

A man and a woman are shown in a close, romantic embrace, nearly kissing. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are positioned in the upper half of the frame. In the background, a large, bright full moon hangs in a dark, cloudy sky. Below the couple, in a misty, wooded area, two wolves are visible. One wolf is standing on the left, looking towards the right, and another is standing on the right, looking towards the left. A small, rustic log cabin is partially visible in the background behind the wolves. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, purples, and greys, creating a mysterious and romantic atmosphere.

# A WOLF'S QUEST

WOLVES OF THE SOUTH

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
HANNAH STEENBOCK



# A Wolf's Quest

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Wolves of the South Book 1

Hannah Steenbock

Buehsteppe Fantasy

## **A Wolf's Quest - Wolves of the South Book 1**

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# Chapter 1

Ben

**M**Y FAMILY WAS BUSTED.

Mom had disappeared weeks ago. Dad was out to distract the Hunters so that my sisters and I could get away. And that meant not drawing any attention to myself.

So I kept my mind strictly on the task I had been given which was to make my way south, for several hundred miles, and look for a pack I could join there.

Doing so had led me to this gas station at sunrise, three days after leaving our home, hoping to hitch a ride. I was doing my best to look just like a normal guy, with my t-shirt, lumberjack jacket, jeans and boots. My backpack held everything that I owned now.

My mind went to our house, to the flames that would have consumed it, and I wrenched it away. That life was over.

I watched a woman fill up her car, put the cap back on with practiced movements and walk to the shop to pay for the gas at the credit card terminal on the outside wall. Something about her caught my attention, although she had chosen not to dress up. Or maybe it was just that, seeing a woman wear sensible clothing and sneakers at an age where many were dolled up to the hilt.

I desperately needed something harmless to focus on, and so I watched her move with some kind of natural grace, her head high, her mouth determined, as if she was doing something she knew she shouldn't. I idly wondered who she was rebelling against.

When she turned away from the terminal, a man intercepted her, rudely stepping into her path.

She tried walking around him and he moved to keep blocking her. She glanced around and caught my eye in an unspoken plea for help.

When that man reached to touch her, I rose. Slipping on my backpack, I walked up to them just as she shrugged away his hand.

"Leave me alone," she growled, her eyes narrowing.

Instead of leaving, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, trying to lead her to her own car.

I stepped up, calling on my wolf to give me a stronger presence. The sooner I could scare away this creep, the better.

"Come, honey, I have a place for such a lovely girl like you."

She tried to duck out of his grip, but he was taking a hold of her neck, putting pressure on a pain point, and pushing his other hand into her side. Her mouth opened in shock.

"Let her go right now," I said, keeping my voice pleasant, keeping the wolf out of my eyes, but doing my best to loom.

"Fuck off!"

I smiled. I've been dealing with challenges like this for most of my life. Most human men can sense that I'm not quite like them.

Most women can, too, but they usually have a different reaction.

"I said, let her go."

He tightened his grip on her neck, and her eyes went wide with fear. He also thought he was using her as a shield against me, but he forgot that a body offers more targets than just the chest and chin. Dad had drilled us in this.

Still smiling, I kicked one of his knees hard enough to cause plenty of pain, and he screamed in a high pitched voice. Then he fell, taking her down with him.

I grabbed her, wrenching her out of his grasp, whirled away and set her down on her feet before turning back to that creep. And then I let him see my anger.

“Get out.” My growl matched his earlier one.

He tried to scramble away, and I just grabbed the collar of his jacket and dragged him off to the side, helping him along, throwing him down into the dirt at the side of the station.

“This is all on tape, so if you think of doing anything stupid, think again.” I pointed to the camera at the roof, and he stared.

I returned to the woman who was still standing next to her car, staring at me.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded in that jerky way that told me she wasn’t. “He... he had a knife,” she whispered.

“Did he hurt you?” I could feel myself frown with anger at that idiot and softened my look with an effort.

“No.” She shuddered, looking past me, obviously watching the creep who had attacked her.

I turned to glance at him, and he was limping away around the corner of the station.



She took a deep breath and when I looked at her again, she was doing her best to focus on me. The shock was starting to wear off, for which I was grateful.

“You saved me,” she said, licking her lips nervously. That small gesture melted my heart, somehow.

I shook my head. “Any decent man would do that.”

She smiled a little. “Even so, I want to do something for you.”

Would she give me what I really needed? The only way to find out was to ask her.

“Well, I need to get south. If you’re going that direction, I’d love a lift.”

Her smile grew. “I do. Headed down into North Carolina.”

That was perfect. “Would you let me ride along?”

“Gladly.”

Moments later, we were on the road, and my heart was a little lighter. Maybe I had managed to pull a fast one on those Hunters. Now I had to hope that the rest of my family could do the same.

# Chapter 2

Sylvia

IT HAD HAPPENED SO fast that I couldn't believe it. I always check before accessing a terminal, and the only person in sight had been that handsome man who was now sitting in the passenger seat.

That creep had come out of nowhere, and I could still feel the pain from his grip on my neck. Without that intervention, I would be driving my own car to my own grave, I was sure of that. I shuddered at that thought.

I had to focus on the road, and I was grateful for that, it kept me from replaying that moment again and again. And of course, having the man who saved me sitting next to me was also a welcome distraction.

"What's your name?" I asked, glancing at him.

Sandy hair, strong chin with a bit of a stubble coming in, skin tanned in the way an outdoor life does to a person. And gray-blue eyes with a few wrinkles at the corners.

I looked away quickly. He was too handsome for his own good, and I really didn't want to follow that stupid movie trope of the vapid woman falling head over heels for her rescuer.

"I'm Ben." No last name, and that was fine by me.

"Sylvia," I said, following his example.

"Thank you for the ride. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome. It's an easy thing to do."

And it was, for me. In fact, it was much better to have a companion for that long drive down to North Carolina. I was looking forward to spending the summer with my Grandpa and Eric, my cousin, back in the place where I had grown up.

My parents had moved north when I had barely started junior high, and I knew there was some bad blood between my mother and Grandpa. But I had just finished my Bachelor and wanted some weeks off. And the idea of reconnecting with Grandpa appealed to me. Of course, I hadn't told Mom.

I glanced at Ben again. He had leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. One hand was wrapped around a strap of his backpack, and that seemed strange.

Pain lingered around his mouth, his whole posture spoke of exhaustion and grief, and my heart went out to him.

He was wearing typical outdoor clothes and didn't give off the whiff I've often caught from homeless people. I wondered what was driving him to go south, but of course, I wouldn't pry.

And then I told my mind to focus on the road, to stop worrying about people I didn't know, and most of all, to keep my heart away from that man in the passenger seat.

I drove for hours in silence, while Ben dozed next to me. I could tell when he finally relaxed into true sleep because the strap of his backpack dropped. And a part of me was happy that he trusted me enough to do so.

Eventually, I had to fill the tank again and pulled off the highway into a small town looking for a supermarket with a filling station, hoping I'd feel safer there.

Ben woke when I stopped at a traffic light, and for a moment I thought I felt wariness and fear before he took a deep breath and sighed.

“Where are we?”

I hadn’t checked for the name of that town and so I shrugged. “I think we’re about three hours away from getting there. I need more gas.”

“Ah.”

“And I thought we’d grab some food.”

He nodded. “Sounds like a good plan.”

I chose to get gas first and pulled up at that station. Ben stayed in his place as I got out and filled up the car. It was such a routine thing to do that I didn’t even think about it when I walked up to the terminal, but as soon as I had entered the number of the pump, I started to tremble. It got worse when I fed my card into it, and by the time it had accepted the transmission and I pulled my card out, my knees shook.

“I’m here. You’re safe.” Ben’s soft voice reached me and I turned around.

He was leaning against my car, looking completely relaxed. Just seeing him allowed me to take a deep breath, and I realized that I had been holding my breath.

Quickly, I walked back to the car, leaving that fear behind, and he got back in just as I opened the driver’s door.

“Thank you,” I said as I started the car. “How did you know?”

“I read body language well.” He shrugged. “Feeling better?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure I wanted to eat anything, but I assumed that at least Ben would, so I took the car to a fast food place next.

He carried his backpack with him when we walked inside, and while the smell didn’t entirely please my stomach, I ordered food anyway. Ben placed his order, as well, and to my surprise, insisted on paying for both of us. And he took the lead after we both had our trays and chose a booth in a corner to sit in.

He sat with his back to the wall, too, which didn't surprise me at all. He was a fighter, and since a few of my college buddies were veterans, I was familiar with this kind of behavior.

He tore into his burger and fries, while I ate slowly, picking at my salad.

Of course, he noticed that quickly. "Do you want to talk?"

I had to think about that, but he didn't seem to expect a fast answer anyway. He simply kept eating, glancing at me, but also obviously keeping an eye on the restaurant and its surroundings.

"Yes," I finally said, gathering my courage."

He nodded, his gray-blue eyes on me. So much attention was scary. I bit my lip and dove right into what bothered me most.

"I took self-defense classes. But when he grabbed me, I froze. I didn't even try to fight. How... how did that happen?"

He nodded again. "Freezing is a normal fear response in humans."

"But... but I thought I could fight! I should have fought." Tears pricked in my eyes and I didn't know if they came from frustration or from the terror I remembered all too clearly.

A tiny smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and it wasn't condescending at all. Instead, it was compassionate.

"Yes, you should have turned into Wonder Woman and beaten him up." He winked, gently, a twinkle in his eyes.

That image was so absurd that I laughed, and his smile grew.

"No, seriously, those classes are not bad. They teach useful moves. But what they cannot teach, simply because they are classes, is how a real attack feels. And a real attack is terrifying."

My mouth made a silent oh. "But you didn't hesitate at all."

He lifted one shoulder in a mild shrug. “That wasn’t my first fight. And I chose to get into it, unlike you.”

Once more, I felt that relief when he had stepped in, when he had grabbed me and lifted me to safety in one strong move. I rubbed the arms where he had touched me.

“I never properly thanked you.” Now I blushed with embarrassment. “You saved my life.”

“You would have found a way to fight him.” His eyes were warm, and his confidence warmed my heart. “But let’s talk about other things. Just know that what happened is over and you are safe now.”

I nodded. That made sense. I chose to store his words in my heart.

“Where did you grow up?” he asked gently, and I found that I could easily talk about that. I told him about the house my Grandpa had built, and how we always spent the summers there until my parents moved away. And how I had planned to reconnect with him in the next few weeks.

Only when we got back into the car did I realize that he hadn’t told me a single thing about himself.

“How did you grow up?”

He smiled. “Very much like you did, except we worked more with sheep, rather than cattle. And my mother home-schooled us, we were far from a school, and money was tight then.”

I nodded.

“It was a good time.” For the blink of an eye, he looked unbearably sad, then forced a smile again. “But now it is time for new beginnings. Are there sheep farmers in your region?”

“Not a lot.” I decided not to pry, and we talked some more about where I grew up. Somehow, it made me look forward to my visit even more.



# Chapter 3

Ben

I HAD TO ADMIT to myself that I felt comfortable around Sylvia, which was a surprise. Seeing her fight through her fear and trauma at that terminal had been impressive. And she really just needed a little help to get through it, and it had been a pleasure to provide that.

Talking with her was easy. So easy, in fact, that I told her more about my childhood than anyone else in my entire life. I could only hope she hadn't seen that stab of grief that surprise me, but she hadn't pried, so maybe I had covered it fast enough.

It was indeed time for new beginnings, but not because we had chosen that.

Change had been forced on us, by those Hunters. My father had looked resigned when he told us to accept this part of wolf life. He called it moving dens. We hoped to rendezvous eventually, to start new families, and to build new lives. In a place where nobody knew us.

Sylvia wasn't much of a talker, and I appreciated that. We spent the day in companionable silence, with the landscape flying by. She turned off the highway when the sun was far in the west and stopped at a small town.

"Do you have a place to stay for the night?"

I shook my head. Going rough wasn't hard on me, and sleeping in wolf shape had many advantages.

She looked worried. "That's not right."

"I'll be fine. Really. No need to worry about me."

A look of determination entered her eyes. "You saved my life. I will not kick you out to sleep in a gutter."

"Oh, I won't." I smiled at her, trying to take away her worry.

"Look, Grandpa has a sofa. The least I can do is let you have a meal and a good night's sleep before you... go."

I sighed and gave in halfway. "A meal would be good. But I really am fine on my own at night, and I won't impose on your grandfather."

Sylvia must have noticed my own determination, because she gave me a little smile. "All right. And we'll see about the sofa when that time rolls around."

I had to shake my head at that, but couldn't help smiling myself. And then I wondered if she was only that friendly because I was what I was.

Well, I'd get a meal out of it, and that was good enough.

She drove on, through the town and into the forest, with the road climbing uphill in many curves.

I had assumed her grandfather lived in some kind of town, but it seemed that his place was out in the country, among the hills. I didn't mind at all, this was territory I would feel at home in.

Finally, she pulled into the yard of a small farm, or what might have been a farm decades ago. The barn had been converted into a workshop, while the farmhouse had been kept neat. The paint on it didn't look old at all, but the yard was messy and didn't have any flowers, which to me indicated that no woman was living here.

"Here we are," she said as she parked next to a large black truck and turned off the engine, taking a deep breath.

Lights blazed as someone walked out of the front door, hurrying to meet Sylvia. I watched the wiry old man glance at me through the windshield, his eyes sharp, and I hid the wolf deep down out of habit.

“Sylvia! It’s good to see you!”

She got out and they embraced. I got out as well, backpack slung over one shoulder, feeling awkward.

“And who is this you brought along?”

Sylvia smiled at me. “Grandpa, meet Ben. He helped me out of a nasty scrape, and so I gave him a lift down here.”

I gave Sylvia’s grandpa a nod, and he walked around the car, his hand extended.

“I’m Theo. Thanks for helping Sylvie.”

We shook hands, something I usually avoid. But in this case, I wanted to be polite.

“I’m just glad I could, Sir.”

He nodded at that.

“Grandpa, Ben has no place to stay tonight, and I thought we owe him dinner, at least.”

He smiled. “There is the sofa, as well, son.”

It seemed there was no way out of it. Well, I could always disappear at night, I thought. “Thank you, Sir.”

“Come in, come in. Eric is already setting the table, dinner’s in the oven, waiting for you.”

He took Sylvia’s suitcase out of the trunk and carried it into the house, shooing us in ahead of him.

It was a typical farmhouse, the kitchen and dinner table taking up most of the ground floor, with a sofa and two armchairs sitting in front of an old TV.

It probably didn't see much use, considering the workload on most farms. Then I reminded myself that I hadn't seen any animals.

The young man who must be Eric took a look at me and quickly added another plate and silverware to the table, setting it for four.

That explained the lack of a woman's touch, I thought, with just two men living here.

"Hello, Cuz!" Eric went to enfold Sylvia in a hug, and now I know who he was. He gave me a nod, and I returned it, doing my best to be as friendly as possible. And decided that I'd disappear as soon as everyone was asleep. I didn't belong in this family.

Sylvia took off her jacket and hung it on a hook next to the door, and I copied her, doing my best to fit in.

