentle, achingly slow. She was thoroughly and completely hooked.

Every brush of his fingers excited her nerve endings. Each brush of his lips touched something deep inside her. Something that had never been touched before.

“How could I have missed this?” he mused.

“Don’t beat yourself--” He tweaked her nipple. “Up,” she finished on a sigh.

She wiggled her hips, needing to feel him inside her again. To prove to herself that this was real, that he was really here, making love to her, that this was not some fabulous erotic dream.

He nipped the blade of her left shoulder with his teeth and a shiver ran through her. She was just about to beg him to take her when she felt the broad tip of his penis run up and down her pussy lips. The water made every movement smoother, slicker, more erotic. The lack of resistance was delightful and left her breathless with anticipation.

Why didn't he take her? Why was he toying with her?

He was trying her patience. She shimmied her hips again and made a sound of desperation. Smart man that he was, he filled her with a single, glorious thrust.

"Yes..."

The next time he rolled her nipple between his finger and thumb she felt a jolt of white hot desire zing straight to her womb.

Need.

Her head fell forward and her eyelids drifted close.

"Make me come, Kaden."

Hands on her hips, he pumped into her slowly...smoothly. He had far more patience than she'd given him credit for. Perhaps too much.

The wolf inside wanted it hard and fast.

There would be time for slow and sweet later. For exploration. Now was the time for fast and furious. To release all the pent up desire from the last few days.

"Please..."

"Have I told you how sexy you are when you beg?" he murmured as he picked up the pace. But it wasn't fast enough. Not nearly.

Growing impatient, she cried his name. Then she reached between her legs for his balls.

He brushed her hand away and shifted his hips. With his next thrust...the feeling of completion, wholeness, took her breath away.

She threw her head back, a cry of delight on her lips, as her orgasm started. He made a sound of satisfaction and a large hand slid up her back and tangled with her hair.

He held her there, captive to his movements.

Harder. Faster. Until she was panting from the exertion. Her arms screamed for forgiveness, but she didn't dare change her position. He rode her through one wave of orgasm right up the mountain to the next.

And then he stopped.

Slowly withdrawing...so slow she thought he'd never fully exit. But then a fast, hard thrust seated him deeply inside her again.

Wicked.

Temptation.

Torture.

With one hand still tangled in her hair, he reached the other around to play with her clit.

"Mmm..."

"You are so fucking beautiful. So wet." He kissed her shoulder. "So mine."

He followed his words with his teeth. But they were sharper than normal, piercing her skin gently between her neck and her shoulder.

Mine...the word floated around her, drowning out the sound of water splashing against the tile.

His finger gave a quick flick back and forth and then she was falling again. Through space and time, into a pool of bliss.

He was claiming her.

A whimper erupted from her throat as searing pleasure shot through her. He did it again. And again. Moisture flooded her pussy and he picked up the pace, the whole time, carefully stroking her.

Gasping his name, another orgasm spiraled through her. In the same instant, he stilled inside her. With his arms bracketed around her and his teeth holding her steady, she couldn't have moved if she'd wanted to.

She didn't want to. She could stay here like this forever.

His frame went rigid, except for his cock. Despite her own mind altering ecstasy she could feel the length of him twitch as he found his release.

He made a sound of bliss and buried his face against the side of her throat.

Several long minutes ticked by, their breathing the only sound other than the echo of the water hitting the tiled floor. Long deep breathes, short quick breathes as they eased down from the peak of pleasure. She didn't dare say anything to disturb the moment.

In fact, she kept her eyes closed and memorized every kiss, every caress. There might come a day when all she had were memories to keep her warm. When that time came, she wanted to be able to relive these

moments in Kaden's arms. "Now that I've gotten us sweaty again, perhaps I should help you get clean," he said softly, and then gently bit her earlobe.

Her heart knocked around in her ribcage. So this is what happiness felt like. Sheer, unadulterated happiness. The kind most people only dreamed of. And all it took was having Kaden want to spend more time with her.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

He pulled out, discarded the condom and then pulled her to her feet. She felt well-loved and very unsteady. Smiling up at him, she blinked away the water droplets and she wrapped her arms around his waist, holding on tight, lest she melt into a puddle at his feet.

WhitePaw could do much worse than have him as an Alpha.

Kaden turned off the shower and reached for a towel. Even though he'd found release, twice, he was still on edge. He'd let himself get wrapped up in a Shewolf, be distracted and forget about Pack business.

But he didn't regret a single second in Ava's arms. Frustrated by the lousy timing of the whole situation, he stalked into Ava's bedroom.

