

Chapter One

“Will we make the order?” Jake shouted to his foreman. Robert leaned closer to catch his boss's words. The bulky hearing protection they wore over their ears dampened the deafening noise of the lumber mill. After looking down at his clipboard and making a quick calculation with his pencil, Robert smiled.

“Yes, with about a thousand board feet to spare.” He gave Jake a thumbs up. Standing on the catwalk suspended high above the floor of the mill, the two men watched the reclaimed lumber running through the huge planers making the boards equal thickness.

“Good. Have them stack what's left over, don't plane it.” Jake bent over, his hands supporting him as he leaned on the railing of the catwalk. Pleased with his new purchase of the lumber from an abandoned warehouse across the Mississippi River in Natchez, Jake smiled. This lumber would fill his latest order for the highly prized old oak. The builder who ordered it was constructing a four thousand square foot timber-

framed home in Oregon for a millionaire movie star who'd insisted on using only reclaimed and recycled materials. Conservation came with a hefty price tag, and Jake McCallan had turned around his family's failing Louisiana lumber mill by providing specialty wood for high-end buyers.

Catching a glimpse of movement from his heightened peripheral vision, Jake turned his head. Hazel, his secretary, was wobbling on unsteady legs towards him. Frowning, he thought she must be upset to come out on the catwalk and without protection.

"Hazel, what do you think you're doing?" Jake pulled off his earmuffs, placed them over her head, and then plopped his hardhat on top of her grey hair. She gave him a brief smile of thanks and then frowned. He leaned down so she wouldn't have to yell.

"Your brother is in your office." He straightened and took her elbow as he guided her back down the catwalk to the main offices.

Jake's ears ached. The noise from the mills' equipment, deafening for a normal person, was even more so for his hypersensitive ears. They stepped through the doors, shut them, and closed out most of the noise. A low rumble penetrated the sound dampening insulation in the floor and walls of the office. Hazel hung up the earmuffs and hardhat with the others near the door and returned to her desk. Shaking his head, he then faced his office. Jake McCallan, President, McCallan Specialty Lumber Company was etched on the door's frosted glass window.

Taking a deep breath, he unclenched his fists, and then entered his office.

Trey McCallan sat in his older brother's leather chair, his boots propped up on the antique oak desk that had served three generations of McCallans. He looked as if he'd

swallowed sour milk. Trey hated everything about the mill, from the smell of the wood to the sound of the saws and belts, but he'd never rejected everything it brought him.

"Why aren't you at LSU?" Jake walked to the desk and shoved Trey's feet off. His boots hit the floor. Jake jerked his thumb to indicate Trey had better move out of his chair.

"I'm taking a break, so to speak." Trey stood and shoved the rolling chair towards Jake, who caught it before it hit him.

"You mean you got thrown out?" Jake spun the chair around, eased himself into it and leaned back. Trey looked good; strong, lean, and powerful, but not the alpha male and Jake knew Trey resented it. Ever since Trey turned eighteen there had been no love lost between them. Merely a dance, each circling the other, Trey looking for weakness, Jake looking to defend what was his by right and effort.

"No. That's not what I'm here about." Trey lounged in one of the two brown leather wingback chairs in front of the desk, stretching out his legs and hooking his thumbs in his belt.

"Money? You've already gotten your monthly allowance." Jake typed on the keyboard of the laptop and brought up the accounts.

"No, but if you're feeling generous, I could always use more. I've decided to go to Europe."

Jake shook his head and hit a key, closing the program. "How can you afford that?"

Trey smirked. "I'm a finance major, Jake. I have investments. Anyway, a small matter has come to my attention. Remember last summer, when I came home?"

Jake remembered. He'd had to go down to the county jail and bail Trey out three times. The fines alone totaled over a thousand dollars. Not to mention paying for the company car he wrecked.

"Yeah. I paid all the fines."

"Yeah, well, this is about a woman." Trey grinned. Jake waited, his eyebrow raised in question. "There was this sweet little bitch I'd sniffed out. Damn, she was fine. Well, it seems she just had a baby."

"Goddamn it, Trey! How could you be so careless? You know we can't just mate without consequences." Jake shook his head. This was horrible, probably the worst thing Trey had ever done. "Is she from here?"

"Yeah, some piece of tail I picked up at the Roadhouse."