Eric pulled the pots with dinner out of the oven while Theo poured water into glasses and distributed cans of beer. I could smell grilled chicken, home-made fries and green beans and my mouth watered.

"Sit, sit!" Theo waved us to the table, and we each sat at a side. I was glad I got to sit with my back to the sofa, it felt safest.

Sylvia smiled at me with almost maternal pride, which made me laugh inside. And I still wanted to sneak away at night, even knowing it would hurt her.

The food tasted as well as it smelled, and I stopped after a few bites in and smiled at Theo.

"This is excellent, Sir. Thank you so much for having me."

"You're welcome. Eric has become quite the cook." He beamed at his grandson.

When we had eaten all the food and cleared the plates, Theo refilled the water carafe, while Eric pulled ice cream out of the freezer and dished it

out.

I stuck to the water, glad that Theo was refilling my glass, and I nodded my thanks. Ice cream was a rare treat, even though it was just plain vanilla with some chocolate crumbs that Eric had strewn on top of every dish.

Sylvia was just telling a story about her roommate at college, when my stomach cramped. I hid a groan, but just a moment later, dizziness struck me and the world started turning. I grabbed the table, just as pure terror swept through me.

Theo's sharp eyes settled on me and narrowed.

"Something I ate," I managed to mutter, feeling worse from moment to moment. I knew it wasn't the food. It was poison.

Sylvia stared at me. "Ben?"

I got up, intending to grab my backpack and run, but I only made it past the chair before my knees gave out.

Eric jumped up and grabbed me.

"Ben!" Sylvia ran around the table, while Theo simply sat there, watching me, his eyes intense.

He knew, I thought, although thinking got more and more difficult. He knew what I was. Horror filled me, even as Eric and Sylvia dragged me to the sofa.

Sylvia was draping a blanket over me, making it even harder for me to escape. Did she know what she was doing?

Her eyes were filled with worry and compassion.

"I'm so sorry," she said, sounding confused. She knew what we had been eating and that it was unlikely to cause me problems. "Please, sleep it off."

I managed a nod, doing my best to keep up the pretense, but the poison was working its way through my system, making me shiver and sweat.

Through the haze of the poison, I watched them finish desert, watched Theo and Eric comfort Sylvia, watched them turn off the lights and walk upstairs to their bedrooms.

With icy and stiff fingers, I clawed the blanket off me. I crawled across the floor to my backpack that was still leaning next to the front door.

I had to get away, it was now or never.

Shaking from head to toe, I managed to pull myself up on my feet and sling the backpack over one shoulder. The door creaked a little when I opened it, but I had to risk that.

Once outside, I tried to pull up the wolf, to find just a little bit of strength, but the poison prevented most of it. Even so, I staggered towards the workshop, and the forest that lay behind it, inviting me, beckoning to me, promising safety.

I had almost reached the workshop when a hard hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around.

“Not so fast, monster.”



# Chapter 4

Sylvia

I WASN'T SURE WHAT woke me, a scream or a flash of intense pain, but both assaulted my senses the moment I opened my eyes. I very quickly noticed that the pain wasn't my own, and it faded just a moment later.

The scream repeated.

I pushed back the covers, pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, took another few seconds to put on my sneakers and ran out of the house.

Another scream, from the direction of the workshop. The lights were on, as well, and now I heard a slapping sound, followed by a gasp.

My heart beat faster. Was was going on there?

I crept across the yard, staying in the shadows. Finally, I was able to peek around the corner, through the open door, and my heart stopped.

Grandpa was whipping someone they had tied across the front of Eric's old truck. While I was watching, another lash fell, and I heard another suppressed scream. Blood trickled down the man's muscular back, staining the top of his jeans.

Then Grandpa rammed his knee into the man's buttocks, eliciting a pained grunt.

I felt sick. Whoever it was they were beating up didn't deserve what they were doing.

A moment later, I noticed Ben's backpack sitting in a corner, and then I understood. My heart froze.

My family was beating up my guest. But why?

"Talk," Grandpa growled. "Where are they?"

The man shook his head, and now I could see it was really Ben. I had hoped against hope that I had made a mistake.

More lashes.

I retreated, unable to stand watching this horror.

They were torturing Ben, the man who had defended me from the creep, who had treated me so gently and with such care. Who had collapsed after dinner, for some mysterious reason. And they were killing him.

I shook, leaning against the wall, biting my lip so hard that I tasted blood. What could I do?

Another lash, a moan, then silence.

"Damn. He's out of it." That was Eric's voice.

"Get the cat over here." Grandpa, his voice calm, as if he were discussing a repair job. "They are tough. It takes time to make one talk."

I heard the chain rattle, heard a groggy moan and another grunt.

"Get his hands on his back." More orders from Grandpa.

The chain rattled again, another moan.

"Put these on his ankles."

I heard movement and dared to sneak up again to see what was happening.

They had cuffed Ben's hands behind his back and hooked them to the cat's chain, pulling him up that way. He was barely conscious, swaying on his feet, bending over to ease the strain on his shoulders.

As I watched, Eric slammed his knee into Ben's stomach, and my guest lost his footing, screaming as his shoulder took his weight.

Grandpa lowered the cat until Ben was lying on the ground. He slowly pulled his legs closer, trying to curl up on his side, his head lolling, his eyes closed.

Eric was fastening a rope to his ankles, while Grandpa did the same to his wrists. They ran the ropes through grommets on the wall, hooked them to the cat, and then Grandpa started the cat's motor and pulled them up.

The ropes tightened until Ben was stretched out on the floor, hands pulled out behind his back. He was moaning with the pain in his shoulders, and I could practically feel it.

Eric kicked him in the stomach again, and Ben squirmed and retched helplessly.

"Leave him for now," Grandpa said. "Maybe his memory will return. Pain can do that to his kind." He chuckled, a terrible sound.

Eric laughed. "I want a beer."

"Sure."

I retreated back into the shadows and waited until they had walked across the yard and into the house. Through the open kitchen window I could hear Eric open the fridge and then pop the lid on a can of beer. The clink of ice cubes in a glass told me that Grandpa was going for whiskey.

Shaking from head to toe, I crept into the workshop. They had left the lights blazing, and so I could see Ben's back clearly, crisscrossed with bleeding lines.

"Ben?" I didn't dare more than whisper.

A little sigh.

I bit my lip. Having to decide between my family and Ben was a terrible choice. But I couldn't let them torture him. And with luck, they wouldn't suspect me if I made it back into bed in time.

I gritted my teeth, knelt at his back and untied the rope from his wrists. I couldn't open the handcuffs, but at least I could remove the strain on his shoulders.

It took less time to untie the rope on his ankles, Eric had been careless, as usual.

When I hurried to kneel close to his chest, he was already looking at me, his eyes dark, filled with pain.

"Sylvie, don't get involved." His voice was hoarse, but I didn't care.

"I can't let them beat you," I hissed. "Can you get away?"

He swallowed hard, lifting his head, trying to sit up, then his eyes cleared a little. "Maybe."

"I don't have the keys to the cuffs."

The corners of his mouth lifted in a weak smile, just as he closed his eyes. "No problem."

I could see his shoulders move, saw his arms strain, and suddenly, he smiled a little more and showed me his hands. A broken chain dangled from the cuffs.

A moment later, he had broken the chain between the cuffs on his ankles.

"Now get back to bed, Sylvie," he said, his eyes on me, lifting one hand to gently touch my cheek.

"I'm so..."

He put a finger on my lips. "Shh. Go and let me get away."

"You're hurt."

"I'll be all right."

I stood and offered him a hand to pull him to his feet, and he took it. He was heavier than I expected, and the way he swayed on his feet worried me.

In just a moment, he would be gone, and I would never see him again. On impulse, I put both my hands on his face, avoiding the cut and bruise on his cheekbone, leaning in to kiss him, intending it to be a farewell and the apology I couldn't voice.

His lips met mine, and fire surged through my veins.

Instantly, his gray-blue eyes shone with something I couldn't quite fathom, and he put one hand behind my head and the other behind my shoulders, pressing me close to him for a few heartbeats, while his tongue caressed mine.

Then he lifted his head, listened for a moment and touched my cheek again. I knew this was good bye, and my heart ached.

"Be safe, Sylvie. Go now."

I stepped away from him, listening for the voices of Eric and Grandpa. They were still in the house, I could hear Eric's high pitched laughter.

"Go." His voice barely reached my ears.

I walked out of the workshop, slipping around its corner into the darkness, giving my eyes time to adjust to it again. I heard a twig snap, and then Ben was gone.

Gritting my teeth, I crept around the house, ready to sneak into the back when Eric and Grandpa left to head back to the workshop. They must not know that I had freed Ben.

As I was waiting, I heard a howl from the forest, and a shiver ran down my back. It was deeper than the coyote howls I was familiar with, and something in it spoke to me.

Grandpa hurried out of the front door, closely followed by Eric.

“Did you hear that?”

The howl was repeated, and both of them rushed to the workshop. I heard them cursing as I dashed into the house and hurried up the stairs to curl up in my bed.

I couldn't sleep. I had so many questions, and not one of them would be answered any time soon.



# Chapter 5

Ben

**S** YLVIE HADN'T BETRAYED ME.

It was ridiculous how much that mattered to me, even if I could hardly think after that beating and with the poison in my blood.

Instead, she had freed me, and that mattered most. She had also bought the show I had put on, and I was glad it had worked. I didn't want her to know how much Theo and Eric had truly hurt me, they were her family, after all, and she already felt guilty as hell.

So I lurched through the forest, stumbling every few steps as my legs refused to work properly. I howled once, more to let her know I got away than anything else.

That kiss had been intense and painful, mostly because my body reacted to it with shocking eagerness and it still hurt from getting slammed repeatedly into that darn grill of that ancient banger they had tied me to. It had also been more than just an idle kiss, although I had not time to sort through that right now.

The biggest problem was that the poison was also reducing my ability to heal fast to almost nothing. At least I had been able to call up enough wolf to break those chains, although their remains were still adorning my wrists and ankles. And that little stunt had taken all strength I had left.

I knew I needed help, especially after stumbling through the forest for hours, getting as far away as I possibly could. They would get bloodhounds first thing in the morning to track me. Yet I had told them the truth, I had no idea where a pack lair was around these parts.

Even shifting was out of the question with that poison still running through my body, and I couldn't leave my backpack behind anyway, not with that precious family heirloom tucked into it.

So I did the only thing left to me. I climbed another hill, clung to another tree and howled again, praying that the right person would hear me.

Common sense returned a little after that, and I stumbled down the hill, catching myself on trees more often than not. If help arrived, it would most likely be in a car, not on four feet.

Halfway to the bottom, I stopped to howl again, bringing the wolf up for it, adding a tiny note of despair, before walking some more.

There was a road down there, I realized, curving along the valley. And no house nearby, a perfect spot for picking up an injured wolf.

If anyone had heard me.

I had my doubts, our kind is not common anymore, and we do our best to stay below the radar. I knew there were some around here, but we never keep details of dens lying around where others can find them.

The only good thing of our house going up in flames was the fact that literally everything burned, leaving no traces of our contacts or extended family.

I clung to another tree and howled again, then sank to the ground, shuddering with exhaustion and lingering pain. It was as good a place to rest as any others, few people were likely to come along this deep into a forest in the middle of the night.

I saw the lights of the car before I heard it. It came up the road and turned into a spot of gravel on the curve more or less below me.

Maybe they were coming to help me.

If not, I needed a plan. It was hard to think through the poison and the pain, but I lifted my head and forced some thoughts.

There was a brook running through the meadow at the bottom of the hill. I thought I saw a few fences, as well, but water was always a good idea to shake off the hounds. And if I could have shifted and run, I'd be far away already, but that poison made it impossible. As those bastards had known only too well.

Someone got out of the car.

And then she opened her mouth and made the yipping sounds a wolf makes when greeting young members of the pack.

I almost fainted with relief.

Climbing back to my feet was a challenge, as my body had gone stiff after kneeling for so long. I stumbled out from under the bushes and practically slid down the incline to the gravel spot, barely avoiding landing at her feet. Instead, I managed to stay upright a little longer, swaying in front of her.

"So," she said, her voice gentle, her back straight, showing her steely side despite the white hair trying to escape from a bun. "How did you get lost in here?"

Answering that big a question was beyond me.

"Looking for help," I muttered. "Hunters got me."

She looked me up and down, obviously noticing I never put my shirt back on. I pulled up a bit of the wolf to let her see, and she nodded, allowing her eyes to go yellow for a moment.

Relief was so strong that my knees buckled, and I ended up in a heap at her feet, after all.

“Carl,” she barked, and a man hurried out of the car, gently removed the backpack, threw it into the trunk and then dragged me into the backseat of the car.

I couldn’t suppress a moan when pain erupted in my shoulders.

He hissed when he saw my back and helped me lean my side against the back of the seat. The world had started to spin around me, and I only managed to cling to consciousness by keeping the wolf close.

A door banged shut, and I flinched. She slipped into the back from the other side of the car, sat next to me and took one of my hands.

“You’re safe now,” she said, as Carl started the car. “Hang on just a little longer, if you can.”

“Who...?” I tried to ask, but only a croak came out.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” she said, a little twinkle in her eyes.

“McMullen,” I managed to whisper. It was getting hard to even move my lips.

“Ah.” She took a deep breath. “Beth Minster here. I doubt you have heard of us.”

I managed to shake my head. Or at least roll it a little, and she smiled and patted my hand.

The car ride seemed both endless and short, and I kept waking up with a start every time my head lolled. Carl and Beth managed to get me into a small cabin and a bed, and then things got really fuzzy.

“Poison,” I managed to mutter as darkness drew closer. The last thing I felt was Beth patting my hand again and I surrendered to oblivion hoping she had heard me.

# Chapter 6

Sylvia

I DIDN'T SLEEP MUCH for the rest of that night, Ben's eyes just kept haunting me. And I couldn't get over the fact that my own family, my Grandpa and my cousin had been gleefully torturing a fellow human being.

Why?

When I could hear Grandpa making breakfast in the kitchen, I knew it was time to face them. And then pack my stuff and go back home, to forget about this horror.

That thought surprised me, but it really was the only reasonable option. Preferably without them finding out I had observed them.

But what about Ben?

He was gone, I told myself, and after what happened during the night, he would never want to come back. I would never see him again, and somehow, that thought hurt.

I could still feel his kiss burning on my lips, raise fire in my body. This had happened with nobody else, and I wanted more.

Don't be an idiot, I told myself, took a deep breath and got out of bed. Dressing was minimal effort, jeans and a t-shirt. I tied my sneakers and saw a spot of blood on the knee of my jeans, and couldn't stop shaking.

Last night had not been a bad dream.

I got up and changed into a fresh pair of jeans before forcing myself to go downstairs, even though the scent of frying bacon made me feel nauseous.

“Morning,” I muttered when I reached the ground floor. The house wasn’t large, and the kitchen took up most of that floor. Grandpa was flipping bacon in the pan, and Eric was already at the table, digging into breakfast.

“There you are,” Grandpa said, looking at me with a frown.

“Where’s Ben?” I asked, doing my best to pretend that I hadn’t seen anything last night, that I hadn’t been in the workshop, hadn’t gotten blood on... I forced my thoughts to a hard stop.