Making love in the shower had soothed his more primitive side...but only for a moment. He could hear the party going full swing. Perhaps taking an extra thirty minutes in the shower hadn't been his brightest move, but no matter what happened tonight, he wouldn't change a thing about this evening.

Fuck. He couldn't wait to be inside her again.

"Kaden..." she called.

"Yeah?" he answered, turning to the open closet. An overhead light cast her in a spotlight. She wore a form fitting blood-red dress that made his mouth go dry. Ending just above the knee, it showed off her legs to their best advantage.

Legs he'd just had wrapped around his waist.

A feral grin stretched his lips. Take that, Alain Whatever-your-last-name-is.

"Can you zip me up?" she asked, wrestling with the zipper beneath her right arm.

Sleeveless perfection.

Towel hugging his hips, he started toward her. Zip her up and get dressed. Zip her up and get dressed. Zip her up--

She smiled up at him and he felt something in his chest tighten. There was something in her eyes, something in the way she glanced at him, almost shyly...and then she turned to the side, lifting her arm to expose the gaping zipper.

"Thank you." Her voice was so quiet, so unlike the Ava who'd gone down on him in his truck. So unlike the rapier tongued woman he'd verbally sparred with in the past. This was the softer, less wild side and damn if she wasn't that much more appealing.

Standing stock still, she offered him another smile. Appreciation, tenderness, and dare he hope, love...they were all there in her eyes. And briefly, he remembered that moment at Bryan's wedding when Brianna had looked at her groom like he was her whole world.

Kaden had wanted that for himself. A woman of his own. A woman who loved and adored him, who would weather storms with him.

The way Ava was looking at him right now...he couldn't help but feel he was at the center of her universe.

She didn't realize she was at the center of his.

She'd been at the center all these years and he'd been too blind to see it.

But he'd fixed that. He'd claimed her. She hadn't said a word to stop him.

"You're welcome."

She stepped into a pair of stilettos that did amazing things to her calves. The same shade as her dress, she did a little twirl atop the spiky heels. "Do I look okay?"

For a moment his lips forgot how to form words. Red. Short. Tight. Curvy. The syllables flashed through his mind but his tongue wouldn't work.

She stared at him expectantly. He licked his lips. If there were any other Alphas at the party, they'd probably drop dead from heart failure. No fighting needed. That would certainly be one way to win beat the competition.

"Way better than okay."

He backed out of the little room before he did something he shouldn't, like strip her naked. Now that he'd sated his sexual appetite, it was time to get to work.

Mate, said the wolf.

Business first, he growled back.

Ava felt calm for the first time in months. She strode out of her old closet, confident that she would turn heads and make Alain rue the day he'd ever decided to screw with her. The heat in Kaden's eyes said it all.

If they could just keep the fire banked between them until pack business was finished...

She paused, earrings in hand, as Kaden shrugged into a jacket. Her mouth went dry as he turned and all thought of banking fires and simmering desires fled her mind.

How he managed to throw together such a smoking outfit with so little time and a single duffle bag, she'd never know. What she did know was that those jeans had been made for him. Dark denim, tight in the ass. She grit her teeth together so her tongue wouldn't fall out of her mouth.

The charcoal t-shirt showed off his powerful chest to its full advantage. A short, black zip up jacket gave just the right amount of sophistication. He'd even managed to scrounge up some leather shoes that complimented the outfit. Gone was the rough, tough, dusty cowboy and in his place, an urban wolf.

Sexy as hell.

He turned around and flashed a brief smile. She swallowed hard.

"Ready?" he asked, holding out his hand for her.

Oh, handsome...you have no idea. She was more than ready. "And willing," she murmured, sliding her fingers against his palm.

He ushered her through the door, his hand slipping to the small of her back.

"I'm ready to make Alain swallow his tongue," she admitted quietly as they strode down the hall, side by side.

Those handsome lips twitched. She wanted to kiss that sexy little crease at the edge. Then rub her cheek against his. Nestle close and stay there all night long.

He paused on the top step of the grand staircase. She glanced up and saw him survey the crowd below. There was a fierce gleam in his dark eyes. She shivered as he tucked her hand into the curve of his arm.

Sometimes he was downright scary. She would hate to be counted as his enemy. Lucky for her, she was now his lover.

And his mate, the wolf whispered.

“You sure know how to make an entrance,” she whispered.

There was a momentary pause in the chorus of conversation. She kept her hand tight on his arm, letting the other caress the railing. Said entrance would be ruined if she fell on her face. Searching the crowd, she looked for her parents.

Almost everyone in the wide entry turned to watch them descend the steps. Ava smiled to herself in satisfaction. She still had it. There wasn't anything a few yards of red silk and a pair of three inch heels couldn't fix.