"Why didn't you use protection?" Jake gripped the arms of the chair until his knuckles were white. A half strength blow from him could kill a normal man.

"You know what it's like, brother, when you get the scent." He inhaled deeply. "When I fuck I want to feel it." Trey grinned. "I ramped up my pheromones, but the little bitch still resisted. So, I had to slip her something."

"Shit, Trey. You raped her?" God, this was getting worse and worse. Jake hauled himself to his feet. The desk was all that stood between them.

"She was willing. Well, pliant, at least. Anyway, when I finished with her, I took off back to Baton Rouge. Call it my end-of-summer romance." He gave a hard laugh.

Jake vaulted over the desk, landing in front of Trey and backhanded him across the face, knocking his brother out of the chair and onto the floor. Shaking the blow off, Trey rose in a crouch growling low in his throat as he touched his hand to his face. Blood

from his nose stained his fingers. Naked hatred burned in Trey's eyes as he dragged his sleeve across his face. Jake's hackles rose in warning.

"What I need, big brother, is for you to take care of it." Trey spit blood on the polished wood floor and moved to put the chair between them.

"It? You mean the baby?"

"Yeah. Make it go away."

"Are you out of your mind? This is your problem, Trey, not mine." Jake shook his head.

Trey's teeth showed in a bared grin. "Love to, really, but..." He shrugged. "It's the alpha male's role to protect the pack. With Dad dead and Sis living in Mississippi, you, Mom, and I are it. You don't want the good name of McCallan to get sullied in some sordid small town scandal, do you?"

"Does this woman know who you are?"

"Yeah, but it didn't seem to impress her at the time. However, she might contact you to get money for the pup."

Trey would think the worst of people, Jake thought.

"Are you sure it's yours?"

"Yeah, it's mine. And I don't want it. She's not my lifemate, just a fuck."

Jake ran his hand through his hair. He considered changing form right in the office, attacking his brother and placing him in submission. But, that was pointless. It hadn't worked when they were younger and he knew it wouldn't work now.

"Christ, Trey. How can you be so callous? You're responsible for this mess."

“Accidents happen.” He touched his nose and checked for blood, but it had stopped bleeding. “I’m a long way from reaching mating age like you, old dog, and I’m going to keep right on playing in the woods. You remember what it was like, don’t you. Even you have a cock and a pair of balls.” He smirked at Jake. “Maybe it’s been so long since you used them, you forgot.”

“I just know my responsibilities, little brother, and I managed to keep the women I was with safe. Did you tell Mom?” He moved behind his desk, putting distance between them.

“Hell, no. Since you love tattling on me, I saved it for you.”

“Just great. You’re such a waste of breath.”

“Well, I won’t be breathing down your neck for much longer.”

“What do you want me to do?” Jake knew he’d regret this. He’d thought sending Trey away to LSU for an education and a dose of maturity would help, but it didn’t seem to be the case.

“Kill them.” Trey tossed off the hard words with a flick of his wrist.

“You son-of-a-bitch, I’m not killing anyone for you. Especially not a local girl and a baby. Your baby, for Christ’s sake! This is the last straw, Trey.” He gave a warning growl low in his throat.

“Then, pay her off. I don’t care.” Trey turned to leave. “I’m leaving for Europe in the morning. Either you take care of it or I’ll have to find someone who will.”

“Don’t drag anyone else into this, Trey. It’s a pack matter.”

“When I leave, you won’t have a fucking pack, Alphaboy. Her name is Rebecca Miller.”

“Is it a boy or girl?” Jake and Trey both knew if it were a boy, he'd be a werewolf. A girl would be safe from the McCallan legacy.

“I don't know and don't care, but if it's a boy, you know your duty, Jake. You're going to either have to take him in or kill him.” Trey smirked. “Remember what Dad said about rogue wolves? They need to be eliminated.”

“Leaving your hands clean, is that how you figure it, Trey?” Jake glared at him.

“You're the boss, deal with it.” He stood with his hand on the doorknob.

“You're out of the pack. Stay out of my territory. That's my only warning.” Jake bared his teeth at his brother.

“Right. There's only room for one alpha in this town and you're it.”

“God damn right.” Jake's fist hit the desk and the pencil cup bounced, spilling its contents across the leather blotter.