“He left,” Grandpa said, his voice lofty.

“Oh.” Technically, he was right, as I knew only too well, but how would an innocent Sylvia react? I pouted. “I wanted to say good bye.”

Grandpa’s face hardened. “There is something you need to know about that boy you dragged in.”

I frowned back at him. What else did I need to know, other than Ben getting tortured for saving me?

He pulled out his cell phone, poked and swiped a few times, and then held it out to me. “Watch this. Look closely.”

I saw the head of a man looking down, just showing a bunch of wild sandy hair to the camera. Someone grabbed his hair and pulled his head back, revealing the face.

Dark brown eyes, sunken, full of pain, mouth tight, desperation in those lines.

The camera panned back a little, showing that the man was wearing a red and black checkered shirt, the kind common among outdoor people. Some-



one slapped him and his eyes opened more, one side of his mouth curling as if in a snarl.

The view widened again, showing the man tied to the front of a truck, and with a shock, I realized that red wasn't originally in the color of the shirt, that the sleeves were light blue and black, and that the red on the shirt was still spreading. His jeans were also dark red on one leg, the one he wasn't putting weight on.

Blood. So much blood.

The camera zoomed in again, just as someone growled.

"Anything you want to say, McMullen?"

The lip curled a little more. "Would be wasted on you."

"So be it."

The man grunted, gave a little gasp and sighed. His face softened and relaxed, mouth opening to reveal blood staining his teeth.

And then his eyes shifted from dark brown to gray-blue, and I clapped my hands over my mouth, because he looked so much like Ben then and because just a moment later those eyes lost all focus and went empty.

The camera zoomed out and I could see the handle of a knife sticking out of the man's chest. They had killed him.

I was shaking, feeling my stomach bunch up, and I swallowed bile. I managed to look at Grandpa, and the glee on his face shocked me even more.

"What...?"

"What you just saw was the end of a monster," he said, swiping away the video and putting the phone back into his pocket.

"What...?"

“It took three days to hunt it down.” He was smiling with pride. “And they finally cornered it, and put it out of misery.”

“It?” All I had seen was a man with sandy hair, covered in blood. Had seen his death. A man looking like an older version of Ben.

“A werewolf.”

I stared. Werewolves were a myth. They didn’t exist.

“Just like that boy you dragged in.” Grandpa’s voice was hard.

Eric snickered when I gasped.

They thought Ben was a werewolf? How... absurd.

“We hunt them,” Grandpa was explaining. “We kill them. They are abominations, they need to be exterminated.”

I blinked more than once. What was he talking about?

“They like to hide in places like ours, trying to blend in, pretending they are human. They murder, rob and rape.”

The words were just gushing out of him, filled with venom.

“What did you do to Ben?” I said, before I could stop those words.

Grandpa growled just like that person off camera in the video. “He got away.”

Of course, I had known that, but having it stated like that still made me tremble.

Eric snickered again. “That’s just like you, Cuz, falling for a werewolf. So naive.”

“I didn’t!” I had, of course I had, but they didn’t need to know that.

He laughed at me. “So you’ll come along to track it when Steven brings over his hounds? We’ll rid the world of another monster soon, just like they did.”

“I will not!” I glared at him. Ben was not a monster.

“Silly Cuz. I bet she fell for that beast.” Eric was still snickering.

“What makes you so sure?” I asked Grandpa. “Just because there’s a little similarity to the... the video?”

“Of course not.” Grandpa looked angry. “I tested him. I put something into the water at dinner that only hurts werewolves. And you saw yourself how sick he got.”

My heart froze. He had poisoned Ben?

Grandpa came to me and patted my shoulder. “Yes, I can understand it’s a shock for you. But that boy is a monster, and it’ll be better to get him off your mind, Sylvie. We’ll protect you against him if he comes back.”

Ben had protected me. And these two would never believe me. Maybe I needed to protect myself now.

I forced myself to nod, to pretend that he was actually consoling me. Because I needed to learn everything I could about this whole werewolf thing. If it was true.

“What did you use?”

He gave me a proud grin. “You know how silver hurts vampires?”

I nodded, that was a familiar trope in movies.

“It hurts werewolves, too.”

I remembered that from movies, too, not that I believed in werewolves or vampires. But Ben had been drinking out of a normal glass last night.

“But there was no silver in the glass you gave him.”

Grandpa smiled indulgently. “Colloidal silver.”

I had heard of that substance, it had been part of a health fad a while ago. My roommate at college had been putting it into her water, claiming it improved the immune system. I had tried it and tasted nothing at all.

And it had made Ben feel ill?

Did that mean he was a werewolf?

And did that in turn mean that werewolves truly existed?

My mind was reeling.

“Sit down, darling. I know this is hard to understand. You didn’t grow up with this as Eric did.”

I knew that was another dig against my parents who had moved away when I was still small and usually, I would have said something, but I was still thinking about Ben.

He was a werewolf?

I tried to pull myself together and remember everything I had read about them in fantasy books. Which was probably not even close to the real thing, but it was all I had to go on.

“Can you explain?” I managed to say.

Grandpa filled two plates with the bacon from one pan, eggs from another pan and several slices of toast before sitting down with me and sliding one of the plates in front of me. Eric poured coffee for me from a thermos, and I gave him a surprised look.

“Come on, Cuz. We still like you.” He handed me the mug.

My family liked me. They cared about me, I could tell. And yet they had tortured Ben with glee. My mind was still reeling.

“Now, you probably know that werewolves look like people who can transform into a wolf.” Grandpa sounded completely serious.

I nodded.

“Not like in the movies, though, they actually look mostly like normal wolves, if they shift completely.”

Well, that ruled out a lot of fun stuff like getting all hairy and things, like in some movies. I didn’t know if I should laugh or feel as if they were

pulling an elaborate joke on me.

Except it hadn't been a joke for Ben.

"But they do have a few attributes that set them apart from humans." Now Grandpa looked angry and I wondered why.

"Really?"

He gritted his teeth. "They can bring up the wolf, as they call it. I think it means starting the shift but not completing it. It gives them strength, speed and the ability to heal fast. And they are insanely attractive to women in that state."

Now I knew why he was angry. He was jealous. Seriously jealous.

"You can tell because their eyes shift. And their face changes a little. You saw that in reverse in the video."

I nodded, feeling sick again.

"No normal human would have survived getting shot five times," he growled, and I realized he was still referring to the man in the video.

My heart went out to that poor dead man. Being hunted for three days, getting shot five times, and then stabbed to death without mercy... nobody deserved that.

Not even a werewolf.

"I know what you're thinking, Sylvia. You believe that this doesn't make them monsters. You're wrong."

"Why?"

"Because they use those abilities to murder people, to steal livestock, and to rape women. And to get away with it." He spat out the words.

Ben had done none of that. He had been a caring, thoughtful and respectful companion on our ride down here. How could he be a monster?

"Is there any proof?"

He slammed his hands on the table, and the plates jumped, the silverware on them clinking as they fell back. I flinched.

“Have you listened to me at all! I said they are monsters. They’ve been wreaking havoc here for decades, if not centuries.”

I found that I was shaking my head. “It sounds like the witch hunts in Europe. There never was proof, but everyone knew a witch.”

“It is not like that at all.” He took a deep breath. “Werewolves are real. Witches are not. You saw that video. You saw his eyes change.”

“Okay, let’s assume werewolves are real.”

“They are!” He lifted his hands as if to slam them down again, but put them back on the table gently.

I nodded. “Yes, but even if they are, is there proof that they do these awful things?”

“We have plenty of stories around here. They are wicked, evil creatures.”

“I mean real proof. Arrests. Witnesses. Court cases, that kind of stuff.”

Grandpa took a deep breath. “The authorities have no idea what we are dealing with. A dead werewolf looks human.”

“The man in the video.” It was hard to even think of him. “What did he do?”

“That werewolf? Got to ask the people up there.” He sighed. “Can you just believe that they are vermin and parasites and need to be exterminated like rats? Can you believe the experience I have just living out here?”

I closed my eyes. So they had no real evidence, and it was a witch hunt. History told me it was useless to try to argue against an ingrained belief. Was this fight even worth it? I would leave and go home and forget about all of it.

Forget about Ben?

I could not. Not until I knew that he was all right. Which meant I needed to stay friends with my Grandpa for a while longer.

“I’ll try,” I said, feeling more weary than after a full day of yard work.

“Thank you, Sylvia.”

# Chapter 7

Ben

IT WAS A HUGE effort to just open my eyes, but my stomach demanded food, and I was aware enough to know that I desperately needed it.

“Ah, there you are, young McMullen.”

I blinked and then remembered Beth. She was sitting in a chair next to the bed I was lying in.

“Carl, get the broth!” she called and then turned to me, helping me sit up, stuffing cushions behind my back and head.

I still felt dizzy, still felt stiff and sore, despite having the sense of having slept for days.

“How long?” I managed to ask, and she seemed to know exactly what I meant.

“Three days. We were worried.”

That must have been an understatement, considering how worn she looked.

“You mentioned poison”, she continued. “And you had all symptoms of silver poisoning but there was none in your wounds. We did a few rounds of detox even so, but...”

“It was in the food, somehow.” I had been thinking about that during those awful moments on that sofa, but I hadn’t come up with a good answer. The food was the only way I could think of.



“And who gave that food to you?”

I would remember those men until the end of my days. “I only know his first name. Theo.”

Beth hissed. “How in the world did you end up with him?”

So she knew Theo, which was all kinds of interesting. Just as she seemed familiar with my last name.

I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts, but at that moment Carl arrived with a steaming bowl in his hands.

To my relief, Beth didn’t insist on feeding me. Her tiny smile made me think that she realized how undignified that would be and that she had chosen not to embarrass me.

It was hard enough and I wasn’t up to using the spoon she offered me. Instead, I drank it slowly straight from the bowl.

Blessed warmth flowed through me and I could feel some of my energy returning. The wolf gave us strength, speed and healing, but it took, as well, mostly food. The bowl was empty too soon, but it seemed she had known that as well, because she went and refilled it herself, twice, before I felt I couldn’t eat any more.

“Now, young McMullen. Your name, please.”

“I’m Ben.”

She nodded. “And do you know a Mal with that last name?”

I blinked in shock. “That... that is my father.”

The breath she sighed out spoke volumes. What had I stumbled into?

“Tell me. What brings you down here, and how did you end up with Theo?”

So I told her the story of how I had met Sylvia, and how she had insisted on taking me to her family and having dinner, at least. The only thing I left

out was that kiss.

Beth's frown got deeper with every word, but she listened without interrupting me.

"She set you up," she growled, her eyes yellow.

"She freed me." It wasn't quite a rebuke, but Sylvia had saved my life. Theo had been looking forward to killing me, I knew that.

"That's a trick to get you to trust her."

I stared at her, sinking back into the cushions.

"You are young, Ben. You have no experience with the deviousness of those Hunters and their families."

Her words had the ring of authority, held the experience of many years. And yet the thought of Sylvia being capable of such subterfuge broke my heart. She had seemed so innocent.

And I had felt comfortable being near her.

It didn't fit. And yet, Beth knew that family better than I did.

"How much did your father tell you about this area?"

I blinked, wrenching my mind back to those days when we had prepared ourselves to move den.

"Nothing. He just sent us here to regroup."

"Us?"

"Me and my siblings. He went out to distract the Hunters, making sure we got away." We had all known that there was a high chance of him getting killed with that plan, but we hadn't managed to come up with a better one.

Her eyes were sad. "And have you heard from any of them?"

I shook my head. We didn't carry cell phones on purpose, they were too easy to track, and while we had agreed on a location to check in with each

other, I didn't expect any of them to be here already. Hitching the ride with Sylvia had taken days off the journey. For a price.

She put a hand on my arm and sighed. "Well, get back to strength, and then we'll see what to do about this mess. It won't take much longer for Theo to come up with an excuse to send the cops here, and by that time, you need to be elsewhere."

I nodded, knowing that she would send me away, that I'd be on my own in a day or two, and I couldn't blame her. "Thank you for all you did."

"Ah, I'm not kicking you out." She smiled, a little sadly. "Mal has left some scent here, and his pups are welcome. But I think we'll need to dye your hair and find a place for you to set up for a while to get Theo off your tracks."

I felt relief flooding through me. I had found a pack who would have my back for now, and that was huge. Then my mind caught up with what else she had said.

"My father used to live here?"

She smiled in a sad way and made me lie down again. "Get some rest first."

I got up out of bed the next day, which felt like a huge improvement. And when I pulled my other set of clothes out of the backpack, I felt for the locket that was buried in one of the pouches. Maybe it was connected to the scent my father had left here, and if I showed it to Beth, she would reveal more.

It was gone.

Carefully, slowly, methodically, I emptied the entire backpack. Everything else was there, including the money, my driver's license and my birth

certificate. The documents had been hidden away in a compartment below the main compartment, so it wasn't a surprise they hadn't been found.

I had put the locket into one of those small pockets with a zipper up high on the back, safe from anyone slicing open the backpack to grab what fell out.

That pocket was empty.

And there was only one place where I had left that backpack out of my sight. I didn't relish the thought of going back there, and Beth would be livid if she found out, but I would not leave my father's most treasured possession in those cruel hands.

I just had a small problem to solve first. I had no idea where Theo's house was. And I couldn't exactly ask Beth. It was obvious she and her mate didn't live in this cabin, which looked much more like one of those holiday cabins people could rent, so I couldn't sneak in a search on their computer.

In addition, I had no real idea where I was, considering I had walked through the forest and then taken on a ride in Beth's car. And I hadn't even set a foot out of the door of this cabin.

It was time to explore.

When I stepped out of the bedroom, I saw Carl sitting at a table, looking through a stack of advertising papers.

"Ah, it's good to see you on your feet, Ben. Beth was hoping that you'd be up today. She asked me to wait for you and take you over for lunch. Oh, and she said to bring your things."

I glanced at the clock at the wall. It was almost noon.

"That sounds good."

He laughed. “You even look hungry, so let’s go.” He folded the papers and I glanced at the first page, hoping to catch the name of the town. No such luck, so I went to grab my backpack and slung it over one shoulder.

I trudged after Carl, and saw that my cabin was indeed one of about a dozen scattered across an area planted with bushes, trees, and a flower bed or two. Two young men were riding lawnmowers, the electric kind that didn’t make a stink.

We were walking towards an old-style farmhouse that had been very well kept. At a guess, it had been in Beth’s family for generations, and instead of cattle, they now farmed tourists. Maybe it wasn’t a bad trade.

We passed a large map at the exit of the cabin field, and I took a quick look at it. It seemed we were in the mountains north of Asheton, which was roughly where we were supposed to meet. I didn’t want to stop, so that was all I could glean for now.

“We’re here,” Carl called out as he opened the door, wiped his boots and stepped in. I did the same, following him to a hallway and then through to a traditional dining room. I could look into the kitchen from there, and a young woman waved at us.

A moment later, Beth walked in, carrying a thermos and a basket of rolls.

“We’ll have more in a moment, so sit down.”

