

## Chapter 18

Cody

What is her game? Why would Tess say such ridiculous things? I don't understand, she's normally so level-headed. Was she being silly? She does make me laugh, but not by pulling a stunt like that. Why would she drag Willow into this, that crossed the line on so many levels. Willow likes her, which I thought was a good thing. She was happy to know that Tess is a girl like her. I don't get it, what happened just now?

I look back over my shoulder, but Tess isn't behind me. I guess I did tell her not to come back right away, but the sun is going down and I don't want her getting lost. I do love her. She's an incredible woman, I've never met anyone like her. She's tough and resilient. I let out a breath and turn back toward the house, I know I don't need to worry about her.

Crashing sounds grab my attention and I rush back as fast as I can. Jared and Naomi stand back as Willow picks up a chair and tosses it out into the woods, shattering it into splinters. "Willow!" I call to her. She doesn't listen to me and keeps grabbing things to throw. She's in a rage I've never seen from her. "Willow, stop! That's not okay." I reach her and she flits out of my reach, grabbing anything she can get her hands on to thrash. "Willow!" She continues her tirade, dodging me again and again. I move after her, finally able to hold her by the shoulders. "WILLOW STOP!" I roar with all the force I can muster. She stills, but her body is hot and trembling, she's panting and her eyes are out of focus, refusing to settle on me.

"Perhaps it might be wise to let her vent." Jared taps my shoulder.

I ignore him, shrugging away. "I'm not letting my daughter act like this. She knows better. What the hell happened while I was gone? Why would you let her behave this way?" I know I sound accusatory, but she's never acted this way with me. "She's been an angel her entire visit," Naomi says. I look up to see the sincerity in her eyes, but the way she's looking at Willow is giving me the creeps. She's watching her like she's waiting for something to happen.

"Mommy! Where's Mommy!" Willow cries then grabs her ears and sinks to the ground.

My heart breaks for my little tyrant. "Baby, you know Mommy is gone," I tell her as I scoop her into my arms.

"Mommy Tess! Mommy Tess!" She wails over and over. Her body convulses and I almost drop her.

Strong slender hands pull Willow from my arms. "I got her, Cody. Trust me. I know what to do." Tess rushes down the steps and lays her on a tuft of grass then starts tearing her clothes away.

"What do you think you're doing to my daughter!" I rush after her.

"Jared," Tess says serenely without looking in our direction. Jared grabs me from behind then pins me to the ground with a force I've never seen from him. I try to break away from him, but he has me in a chicken wing submission hold and I can't move.

"Get off! My daughter needs me." I yell. I'm so confused, I have no idea what's going on. Why would he keep me from my daughter? Why is Tess taking her clothes off?

Willow screams and Jared allows me to slightly turn my head so I can see her. "Tess has her. She's just fine." He says with a calmness I can't fathom in this situation.

I barely hear Tess's voice soothing Willow. "Focus sweetie. Your dad is fine. I promise he's not hurt." Willow looks up at Tess and Tess gives her a nod. "I promise he's going to love you no matter what. Just let go. You can't hold back or you'll be in more pain. Let go, sweetie. Let go."

Willow closes her eyes and I automatically feel sick from the sound of bones breaking and flesh tearing. Oh fuck no! That's my baby!

"Willow!" I cry out and thrash with all my might to get Jared to move.

"GET OFF ME!" I tell him and he reluctantly releases me. I spring across the ground to reach my daughter, but she's gone. In her place is an adorable little wolf pup.

I kneel beside Tess in complete shock as she strokes the puppy. "You did great. Do you want to go for a run?" The little puppy gets to her feet, spins a circle then yips. "Alright." She looks behind me then back to the puppy. "Your grandparents will take you. I'm going to talk with your daddy. I promise it will be okay."

I'm dumbfounded and can't seem to move. My daughter was here a moment ago, now, in her place is the cutest puppy I've ever seen. "What is going on?" I say to no one in general. Two full-grown wolves walk up on either side of me out of nowhere and I flinch from one to the other. The wolves seem focused on the puppy so I try to be as still as possible. I know wolves are very territorial. The smaller of the wolves gives the puppy a lick and the larger of the two leads the rest toward the woods. Once they're gone I look back to the porch, but Jared and Naomi are gone and all that's left is a folded pile of the clothes they were wearing.

Tess's touch makes me jump. "Cody? Are you alright?" I finally close my dry mouth only to let it drop open again. Nothing makes sense. I keep looking back and forth from the patio and the trashed furniture to the woods. Cool, soft hands hold my face and force me to look into a pair of familiar, warm, and loving eyes. "Cody. It's Tess. Can you answer me, please? Tell me what you're thinking."

I place one of my hands over hers, feeling her familiar skin. "Tess. I'm going mad. What the fuck did I just see? Was, was, that all real? My, my, my daughter."

Tess takes hold of one of my arms and pulls me to my feet like I weigh nothing. "Come on, big guy. Let's get you some coffee." She hooks her elbow into mine and slowly leads me back to the kitchen where she plops me into a chair. I keep looking out into the empty woods. "Here. Drink up." She places a coffee in front of me then sits so I can't see beyond her. "Cody. You're not going mad. That was all real."

"That was all real." I numbly repeat.