They didn't stop to make chit chat. Almost as if he was reading her mind, Kaden headed for the back terrace. The throng of people glanced their way and parted. Beneath the flowering arbor, she gazed out at the party-goers.

She only recognized about half of the people in attendance and she could smell plenty of human flesh. Fancy perfume. Cologne that made her nose twitch, and not in a good way.

Frowning, she swept her gaze across the crowd again. She didn't see any of her family. Not her brother, nor Alana. So this wasn't a family event. That should have made her feel better. It didn't.

Was her father lending the house to someone? That would explain why she hadn't been involved with planning the event. But surely he'd be here. Her mother too. And she was willing to bet her favorite teardrop earrings that if her father was here, Alain wasn't far away.

She knew the instant that Alain had spotted her. A gaze so intense that the hair on the back of her neck stood on end pegged her.

“There he is,” Kaden murmured. She followed his gaze, slowly, as if she didn't have a care in the world. Knowing that slow, steady movements could drive a man insane, she did her best to blink in slow motion. Take that, mascara commercials.

To her surprise, Alain was standing next to the redheaded woman Kaden had danced with at Brianna's wedding reception. What was she doing here?

Carrottop paused from gulping down a cocktail to say something to Alain. But Alain's piercing gaze never wavered from Ava.

Damn him. He was still ridiculously handsome. But he was not going to become the Alpha of this pack.

Pulling her shoulders back, she decided to pretend she was completely at ease. Kaden had taught her that a good bluff could drive the other party crazy. And if she played her cards right, Alain would be tugging on his tie in no time.

She turned a luminous smile to Kaden. The usual tendril of desire that snaked through her when his gaze met hers coursed downward. Her breathing shallowed and she turned to look out at the crowd again.

Numerous couples danced around the stone terrace. Without missing a beat, Ava said "dance with me."

Though Kaden didn't say a word, she could tell by his quick response that he was pleased with her request. They made their way to the dance floor and he slid an arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

For a moment, she closed her eyes and imagined that it was just the two of them. That the rest of the world and all their responsibilities didn't exist.

Kaden had asked her what would happen if neither of them became the Alpha...if the Alphaship wasn't at stake. She was starting to get some definite ideas. Dancing. Kissing. Hot shower sex.

All acceptable ways to pass their time.

All preferable to dealing with business and pack laws and too much testosterone.

No crunching numbers. No ensuring future viability and security for a species that could survive better than any other on the planet. No baby-sitting. No trying to win her father's praise.

She'd been striving, for so-so long, to outdo her brother and sisters. And that was the crux of the matter. She'd spent far too much time trying to win her father's approval and not nearly enough living her own life.

But it was that drive that had put Kaden directly in her path.

"I can still remember the first time I really noticed you," she whispered.

"Yeah?"

She opened her eyes and tilted her head back. "You were following Father through the foyer toward his office. I was coming down the stairs...all of..." she counted back the years. "Fourteen. You had this

swagger about you. Masculine, predatory, and yet, graceful. All wolf. That's what I thought."

His gaze flicked around the dance floor, as if gauging if anyone was eavesdropping.

She let her gaze follow his.

"So when did you decide you wanted to become the Alpha?" he murmured.

"I--" Her fingers plucked at his jacket and she kept her gaze locked on the zipper. "When I was fifteen my two older sisters complained to Daddy that I wouldn't stop following them around. I idolized them. They were so cool. Older. Confident. I was just learning to control my shifts. They'd mastered it. I had this massive crush."

On you. She smiled at the memory...at her adolescent plan. "They had boyfriends. I was interested in clothes. They had a license to shop. I convinced myself that if I could be like them, I could win you."

She shrugged away the next memory. The one that had shaken her world. "Their comment crushed me."

He squeezed her hand.

"My dad told me to stop following and take the lead." The major events of her life flashed before her eyes. Straight As in school. Honors at graduation. Meeting and learning about every member of the pack.

Wow. What a pity party.

Her wolf snarled at the weakness.

"I've been failing ever sense." She looked up then. "I've been following what I thought my father expected of me. I followed my mother's example. I thought...I don't know what I thought. In fact," she said, glancing around again at the crush of well-dressed bodies. "I'm not really sure I thought it out all that much. I just thought 'Daddy wants me to be a leader.' Somehow I thought that meant taking his place one day. And I suppose I thought that if I became the Alpha then I'd have what I really wanted. His respect. Yours. My sisters'."

"You have mine, Ava."

He let go of her hand and cupped her cheek.