She bustled around, setting the table for us three, and then the young woman brought a bunch of plates with food. I could smell fried meat and scalloped potatoes, and my mouth watered.

Yes, the wolf was very hungry.

Beth did let me eat in peace, but as she looked as if she was bursting with news, I hurried up.

Of course, she noticed, and she smiled when I pushed the plate back and wiped my mouth.

“Are you ready for talking?”

I nodded, asking the question that had bothered me for days. “How did you ever find me?”

“Ah.” She smiled. “We had a report of an unknown howl near Theo’s house. We do try to keep a close eye on him and his... friends. And Carl has a lot of experience in how and where wolves run. He’s our expert in locating lost wolves. He hoped you’d end up at that parking lot, considering the lay of the land.”

I nodded, that explained a lot. And I wondered how well established this pack was.

Beth took a deep breath. “And now, we need to talk about you and your future. Do you think you can handle that?”

It was nice of her to ask, since she probably knew it wasn’t an easy topic. I nodded.

“Let’s start with some good news.” She smiled. “Theo has sent police on the pretext of someone sneaking around his house, telling them he thought he recognized someone from here. I told them I couldn’t let them search an occupied cabin, and they agreed. So we have that off our backs already.”

That was good news indeed. I smiled with relief.

“Now, to get you onto your own feet, what do you do well?”

That was a problem. I had no formal training in anything, but I could handle a computer fairly well, I could drive a car, repair almost every farm equipment imaginable, and I could herd sheep and cattle. We had done a lot of that in wolf shape.

Beth laughed and laughed when she heard that.

“Mal hired you out as his sheepdogs? That’s the best I’ve ever heard.”

“Well... he didn’t put it quite that way.” I grinned with her. Come to think of it, I could also track quite well, Dad had often complimented me on my wolf nose. Maybe I could make good use of that.

“I suppose police here doesn’t cooperate with our kind, do they?”

Beth’s mouth went prim, and I decided that I had asked the wrong question, so I shut up and let her carry the conversation again.

“Can you ride a horse?”

“Yes, if I have to. They usually aren’t happy with me.”

“Hmm. We could use another tour guide, but maybe it’ll be on our walking tours first. And maybe you can make a friend among our horses. We have a couple of steady mules, as well.”

“That sounds good. What kind of tours do you offer?”

“Guided tours of one to five days, both on foot and horseback, in the parks around here. Including some survival events.”

I nodded slowly. “I’d have to learn about the sights here, but I could do those with a bit of training.”

“Great. I’ll let you go out with our guides to learn. Bears have become a problem here, so I can easily justify another hand with the groups. How good are you with a gun?”

“Okayish.” I had never liked guns.

“Good enough to stop a bear if you have to?”

“Yes.” And I decided I would get some practice soon.

“Perfect. We’ll move you into an apartment today, the cabins are all booked out starting next week. Carl will show it to you and then take you around the farm.”

It was very clear who was running this operation, and I didn't mind. Pack leaders were leaders because of their personality, not their gender.

"I'll probably have to get a few things, I was traveling light."

"So you were. Jen here will do a store run this afternoon, you can go with her."

"Thank you."

Beth stood, and I knew that I was being dismissed. That was fine, I was a new and lowly not-quite-member of her pack, I was younger than her and Carl by far, and that was how hierarchy worked. No matter what kind of scent my father might have left here.

"Come."

Behind the farmhouse, out of sight of the cabins, a modern house rose, surrounded by trees for shade. Carl led me inside, showed me a door on the second floor and handed me a set of keys.

I quickly tossed my backpack on the bed, locked the door and followed him out of the building. That apartment could wait, although I had liked what I had seen of it. But you didn't keep the pack leader's mate waiting.

After a while, I had a healthy respect for the size of this tourist operation. It had a barn full of horses, an arena, a shooting range, a basketball court and a lawn where any kind of wellness activity could happen, something that I had only seen from afar. I thought I had seen a sign pointing out a golf course, as well.

They also owned more land further out which was farmed the traditional way, and I decided Beth should know I'd feel more comfortable there. But for now, she was setting me up as a tour guide, and I wouldn't dispute her choice.



In the afternoon, I took a seat in the van that Jen was taking to town to do the shopping for the next few days.

“Beth told me you’re still recovering from an accident, but could you be my muscle?”

It was interesting to learn what she had told her pack about me, I thought, and nodded. “Of course.”

“Perfect.”

We ended up with two grocery carts, and I loaded the heavy bags of rice, flour and other produce into the back of the van while Jen was sorting the more delicate vegetables into boxes at the side door. My own purchases lay on the passenger seat.

I was just closing the doors of the van when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Ben?”

# Chapter 8

Sylvia

**B**EN TURNED SLOWLY, WHILE my heart was in my mouth. He looked fully recovered, and that was a relief.

“Hang on for a moment, I forgot to take those to the bottle bank,” a female voice called out, and he just nodded. I saw someone hurry away from the van carrying a large bag that clinked.

Would he hate me? I bit my lip.

His gray-blue eyes were serious. “Sylvie. You need to forget me.”

I hid a sigh. Yes, that would have been best, I agreed. But I couldn’t. I had so many questions, and of course, that video was still playing in my head. Now that I was seeing Ben again, his resemblance to that man was uncanny.

It took an effort to meet his eyes, but I did. “I can’t. There is something I must tell you. Something... that really matters.”

He glanced at the cars around us, and shook his head. “Not here.”

I nodded, that made sense. “Let’s meet somewhere else.”

He shook his head again. “No, Sylvie. Maybe I can trust you. But I cannot trust your family.”

That hurt, especially because he was right.

“I’m sorry,” I said almost automatically, but that didn’t even come close. I was still horrified by what they had done to him.

“Sylvie. Go home to your parents. Leave this area. Find happiness there.”

He was so calm and patient, and of course he was right. And yet, I couldn't, I had to tell him about that man first. And the colloidal silver.

“But...”

A tiny smile lurked in the corners of his mouth, soft, caring, understanding.

“You stumbled into something very dangerous here. And...”

“All right, Ben, we can go!” That was that woman calling from the other side of the van, and something shifted in his face.

“Good bye, Sylvie.”

He turned and got into the van, and that was when I took a good look at it. It was green and bore the logo of one of the many tourist outfits of the area, Swan Valley Guided Tours. In an instant, I committed their website to memory.

The van left the parking lot and I stood there like a fool watching it go, before I collected my senses and returned to my car. Grandpa had sent me to get their groceries while Eric and he were out repairing a barn.

I sighed and wished I could forget Ben and that night of horror. But I owed him, and I was never someone to shy away from a debt.

So I sat in my car and pulled up the website on my phone. Their specialty were hikes and guided tours on horseback, and I decided that I might as well have some fun on my vacation. Housekeeping really wasn't what I had come here for. And maybe I would see Ben again.

They offered detailed descriptions of their tours, including the first names of the guides and there was only one Ben. I hope it was him, and not some other guy. Even so, I smiled to myself and booked a hike to a waterfall

called Michael Ridge Tour. A few hours in nature away from my Grandpa would do me a lot of good.

And even if I didn't have a chance to talk to him on that tour, I could leave a message for him with the company, a way to contact me, without revealing more about himself.

I breathed more easily after having that idea. That would work in any case. I could simply write a letter to him, give him my phone number and email, and give him the option to contact me if he wanted to do so.

And if he wanted to forget me, well, that was his right.

Even if that thought hurt.

.....

Waiting the five days until that hike was hard. Grandpa and Eric took me more and more for granted, expecting me to clean and cook for them, and I knew I would leave right after that hike. I already started spending my days in town, just to get away from that old house and that workshop. I didn't have the money for a hotel, or I would have rented a room gladly. So I also looked for cheap accommodation that wasn't horrible.

On the other hand, I didn't think that Grandpa would let me rent a place and so it came down to the same thing in the end. I had to turn tail and go home.

But I really wanted to see Ben for one last time.

So I packed my things after Grandpa and Eric had left the house on my last day there, wrote that letter to Ben, put everything into my car and drove down from the mountains and across the wide valley to the home of the Swan Valley Guided Tours, as the instructions said.

And my heart immediately danced with joy, because Ben was there at the parking lot, chatting with other tourists, standing close to a small bus with the logo on it.

That would be our ride to the trail head for the hike. I swallowed hard before getting out of my car, because I knew he would not be pleased.

And he almost rolled his eyes when he saw me, only to bring up a professional smile next.

“Hello, Sylvie.”

He used the nickname he had given me, and that made my heart flutter even more. I both enjoyed and hated it.

We had to wait for one more couple, and then Ben and the other guide sent us all into the bus. The other guide was driving, and Ben started reading out some information about the region and the waterfall we were going to see.

I had a row of two seats for myself and so I simply closed my eyes and listened to his voice. It was more soothing than it should be, I thought.

The drive lasted about half an hour, and the last stretch wound into the mountains until we reached a small parking lot. I grabbed the small backpack with my water bottle and a light lunch and left the bus with everyone else.

There were about a dozen people in the group. Several of them were carrying walking sticks and wore heavy hiking boots. I only had my sneakers, but it didn't matter. It was dry weather, and I never had any problems hiking a trail.

We headed out and soon settled into the hike, with the other guide taking the lead and Ben bringing up the rear. I made myself walk in the middle of the group, expecting he would not want to talk or even be close to me.

It was more than beautiful. The trees were settling into the summer green, birds were still calling everywhere, and once we saw a black bear on the other side of the river we were following.

After about half an hour of hiking, rain hit in a short shower, and I found that I didn't mind it at all. The wet leaves sparkled when the sun came out again, and the world was even more colorful.

I looked up when I heard a hawk call, and suddenly, a rock turned under my foot and I slipped and fell, feeling the ankle twist under me with a flash of pain. It happened so fast that I didn't even have time to cry out.

Angry at myself, I got up and found that my right ankle wouldn't carry my weight. I would have fallen again, but one of the other hikers caught me.

"What's wrong?" The tour guide was at my side immediately.

"I twisted my ankle." It was surprising how calm I felt, my mind already working out how to deal with this. "What a stupid thing to do."

The tour guide put a hand on my arm, nodding with sympathy. "I'm sorry. We'll take you back to the bus."

"I don't want to ruin everyone else's hike," I said, still feeling amazingly calm. "This is not life-threatening, and not even terribly painful."

"I'll take her to the bus. Tom, you can keep guiding the tour." Ben looked resigned, and I couldn't blame him.

"Would you be okay with that?" the other guide asked me. Tom. I mentally pinned that name on him to remember it.

"Yes." I was much more than okay with that, but Tom didn't need to know.

The rest of the group made comforting noises, but I could tell how relieved they were to have a solution that demanded nothing of them.

“I’ll be fine,” I told them. “Don’t worry about me. Enjoy the hike.”

Tom gave Ben a grateful look. “You should have reception at the bus, just call headquarters, they’ll send a car to pick you both up and get Sylvia medical attention. I’ll handle the rest.”

They left, and I was more than relieved to see them go.

“First, sit down.” Ben helped me hobble to a rock and I sat down, knowing that he would be angry. He put his hands on his hips. “And please, tell me that you didn’t plan this.”

I bit my lip. He deserved the truth. “No, not this. But I did want to see you one last time before going home, so yes, I planned the hike, hoping you’d be one of the guides.”

He sighed. “Why?”

“I... there are a few things I need to tell you. Things I learned after... you left.” Which was a terrible way of saying that he had to flee from torture.

“I see.” He took another deep breath. “Well, let’s get you to the bus before we talk.”

That seemed like a good idea. Getting to the bus would be difficult.

Ben went to the river, removed his bandanna and dunked it into the water. Then he wrapped it around my ankle, cooling and supporting it.

“See if you can stand.”

I could for a few steps and then the pain got too bad. I stood in place and just couldn’t put weight on it. “I’m sorry.”

He sighed again. “It was an accident. I saw the rock turn under your foot.”

So he had been watching me closely, after all. My heart wobbled.

“I suppose I’ll have to carry you.”

I stared at him. “You can’t.”

His lips lifted in a little smile. “Can’t as in you won’t let me or can’t as in lacking strength?”

“It’s quite a distance.” I couldn’t tell him I wouldn’t mind being held by him. I didn’t even want to tell myself that.

“Ah. Well, we’ll see.”

And with that, he bent and picked me up, hefting me into his arms, one of them under my knees, one around my shoulders, pulling me close. I put one arm around his neck.

It was shockingly comfortable.

He stepped out carefully, and I could sense his strength. It was reassuring even though I knew where he got his strength, thanks to Grandpa’s ranting. I didn’t dare look at his eyes.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Ben didn’t answer. He walked along the trail, carrying me, barely getting out of breath. He did stop once, just settling on a rock for a bit, without putting me down.

“I’m glad you’re going home,” he said, after he started walking again. “Your grandfather is a dangerous man.”

“I... guess so.” My Grandpa had tortured him, so Ben was putting it mildly. I more than agreed with him. Theo was also a nasty, old-fashioned man with terrible ideas about women and society, and I was done with him.

He glanced at me in surprise, and I noticed that his eyes had gone dark brown. I bit my lip as that video flashed in front of my eyes again. He looked even more like the man who got killed.

“It’s all right,” he said, not specifying what he meant, and I decided to ignore his eyes.



“I packed my car this morning and left,” I told him instead. “I wanted to start the drive home after the hike.”

His relief was palpable. “That was a good idea. Except you won’t be leaving tonight.”

“My car is an automatic. I can drive with my left foot.”

Ben shook his head at me. “Even if you could drive, you won’t be able to stop and take care of yourself.”

I hadn’t even thought about that. He was right, of course. So I didn’t say anything, and he just kept walking. When we finally reached the bus, he told me how to open the door so he could carry me inside without having to put me down. He settled me in one of the rows, knelt in the one ahead of it and leaned against the backrest, keeping me in sight as he made the phone call to their headquarters. While he did, his eyes changed back to gray-blue.

“They’ll get here as soon as possible, no longer than an hour. I hope you don’t mind being stuck here with me.”

I shook my head. And then I could no longer evade telling him about the man and about that terrible video. My eyes filled with tears.

“I... I don’t know how to tell you this.”

# Chapter 9

Ben

I COULD TELL THAT Sylvia was upset and that it wasn't about her ankle. In fact, she had been amazingly calm about her injury, although her plan to drive home despite it was clearly not well thought out.

"Just start," I said, folding my arms on the backrest of that stupid row of seats and leaning on them. That bus offered nothing comfortable to sit.

"I... I'll tell you the easier part first," she said, biting her lip again.

I just nodded.

"Grandpa... he explained to me why you felt so ill that... that evening."

"Tell me." I had to know this, she was right. We all needed that information, because that poison had almost done me in.

"It was colloidal silver," she said in a rush, and my heart almost stopped. They had found a way of poisoning us that we couldn't detect.

"It... it doesn't hurt normal people," she went on. "And he put it into the water, so we all drank it. I've had it before, and you can't even taste it."

She was rambling now, while my mind tried to catch up with what she hadn't said.

"Normal people?" I asked, fearing what else that man had told her.

I could see her reining in her racing mind, watched her refocus on me.

"He... he said you're a werewolf. Because you reacted to the silver."

"I see." My heart went cold.

“He... called you a monster.”