Tess touches my face and I close my eyes. It doesn't help because I see the whole thing happening all over again. "Cody, open your eyes, please. I need to know you're not going into shock or anything." I open my eyes and she searches mine, for what I have no clue. Finally, she lets out a breath. "I'm sorry you had to find out that way. I tried to tell you, but I guess seeing it makes it easier to believe."

I shake my head, "No. It doesn't. I still don't believe anything I just saw." I answer with the first thing that enters my mind. "My daughter disappeared and a wolf puppy was there in her place."

"No, hon. Your daughter didn't disappear. She is the puppy. Jared, Naomi, and I are just like her. She's not some freak of nature. She's a werewolf, we're werewolves."

I take a deep staggering breath. Tess pushes the coffee mug into my hand and I take a long drink, nearly burning my mouth. Tess has a look of concern as I wipe my mouth. "You're all werewolves," I repeat dismally. Tess nods. I scrub my hand down my face, then settle back on her loving, caring eyes. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Tess shakes her head. "Nothing. Willow was holding back because she thought you would hate her once you found out."

I knit my brows. "I could never hate my daughter."

"I know. I told her that." She supplies.

I close my eyes. Now that I'm more calm I relive the scene. My daughter's bones cracked and her flesh ripped. I think I'm going to be sick, but Tess forces my face up and catches my eyes again. "Was she in pain?" I ask.

Tess slowly nods. "It didn't last long and she's probably forgotten by now. Running as a wolf for the first time is exhilarating and exciting. That's the part she's going to remember." That information brings me a little comfort so I nod, letting her know I understand.

A howl sounds from a distance and Tess moves away from me. "Where are you going?" I ask then squint my eyes to watch out the dark woods.

"They're coming back. Willow is going to need some clothes. I won't be long." I watch Tess dash up the stairs then bring my focus back to the woods.

It's hard to see anything, but after a silent moment, I hear a rustling before a wolf puppy darts out of the brush and scampers up the stairs to sit patiently at my feet in front of me. The two large wolves break the clearing then sit in the duff in similar positions as the puppy. She yips at me, gaining my attention then tilts her head in an adorable fashion. I can't help but smile, she's so fluffy and cute.

I pick her up and pet her like I would any puppy. But this isn't just any puppy, this is my daughter, my flesh and blood baby girl. She licks my face excitedly and I laugh. "Okay, okay," I tell her and she stops licking. She stares at me with an intelligence far too advanced for a mere canine. But those eyes I recognize instantly. They're the eyes of innocence. They're the eyes similar to her birth mother. They're the eyes that brought me joy in a time of heartache. The same eyes that look at me with love and trust. "Willow." Her name escapes my mouth.

Her fluffy tail begins to wag so fast. I laugh again as tears leak from my eyes. My daughter whimpers as she licks the salty drops of liquid from my face. "I'm alright, Shortcake. It's just surprising, that's all. I love you. Nothing will ever change that." My words are true. Nothing will ever change the love I have for my daughter. I lay her against my chest and she rests her head on my shoulder, her tail still wagging.

Naomi flicks on the kitchen light and Jared sits at the table. "Sorry for holding you down, Cody. Tess needed the space to get Willow to shift."

I nod my head remembering the strength he had. "You definitely caught me off guard."

"I had to or you would've fought me off. How did you command me like that?"

I have no idea what he's talking about. "How did I what?"

"You commanded him to let you go. It's something Alphas do. Jared is an Alpha, but your command overpowered him." Tess explains as she approaches my side. She throws the yellow checkered sundress over her shoulder then holds her hands out to take Willow. I kiss my daughter's head then hand her over.

Mulling that over, I shake my head. "I don't know. I just needed to get to Willow."

Jared nods his head then Willow runs up to me in her yellow dress. I hold my arms out for her and she climbs into my lap. "I'm sorry for making you afraid, Daddy. I didn't mean to break Grandpa and Grandma's things." She looks at Jared. "I'm sorry, Grandpa."

"It's quite alright, Willow." He tells her.

I brush her hair out of her face. "That wasn't your fault, Sunshine. It was just an odd situation." I look at the two. "Right? Was that part of the whole shift thing?"

Tess sits beside me and I automatically take her hand. "Kind of. Normally when a tot shifts for the first time, they're a little impulsive. It won't be like that again. Now she can shift at will and it will be faster and relatively pain-free." She explains. I'm sitting at a table full of werewolves and I'm the only human among them. That sounds crazy, but I saw it. My daughter shifted into one right before my eyes. It's real. It truly did happen. "So what now?"

"I think it best you take Willow to Tess's pack. Willow can shift at will, but sometimes new wolves shift when their emotions are out of control. She would be safest there." Jared answers. Tess's pack. That's right, she did tell me her tribe is actually a pack. "Alpha Micco is one of the few Alphas that doesn't have a problem with humans. Plus he already knows you, so that helps. He might be willing to take you both in."

Tess squeezes my hand so I look in her direction. "What do you think?" I trust her judgment.

She nibbles her lip then speaks. "Willow needs a pack, I agree with Jared, but there are other factors we need to consider."

I look at her in question. "Does it have anything to do with the mate thing you were trying to tell me about?" Her eyes tell me I've hit the bullseye