For a single, bliss filled moment, he stared down at her, not with heat. But with tenderness. A tenderness that belied what they were, who they were.

And then, in front of everyone, he ducked his head and kissed her.

A gentle, smooth brush of his lips. She melted against him, more turned on than ever before.

So this was what all those romantic comedies were about. This feeling. Not the crazy, hot, nuclear desire. But a tender, almost lazy desire that melted her from the inside out, sweetly, slowly. And built her up, made her feel like the world was at her feet and that anything was possible.

Even earning the love of a werewolf who'd snagged her eye, and her heart, almost a decade ago.

When he raised his head again, she half expected to come crashing back to earth. She'd never felt so light, so carefree.

She sucked in a deep breath. Staring into his eyes, she realized something. "I don't want his respect anymore. Or my sisters'."

He traced her jaw with the pad of his thumb.

"What do you want?" It was time to lay it all on the line. For the first time in years, she felt absolutely sure of herself and not the least bit conflicted.

"You."

Before he could reply, his gaze flicked over her shoulder and he pulled back a fraction.

"Here comes your father," Kaden warned.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Despite his soothing delivery, his words jerked her out of the moment.

Straightening her spine, she kept her hands where they were: one raking through the hair at his nape, the other flat over his heart. A fresh round of irritation bubbled through her at her father's lousy timing.

"Kaden, Ava, welcome back. How's everything at the ranch?" her father's voice interrupted.

Kaden turned so that they were both facing the Alpha of their pack. Her knees brushed his and his hand tightened on her hip. For some reason being in his arms brought a rush of strength, courage, and an eerie calm.

"The men are recovering well. Things should be back to normal in the next day or two."

“Excellent.” He pressed his hands together. “I’m surprised you’re back so soon.” He studied them, his gaze lingering on the hand around Ava’s waist.

Did he guess? Could he scent the change in her? The cycle?

It’d serve him right if she ran off with a man, abdicating her duties to the family and the pack. Just the thought was appealing. What would her father say to that? Would he shrug his shoulders or beg her to stay?

She realized after another moment of silence that Kaden wasn’t going to rock the boat. “Actually, Brianna called me.”

Her father’s keen gaze swerved to hers. “Brianna?”

“She said you had some...news.” She glanced up at Kaden. “We wanted to be sure to hear it in person.”

Phillip glanced around at the party goers. Why did Kaden get the feeling he wasn’t going to like what was about to go down. He was tempted to grab Ava’s hand, leave and say to hell with it all.

The Alpha nodded and then held a hand out toward the house above. “Come on.”

Kaden kept his hand at the small of Ava’s back as they followed her father through the crowd. The terrace was a heady cocktail of perfume, ocean breezes, and alluring female. But his wolf was on full alert, not just aware of the woman at his side, his mate, but also for the threat that lay around the corner.

Phillip led them into his study. Kaden had been in the book-lined room many times. It always smelled of leather and lemon oil. Rather than sitting down, her father leaned against the massive, intricately carved desk. It was a man’s desk in size and heft.

“A new option has opened itself.” Phillip glanced at Ava, then studied Kaden. “There’s another person I’m considering for the Alpha position.”

“Alain.” Ava bit out the word.

Kaden squeezed her hip. They needed to keep calm.

Phillip clasped his hands together, almost as if he were praying.

Clasped hands. Praying.

And that’s when Kaden realized Phillip Garnier was bluffing. It’d always been Garnier’s tell.

“Brianna told you...” her father trailed off, not denying it.

“Why him?” Ava asked and Kaden made another realization. The beautiful woman at his side, the woman who’d spent her life looking up to this man, working herself to the bone to please him, was less than a minute away from dissolving into tears. He could hear it in her voice. Feel it in the tension of her body. And as a wolf, she would take that as the ultimate sign of weakness. Things would get ugly very quick. But before he could do anything she piped up again.

“You know what, it doesn’t even matter. I quit. I’m out. I’m done. I’ve poured over your books, learning all your businesses. I’ve planned parties and kept pack laws. I’ve made nice with the locals and been your ‘ear,’” she sneered. “But I’ve royally failed to live my own life. And I’m done trying to live yours. You win, Daddy.”

“Ava--” her father stepped forward.

She held out a hand to stop him.

“Maybe if I’d been a boy everything would have been different. But we can’t change our chromosomes,” she laughed. She actually laughed. Kaden was stunned as hell. And oddly aroused. Her passion made him want to carry her off and claim her. Again.

She glanced at Kaden quickly before pegging her father again. If looks could kill...