She was sitting in the bus with me, after having let me carry her for half an hour. After her grandfather had told her what I was. She was trusting me with the information about colloidal silver, too, so she couldn't be thinking of me as a monster. Could she? I would hate it if she did.

“Are you?”

“Yes and no.” I didn't know what to say, and she looked a little annoyed at my evasion.

“Ben.”

I took a deep breath. She deserved an honest answer, especially since it would only confirm what she already knew. “Yes, I'm a wolf. No, I'm not a monster.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, gave me a trembling smile, and my heart started beating again.

“That wasn't so hard, was it?” I managed an answering smile, and was shocked to see her eyes fill with tears again.

“There is more,” she whispered.

“Is there a way to make it easier?”

She shook her head and swallowed. “You see, Grandpa showed me a video.”

“Yes?”

Her tears spilled over and fell. “Of a man getting killed. Someone who looked very much like you.”

My heart missed a beat. I knew the Hunters loved that kind of video, it was the closest thing to a trophy they could have. Was there one about my father? It wouldn't surprise me.

“Yes?” I said again, trying to be as calm as possible about it.

“He... his eyes changed when...”

I nodded. “It is one of the few visible signs of the wolf.”

“Like yours, dark brown.” She bit her lip again, and I was annoyed at myself. I hadn’t wanted her to see that.

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “I don’t mind. I’m just... I’m so afraid it was someone you know. Someone you care about.”

Someone who looked like me. Caring about my feelings. Bloody fangs, she was hurting too much from it. And the only way out was the way through.

“Tell me all about it.”

Crying, trembling, sobbing, she told me what she had seen, and on impulse, I got up, squeezed into the row with her and pulled her into my lap. She buried her head in my shoulder.

“And then... then they called him McMullen.”

My mind went still. She couldn’t know, I had never told her my last name.

“He was so defiant. So brave. And they killed him. Just... like that.”

I held her close, while pride swelled my heart.

“Grand... Theo said they hunted him for three days. And shot him five times before they caught him. I can’t even imagine his pain.”

My father had died like a true wolf, and finally knowing about his fate and his immense bravery was a relief and almost a source of joy.

“Sylvie, it is all right.”

“How can you say that? He is dead!” She stared at me, and I knew I had a lot of explaining to do.

“He died protecting me and my siblings.”

She stared at me in pure horror. “So he was your father?”

“Quite likely. His name was Mal McMullen.”

“I’m so sorry.” Her tears flowed freely.

“There is no need to be sorry.”

“Don’t you miss him?”

I took a deep breath. Of course, I was missing him, and I would grieve for him. But how could I explain that he had chosen this end? That the manner of his death was not something to be shocked at? That I and my family would feel pride at his passing?

“Yes, I do. But you see, he was a true hero.”

She stared at me in complete disbelief. “How can you say that? They murdered him.”

“Yes, they did, just as humans have murdered our kind for centuries. He gave his life for us, buying us time to flee. And among our kind, that is the highest sacrifice and honor.”

It started to sink in that my father was dead, and I felt something shift inside me. My pack leader had died, and I was no longer a pup. I took a deep breath.

“By telling me, you have done much more than you know, Sylvie. You’ve given me peace.”

“Really?” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and my heart went out to her.

“Yes. And thank you for grieving for him. That is rare.”

“I saw him die, Ben. I saw his eyes turn and... and...”

“Shhh. Let it go.” I wrapped her into a tight hug, and in order to distract her, I kissed her.

Her eyes flew open, and heat flooded me, unexpectedly. She kissed me back eagerly, her eyes intense, her body trembling, her scent suddenly filling my head, my heart joyfully opening to her. I had heard of this happening, and had always thought it was a myth.

It wasn't.

It was shocking.

And it was the best thing I had ever experienced in my life.

# Chapter 10

Sylvia

I LOST MYSELF IN that kiss. It was much more intense than the one in the workshop, and even that had been better than any in my life.

This one, however, was life-changing. I felt our two hearts meet and meld, felt myself soaking up his essence and sharing mine.

It lasted forever, and not long enough.

I sighed when he lifted his lips from mine, looking slightly dazed. I felt the same.

“What was that?” I whispered.

He smiled softly. “Something very special. And it means we need to talk to Beth before we take this further.”

I blinked, feeling completely confused. “Who is Beth?”

“My boss.” He grinned.

“What?”

“And the closest thing to a leader I have right now.”

My mind jumped to all the stupid fantasy stuff I had read about werewolves. I reminded myself that it probably was all fiction.

“You may want to explain that.” I grinned back at him, still soaring from what I had experienced.

“She really is my boss. She owns the Swan Valley Guided Tours.” He tucked my head under his chin and sighed.

“And?”

“And she’s a wolf. She rescued me that night.”

I felt something else relax inside me. “I’m so glad you found help.”

“Yeah.”

Guilt flooded me. I couldn’t help it, even though reason told me I couldn’t have known that Grandpa... no, he would be Theo from now on, I wanted nothing more to do with that man. I still felt guilty, and shuddered at the memory of what they had done to Ben. To the man I loved.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

He just held me tight. “No, never, my love. You were the one who saved me.”

My love. I closed my eyes and soaked up those words. Yes, he was. “Say that again, please.”

“Say what?”

“My love.” I could feel my voice change as I said those words, because they came straight from my heart.

He sighed deeply. “My love. It feels so right.”

I closed my eyes and just breathed, reveling in his scent, his touch, yes, even his love.

“It does. I don’t ever want to let you go.”

He chuckled. “I don’t either. But our rescue team is pulling into the parking lot right now.”

“Oh.”

A man and a woman entered the bus just a few moments later, and the man frowned.

“No snuggling with customers,” he growled, while the woman rolled her eyes.



“It’s on the customer’s demand,” I said with a grin, while regretting that Ben was releasing his hold on me.

“It’s still against the rules.”

“Ease up, Greg.” The woman nudged him aside. “Let me check out that ankle. Sylvia, is it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Barbara. Tell me what happened.”

I quickly told her the story while she unwound Ben’s bandanna and probed my ankle. I winced a few times.

“That doesn’t seem too bad, and it’s definitely not broken. I’ll put a wrap around it, and Ben can carry you to our car.”

“No...” The man glared at her.

“Shut up, Greg.”

“But...”

“Stop being so blind and get out of the way.”

I was grateful when she bustled Greg out of the bus, on the pretext of getting her medical supplies. Soon, my ankle was firmly wrapped in a bandage and Ben was stuffing his damp bandanna into his pocket.

“Greg, stay here and wait for the tour. I’ll take them back to headquarters and get everything sorted.”

The man sighed and took the keys to the bus from Ben. “You get all the fun.”

“Because I keep my eyes open.” She winked at him, and I realized they were just teasing each other.

Ben did carry me to the truck they had driven up here and Barbara slipped into the driver’s seat easily.

“Go on, snuggle in the back if you want.” She grinned.

So Ben helped me settle in the back and then pulled me into his lap.

“Thanks, Barbara.”

She smiled at us through the rear mirror. “Of course, Beth will have words, but eh. Like I told Greg, I have eyes in my head.”

Were we so obvious?

Ben snorted slightly and held me close throughout the drive. And of course, he carried me into the office building and followed Barbara into a back office with a couch. She grinned at us when Ben simply sat down without letting me go.

“I’ll get Beth.”

She must have seen me bite my lip because her expression softened. “Don’t worry. She’s the boss, but she cares.”

“I will not let you go,” Ben said, his voice a soft growl that sent shivers down my back. “Neither Beth nor Theo will separate us.”

“I have some income, if it matters,” I said slowly. “I want to go for my Master’s and just took time off from my job at a library. They understand summer breaks.”

“You have a degree?” He stared at me.

“History and Library Studies.” I shrugged. “Nothing to get rich on.”

He laughed. “Is it useful?”

“Somewhat. I can run a library if I have to.”

I heard steps in the corridor and an elderly woman walked in, her silver hair done up in a bun. When she saw us, she raised one eyebrow, sniffed and sighed.

“Your timing is awful, Ben.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not something we planned. I did try to stay away, but Sylvie booked a hike.”

Her face softened. "I understand. Would you introduce us?"

"Beth, this is Sylvia. Sylvia, meet Beth Minster."

"You don't even know her last name?"

Ben grinned a little sheepishly.

"It's Mason. Sylvia Mason." I swallowed as her eyes sharpened.

"Would your mother's name be Erika?"

I stared at her in shock. "How do you know?"

Beth took a very deep breath. "Just like your father you can sure pick them, Ben. She's Theo's granddaughter, isn't she?"

"Yes," we said at the same time, and Ben chuckled while Beth's lips tightened.

"Neither of you know how tangled your family history is, and you just made it much worse." She frowned. "There is only one thing to do. I need to get you both out of here, immediately. Because Theo will be livid, and he will do his best to get you both killed."

I stared at her. I knew he would try to kill Ben, but she seemed to mean me, as well. "Killed? I found out he's horrible, but..."

"Your mother never told you, did she?"

I shook my head, feeling my heart sink.

Beth's eyes met Ben's. "Does she know about us?"

He nodded, and she sighed again.

"Theo told me first," I said, catching her eyes and holding them. I really didn't want her to blame him. "He also told me how he poisoned Ben."

Her eyes sharpened and her focus was just as unnerving as Ben's. I knew I was reacting to her wolf.

"Tell me."

I explained about the colloidal silver, and she gritted her teeth. “That is diabolical,” she muttered.

“Especially as it has no taste.” I nodded. “But now it’s my turn. Tell me what my mother should have told me.”

Beth took a deep breath and sat down at the desk in that office. “This will be a surprise for both of you. You see, Ben’s father is originally from here. And long ago, he fell in love with a human woman called Emily.”

I nodded and felt Ben do the same.

“She was the sister of Erika and Ethan Morey, the oldest girl in the family.”

I gasped. Ethan was my uncle, Eric’s father. Which meant that Emily was my aunt, except I couldn’t remember much about her at all.

Ben frowned at me.

“My mother and my uncle,” I said quickly, and he nodded.

“When Theo found out, he beat her to death and told the police that Mal had done it.” Beth looked furious. “Mal had to flee.”

My mind reeled.

“Erika left, as well, with her entire family.” Beth nodded at me. “She should have told you before you came here.”

“I didn’t tell my parents about my plans. I only remembered Theo from when I was little, and I had planned to... reconnect. He was happy to have me when I called him. I had no idea...”

My heart was so heavy, and Ben pulled me closer to him.

“You didn’t know,” he said softly. “And your plans meant that we met. I cannot regret that.”

“Did they have what... what we have?” I dared to ask, not even sure what we had, just that it was special and important and deep.

Beth closed her eyes. "Yes."

I saw Mal's face in my mind, saw his defiance, saw his death, all over again.

"He's dead," I said, quietly, not bothering to hide my tears.

Beth growled at that.

"Theo has a trophy video that he showed Sylvie," Ben explained. "From what she told me, we both believe it was him."

It seemed that all of us were now in various stages of upset. I could tell that Ben was holding back on his grief for my sake.

"He died well," Ben added, with just a tiny crack in his voice.

Beth took a deep breath and stood. "There is a farm we run, up and out of the valley. I don't think Theo knows about it. I want you both there tonight."

"We can take Sylvie's car. It shouldn't sit in the parking lot here anyway, just in case." Ben's voice was steady again.

"I agree."

"They don't know where I am. I didn't tell them about the hike," I said, trying to help. "But I packed everything, I had planned on leaving today."

"So Theo knows you were leaving?"

"They will have to check my room to be certain, but yes, they will know tonight at the latest, since I won't have cooked dinner for them."

Beth frowned again. "They?"

"Theo and Eric, my cousin. They expected me do the housework. I didn't visit to become their maid, so I decided to cut my stay short."

She snorted at that. "I'm beginning to like you, Sylvia."

I managed a smile. "Thank you."

“Now. You two get yourself off to Ben’s apartment. Your bond needs privacy. I’ll send someone with food.”

I could feel Ben relax immensely. “Thank you, Beth.”

“At sunset, you leave.”

“Yes,” we said, once again in unison, and Beth shook her head with a smile.

# Chapter 11

Ben

**B**ETH ESCORTED US TO Sylvia's car in person, which was a huge honor. I gently settled Sylvia into the passenger seat and Beth entered the location of the farm into the GPS system herself.

"Now, you won't have reception up there, but they do have a landline. Call us when you get there. They are expecting you."

I nodded. "Thank you again, Beth. I'm more than grateful that you're protecting us."

She smiled and there was that twinkle in her eyes again. "You know, I don't mind getting the better of Theo. Get going and be safe."

"We will be." To my surprise, she opened her arms, and I hugged her. She was stronger than she looked, and I smiled to myself.

Yes, my father had sent us to the right place.

I got into the driver's seat and adjusted the seating, then reached out to put a hand on Sylvia's thigh. She smiled at me, and my heart melted.

We had spent those hours in my apartment snuggled in bed, just holding and kissing each other, and it had been wonderful.

And taking Sylvia to safety was even better.

I hadn't driven a car in a while, but hers was small and easy to handle. Soon, we were gliding along on the road, heading north and west, and every mile we put between Asheton and Theo felt good. The GPS made it even

easier, and I had to admit that it wasn't just a toy to sell new cars. It warned me with plenty of time to get the exit we needed, and then it led me to pick a road that wound up the mountain in many turns.

There was a car behind us, the headlights showing clearly in the dark.

It followed us, not closely, and I didn't waste much thought on it, since there was no way the driver could overtake us. It was difficult enough to make all those turns keeping the car going smoothly, and suddenly I realized I wanted to impress Sylvia with my driving.

I almost laughed out loud at that insight and relaxed. She was quiet, letting me drive and trusting me, which filled my heart with even more love.

We were clearly bonding, there was no doubt about it anymore, especially as Beth had already acknowledged it. I would have more explaining to do but it could wait until we got to safety.

The car behind us came closer until the headlights blinded me. I turned the mirror down, but they were still uncomfortably close.

"It's Theo," Sylvia said suddenly, with fear lacing her voice.

I couldn't risk looking into the mirror, I needed my sight for the road.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And Eric." At that moment, the car behind us ran into hers, very deliberately, bumping us.

Sylvia's breath caught and I felt my hands grip the wheel harder.

They were driving that big, black truck with a large cattle bar. I sped up, knowing it wasn't safe. With a bit of luck, this little car could handle the turns better, though.

But I couldn't lead them to Beth's hidden farm.

They stayed close, trying to get at us again, but I managed to speed up to avoid them.



Sylvia was gripping the handle above the door, gritting her teeth. I admired her for her determination.

The tires squealed on the next turn and the car drifted a little. I gritted my teeth, as well, knowing I was driving at the limit of my ability.

They bumped us again when I had to slow down for a hairpin curve.

We were getting closer to the farm, so I leaned on the horn, hoping they would notice something, hoping to warn them.

More curves, and then a stretch of straight road, although I could see the next curve ahead.

I accelerated, but they were faster. I tried to keep the little car in the middle of the road, trying to not let them catch up, but the massive truck thundered closer anyway and then Theo rammed the little car with full force, hitting the left rear corner, slewing us around.

