

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE

# *Quickies*

*Naughty Nuptials*

*This Side  
of Desperate*

Heather Holland

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

This Side of Desperate

ISBN 9781419911460

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

This Side of Desperate Copyright © 2007 Heather Holland

Edited by Jaynie Ritchie.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication June 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

## **Content Advisory:**

**S - ENSUOUS**

**E - ROTIC**

**X - TREME**

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

*S-ensuous* love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

*E-rotic* love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

*X-treme* titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

# ***THIS SIDE OF DESPERATE***

**Heather Holland**

### *Dedication*

To John, the most wonderful man I've ever had the pleasure to know. Without you, I'd be lost. Thank you for giving me the greatest gift in the world—your love. I love you, baby. Also to my mother, my sister, and the rest of the clan. Thanks for always being there for me when I need you most.

### *Author Note*

When this story first began, there were no wolves involved, but the characters had other plans. In the end, I think they were right. The wolf twist certainly made for a better story.

## Chapter One

Stone Blackthorn peered through the viewfinder and snapped a series of quick photos. This was just the break he needed. He had no doubt that these photos would get him on the front page of the *Ridgeway Times*. Everyone in the country wanted details on the McRae-Thayer wedding and he had pictures of the event. Well, not yet, but he would have them as soon as the thing started. For now, his unwitting subject was Marissa McRae, only daughter of Hector McRae, a notorious gangster type of local legend.

If he admitted it to himself, he would say she looked none too happy to be here. In fact, she looked agitated and anxious. Was that how a normal bride looked on her wedding day? Stone really couldn't say since he hadn't attended many weddings.

Stone had a rather unexpected response to the woman before him. His cock stood at attention to salute the lovely lady. Lowering his camera, he glowered at his crotch. "Would you lie down and be quiet already? We're here to work, not lust after the bride." Oh, how he lusted after her. His heart thundered in his chest so loudly the sound echoed in his ears. His cock pulsed with each frantic thump, forcing him to pay attention to it. This so was not going to work. He tried shifting his position to relieve some of the pressure, but it didn't help. Why did Marissa McRae have to be such a knockout?

Her red-gold hair was up in some complicated-looking knot at the back of her head. Slender hands fisted at her sides as she paced wildly about the room she occupied. The snow-white wedding gown she wore pushed her breasts together and up, showing off nicely rounded curves of flesh that made his mouth water. The sequined gown accentuated her slender waist and showed her lovely hips to perfection.

Stone shook himself, trying to regain control over his errant thoughts. He had a job to do and gawking at the bride was not it. He needed to scope out the rest of the church and see if he could capture photos of any of the guests, the groom or the father of the bride. When he began moving, his feet propelled him closer to the windows in front of him instead of around the building as his mind insisted. He pursed his lips and tried to force himself away from her, but no matter how hard he tried, his body refused to listen.

A few feet from the window, he noticed her scent mingled with a hint of fresh roses. Drool gathered beneath his tongue and his cock hardened further. Marissa called to him on a primal level that had the beast within begging to surface. Stone clamped his jaw shut and ground his teeth together. He would not let the beast out, no matter how badly it wanted to leap to the forefront. Keeping the wolf in check was no easy feat, but somehow he would manage. He had not gotten to where he was by allowing it to roam freely.

The closer he got to the window, the stronger her aroma. He closed his eyes. Images of long legs and fiery hair wrapped around his body instantly bombarded his mind. His eyes popped open. This would never do. He had to get away from her and fast. Ripping his gaze from the woman, he looked away before his libido forced him to turn back to the window. He sucked his breath in when he came face-to-face with the object of his desires.

Green eyes stared at him without blinking. She looked almost desperate—a pleading look swirled in the depths of those beautiful orbs. Her fingers worked frantically at the latches on the window and pushed the pane up until only a thin screen stood between them. Stone swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and licked his lips in an attempt to wet his suddenly dry mouth and lips. What in the world would he say to her when she asked what he was doing lurking outside her window?

“Help me,” the words tumbled out of her mouth so faintly and quickly he was not certain he heard her correctly.

"Excuse me?"

"Help me get out of here." She shoved the screen out of the window, stretched a hand out to him and hiked a foot up onto the windowsill.

Stone quickly dropped his camera, which fortunately the strap around his neck caught, and reached up with both hands to help steady her and keep her from falling. If she hurt herself because he stood by and did nothing, he knew he would never forgive himself. "What are you running from?"

She blew out a huff of air. "Everything."

Not much of an answer but he was not exactly in a position to further question her. As soon as her small feet hit the ground, she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him toward the parking lot at a breakneck speed. "Do you have a car?"