“I’ll say this once,” she said evenly, commanding attention. “Make Kaden the Alpha. He’s given his all to this family and to this Pack and if you can’t see that then you’re blind. He’s strong, smart, and completely capable of seeing WhitePaw well into the future.”

It was Kaden’s turn to whisper her name.

He didn’t stop there. “Would you excuse us a minute?” Kaden said to Phillip. He didn’t wait for an answer, rather he pulled Ava across the room.

“What the hell are you doing?” he murmured. Unable to keep his hands to himself, he cupped her shoulders. “He’s bluffing,” he whispered. “He’s not really considering Alain. There’s something else he’s after.”

Realization dawned in her beautiful brown eyes. But instead of confronting her father with the truth, she gave a sad smile and she shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not built for the role. You said it yourself. If he declared warrior’s rights, I’d be SOL. I told you, Kaden, you were born for this job and we both know it.”

He stared at her for several heartbeats. “Why are you doing this?”

Did she really not want to be Alpha? So suddenly? Why? What had changed?

But the pain in her eyes swiped the questions right out of his mind and the beast inside him growled. She was giving up her dreams, her goal, for him.

Not just for him but because her father was fucking with her mind, testing her, even now. The frustration of working against a stacked deck had been too much for her and she was retreating. Hell, he didn't blame her.

There were plenty of days when he felt like throwing in the towel. Life sucked some times. Add to that the inner battle that he waged daily, it was enough to drive a wolf insane.

"Because...it's the right thing to do. The right decision for the pack." She glanced over at her father. "And." She lifted her gaze to Kaden's. "Because I love you."

Her words ricocheted inside his ribcage. Pride, hope, joy, love. It was all there. Swirling inside him. Making him want to howl at the moon.

It made him want to fight for her. Kill for her.

He pegged his leader with a glare. "I'm out too."

"What?" Ava actually screeched the word. She sounded more hawk than human.

Her father parroted her.

Kaden had to force the words past his lips because they went against everything he'd ever worked for, "let Alain have the job."

"Kaden--"

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Kaden was running blind. Unsure of his next move. His feelings for the Alpha's daughter shook him to the core. His Alpha's bluff confused him. But Kaden had learned from the best.

"Your daughter would make a perfect Alpha, sir. I know I don't have to tell you why. But barring that, Alain would be a fine choice."

"Kaden, you can't do this," Ava said, her eyes pleading.

"Sure I can, sweetheart. You were right. I am an outsider. And the Alphaship is yours by birthright." In for a penny...in for a pound. This was going to hurt like hell. He just hoped he was right.

"What the hell is wrong with you two?" Phillip thundered.

Kaden cut him a glance, sure that he was on the right track. Phillip was up to something. Using Alain as a smokescreen. But two could play that game. "When you've made your choice, give me a call."

Phillip's mouth dropped open and for a moment he looked like a fish.

"See you around," he whispered to Ava. Avoiding her eyes, he tapped her under the chin with a finger and then, to prove he was serious, he made a beeline for the door.

Heart aching, he kept walking even when she called him back. He'd give Phillip till sunrise to get his head out of his ass and do the right thing. Then he was coming back for his woman.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Ava rounded on her father, the beast inside her ready for a knock-down, drag out fight. Her lip curled and she dropped her chin.

"What have you done?" she demanded, her heart breaking.

"Ava, Phillip, come back to the party," her mother appeared in the doorway Kaden had just exited. Ava felt her mother's gaze. "What's going on?"

Ava gave an unladylike snort. "Ask your mate."

She turned to leave, hurt by Kaden's departure. He'd confused her, aroused her, made her fall in love with him...then he'd claimed her.

She closed her eyes and pursed her lips.

But when push came to shove, he'd abandoned her. Was she just part of the package? If he wasn't going to be Alpha then he didn't want her either?

Until that moment she'd thought it impossible for her kind to hyperventilate. But she was oh so close.

She'd thought that she'd meant more to him than that. At the very least, shouldn't they discuss--discuss what? He'd done the same thing she had.

If he was going to give up everything he'd fought so hard for and turn his back on what they had...how could she argue with that?

"He's bluffing," her father called.

She whirled around and marched across the room until they were toe-to-toe. "How can you be so sure? He's gone, in case you haven't noticed," she said, gaining her second wind.

He didn't answer, but he did lean back...away from her fury. She couldn't remember ever being so angry with him. Disappointed, disheartened, frustrated...yes, but never ready to draw blood.

"Phillip, what did you do?" her mother crossed the room.

"He's naming Alain, Alpha. Or didn't he tell you?" Ava said the words without looking at her mother. If there was one thing her father had taught her, it was never turn your back on the enemy.