I hit the brakes and gripped the wheel but it was too late. Sylvia's little car spun off the road, tipped over the shoulder and tumbled into the dark forest.

Metal screeched, glass shattered, and all I could do was to pull my arms in tight and protect my head. The seat belts tightened painfully and the airbags blew with a massive bang.

The car rolled twice and then slammed into a tree or two, coming to a rest at an angle.

Wolf fury filled me and I heard myself growl, even as I turned off the ignition and opened the seat belt so I could lean over to Sylvia.

She looked at me with her teeth bared, in matching fury. The dust of the airbags covered her face and made her look even more feral.

Yes, we were bonding, and that gave me a moment of wild joy. It grew when I saw she was basically unharmed.

“You need to run, Ben. They will come after us, and they will kill you. I may get the benefit of doubt.”

Her voice was calm and clear, and I loved her even more for that.

Her plan was sound. I leaned over to kiss her.

“Will you be all right?”

“Yes. I just can’t run with that ankle, and I will need you to rescue me. Go and get help.” Her lips twisted at that. And then she told me Theo’s street address in the same calm voice.

I couldn’t help admiring her. I stole one last quick kiss, kicked out the windshield and crawled out of the wrecked car.

“There he is!” someone shouted, and I thought I recognized Eric’s voice.

I ducked and ran, doing my best to avoid the car’s headlights and the strong floodlight one of them carried. A shot rang out, and I knew my chances of escaping were getting slimmer. I ran downhill and to one side, and when Silvia screamed, I paused and looked back, and the floodlight caught up with me.

Another shot rang out and a mighty fist slammed into my shoulder, knocking me off my feet.

The flash of pain was next, and my vision dimmed, even as I forced myself to keep rolling, to avoid being an easy target, all wolf senses screaming.

I tumbled into a tree, feeling two ribs break and that pain was so much that I lost the grip on reality for a few heartbeats.

Sylvia was still screaming, cursing, fighting them, causing chaos, and she was magnificent, doing her best to distract them and letting me get away.

One of them was methodically searching the forest with his strong light, however, and just as the beam was about to hit me, I managed to roll behind

that tree, to curl up in the hollow below its roots and lie there, panting, in pain and close to blacking out.

# Chapter 12

Sylvia

“GOT HIM.”

The deep satisfaction in Theo's voice made me shudder. I hid my fear for Ben by yelling at them, made myself scream with everything I had, trying to drown out any sounds Ben might be making.

Because I had seen him tumble, had seen him fall out of the cone of light from Eric's floodlight.

Theo had shot my love, and I hated him for it with intense fury.

Now I had to make sure they had their hands full with me so they wouldn't have time to hunt Ben down. So they wouldn't get a trophy video of his death. My heart twisted at that thought.

I crawled out of the car, that ankle be damned. As I had hoped, Theo ran over to me, intent on catching me, slinging his gun on his back.

“No, you're not getting away, you bitch!”

Something shifted inside me at his crass curse. This was no longer my Grandpa. This was the enemy. I screamed at him, although I wanted to snarl and growl.

Was I connecting to Ben's wolf?

If so, Theo must never know, because then he would kill me on the spot.

I got my feet under me and ran uphill, mildly surprised that my ankle didn't bother me, until I stepped on a dead branch and it twisted again.

With another scream, I fell, still intent on drawing both Theo's and Eric's attention on me.

Eric reached me first.

"Easy, Cuz, it's us, easy!"

His words made no sense at all. I slapped away his hands when he tried to grab my wrists and scrambled uphill again, pain be damned. If I reached their truck first, I could drive away in it.

And leave them behind to hunt Ben.

No. That plan wouldn't work. But maybe I could make them think that it was my plan, and buy more time for Ben.

If he was still alive. That tumble had looked bad.

I could not allow myself to doubt him, I realized. I called up my fury and slapped away Eric's hands again.

"Sylvia! We want to help you!" he yelled, and I finally understood what Theo must have told him.

"Leave me alone!" I screamed at him, and he actually hesitated.

Theo did not.

He grabbed me around the waist, and I screamed some more and twisted out of his grip. I allowed myself to fall and roll downhill for a distance.

Theo cursed and ran after me, grabbing me again. I clung to a tree, locking my arms around it as he pulled at me.

"For God's sake, Sylvia!"

"I'm not going back with you!"

"You will!"

Our shouting match went on, and he kept pulling at my jacket, until it tore. I found some satisfaction in resisting him, knowing that he would take me to his house in the end, but making it as hard as possible.

“Sylvia, please.” Eric was begging me, and I thought I could hear a sob in his voice. “Please, don’t fight us. We really want the best for you.”

“You just want a maid!” I screamed at him, and he actually took a step back.

“That’s where women belong,” Theo roared. “In the kitchen!”

I kicked him as hard as I could, and he cursed me even more. Could I hold out long enough for Ben to bring help?

I saw his fall in my memory and knew I couldn’t expect him to.

“I know exactly why Mom moved away!” I yelled back, and the shock on his face was visible even in the low light from my dying car.

“How dare you,” he growled.

“Because you will always hold women back!” I screamed, trying not to give away Beth’s secret, and the look of relief on his face would have been comical if I hadn’t know the real reason.

I kept up the screaming, fighting both glee and shock that he had practically admitted to killing my aunt.

Where was Ben?

“Eric, hold her!”

When Theo let me go, I ducked and scrambled uphill again, evading Eric’s hands. Theo uttered another string of curses, this time aimed at Eric.

I kept struggling upwards, even as Theo reached me. Something hard hid my head, and my legs went out from under me. A moment later, Theo had picked me up and thrown me over his shoulder, in an amazing show of strength.

The dizziness left quickly, and I returned to struggling and screaming, although my throat was getting raw.

Surely Ben must have gotten away by now?

I grabbed Theo's cap and slapped him in the face with it, and he cursed again. A few steps later, he threw me on the ground and knelt on my arm.

"Now cut it out. I'm having enough of this." He lashed out with his fist, but I moved my head away and he slammed it into the ground.

"Grandpa, no!" Eric grabbed his arm, and Theo violently lashed out at him. Eric fell and rolled down the hill for a short distance.

I was still looking at my shocked cousin when Theo struck again, and this time, he hit me.

The world turned dark for a few moments, and when I could see again, Theo had me over his shoulder again and was opening the door of his black truck.

I grabbed the frame, determined to fight him for as long as I could, screaming at the top of my voice. My face throbbed where he had hit me, and I felt my eye swelling shut. Yes, it hurt, but it was nothing compared to the pain I felt when Ben had gotten shot.

Theo punched me in the face again, and when I gasped in shock, he threw me into the truck's cabin.

"Eric, get in here!"

I kicked him when he tried to climb into the driver's seat and he grabbed my injured ankle. I screamed in pain, pulling my legs in, and he slipped into place. From under the dashboard he pulled out zip ties and even though I struggled and fought, he had me bound quickly, ankles, knees and my hands behind my back. I could tell it wasn't the first time he had done this.

"Eric, hold her down, dammit! Don't be such a wuss!"

My cousin gave me a pleading look but he pulled me into his arms and held me even as I squirmed and kicked as much as I could.

The zip ties were so tight they hurt and just straining against them with my wrists cut my skin. I gave up on that quickly.

Theo started the truck, turned it on the narrow road and sped down the mountain, back into the valley.

There was no point in fighting anymore and I leaned against Eric, trembling with fury, exhaustion and fear for Ben.

He was out there, badly hurt, alone in that forest, and there was nothing I could do for him.

Normally, I would have cried, especially as reaction set in, but I didn't want to give Theo that satisfaction. So I kept quiet, nursed my fury and decided to fight again when I had a chance of getting away.

"Sylvia." Eric's voice was low, almost a whisper. "Please. They bewitched you. We're just rescuing you. Believe me."

Oh yes, Ben had bewitched me, in the best of all ways. Of course, Eric believed Theo, he had no better information, had been raised inside my grandfather's hate.

"You're wrong," I just said, knowing he wouldn't believe me.

Eric sighed and lifted my legs in a more comfortable position, and I was grateful for small mercies.

"And from now on," Theo growled. "You will obey me."

I had no intention of doing so.



# Chapter 13

Ben

**S**YLVIA WAS STILL SCREAMING, and her voice and her need penetrated my pain as I huddled below that tree. I had to help her, but how?

My wolf beckoned to me, whispered to me, although it took me a while to realize that shifting would actually be a good idea. I could move much more stealthily in that shape, and my injured shoulder wound would be less debilitating.

And there was nothing I had to carry, as my backpack was in the wreck of Sylvia's car. At least it hadn't gone up in flames.

I breathed through the pain of my broken ribs, called the wolf, bathed in its fury, and the change hit almost instantly. The pain diminished, held in check by the anger I felt at those two men who had dared to attack me and my mate.

My... mate.

I needed to rescue her.

It didn't take long to wiggle out of my torn clothes. My shoulder still burned and I could smell the blood, but it mattered less.

Sylvia was still fighting, screaming, making it hard for Theo and Eric to get her into their truck. I was so proud of her. Silently, I ran up the hill at a distance, racing for the road, fury dimming the pain of my ribs.

That huge, black truck was parked up there, the large flat bed open, headlights still on.

It was a surprise that no other car had passed yet, but this was a remote road in the middle of the mountains. And it was late, most likely after midnight, and any self-respecting farmer was long in bed.

I sniffed the truck. It was fairly new. I needed to find a way to free Sylvia, but fighting those two was not going to happen, not while Theo had his gun.

Maybe I could ride with them.

Something inside me laughed at that idea and I shifted back into human shape. My shoulder throbbed and the pain in my ribs almost made me double over when I pushed myself to my feet. Stepping onto the foot rest at the back of the truck, I pulled myself up and over the edge, dropping into the bed. Immediately, I shifted back into the wolf, fleeing the pain of my poor, weak human body.

A tool box was lashed into the truck bed, just behind the cabin. I snuggled into the nook between it and the wall of the bed, hoping that they would not check for a hidden passenger.

Sylvia was still screaming, her voice getting hoarse, and then I heard a fist smacking into a body, and my fury burned even higher. My lips lifted to bare my canines and I growled under my breath.

How dare he hurt my mate?

I quickly pushed the wolf back just a little. I needed stealth here, and less fury.

Not much later, I could hear the scrabble when they tossed Sylvia into the cabin, and crouched low. Theo shouted something, and then my mate went quiet, giving up the struggle.

The doors slammed shut, the truck's engine started, and Theo turned around on the road.

They had not noticed me.

I wedged myself into my corner, put my head on my paws and closed my eyes. For the duration of the ride, I would let my body heal as much as it could.

And then I would fight.

# Chapter 14

Sylvia

I WOKE FROM HORRIBLE nightmares when Eric shifted my body, and I recognized the workshop illuminated by the truck's headlights when Theo pulled into the yard.

I was back at his home. If he had his way, it would become my prison. I vowed to myself that it wouldn't.

Theo turned off the engine, threw open the door, stepped down and then turned to grab my ankles. I kicked him and he cursed me.

"Eric, get her out, then."

My cousin grabbed me under my arms and got out before pulling me after him. I didn't struggle much, my face hurt terribly, my eye was swollen shut and pain pulsed in my head. The pain in my ankle was almost an afterthought.

Theo threw me over his shoulder again, and I was shocked that he was carrying me to the workshop rather than the house.

"Eric, get the rope. This girl won't go anywhere."

Rope could be cut, I told myself, but found it hard to banish the memory of Ben getting tortured in that workshop. Did he have something similar in mind for me?

"Grandpa, Sylvia is hurt." Eric was hurrying after Theo. "She needs to be in bed."

“She chose to go with a monster, she’s getting what she deserves.”

“But Grandpa, you said you wanted to rescue her. I don’t understand.”

Theo dumped me on the ground, tied my wrists to one of the grommets on the wall, put a rag in my mouth and tied a second one around my mouth to gag me. Finally, he glared at me.

“Maybe a cold, miserable night will teach you to appreciate my home, you ungrateful wretch. Maybe then you’ll learn to be happy in my kitchen. Until I find a man to keep you in line.”

I could see Eric’s shock, watched him shake his head.

“Go inside and heat those pizzas, Eric, then bring one out to me. I’ll stay here to see if they take the bait. By now, those monsters should be aware of what happened.”

My heart almost stopped.

Theo settled into Eric’s old truck, the one they had tied Ben to. I watched him reload the gun he had used to shoot Ben, saw him wind down the window and rest the gun’s barrel on the opening, and my heart sank.

I had severely underestimated Theo’s desire to kill as many werewolves as he could. And with that gag in my mouth, I couldn’t even warn them.

Soon, breathing became difficult. And my hands and feet were starting to get numb.

I made sounds, hoping to alert Theo, scared that he wouldn’t mind if I suffered permanent damage, but he just cackled.

Where was Ben?

My imagination showed me his lifeless body in the forest, and I angrily pushed that image away. He could not be dead! I would not accept that until someone showed me his body. Instead, I clung to the hope that he would save me somehow, because I certainly could not.

And with a flash, I realized that this was what I had been afraid of when that creep attacked me at that gas station. Getting tied up and abused, and eventually killed.

Except it was my own grandfather doing it to me.

What had Ben said?

*You would have found a way to fight him.*

I let his words fill my mind, until I found new strength. There wasn't much I could do, but I could make noise. I shifted around and started banging my feet against the wall of the workshop, even though it hurt where the zip ties chafed my skin.

At the very least, I hoped to get on Theo's nerves, so he would come and change the way he had immobilized me. For that he'd have to put down his gun, and that would be a huge improvement.

"Stop that!" he growled after a while.

I glared at him and did not.

"I said, stop it!"

I raised my eyebrows at him, grinned into my gag and continued hitting the wall. It was not easy, I had to focus on breathing through my nose and not choking on that gag, but just annoying Theo was worth it at this point.

He would regret what he had done to us. Fury filled me, gave me strength, gave me the determination to keep going.

When Theo put down the gun, both fear and elation flooded me. As he came closer, I could see his eyes, filled with anger of his own.

"Stop that right now!"

Looking directly into his eyes, letting him see my defiance, I deliberately hit the wall again, and he roared. And pulled back his arm to hit me, hand balled into a fist.

“Grandpa, no!” Eric yelled and came running, putting a plate with pizza onto the hood of his old truck. “No!”

Theo lashed out at me and I jerked my head away. His fist grazed my cheekbone and hit the wall. He screamed in fury and pain. When he pulled back for another hit, Eric grabbed his arm.

“No!”

Theo rose and whirled. “Stay out of this, you sissy!”

“This is Sylvia!” Eric screamed. “Stop hurting her!”

“She is a worthless werewolf toy now,” Theo roared.

“You are insane!” Eric stumbled back, his eyes wide. “I’ll call the police.”

“The hell you will!” Theo turned and lashed out at Eric who ducked too late, still in disbelief. Two blows later, Eric was on the floor, moaning. I watched helplessly as Theo got zip ties and tied up Eric.

My cousin’s eyes met mine, filled with horror. Then Theo dragged Eric out of the workshop, and I was alone. I trembled with fear. Yes, my grandfather was insane, there was no doubt about it now.

Where was Ben?