A wave of excitement washed over him. His feature story revolving around her wedding just morphed into something bigger—much bigger. This would definitely guarantee him a byline on the front page. "What?" he asked, not fully understanding what just happened while he thought of his career.

She stopped and turned to look at him without releasing her hold on his arm. "I said, do you have a car? We need to get as far away from here as possible before they discover that I'm gone."

His racing thoughts braked—hard—as he realized what she was getting at. Marissa McRae wanted him to help her run away. He was in such deep shit. No one crossed this woman's father, but like the fool Stone knew he was, he nodded his head. "Over here." Stone pulled the keys from his pocket and hit a button disengaging the alarm. She zeroed in on the beat-up green sports car and hurried toward it. Her high heels clicked loudly against the pavement and the breath rushed out of her lungs in gasps. Not exactly the type of situation he wanted to hear those sounds spilling from her lips during.

Marissa dove into the backseat and hunkered down as far as she could. He stared at her a long moment, until she lifted her head and frantically waved him into the car. "Come on. Move it."

Stone jumped in behind the wheel and slid the key into the ignition. He slammed the door and threw it into drive, peeling out of the parking lot much faster than was smart. "Where are we going?"

"I don't care so long as I'm not here any more."

Stone still had no clue what was happening, but he was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. If she wanted to run away with him, who was he to argue? Deep inside him the wolf paced anxiously, though he had no idea what it waited for so eagerly. With no idea what to do, he did the only thing he could—took her to his place, which made the wolf *very* happy.

Marissa lay in the back floorboard on top of lord only knew what with a total stranger driving her heaven only knew where. She had no idea who the man was or what type of person he was, but the moment she set eyes on him, she knew he was her way out. Anything was better than staying at the church and marrying Randall Thayer. What her father saw in the sleazy little man, she never knew, and she really didn't care. She would not marry him under any circumstances, so she took the only other option left to her—running away.

She desperately wanted to see where they were and in which direction they were headed, but she didn't dare lift her head for fear of someone spotting and recognizing her. Marissa chewed on her bottom lip. How was she supposed to get out of this mess? If she thought her options slim before, they were microscopic now.

The car pulled into a garage. Marissa remained perfectly still for several long heartbeats before grabbing the back of the driver's seat and pulling herself up into a sitting position. She peered into the front seat and straight into a pair of ice blue eyes. She flashed him a nervous smile. "Hi."

His icy eyes widened just a fraction. "Hi, I think."

"I am so sorry to drag you into this, but I was desperate."

He appeared a bit taken aback by her words.

"Let me explain," she quickly added. "I'm being forced into a marriage I don't want. I needed a way out and when I looked out the window, there you were, so I seized the opportunity."

"Your father will get me prosecuted for kidnapping once he finds you or make me disappear."

The rich, deep tones of his voice sent shivers racing down her spine. The man had a voice that would make a saint faint. She shook her head. "I'm of age. So kidnapping charges are out, especially since I'm the one who forced you into this." She peeked up at him from between the seats. "Besides, it won't be an issue, because he won't find me."

He quirked one thick ebony brow at her. "What makes you so certain of that?"

"Because if he finds me, my life is as good as over." From the look on his handsome face, she guessed she made no sense to him, but she couldn't help it. She simply could not marry Randall. The man gave her the major creeps. Her skin crawled every time she caught him leering at her.

Marissa briskly rubbed her hands over her bare arms. "Are you at least going to invite me in?"

She watched him climb from the car and open the door for her. "Come on. The door's this way." He took hold of her arm and pulled her toward the entrance into the house. "By the way, my name is Stone. Stone Blackthorn." He glanced at her. "And you're Marissa McRae."

She barely bit back a surprised gasp at his words. "How do you know that?"

"Because I'm a reporter and was scoping out the church in hopes of some good pics to accompany the story I'm writing on your wedding."

That was a surprise, though why she wasn't sure. Her father was notorious for all sorts of underhanded stuff. Marissa knew she should have expected at least a few reporters lurking about. For the first time in her life, she was glad her father had a reputation because it gave her a means of escape.

"Sorry to ruin your story for you."

His massive shoulders shrugged. "You didn't ruin anything. At least I've got the inside scoop on the McRae bride gone wild."

Marissa gaped at him. "I haven't gone wild."

He moved closer and pressed his forehead against hers. "You ran away from your own wedding."

She blinked and stared into his icy eyes. "True, but it wasn't really my wedding. It was my father's. I had no say in it."

"Do you love Thayer?"