"Dammit, Ava. I was never going to name Alain alpha. Kaden called my bluff." He glanced down at his hands.

Ava could do nothing more than blink. Her father was admitting his bluff?

"Now he's bluffing," her father said, glancing at the door Kaden had just exited. "God knows why he didn't just call me on it. I always knew that kid was too smart."

The tips of Ava's fingers itched, as did her teeth. Her skin tingled, moments away from her shift. She fought the wolf but growled out her displeasure.

"He's not a kid," she said slowly. "He's a man. A smart man. And you hurt him with your stupid games."

A smart, sexy man. But what if he wasn't bluffing? What if he really didn't want to lead the WhitePaw pack? What if he was forcing her father's hand? Forcing him to accept Ava as the new pack leader?

Would he do that? For her?

And if he was, that meant--

"I just wanted the two of you to get your heads out of the sand, stop dancing around each other and fall in love," her father shot back.

Ava was so stunned that the wolf stopped pressing. Hell, she almost tipped over backwards.

"Phillip," her mother scolded, a deep frown marring her lovely face.

Ava shook her head but the thoughts up there were still scrambled.

"You...let me get this straight," she said, stepping away from him. She closed her eyes, sure she hadn't heard him correctly. Her practical father..."You were trying to play match maker?"

“The Alpha of a pack is more than one person, Ava,” her mother said, as if that explained everything. As if that excused her father’s manipulation.

“It takes a team,” her father agreed. “A strong Alpha team. You and Kaden--”

“Me and Kaden? Do you see Kaden in this room? He left!”
And he’d taken her heart with him.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Ava took a cab to Kaden’s house. She still didn’t understand why he’d left her standing in her father’s study all alone. He’d seen her father’s bluff and raised him one. And he’d warned her. But did he have to leave her?

Her stomach had never twisted in so many knots as it had when she’d watched him walk away. When she’d called his name to his retreating back and he hadn’t turned around. When he hadn’t reassured her that everything was going to work out just fine.

The Alphaship didn’t even matter anymore so long as he came to his senses. So long as he felt the same way she did.

His truck was parked out front. But even though the lights inside the house were on, there was no sign of him, as she walked up to the expensive front door with etched glass.

She rang the doorbell and waited. Two or three minutes ticked by and there was still no answer. Maybe he was in the shower.

She knocked and waited another minute, peering through the glass. A small movement on the back patio caught her attention.

Not willing to let it go, she waved the cabbie off and slunk around the side of the house. She followed the pathway and found the gate unlocked. As she neared the back corner of the house she heard raised voices. Both male. One she recognized easily.

Clinging to the darkness, she paused to listen.

“The truce is over, Kaden. Your guys broke your end of the bargain. The blood is on your hands.”

“The hell it is. You think I don’t know about the unprovoked attack? I was only gone three days, Juan. And I checked in every day.”

What attack?

“Unprovoked? My father was right,” the other man sneered. Ava peeked around the corner. The two faced off, standing next to the pool. She saw it then, a flash of brushed metal. “The only good wolf, is a dead one.”

Ava shifted without even thinking and broke into a dead run as the man aimed the gun at Kaden’s chest. Haunches curled beneath her, tail straight for balance, she launched herself at the man she loved.

A loud pop blared in her ears as she tackled Kaden. Pain exploded in her side as they hit the water. She gasped for breath, the scent of blood and chlorine filling her nose.

“Son of a bitch!” Kaden roared a moment later.

Her paws splashed the water, churning up the blood. Every heartbeat made her lightheaded. And then inky blankness claimed her.

When she came to, Kaden was holding her. “Ava, honey, you’ve got to shift.” He ran his fingers over her shoulder and down her side. “Come on sweetheart, I know you can do it.”

Shifting would hurt as much as the bullet wound. And in that moment, she didn’t have the strength. Motivation was nowhere in sight.

Darkness started to claim her again, starting at the edge of her vision. Strong hands shook her, chasing away the blackness. “Come on. One shift, Ava. One shift and you’ll be healed.”

Though she heard the words, she couldn’t bring herself to care. She’d rather take a nap. A nap would be nice. Why were her toes tingling like that?

Kaden hunkered down, got in her face. Close, intimate, his breath mingling with hers. His fingers sank into her fur.

She must be dreaming.

“Fight, Ava. One shift and you’ll be good as new again.”

What would happen if she didn’t shift? Could she take a nap? If she was asleep, she wouldn’t feel so bloody awful. If she was asleep, she could dream of Kaden.

The tingling in her toes moved north to her paws. That didn’t seem good. Neither did the light-headed...

She struggled to sit up.