“Fuck you, big brother.” With that, Trey left, slamming the office door so hard the glass cracked.

Jake slumped into in his chair. Placing his elbows on the desk, he put his face in his hands, then dragged them through his hair. How could his brother expose an innocent woman to their world? Trey knew the rules but had always flaunted them. Jake supposed it was just a matter of time before something like this happened, only he figured his brother would be shot running the streets as a wolf, or killed in some bar fight. They weren't indestructible, just damn hard to kill. Even in their human form a werewolf was too strong. However, they could be fatally shot, stabbed, or like his father, die in a car crash.

Reaching over to his phone, he hit the intercom. "Hazel. Get me the address and phone number of Rebecca Miller. She's local."

Jake sat back and closed his eyes. He'd have to handle this personally.

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Rebecca stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes. The baby was finally down, after four hours. Why he'd woken up so soon from his nap, alert and ready for action, she didn't know. What she did know was if she didn't get some sleep, she'd lose her mind.

Tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, she listened. Sweet silence. No crying baby, only the sound of her own ragged breathing. Rolling over, she exhaled and let herself drift. It was a month since he'd been born and it'd been a doozy. Sleepless nights broken only by sleepless days. She'd never taken so many walks around the block pushing him in the stroller. Benjamin loved being outside. Even at night, she'd taken him out in the stroller to soothe him. The baristas at the local Starbucks were getting to know both her and her baby.

Her baby. Just the thought of Ben made her heart sing. He was so beautiful, so tiny, so demanding. Once she got over the initial shock and accepted she was going to have a baby, she'd enjoyed being pregnant. Well, the morning sickness sucked, but she loved the way he felt growing inside her; from the first little fluttering movements to the big kicks and barrel rolls.

The only hard part was doing it alone. In her daydreams, her husband would lovingly stroke her belly and adore how she looked all big and round. In reality, her face

looked too full, her bras didn't fit, her feet were swollen, and she was left to face this alone.

On days like today, when the exhaustion threatened to overtake her, she would tell herself with a dash of pride, "You did it, girl, all by yourself. Who needs a man?" Today, a small voice answered her, "Ben needs a father." Rebecca felt a pinprick of doubt as she'd wondered if she'd done the right thing by having the baby. Picking up the blue baby album lying on the coffee table, she flipped through it and her doubts vanished. After nine months carrying him in her womb, and one month of loving him in the flesh, she couldn't picture her life without him.

As she flipped the pages of the album, she relived every moment, from his prenatal ultra-sound snapshots, to his birth certificate, even the tiny bracelet he wore at the hospital. She wanted everything ready for the day her parents would forgive her for shaming them and agree to see Ben.

Right now, all she needed was some sleep. Just a few uninterrupted hours were all she asked; a week's worth would be nice. Ben would wake soon and she'd have to become super mommy, fast on her feet to get to him, able to clean poopy diapers without barfing, and a continuous supply of milk.

She put the album back on the table and rolled over, searching for a comfortable spot on the sofa. Rebecca noticed one of Ben's stuffed bears on the floor. She picked it up, brought it to her face and inhaled. Ben's soft baby powder scent filled her heart and soul with contentment. Pulling the bear to her chest, she nestled down in the cushions and fell asleep.

* * *

Jake parked the Explorer outside the small house. From the way Trey talked about the woman, he'd expected to be sitting outside a trailer on the other side of the railroad tracks of their small central Louisiana town.

But the address was in the older, historic section in the heart of town where spreading oak trees and huge magnolias lined the streets. The white wooden house had dark blue shutters and brick red trim, and, like most of the houses in the neighborhood, it was raised off the ground about three feet. Azalea bushes marched along the freshly painted white picket fence and white camellias stood guard on either side of the wide front porch steps.

With his hand on the door of the car, Jake took a deep breath. Damn, this was going to be hard. Explaining himself meant exposing himself, something he never did unless it was necessary. Only a few people who weren't werewolves knew of his family's secret. Hazel, his secretary was one. She'd worked for his dad for over twenty years and was a trusted family friend. Jake's best friend from high school, Barker Sims, was another. Barker, a cop on the town force, was a good friend to have when you're a werewolf with a brother who loves to skirt the law.