She jerked in response to his question. In the months since the wedding announcement, he was the first person to ask her that. Marissa shook her head. "I can't stand the guy."

"Then why marry him?"

Marissa just stared at him. "How much do you know about my father? Once he decrees something, it's done no matter what the people involved think."

Each time she moved, her skirts rustled. She should have grabbed a change of clothes on her way out the church window, but getting away had been her primary concern. "You wouldn't happen to have something I could change into, would you?"

His blue eyes flared for a split second and his head shook. "I'm afraid I'm fresh out of women's clothing."

"Really long t-shirt? Boxers? I'm not picky."

Strange expressions that she couldn't place crossed his handsome features. "Give me a second to see what I can scrounge up."

Marissa smiled and nodded. "Thank you."

He muttered something as he left her alone in the living room. Marissa looked around at the sparsely furnished room. The place screamed bachelor pad. What was such a handsome man doing living alone? She mentally shook herself. *It's none of your business, Mari.* However, she could not deny being curious about her rescuer.

She found no family pictures anywhere. A large TV took up the space on most of one wall and the entertainment center around it housed electronics of all sorts. Not a feminine touch anywhere in sight. A sound behind her had her spinning around to find Stone staring at her from the hallway. He lifted his hand, which held the clothing he managed to find.

"These are the best I could come up with."

Marissa smiled and closed the distance between them. Her fingers brushed against his when she took the clothes from him and electrical shocks traveled up the length of her arm. Odd, that reaction. "Thank you."

"You can change in my room. Last door at the end of the hall."

She skirted around him and moved down the hallway with the loud sound of her rustling skirts echoing off the walls and sounding even louder in the confined space. Feeling around on the wall, she found the light switch and flipped it on. Marissa lifted a brow when she saw the room. Definitely a bachelor. There were no sheets on the bed, just an old comforter. Marissa shook her head and pushed the door closed. The sooner she got out of the wedding gown, the sooner she could at least feel more like herself again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stone paced the floor, trying to figure out what to do. Marissa was in his room—naked, and the thought nearly doubled him over with need. His skin crawled—a sign the beast wanted out and badly. The only thing keeping him from stalking down the hall and bursting into the room on her was sheer strength of will. He had other things

to worry about, like her father. Hector McRae was not a man to cross, though Stone wasn't worried about the man. He was more than capable of handling anything the human could toss his way. What worried him was Marissa. She was an innocent in all of this. If she got hurt, he would never be able to forgive himself.

He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it. The fact that she ran away was his fault. Stone could have dug his heels in and refused to aid her, but he wouldn't have been able to live with that either. The next person to happen by may not have been as noble as him – though the wolf wanted to be anything *but* noble.

"Thank you for the change of clothes."

Marissa's soft voice caught him off guard and had him spinning around to stare at her. Long, red-gold hair tumbled down to frame her face and brush past her shoulders. His shirt hung to her knees, and the boxers she wore peeked from beneath the hem. Her small hand fisted around the fabric. One corner of her delicate mouth turned upward. "They're a little big. You wouldn't happen to have a safety pin, would you?"

Stone tried to speak but couldn't find his voice. He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried again. "I might have one in the junk drawer." It took a great deal of effort to pull his gaze from her sexy form and head into the kitchen to find the much-needed pin. If the boxers fell, it would be one less barrier between him and the sweet taste of heaven. Chills raced along his arms and his skin itched. He clamped down on his lust and willed the wolf to lie down and be quiet.

With his mind preoccupied, he dug through the drawer. "Ow!" A sharp pain shot through his finger and he jerked his hand back, shaking it wildly. An opened safety pin stuck out of his fingertip – not the way he planned to locate it. He pulled the pin out and stuck his finger into his mouth, sucking the bead of blood from the tip. This woman was obviously dangerous to his health.

"Is something wrong?"

The soft, musical tones of her voice skittered down his spine. His cock hardened and pushed against the fly of his jeans. Stone pulled his finger from his mouth and

turned to face her. "Nope. Everything's fine." He held up the pin. "Found the safety pin for you."

Her smile lit up her entire face and her green, green eyes. "Thank you." A blush crept into her cheeks and she averted her gaze. "Sorry. I seem to be saying that a lot lately."

He brushed a stray strand of her fiery hair from her cheek. "It's okay, Marissa. You're quite welcome."

She tilted her head back, exposing the long, elegant lines of her throat. His hand moved up of its own accord and cupped the back of her head, threading his fingers through the silky strands of her hair. Her lips parted on a soft sigh, and he knew he was in trouble. He could not stop himself nor could he deny the wolf any longer.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this mess."