“That’s my girl.” He cupped her cheek. “You know you’re my mate, right?” Despite her exhaustion, his words made her light and happier than she’d ever been. “Shift so I can kiss you properly.”

Blanking her mind, she shifted back to her human form. But this time, she did as Kaden instructed. Releasing her mind, finding a happy place.

Her happy place was in his arms.

The moment she was human again, she wrapped her arms around him and he held her high against his chest.

"You crazy woman. What possessed you to run in front of a gun?"

"I couldn't lose you."

"You're not going to lose me." Cupping her cheek in one hand, he kissed her. Softly at first, then deeper. "I love you, Ava."

The ringing of a phone shattered the bliss-filled moment. Growling, he stretched back and retrieved his phone from the small patio table.

Why was he taking a call at a time like this? She closed her eyes, her feelings raw.

"Yeah?" he said by way of greeting. "She's with me."

She opened her eyes. Who was he talking to?

Your father, he mouthed.

"The truce with Estivez is off." There was a pause. "Yeah. He showed up here tonight...with a gun." Another pause. "I'm fine, thanks to your daughter."

Ava heard her father's roar as Kaden held the phone away from his ear. "She's fine."

She couldn't imagine what her father was saying now. Part of her held out hope that he was scared for her. Concerned. But he was also the Alpha. The leader. He had more pressing matters to attend to...like a rogue, punk-group of weretigers.

"You know this will mean war." Kaden said.

War?

She was having trouble wrapping her mind around it all. Soaked to the bone and naked, a chill was working its way through her body. Less than a week ago she'd been dancing at her sister's wedding, her life, for the most part, peaceful. Now she was in love with a wolf who put duty above his heart and there was talk of war.

Gingerly, she eased out of Kaden's lap and circled the pool.

"Sir, I need to go."

She heard the clank of the phone as he returned it to the table. Then, soft foot-falls behind her.

Staring down at the dribble of blood on the concrete, her hand went to her side, just above her right hip. The bullet wound was just a memory. A painful memory.

She hadn't thought, simply reacted. The weretiger was obviously long gone, which was lucky for him. At the moment, she wasn't feeling particularly magnanimous.

"You were right," she murmured. "Daddy was bluffing."

Kaden stepped closer. She felt his heat before his hands clasped her shoulders and turned her to face him.

"All this time, he was playing matchmaker." She told him what her parents had said.

Kaden pulled her into a hug. "I'll admit I didn't see that one coming."

She soaked in his warmth, despite the fact that he was still soaking wet. His strength surrounded her. Eyes closed, she memorized every breath, the feeling of his body pressed against hers.

"Why did you leave?" she finally managed to ask just before a shiver took over.

"So that your father wouldn't call my bluff. I've always respected him as a leader but I don't appreciate being manipulated."

She leaned back in his arms and stared up at him. "Even if that manipulation brought us together?"

"I don't mind that at all." He brushed kisses across her forehead, down her cheeks, over her lips. "I was giving him till tomorrow morning to come to his senses. Then I was coming for you."

"You were?"

"But you got here first."

"What will happen now? With the weretigers?" Did Elizabeth know?

"It doesn't matter." He scooped her up and headed in through the open door, leaving a trail of water droplets in their wake. She clung to his shoulders as he started up the stairs. "The only thing that matters from here on out, is you."

He kissed her then. It was a kiss of love. And promise.

Epilogue

One year later

Ava clung to Kaden as he carried her across the threshold. She'd been living with him since the night she'd gotten shot in his backyard. And after they'd finally managed to convince the police that there hadn't really been a gunshot that night, she'd given herself to him.

And almost every day since.

"What a day," she said, brushing her lips against his jaw.

As they'd promised her father a year ago, Kaden had become the proud Alpha of the WhitePaw pack. They'd married today in a small, family-only ceremony. She couldn't wait for the honeymoon to begin...not that they hadn't enjoyed each other plenty during the last three hundred and sixty five days. And nights.

"Did you have enough to eat at the reception?" he asked, heading for the stairs. It was like déjà vu.

"Yes. Why?"

He kissed her and didn't stop until they were standing in the center of the master bedroom, naked and in each other's arms.

"Because I don't intend to let you out of this room until morning."

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The blonde peering into his bedroom window never heard him approach.

"Can I help you?" he asked mildly when he was within pouncing distance. Shrieking, she whirled to face him, backing up at the same time. Her hands came up to balance herself, but it was too late. He made no move to rescue her even though he could have. Her momentum toppled

her over the railing and into the soggy grass below. She landed flat on her back.

From the edge of the porch, he stared down at her not feeling the least bit sorry for startling her. What did a man have to do to get privacy?