Now, Jake might have to expose himself to an innocent dragged into their world by his reckless brother. Not just reckless, Trey had a cruel streak. Sure, he could be charming when it served him, but underneath, he was just bad. Ever since Trey made his first change at thirteen he'd abused his newfound powers even though their father had explained the responsibilities of being a werewolf. Ignoring Dad, Trey decided whatever Trey wanted, Trey got.

Jake got out and stood on the sidewalk. Stop stalling, he told himself, it's not going to get easier. Walking to the gate, he went through and trotted up the porch steps to the front door. Taking another deep breath, he knocked and waited. The house was silent. He knocked again.

The door was opened by a woman in her late twenties hugging a blue teddy bear to her chest. Her dark auburn hair was pulled up in a ponytail and part of it had fallen out to hang down one side of her face, partially cloaking sleepy, deep green eyes, full lips, and delicate features. Trey was right about one thing. She was a sweet little bitch.

"Excuse me, are you Rebecca Miller?"

She stared up at him. He could tell she was deciding if she should slam the door on him or scream. It wasn't his looks, he was well aware of his good looks. He was also aware at six feet three inches and two hundred and twenty pounds, he could intimidate people.

"Yes, I am. Who are you?" Shifting her weight, she dropped the hand holding the bear to one round hip and managed to look as if he didn't intimidate her at all.

"You don't know me but I'm Jake McCallan."

Her eyes grew wide and then narrowed. Instead of speaking, she stood in the doorway as still as a statue.

"My brother is Trey." Her steady stare made him self-conscious. Jake looked down at his work boots, frowned, and then looked into her eyes. Deep woods, cool shade and cold, clear streams spun in his mind's eye.

"What do you want?" She angled herself in the doorway in a useless attempt to block access. Jake was capable of kicking down any door.

"I'm here about the baby. Can I speak to you about this? Inside?"

Her heated gaze traveled up and down the length of his body. He gave her his most innocent smile, the lop-sided one he always used on his mom when he was a kid. It must still be working, because she stepped back and let him in.

"Thank you, Ms. Miller."

"Call me Rebecca." She walked over to a gliding chair and sat, indicating he should sit on the couch. The blue bear found a seat in her lap.

Lucky bear, Jake thought.

In the closed room, her scent hit him full on. Female musk blended with another scent, making the hair on the back of his neck stand up and take notice. Milk. She must be lactating, he thought. Christ, the combination was heady. His nostrils flared as he drank her in like a fine wine, swallowed hard and then brought himself under control.

"Rebecca, my brother Trey is many things, most of them no good," he said. "I can't begin to tell you how upset I am about this."

"Look, if you think I'm going to file a lawsuit or ask for child support, forget it. I don't want anything to do with Trey, you or your family, Mr. McCallan." Her hands rested on the arms of the chair as she glided back and forth. She looked regal, despite the t-shirt and the soft jersey sweat pants she wore. He could have sworn the bear was smirking at him.

"I understand. I know the pain and embarrassment he's caused you."

"Oh, you do? When did men start having babies? You try squeezing a ten-pound watermelon out your ass, and then talk to me about pain." Clearly, she had a wicked

sense of humor. "As for embarrassment, I hardly think you have any concept of the depths one can reach."

"I assure you that..."

"Do you know how many times you have to answer the question married or unmarried, when you fill out medical forms? I lost count. Furthermore, I doubt everyone you or your brother has met over the last nine months knows that-" she held up a finger. "One, you slept with a man. Two, he knocked you up. Three, he deserted you." The three fingers curled down to join the others in a tight fist. She stood and the bear fell to the floor. Turning her back to him, she looked out of the window. "And I doubt you had to stand in front of your parents and tell them you got knocked up during a drunken one-night stand."

What could he say to that? Jake stared at the bear on the floor. Something tried to surface to the front of this brain, but it slipped away.

"I only found out about this yesterday, Rebecca."

"Trey just told you? Odd." She turned to look at him.

"What?" Jake sat forward.

"I told him I was pregnant three months before I had the baby."

Swiping his hand through his hair, Jake muttered under his breath. "That bastard."

"Are you talking about your brother or my baby?" Her green eyes blazed.

"My brother." He swore, brother or not, if he ever saw Trey again, he'd kill him.

"Just what do you want?" She folded her arms underneath her full breasts.

He couldn't help but notice her narrow waist and round hips. His animal back brain told him with her lovely hips and those full breasts she could have many pups.