Realistically, there was no way he could be even close. I told myself to hang on, to play for time.

Theo returned after just a few moments, and removed the gag from my mouth. I wondered why.

“Time for you to scream,” he growled, his eyes wild. “Draw them here. Make them come to me.”

“Grandpa...” I managed to mutter, deliberately using that name for him, trying to reach him, and he shook his head.

“You chose the wrong side. You’re no longer part of my family.” He pulled a hunter knife from a sheath on his belt.

“We’re alone here, Grandpa. Nobody will hear me.” That was probably not true, but I really didn’t want him to hurt me any more.

“Ah, but I will.”

I stared at him. “Grandpa, please.”

“They defiled you. Just like they corrupted my Emily. My sweet little Emily.”

“Grandpa...”

“They destroyed everything I cared about, they took my daughter, they drove the others away. They took Sylvia. And even Eric is no longer listening to me.”

“Theo...”

He wasn’t even looking at me. “They are all gone. And soon, those monsters will pay for what they did to me.”

“I’m here,” I said, trying to reach him through the pain, through the delusion.

His eyes focused on me. “You’re not my sweet Sylvia anymore, either. They poisoned your soul, and that’s why you didn’t want to cook and clean and be the woman you’re meant to be.”

My mouth dropped open in dismay.

“I’m here,” I repeated, helplessly. I was familiar with this kind of delusion, with choosing a scapegoat for every real and imagined slight. I had studied the witch hunts. And I knew there was nothing I could say that would change his mind.

He stared at the knife. “It’s in the blood. It must be.”

“Grandpa...” I had to stall for time. “Tell me about Emily.”



His eyes filled with tears, and for a moment, I felt his pain.

“She was the first baby we had. She was so beautiful. Such a good child. Always did what we told her to do, unlike Erika.”

Now I fully understood why my mother had left, and I felt a clear kinship with her. Not that I would say so to Theo.

“She was good in school. Did chores with a smile. Until she met that blonde, handsome monster.” His voice dripped with venom.

Mal. Ben’s father. No wonder he had gloated over his death so much. Tears filled my own eyes. Beth had been right, our families were tangled in a bad way.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with hate. “And you brought in a monster just like Emily did. I knew him for what he was right away.”

There was nothing I could say. His mind was completely fixated on blaming everyone except himself.

“After you freed him, I tested you. Oh, yes, I know you did that. With the silver in his body, he couldn’t have gotten away otherwise.” He glared at me. “And you turned just like Emily had, resenting the work of a woman in the house, refusing to obey me. That’s when I knew those monsters had already defiled you. When did he rape you?”

I blinked several times. “Never,” I said, completely stunned. How could he even believe such things?

He laughed, a bitter, hysterical, wild laugh.

I trembled inside. My grandfather was very clearly insane.

“And now, I will get that bad blood out of you. I learned that beating doesn’t work.”

He lifted his knife, and I screamed.

# Chapter 15

Ben

I WOKE FROM MY doze when the truck's engine was turned off, but I didn't dare look around. Instead, I snuggled deeper into my corner, wolf senses wide awake.

I listened to Theo and Eric talk and realized that Sylvia's grandfather was taking her to the workshop instead of the house. I trembled with fear for her, and rage flowed again.

He was going to torture my mate just as he had tortured me.

I needed to get off the truck, and so I listened intently. And when Theo was in the workshop and Eric had gone into the house, I shifted into human shape, wincing with the pain in my shoulder and taking shallow breaths.

My body was healing fast, but not fast enough this night.

I quickly dropped over the wall of the truck's bed, crouched on the ground and shifted back into the wolf.

The pain receded again as I crawled below the truck. That felt good but it also made one thing clear: I was in no shape to fight both of them, let alone at the same time.

Silence fell.

I waited, counting every second, trembling.

But silence meant that nothing was happening, that Sylvia was probably safe for now. I could hear Eric move around in the house, clattering with

plates in a way that told me he was upset.

That was good.

And then I heard a rhythmic knocking sound coming from the workshop. I perked my ears. Was that Sylvia trying to tell me something?

Probably not. She couldn't know I was here. Most likely, she believed I was still lying in that forest, and I knew that this thought would hurt her.

The wolf in me wanted to rush in and just tear apart Theo, but he had that gun. Rushing in was a certain way to get myself killed, and that would hurt Sylvia even more.

Theo was shouting, and I mentally applauded Sylvia for thwarting whatever plan he had. Then Eric marched out of the house to the workshop, carrying a plate with something that strongly smelled like pizza.

My mouth watered, and I sternly called the wolf to order.

More screaming and shouting echoed through the workshop, with Eric's voice being defensive, and I strained to understand what they were saying. I couldn't, but suddenly, Theo was dragging Eric out of the workshop. The young man had been bound with zip ties and was barely conscious. I managed not to yip in surprise.

Had he turned on his grandson already?

He dragged Eric into the house and hurried back into the workshop. The door fell almost close but got stuck on something, probably one of Eric's feet.

I could get into the house.

That meant I could get to a phone and alert Beth.

Which in turn meant she could send help.

I slipped out from under the truck and ran to the door as silently as I could. I nosed it open and saw that Eric was staring at me, looking woozy

and confused.

“Wha...?”

I nudged him then ran the few steps into the kitchen and shifted. I dug through some drawer to find a pair of sturdy scissors before returning to him.

“Eric, where’s the phone?”

He stared at me with huge eyes. Yes, I knew I was buck-naked, but he looked more than shocked.

“Eric, come on. Sylvia needs help. Where’s your phone?”

He glanced at a spot in the living room, and I smiled. “Thanks.”

It was a landline, but I didn’t care. I dialed the number of our outfit, and prayed someone would pick it up, preferably before it went to an answer-phone.

It did after three rings. Dammit. I dialed three more times before a very exhausted voice answered the call.

“Yes?”

It sounded like Beth. “It’s Ben. We’re at Theo’s. He caught Sylvia.”

“Got you. We’re coming.” Yes, it was Beth, and now she sounded wide awake. She also hung up on me. I put the receiver back and turned to Eric.

He was still staring at me.

“Ben?” A shocked whisper.

I nodded, picked up the scissors and went to his side.

“You... how... you’re hurt.”

I glanced at my bare shoulder. Blood was still slowly seeping out of the wound and it still hurt like hell. “Yes, well. You shot me.”

“I’m sorry.” His eyes focused better. “Grandpa wants to kill Sylvie. I... I couldn’t stop him.”

My heart froze. “Will you help us?”

He nodded. “He’s... insane.”

I cut through the zip ties on his hands and ankles.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. But why...?”

He glanced at my nakedness.

I grinned, obviously with some of the wolf in me because he flinched. “Clothes are not included when shifting.”

“So you are...?”

“Yes, I’m a wolf. You know that, you saw me come in and change. Does it matter?”

I could see him make a decision.

“Sylvia loves you. She wouldn’t if you had hurt her, like Grand... like he claims. And you freed me.” He sat up, rubbing his wrists.

“I love her, too,” I said softly. Eric relaxed a little.

I heard a scream from the workshop and knew our time had run out.

“Do you have a gun?”

Eric stared at me, then shook his head. “Grandpa has.”

I sighed and opened the door, determined to do what it took to save Sylvia.

Eric pushed past me and ran towards the workshop. I followed him on his heels, even though it was a very stupid thing to do.

“Grandpa,” he screamed. “No, no, no!”

I saw Theo draw a handgun from a holster at his back, lift it in a smooth motion, and I threw myself at Eric just as the shot rang out.

It grazed my left arm, and I growled. The next shot went above us and then I rolled, shifting into the wolf as I did so, barely evading the third shot.

Sylvia was screaming and as I scrabbled away, she rolled over and kicked Theo as hard as she could.

He whirled and his next shot hit Sylvia in the leg.

Her scream tore through my heart. Rage flooded me and I stopped thinking. With two huge strides I was on him, jumping his back, snarling into his ear.

He went down under me, and I grabbed his neck in my teeth, about to shake the life out of him.

“No, Ben, no. Don’t kill.” Sylvia called out to me, and I hesitated. Theo roared and bucked, and I jumped off him before he could throw me, intent on keeping control.

He got up on his knees, lifting his gun. I dashed away, and Sylvia kicked him again.

She was so brave.

He shifted to aim at her, and just as he squeezed the trigger, I threw myself at him, toppling him over.

The shot hit the wall, ricocheted through the workshop, and a metallic sound told me that it had probably landed in the old banger.

I lunged and grabbed the gun with my teeth, tearing it out of his hands, and then I ran out of the workshop, his curses following me.

I was just dropping the gun into a bunch of poison ivy when I heard Eric scream again and rushed back.

Theo had a knife in his hands, and Sylvia was cringing away from him as best as she could, with her hands tied behind her and lashed to the wall.

Rage made me growl as I raced towards him, as Eric tried to grab his hand. Theo turned and slashed at Eric, and the young man staggered back

with a shocked gasp, his arm sliced open. He would need help very fast or bleed out. And he didn't deserve that.

So I jumped Theo, shifted mid-jump and landed on him as human. Sylvia kicked out again, and his knife went flying. I grabbed his head and slammed it down, breaking his nose.

Theo screamed, I turned his head a little, slammed it down again and then punched as hard as I could. He went limp and I breathed a sigh of relief before remembering Eric was badly hurt.

Sylvia's cousin was clutching his arm, eyes wide in shock, face pale and drawn with pain. He was still bleeding too much, and so I ran to him, tore his t-shirt off him and twisted half of it into a thick rope before using it as a tourniquet around his upper arm to slow the bleeding.

And blessed my father for drilling us in first aid.

"Stay down, Eric. Help is coming."

Eric swallowed hard, still clutching his arm but bleeding much less. I was hoping that help would arrive soon.

"The zip ties are in the top drawer of that metal cabinet," Sylvia said calmly, although I could hear the pain in her voice.

"That is a very good idea." I took the time to thoroughly tie up Theo before freeing Sylvia and pulling her into a tight embrace, ignoring my own pain, damning those ribs. Theo had given her a black eye, as well as shot her, and my rage flared.

She clung to me, shaking and trembling.

"How bad is the leg?"

"Dunno. It hurts."

I held her close, rage still roaring, and took a look. Blood was staining her jeans but it wasn't pooling, so I could hope he hadn't hit an artery. I still

wrapped the remains of Eric's t-shirt around her leg. Gradually, she stopped shaking.

"What do we do now?" she whispered into my shoulder.

"We wait for help. I called Beth."

"Oh."

A little later she lifted her head, a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. "You look great, my love. But maybe you should borrow some jeans from Eric. First room to the right when you get up the stairs."

That was another really good idea. Somehow, I found I could love her even more.

I hurried into the house and found the room with no effort at all. His jeans were tighter than I liked them and too short, but they did cover up all the necessary parts.

When I returned, Sylvia had moved to sit next to Eric, holding his hand. He looked as if he would lose consciousness any moment.

"Hang in there, Cuz."

He blinked. "Sylvia, forgive me. Please. I can't..."

I knelt at Sylvia's side and he met my eyes for a moment before looking away, and then they closed. I slapped him.

"Eric! Stay with us!"

His eyes fluttered open, and a moment later, he looked at me. "So... sorry." His voice was slurry, and it alarmed me.

Then I heard sirens and squeezed Sylvia's shoulder. "Keep him awake. I'll get the paramedics."

"Thanks." A moment later, she slapped Eric, and he moaned.

I stepped out into the yard, making sure I was clearly visible in the light coming from the workshop, holding out my open hands just as the first po-



lice car raced into the yard. It was followed closely by the little car that Beth had used to pick me up with, and I relaxed, feeling a grin trying to rise.

Maybe they did have a cooperation with the police.

# Chapter 16

Sylvia

THINGS HAPPENED QUICKLY ONCE help arrived. Ben brought them into the workshop and made them help Eric first before pulling me into a hug again, before starting to answer questions, before letting anyone look at our wounds.

His embrace made all my pain irrelevant. Just being close filled me with calm and happiness. I remembered Beth mentioning a bond, and when she walked in and saw us together, she smiled. And immediately took control over what the policewoman wrote down.

Theo was hauled away in a police car, and I was relieved he was gone. When Eric was loaded onto a stretcher, Ben stopped the paramedics to ask how bad he was, and their little smile told me everything. My cousin would survive his heroics.

In the end, Beth made us sit in the back of her car, taking us to a small hospital at their organization. I realized that it would be specialized for the healing of people like Ben and her, but wondered a little about being included myself.

When I said so, he smiled.

“You’re one of us now.”

“Really?”

“Well, almost.” His smile got a little crooked and he glanced at Beth.

“Go ahead, tell Sylvia.” I could see her answering smile in the rear-view mirror.

It was almost amusing to see Ben squirm a little. The man who had barely flinched after getting shot was now looking decidedly uncomfortable.

I put my hand on his bare chest. There was still blood on it, and while I hated that he did get hurt, the blood itself didn’t bother me.

“I love you, Ben. I want to spend my life with you. So tell me.”

His entire expression softened and he held me tight.

“You already have some wolf blood from one of your ancestors, or we wouldn’t be bonding so quickly.”

I nodded, even though I had no idea who might have carried it.

“But for you to have full access to your wolf, the... trait needs to be activated.”

“Really?”

“In a very old fashioned way.” He blushed, and I couldn’t help grinning, he looked so cute.

“Yes?”

“By... by...” He couldn’t meet my eyes.

“Mating.” Beth’s voice was very matter of fact. “Preferably mating within a bond, but with enough wolf blood it can even happen with more casual sex. Full wolves won’t sense much of a difference.”

I could feel Ben relax and breathe a sigh of relief as his leader explained, and I hid my smile.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, then.” The truth was that I was looking forward to it. If the kisses were any indication, it would be fantastic.

Ben breathed in sharply. “You... don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” I kissed his jawbone.

“You two should wait until you’re a little more healed,” Beth said, still in that detached, calm voice, and I couldn’t help giggling. “But I will make sure you get a room together, and Ben still has his apartment.”

With a nice bed, I remembered and smiled in anticipation.

We didn’t talk much for the rest of the ride, and Beth took us directly to their hospital. And of course, Ben insisted on carrying me, despite his injuries. And he insisted on sitting at my side as they examined the gun wound.

“It was a small caliber,” the doctor explained, a slim woman with dark hair and a face that reminded me of a fellow student from Italy. “So we don’t need to do much, especially as it is already not bleeding much. You’re healing fast for a human.”

“We’re bonding,” Ben said, and I was proud of him.

“Ah. That explains it. Congratulations.” She smiled at me. “And welcome to the pack.”

“Thank you.” I had no idea what the etiquette was on bonding, but it seemed a bit like getting engaged. Just more intense.

Quickly, they put a bandage on my leg and then rewound the support on my ankle. Finally, they gave me a mild painkiller, and it took effect almost immediately.

“Now you, young man, you need that shoulder taken care of,” she said and gave him a sharp look. “No more carrying your mate around anymore, either.”

He blushed severely and I took his hand when the doctor probed his shoulder.

“That one is healing nicely. As are your ribs. I would assume you spent some time as a wolf tonight. But that arm needs a few stitches, and you’ll

probably keep a scar.”