Her wheat colored hair covered her face and the rain slowly soaked her clothes. She seemed too startled to move. Finally, she eased up on her elbows. Her breasts heaved and fell as if she might start crying. The last thing he wanted was a crying woman. Or a lawsuit.

“You all right?”

With a perfectly polished hand, she flicked her hair out of her face and glared up at him. The blue eyes that locked with his couldn't have surprised him more if there'd been eight of them.

Amanda St. James. Alive and in his yard.

Couldn't be. He narrowed his gaze and took in her features. Same cute pixie nose. Same rosy, heart-shaped mouth he'd longed to kiss. Same delicious curves that his hands itched to caress.

Suddenly he was transported a decade ago when they'd all been hanging out on a hot summer day. It had been August. Suffocatingly humid. Then Amanda had grabbed the hose and proceeded to drench him and his brothers to the bone. Her kissable mouth had laughed and smiled as they'd chased her. When they'd finally caught her, turning the hose on her, the water had plastered her clothes to her sweet young body.

It had taken all his willpower not to carry her off that very afternoon. To kiss her all over – from that adorable nose, to those delicious berry pink lips, to her hot pink toenails.

The clap of thunder brought him back to the present. His eyes didn't fool him. He sniffed the air and her scent filled his lungs. She smelled so sweet, so familiar, and so wonderful that he almost closed his eyes to savor it. Instead, he took in her pitiful form. She looked like a drowned cat. He watched as the rain molded her shirt to her breasts. Either from cold or, heaven help him, desire, her nipples beaded beneath the fabric and stood out like pebbles.

He clenched his fists. Long dormant need surged upward startling him with its intensity. Its rawness. He hadn't seen or heard from her in nine long years but he'd never stopped wanting her. It was the reason he dated a long stream of women, never settling down. He'd never felt this kind of

urgency with anyone else. Although he'd tried to wipe away her memory, none of them could compare to Manda. His Manda.

But her presence now reminded him of how she'd fled all those years ago. She'd gone off to Yankee country for school. Then she'd gone on to work for one of the biggest broadcast companies in the country. Never looked back. Never called. Simply fled. Ran from him.

His inner beast had been too proud to let him chase. Had been sure she'd come back in a week or two. Weeks had turned into years and now almost a decade. Now the beast growled deep inside, for the years he'd lost, for making him want her so, making him wait. It lay coiled, anxious and ready to spring to life and take what it wanted.

He crossed his arms over his chest, trying to keep the dangerous animal inside on a tight leash.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Amanda St. James." He couldn't keep the disdain from his voice. He hoped to hell she couldn't hear the hurt, the yearning... "Did the Yanks kick you out? Get too cold for ya up north?"

"What a mean thing to say." For a moment, she looked genuinely wounded. But he told himself that was part of her game. The network probably sent her. How he didn't want that to be true...

"Then what are ya doin' here?" Probably snooping for a story, he thought. Figured she'd use her looks, her connections, to get it. Like hell, she was going to get her story.

Her tongue slipped between her glossy pink lips to lick a raindrop. That simple movement reminded him of all the times she'd licked her lips, stuck out her tongue at him – reminded him of everything he really wanted in life.

And just how much he wanted to kiss her.

Once again, he took in her sad wet form and saw everything he'd wanted for hundreds of years. Everything he'd been denied and had denied himself.

Sebastian knew he couldn't be angry; she was worth the wait. He couldn't let her get away again. This was a sign from the Gods. She was meant to be his. He'd known it all those years ago when he'd watched her blossom in front of his eyes. While he'd waited for her to grow up. Waited for her to come to him.

He still knew it. Nothing had changed, he reasoned. Except that he wanted her more now than he had nine years ago.

And she was well over eighteen now. He would finally make her his. With the effortless grace his kind was known for, he leapt over the railing and landed at her feet. Oblivious to the rain, he glared down at her. "Get up," he ordered. She started to crab crawl backwards but she couldn't get away fast enough. In a lightning fast move, he hoisted her over his shoulder. She barely weighed more than a sack or two of sugar. "What are you doing?" she cried. "Taking what's mine."

Author Bio

An action movie buff with a penchant for all things supernatural and sexy, Selena Blake combines her love for adventure, travel and romance into steamy paranormal romance. Selena's books have been called "a steamy escape" and have appeared on bestseller lists, been nominated for awards, and won contests. When she's not writing you can find her by the pool soaking up some sun, day dreaming about new characters, and watching the cabana boy (aka her muse), Derek. Fan mail keeps her going when the diet soda wears off so write to her at <mailto:Selena@selena-blake.com>

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