

Chapter 19

We wait to discuss the events of the evening until after Willow is tucked into bed. She insists everyone kiss her goodnight. Tess is last and Willow gives her the biggest hug. "I have a mommy now." She says. I swallow down any retort, I love Tess, but we haven't even discussed being married. I look to Jared, he catches my eye and nods. Naomi looks a little upset by Willow's declaration but doesn't say anything. Willow falls asleep before we even close her bedroom door. I hold Tess's hand, stopping her at the top of the stairs. "Tess, I didn't expect Willow to take to you so easily. I hope her calling you mommy doesn't scare you away."

"Why would it?"

Her hair is a mess in one of her usual buns. I gently pull the elastic from her hair and begin to comb her dark tresses with my fingers. "I mean our expectations may not be aligned. We've talked about being together, but never discussed anything long-term." She places her hands on my chest and leans in with her eyes closed. My arms automatically wrap around her as she inhales deeply then lets it out. I kiss her forehead and give her back her elastic. "Well, we do have a lot to talk about now, don't we? I think we need to include Jared and Naomi since they understand what's going to be happening. Naomi said she has coffee and a small dessert in the living room." "When did she tell you that?" I ask. I don't remember Naomi saying anything except goodnight to Willow.

"She just told me."

"Oh, I didn't hear her," I admit.

Tess holds my arm. "Of course you didn't, that's a werewolf thing. I'll explain everything." She reaches up on her toes to kiss my cheek.

"Come on, big guy." She starts piling her hair back into her usual messy

bun on her way down the stairs. The corner of my mouth ticks up then I follow behind her to the living room.

Naomi has a carafe and fixings for coffee with a crumb cake waiting on the coffee table. Tess prepares a mug and plate then hands them to me. "Thank you, Darlin'."

She winks then prepares a second mug and plate for herself then sits back on the sofa beside me.

"Cody. You're going to need to know what to expect when it comes to Willow." Jared grabs my attention. "Werewolves are highly social. We crave belonging and touch. Willow will need to be in a pack. That's another reason I suggest you go

to Tess's pack. Willow told you about us taking her to meet a few kids, that was actually Naomi's old pack. Naomi's brother is there so we paid him a visit. We thought Willow was showing signs of getting her wolf soon, so we actually wanted to double-check with Naomi's old Alpha. It's been quite some time since we watched a tot get their wolf.

I rub my hand down my face. "How did it even happen? How is my daughter a wolf?" I ask rhetorically to no one in particular.

After a sip of her coffee, Tess takes a deep breath then begins. "Willow is a werewolf because the werewolf gene is dominant, she got it from her mother, Audrey."

"No way." I contrast. "There is no way Audrey was a werewolf. I would've known."

"Audrey was what we call a runt." Jared leans forward to set his mug on the table then rests his elbows on his knees as he explains. "She was born premature and was very weak. Werewolves have some special abilities, healing being one of them, but she didn't heal like she should have. In fact she never should've been sick, that's how we knew she would never have a wolf. She survived, but she never shifted. I was my

pack's Alpha at the time. Naomi and I left the pack to my Beta, that's the second in command. We had to leave because humans are not welcome around werewolves."

I put my hands up at that. "Wait. Tess, your leg didn't heal very fast."

She nibbles her lips with a guilty look on her face. "I'm sorry, that's not entirely true. I re-cut my wound when you weren't in the cabin, then I had my dad do it again when he showed up the next morning. He used my kunai. My kunai have wolf's bane in the blades. Wolf's bane is poisonous to our kind so it takes us longer to heal from it."

My mouth is hanging open as I look over her scarred leg. I take her leg in my hand and run my thumb over the scar feeling sick to my stomach. "You cut yourself to fool me?" I'm horrified that she would do such a deceitful and disturbing action.

She shakes her head. "Not to fool you, Cody, I swear. If I healed normally, you would've been suspicious. I had to keep our secret. Humans don't know of our kind. It's werewolf law to keep it that way."

"She's right. I'm one of fifteen on the werewolf council that rules over the almost 600 packs. The last wolf to tell a human about werewolves was over 50 years ago. He shifted in a drunken fight. The wolf was marked as a traitor with a wolf's bane blade then imprisoned and the human was killed to keep our secret. Audrey knew what we were, but no one knew of her, except Marco. Marco is also on the Council. He helped me keep her a secret. Humans can't know about us."

"That's still true, unfortunately," Tess tells me. "Even I didn't know Jared and Naomi had a daughter. But you see the problem. You're human but Willow's father and my mate, so that leaves us in an odd position, on top of all the crap on my end. My dad already knows about you, obviously, but he hasn't told anyone else."