Christ, he shook himself, what was he thinking? It had to be her scent. It was driving him crazy. He had to leave soon before it was too late.

“Is it a boy or girl?”

“A boy.”

Of course, Jake gave himself a mental slap to the side of his head. The blue bear. Blue is for boys. Jake's heart sank.

“I named him Benjamin Wells Miller.” She tilted her chin up, defying him to say something.

“Not McCallan?” He wasn't sure if his disappointment was because it was a boy or because the child didn't carry his family name.

“No. Don't worry. There is no evidence who the father is.” She said it with such distaste, his anger rose in defense.

“There is nothing wrong with the McCallan name, just my brother. I don't care about evidence, Rebecca. I just want to know if there is anything I can do to help you.”

She lowered herself into the chair, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Help? You mean buy me off, don't you? I know you McCallan's own half this town, half the land in the parish, and you probably run it, too. But, you aren't going to own me or my son.” Her eyes flashed her spirit at him, making her even more beautiful. He suppressed a groan of desire, but couldn't do a damn thing about his erection. “And you won't run me out of this town either.”

“It's not like that. I don't want-” He couldn't finish. How could he explain? Just come right out and say “Your son is going to be a werewolf.” No, it was too soon.

Besides, would she even believe him or think he was insane? It was a hard story to swallow, unless you saw it for yourself. And he wasn't ready to do that, not unless it was absolutely necessary.

Regardless of what she wanted, this child was going to be a werewolf and needed to be prepared for it from the time he was six until puberty, just as Jake, Trey and their father had been. Without the training to help him change into his wolf form and back to human, the boy would probably die the very first time or be trapped forever as a wolf.

Death now or death later? Dear God, how could he make that horrible decision?

"I think you'd better leave, Mr. McCallan." She stood and so did Jake.

"Perhaps you're right." He headed towards the door.

Too many thoughts bombarded his brain and he didn't like any of them. Trey's harsh words echoed. Kill them. Trey would throw the rules in his face, placing Jake between his duty to the pack and his morals as a man. Shocked he could even think of killing her and the pup, Jake stomped the thought, grinding it into sawdust on the floor of his mind.

Next up in the path of his mental buzz saw was the overwhelming urge to mate with this woman. His erection, an unwilling captive behind the zipper of his jeans, throbbed with his surging hunger for her.

Jake fought his raging desire. He'd never wanted a woman this badly. The hackles on his neck had risen along with his cock and his body quivered as he inhaled her delicious scent. It called to him, reaching into someplace deep and wild in his brain. He wanted to howl as he covered her with his body and mated with her.

He was truly crazy if he thought that was ever going to happen. His brother had drugged and raped her. There was no way, seeing the look of hatred in her eyes when she spoke the McCallan name, she'd ever let him near her.

"Mr. McCallan?"

Shake it off, boy, he told himself. Fists clenched, he was almost to the door. The change was too damn close. He had to get out of there. Now.

"Mr. McCallan, is something wrong?"

Reaching for the doorknob, he closed his eyes tight as every muscle in his body strained to change and every bit of his mind ordered his body not to. A war raged inside and he had no idea how to stop it. He'd never had such a fierce reaction to any circumstance or any woman.

"Mr. McCallan? Jake!" Rebecca's voice cut through his thoughts as her hand touched his arm. He could feel the warmth of her through his blue denim shirt. Instead of igniting the fire, her touch soothed him, doused the inferno, and brought him under control. Amazed, he turned to her and opened his eyes.

She looked up at him, green eyes wide and biting her bottom lip as her hand rested on his forearm. Through the soft t-shirt, he could see the curve of her full breasts, nipples like hard points. She held her breath, waiting.

Jake cupped her face with his hand. His thumb eased her bottom lip from her teeth's bite and then brushed against it in the lightest caress.

"I have to go now," was all Jake could manage to say.

Nodding, she looked bewildered as her eyebrows furrowed downward and her eyes searched his. As he dropped his hand, he caressed the softness of her cheek, then opened the door and left.

Jake strode down the walk and got into the truck. He stared out through the windshield, his hands clutching the wheel, as he collected his thoughts. Christ, she must be thinking I'm out of my mind or I had some sort of fit, he thought. Well, that was better than the truth, wasn't it?

The truth? That was for another day.