His eyes found mine. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not.” I lifted his hand and kissed his palm. “I love you the way you are.”

He stoically endured getting his arm stapled, and took a deep breath when the doctor finished bandaging it up.

“Now, I want you to spend the rest of the night...” She looked at her watch and grimaced. “And tomorrow here in the ward. After that, three more days of rest. And I will check on both of you.”

I smiled at her, feeling in very good hands. “Thank you.”

Since Ben was forbidden from carrying me, I leaned on him to make it to the room we had been assigned. I was surprised to see it didn’t have hospital beds at all. Instead, it held one large bed that looked incredibly soft and inviting.

It even had its own bathroom, and it was a relief to brush my teeth and curl up in bed, letting Ben curl up next to me, resting on his good shoulder. Of course, he wrapped me in his arms again, but before he could say anything, he fell asleep.

I held the hand he had put on my chest, needing the contact, needing to touch him, needing to feel that he was real. I had come too close to losing him and everything he meant to me.

My mind went to this bonding thing and what Beth had said. Would making love to him really activate the wolf in me? Did I even have one?

I had seen Ben shift back and forth during the fight, moving too quickly to get a good look at him. I couldn’t wait to admire him in his wolf shape, considering how gorgeous he was in human shape.

Finally, sleep caught up with me, as well, and I slipped into dreams filled with his scent and the howling of wolves.

# Chapter 17

Ben

**S**YLVIA WAS HEALING ALMOST as fast as I was, which boded more than well for our bond and for our mating.

And yet, I dreaded that day. A wolf mating could get intense and I was afraid that it would scare her.

The doctor sent us home to my apartment the next afternoon, declaring us well enough to heal on our own. I was glad to leave the hospital behind, even though they did their best to reduce the smells of disinfectant and illness. Wolves didn't do well in normal hospitals, at least that's what my father had always said. I didn't intend to try that out.

Sylvia relaxed considerably when she shut the door behind her. Then she grinned at me, and I realized I had simply put Eric's jeans back on, lacking any clothes of my own.

"We both need a decent shower," she declared.

I completely agreed. "Do you want to go first?"

"Well, let me check something." She quickly looked into the bathroom and returned with a grin.

"Yes?"

"It's big enough for two. And I would love to get my back scrubbed."

I blinked. Was she suggesting that both of us should get into the shower together?

She walked to me, her grin slowly fading, and then she took my hand. “Ben. I was flirting with you. But you look scared.”

“I... I just don’t know.” How would I be able to tell her that while I had some experience with kissing, things had never progressed beyond that? My family had led a very reclusive life.

“What do you mean?” Her question was gentle, her voice soft.

“I never...” I licked my lips nervously, a wolf gesture, not that she would know that.

She lifted both hands, slowly, carefully, as if trying not to scare me, putting them on either side of my face.

“I love you, Ben McMullen. I want to spend my life with you. I want to... mate with you.”

Her eyes were intense when she leaned in to kiss me, and my body sang under her touch.

“Sylvie...” My voice broke, and I tried again, trying to explain what was deeply embarrassing. “I love you, too. But I need your help here.” My hands went to hold her, one behind her shoulders, the other in the back of her neck, and that felt totally natural.

“My love.” Her lips moved against mine, and fire filled me. “I will teach you. We can start in the shower.”

She let go of me and simply took off her clothes. As I copied her, I told myself that she had seen me naked before, so that shouldn’t be difficult. And Eric’s jeans were uncomfortable anyway.

“You look gorgeous,” she said and put one hand on my bare chest. “Just in case nobody has told you that before.”

I almost laughed, but her words touched me deep inside. “Nobody ever has. Until now. And you are beautiful and more.”



“Come.” She took my hand again, and I let her.

It was exciting to stand in the shower with the woman I loved, watching her move under the spray. And just a moment later, we were soaping each other’s bodies, and I was relieved she had chosen this way to help me get familiar with hers. I couldn’t stop touching her, and when we were done and toweled of, I simply picked her up again, as I had done so often, and carried her to the bed.

And then she took over, touching me in ways that were electrifying.

“My love. Let the wolf take over,” she said when I was still not entirely sure what she wanted in which way. And I certainly did not want to let the wolf take over.

Until she bit me.

It was a soft, gentle bite to my neck, but after that, the wolf would no longer be denied. I growled, deep in my throat, and her answering growl raised goosebumps on my entire body.

She laughed, her eyes teasing me, and I lost all inhibition.

We made love all night, and after that first, wild ride, it was caring, loving and no less intense. Dawn was lighting the sky when we finally fell asleep, sated, happy and content.

# Chapter 18

Sylvia

WAKING UP WAS A slow, delightful process. Making love to Ben had been a revelation, both because of his innocence and because of the underlying wildness of his wolf. I could still hear that growl he made after I bit him, more playfully than anything, and it had the power to make me quiver inside in response.

He was still fast asleep, and so I took my time to study him. His face was softer in sleep, more relaxed. I also thought it was more defined than when I first met him, not that I could pinpoint the change.

His hair was messy, and he needed a haircut. He also needed to shave, and I found myself wondering how a well-shaped beard would look on him.

Those lips now... I wanted to lean in and kiss them again, but I held myself back. It was only two days since he got shot, not once but twice, and I was certain he needed his sleep.

Then I noticed his smell, and that made me wonder. He smelled good, strong and clean, and very clearly male. But how could I sense that now?

I sniffed, and I could also smell the shampoo and shower gel we had used. I went still and checked all my senses.

I could hear people move inside the house, as well as the traffic outside, although the road was a ways off. I could even hear someone talk in the corridor.

Was my inner wolf waking up?

The thought made me tremble. I needed to find out how that would happen, and... My mind ground to a screeching halt. Would I be able to become a wolf? And how did that work?

As if he sensed my agitation, Ben opened his eyes and before he had even blinked once, he reached for me and pulled me close.

I kissed him right away, and his eyes shifted, from gray-blue to dark brown. My body reacted immediately, and my kiss became urgent and demanding, just as his hold on me tightened.

When we finished that round of lovemaking, I snuggled close and finally found the courage to ask the question burning in my mind.

“Is there a wolf inside me?”

His smile was proud. “Oh, indeed, my love.”

“Will you teach me to... work with her?”

“Absolutely. But Beth will also be a good teacher. And since I know you’re dying of curiosity, your eyes turn a lovely copper.”

I stared at him. “They... they already do?”

“They do.” his voice was full of love. “You are truly a wolf now. And we need to tell Beth.”

I was reluctant to leave our nest and get dressed but my stomach growled and made it very clear that food was becoming an urgent priority.

It seemed that someone had very good timing, because a knock at the door came just as we had gotten dressed and were kissing in the kitchen. Ben went to answer the door and laughed, bringing in a box with food and a note with instructions.

*Eat first. Then see me in my office. Beth.*

“Well, then.” I grinned at Ben and quickly set the table. The food was delicious, but we agreed that we shouldn’t keep Beth waiting.

She received us with a large smile on her face. “You were fast,” she said and I wasn’t entirely certain what she was referring to, especially when I caught that twinkle in her eyes.

“Look at me,” she told me, and so I did. Her blue eyes suddenly turned yellow and she growled at me. I felt the hackles rise that I didn’t really have, and my eyes narrowed just as my lips curled. What was going on here?

Beth smiled again and I felt myself relaxing.

“Well done, both of you.” Her smile included Ben and was full of maternal pride. “And you do have a most beautiful copper hue in your eyes, my dear.”

“Thank you,” I managed to say.

“Now, we do need to teach you,” Beth said, her voice becoming more businesslike. “And Carl does that very well, so you’ll get lessons from him that you can practice with Ben. Starting this afternoon.”

I blinked. “That is fast.”

“Yes, it is. But you’re making fast progress, and it is easier to learn to do things correctly at the start, rather than going all wild and having to unlearn bad habits.”

Something in her eyes told me that she had experience with those unwelcome habits.

“May I ask a question?”

“Certainly.” She was still smiling.

“I think I saw Ben shift very quickly, even mid-jump. Is that normal? And... and does it hurt?”

“Shifting that quickly and still landing how you want to land is tricky and takes a lot of practice. I assume Ben had that.”

He nodded, without elaborating.

“And yes, it hurts a little, but that also gets less with practice, when your body gets used to it.”

I grinned. “I think I’ll enjoy practicing.”

Her smile vanished. “For now, I only want you to shift with supervision. Do not try it on your own.”

I could hear the warnings, even if she didn’t voice them, and so I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Beth laughed. “I guess I was using my leader voice there. You’re good, Sylvia. I’m giving you and Ben three more days off, to continue your bonding, except for the lessons with Carl. You need those. And then we’ll talk about what you two want and how we can integrate you into our structure here. Don’t worry, there are lots of options.”

“Thank you.”

I couldn’t help grinning. I was looking forward to a future here, together with Ben. And admitted to myself that my little summer vacation had turned out very differently from how I had imagined it.

# Chapter 19

Ben

**T**HREE DAYS LATER, SYLVIA and I borrowed the little car from Beth to take Eric home after he got released from hospital.

He was surprised to see us, I could tell, and more than a little embarrassed.

“Hi Sylvia, hi Ben. What are you doing here?”

“Picking you up, Cuz.” Sylvia grinned at him. “A little bird told us that you’d be released today.”

“Oh.” His smile was still crooked. “I guess that’s... good. I’m just...”

“Let’s talk later,” Sylvia said, glancing around the lobby, and Eric nodded immediately.

Since she insisted on driving, I chose to let Eric sit in the passenger seat and deliberately took the seat behind Silvia to avoid scaring him.

It took him a while to find his voice, which was understandable. After all, he had helped Theo hurt both of us.

When he took a deep breath, I pulled up a little wolf to hear him better, without seeming to listen intently.

“Look, Sylvia, I don’t even know where to start.” He sighed. “I did so much wrong. I believed what Grandpa said. And I’m more sorry than I can say, because you both got hurt so badly. I want to... make it up to you, except I never will be able to.”

“Eric. Cuz. You made the right choice when it really mattered.” Sylvia looked at him for a moment before focusing on the road again.

“It’s not enough,” he muttered. “You almost got killed.”

“Almost,” I said gently, and Eric winced only a little. “Almost is what counts. We’re practically healed. And you bought enough time for us to turn that fight around. That also counts.”

He snorted a little. “You make it sound as if I was a hero.”

“You did what you could, at quite a risk to yourself. In my eyes, that does make you a hero.”

He shifted in his seat to look straight at me, a deep frown on his face, guilt in his eyes.

“Ben, don’t you see? I was one of those Hunters. Theo made me join in. We killed one or two of your kind, not by my hands, but I watched. I laughed with the others. I even hurt you and helped... Theo to whip you. I don’t know how you can forgive me. I cannot forgive myself.”

“You saved me and Sylvia. And would you agree that Theo is somewhat insane?” I asked him.

Eric nodded. “More than somewhat. But even that doesn’t excuse it. I should have seen this.”

“And most of the Hunters you know are also believing this delusion, right?”

Eric nodded again.

“It is a group hype that is very difficult to escape,” Sylvia said slowly. “Just like those witch hunts. Those are cults. People believed that stuff. They thought they were protecting their families. Just like you did.”

“Are you... excusing what I did?”

“No, but understanding it and forgiving you.” I made my voice gentle again. It didn’t happen often that a Hunter was willing to change. I wanted him to stay on our side.

“I don’t even know what to do now,” he said after a while. “I mean, I can take care of the house, but I always just did what Grandpa told me to do. I don’t even have a job.”

I understood that feeling only too well.

“Let’s get you healed up and then we’ll see.” I didn’t want to promise anything but I would ask Beth. I was fairly certain Eric had no idea how much useful information he held that would help our kind in this area, from who those Hunters were to all the internet platforms they used.

When Sylvia pulled into the yard, I stared at the black truck still sitting there and remembered how I had crouched in that flat bed, in wolf shape and in pain. I hoped I hid my shudder well.

We all got out of the car and Eric opened the front door of the house. I was surprised to see it wasn’t locked, but then, none of us had checked it before leaving. Fleetinglly, I wondered about the workshop and what we would find there.

Sylvia glanced at me, and I could tell she wondered the same.

When I heard a snarl, I rushed to push past Eric, just as a shape launched itself at him. I braced myself and caught the wolf that was attacking him. Its claws tore my shirt and the skin beneath it, but I hardly felt the injury.

“Liz. Dear Gods, Liz!”

The wolf ducked and snarled again.

“Sylvia, get out. Let me handle this!” I shifted into the wolf without waiting for an answer, wiggling out of my clothes. Then I made the soft yipping sounds of greeting, and the wolf stared at me and whined.



I yipped again and the wolf stepped back, turning the head aside, offering me her throat, declaring peace. I gently put my teeth over her snout, then licked her, doing my best not to give in to the shock I felt.

My sister Liz had gone feral.

... to be continued.

# Preview of "A Wolf's Fear"

## Chapter 1 - Liz

Wolves don't cry.

Which is why I had no tears when I was lying under a bush, watching our house burn down to the ground.

Dad had forbidden us to watch, of course, but I had hidden my backpack and returned, needing to see the end of our life as a family.

Nessa had left in the morning, taking the motorcycle. She was my older sister, and Dad had sent her off first, hoping the Hunters wouldn't follow her on what looked like a normal grocery shopping run.

He had sent me and Ben to walk to town separately, through the forest. I was supposed to take a Greyhound, and Ben would hitchhike, since it was safest to do so for a man.

We were supposed to meet up at a library in Ashton, in North Carolina, hundreds of miles to the south.

And Dad would give the Hunters the longest run in history to ensure that we got away safely. I knew I would probably never see him again, and it hurt more than I wanted to admit to myself.

We were wolves. And when Hunters found us and decided to act, we rarely fought back. Instead, we ran and tried to hide elsewhere. It had been that way for centuries, and nothing would ever change that.

I tried to tell myself that I could handle it. That I was a grown wolf, that I knew how to live in both shapes, and that I would find a place and a mate and be happy.

And knew that for the lie it was.

It took hours for the fire to burn out. Not a single fire-fighter came, and that was no surprise, either. We had few friends in the region, and when Mom had disappeared two weeks ago, we knew our time was up.

When only glowing embers and a sooty brick chimney were left of our home, I got up and slipped away to the forest, to pick up my backpack and start that long journey south.

The sun rises early in summer, and it was just peeking through the trees when I reached town again, back in human shape. I went to check the Greyhound schedule. But before I even reached the wall where it hung, I recognized the dog of one of the men hanging out there, and knew he was one of the Hunters.

Of course, they were looking for us. And if that dog got a good whiff of me, I'd be dead.

I walked past the station, checking the wind. Fortunately, it was blowing my scent away from that dog. I kept walking, knowing I needed a hiding place, knowing I was prey, a young woman alone, the backpack indicating I was likely not living here.

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# About the Author



Hannah Steenbock is a German writer of Speculative Fiction. She uses both her native German and English as languages for her tales, as she loves English and tends to think in that language when plotting Fantasy.

After finishing University with a degree in English and Spanish, she lives and works in Kiel, the northernmost state capital of Germany. Her other pastimes include strolling along beaches, talking with trees and devouring as many stories as time allows.