"Wait. Before we go into what's happening on your end, tell me about the mate thing. I'm guessing it's kind of a big deal?" I ask her to clarify.

Tess turns her body more toward mine so I match her position. "Mates are..." She shakes her head with wonder on her face. "Mates are everything to a werewolf. You only get one. Some Werewolves spend their lives searching for their mate. Mates are a blessing from the Moon Goddess. We mark each other with a bite on the neck and form a bond so strong nothing can break it. We are gifted a perfect match that once mated is a lifelong bond." "Actually it's more like an infinite bond." Jared corrects.

I look between him and Naomi. They're clearly in love and have always been a tight couple. My eyes fall back to Tess. She's worrying her lip without looking at me. I can tell she's concerned about my reaction to everything. "Darlin' how do you know that I'm your mate? I'm not a werewolf."

"There are clues. First of all your scent drives me wild. That's how I got caught in the trap, I could smell you on the breeze. We have excellent sense of smell along with hearing, strength, speed, and health. I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings because I was too focused on finding you. Once I locked eyes with you, I was sure it was you that I was smelling. But when you touched me the first time, it was like a buzz of ecstasy straight to my heart and..." She clears her throat and her cheeks turn rosy. "It was like nothing I've ever felt," I remember having the same feelings. I was lost in her eyes as soon as we looked at each other. Her scent calls to me, even in a crowd and I'm not even a wolf. I reach up to stroke her cheek and that buzz is still there just as strong as it was the first time. "It wasn't just you, Tess. I recognize all of those sensations." I drop my hand and my body stiffens as that first meeting jars something pretty important. "Wait, Tess. You bit me. Should I have turned into a werewolf?"

Jared laughs loudly while Naomi giggles behind her hand. Tess is holding back a laugh, but she quickly gains control. "It's not Hollywood. We don't work that way. Werewolves are born, not created. If it were, our situation would be much easier."

"Right, your elders are forcing you to get married," I remember her reason for staying at the cabin, besides being my mate.

"As I mentioned earlier tonight, my dad is the Alpha of our pack. I'm his only heir so once he retires, the pack falls to me. However, the elders would never allow a female to be the Alpha so I had always planned that when the time comes, my mate would be the next Alpha and I would fulfill the role of Luna."

"So as your mate, I'm supposed to be the next Alpha of your pack?"

Tess lets out a deep breath then nods.

I take a few drinks of my coffee while I let this all sink in. "Normally," Tess begins. "Mates are found much earlier in life, or not at all. In my case, the elders were growing impatient that I hadn't found you yet. They're planning on making me choose one of the single males in my pack to mate with. That's what happens when someone gives up the search, they take a choice mate."

"You found me and I'm human. I take it the elders aren't going to like me, are they?"

Tess and Jared both shake their heads. "No. After I found you, I didn't know what to do, so I told my dad I wouldn't reject you. My dad and I started training you not just for your fight, but also because he wanted to see if you're Alpha material. You made the cut or he would never have bothered." Tess looks at Jared with a look of dejection. She takes my hand. "Remember the wolf that chased you?" Tess brings that up and I feel my cheeks warm up with embarrassment. "That was one of the single males from my pack, Griffin."

"Oh, shit." Jared breathes out and closes his eyes with a grunt. I look between the two in question. "I don't know most of the wolves in the separate packs, but I know this wolf. Griffin's Grandfather is one of the elders in her pack. The guy's a real piece of work. If Griffin saw the two of you, you might be in danger, Cody."

"Dad said he would take care of it since Griffin attacked a human," Tess tells Jared.

He tilts his head with a dubious look on his face. "Still you should proceed with caution. They could very well throw you in a dungeon for life or kill you on the spot."

Now I understand Tess's reluctance to return to her pack. "Is that why you decided not to go back? To keep me safe?" Tess hesitantly nods her head. I think through the situation very carefully. My life is at stake whether I go to her pack or not. If any wolf spots us, they could easily rat us out to the council. If I come forward as Tess and Micco planned, maybe they would be accepting of me. I nod towards Jared then look to Tess. "Willow needs to be in a pack. I think we should go to your pack. If they see that I'm the mate and a parent of your kind, maybe they would be more accepting."

Tess's eyes go soft. "That's what I hope, but there is still that danger. My dad won't let anyone hurt you, but the elders can step in and alert the council." Her eyes become misty and her chin begins to tremble. "I can't lose you, Cody." I pull her onto my lap so her nose rests on the juncture of my neck. "Shh, babe. It'll be alright. I'm a pretty tough guy." Tess slightly chuckles.