It took a moment for her words to sink into his hazy mind. Stone rubbed his nose against hers. "Am I complaining?"

Marissa stared him straight in the eye. "No, but you have every right to. It wasn't fair of me to impose upon you as I did."

Stone brushed his lips against hers with the lightest of touches. "I didn't have to go along with you, but I did. You have nothing to be sorry about, Marissa. I'm glad I was able to help."

He feathered another kiss across her lips. She went up on tiptoe, following his every move. "Are you going to kiss me or continue to tease me?" she whispered.

With a hand at her nape and one on her lower back, Stone pulled her flush up against him, the safety pin forgotten. He crushed her small form against him from breast to hip and claimed her mouth like a man dying of thirst. Her lips parted, gaining him entrance into the warm recesses of her mouth. She tasted of honey and berries and went straight to his head—and his cock. His erection strained against the denim of his jeans, aching to break free of its restraints and claim that which was before him and his for the taking.

Her hands slid up his sides and curved around to his back where she spread her palms wide and held on tight. Her soft, ample breasts pressed into his chest and he thought he felt the rapid beat of her heart vibrating through him. Stone pulled back from her, no easy feat, and stared into her misty eyes. "Be sure."

"What?"

"Be sure this is what you want, because if it's not, now is the time to walk away." Just a kiss. One high-powered, passionate kiss and he was on the edge of his control already. She had no idea what she awakened with her sexy little smile and sultry body. He had to give her a chance to back out before he totally lost control of himself and the beast.

She brushed her nose across his chest. "I'm sure this is what I want, Stone."

Stone heard nothing except her assurances she wanted to be with him. The rest simply did not register in his desire-clouded mind. He scooped her up into his arms and carried her back down the hall to his room. Her fingers played at his neck and through his hair. The wolf moved just beneath his skin and he silently pleaded with it to remain hidden. The last thing he wanted or needed was to frighten her by going furry.

He did not bother with the lights. Dark or light, he saw everything and with the lights off, he at least stood a chance of not outing himself and his – differences. The bed lacked sheets, something that had never bothered him before, but it was too late to worry about it now. Stone allowed her slender form to slide down his body until her feet touched the floor. Her skin felt like silk against his palm when he reached up to stroke her cheek. She was so beautiful, and he was nothing more than a selfish bastard. What they were about to do had nothing to do with emotion and he knew it. Marissa was confused and rebelling against her father, and like a fool, he was helping. The honorable thing to do would be for him to turn on his heel and walk out the door, but no matter how hard he tried, his feet refused to budge.

The wolf snarled within him at the very thought of walking away. He mentally strapped a muzzle on the beast and warred with himself over the matter. Take what she

freely offered and to hell with the consequences or do the noble thing. It was a no-brainer—literally. Throwing caution to the wind, he bent his head and claimed her supple lips once more.

She pushed up onto her tiptoes, pressing her mouth harder against his. Her tongue traced the seam of his lips and he took advantage of the situation. Stone pushed his tongue between her lips and scraped it against her teeth until it tangled with hers. She tasted just as wonderfully sweet as moments before.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” she mumbled against his lips, tugging his shirttail from his waistband.

Stone cracked a smile and pulled back to help her remove the troublesome garment. “If I’m wearing too much then you are as well.”

A wide grin lit up her entire face. “That’s fixable.” Before his shirt hit the floor, she released her hold on the boxers she wore, dropped them to the floor and reached up to undo all the buttons down the front of the shirt she wore and let the edges hang open.

He sucked in a breath, and quickly released it. She was, quite simply, exquisite. All shapely curves and creamy skin. His mouth watered just looking at her. Marissa, a sweet confection just waiting to be tasted. He licked his lips in anticipation.

Moving closer, he pushed the fabric back off her shoulders and allowed it to slide down her arms to pool around her feet. Nimble fingers worked at his fly, releasing his hard cock from its binding. Stone breathed a sigh of relief the moment he sprang forth from the confines of his jeans into her warm, waiting hands.

## **Chapter Two**

Marissa's insides knotted and her nerves were on edge. She was naked in a strange man's house with him just as naked and standing before her. Her mind must be waiting back at the church, because this was unlike her. But she wanted him on a level she couldn't explain, not even to herself. It was insane and yet it felt so right. Perhaps her rebellious streak against her father was just taking her to an all-new level on things—one she could never take back.

She shook off her jumbled thoughts and stroked his rigid length in slow, steady motions, enjoying the contrasting textures of hard tissue covered in satiny skin. A moan passed his lips and she smiled, pleased with her ability to arouse him so easily. Things were so different with Randall—not that she gave a damn if she ever turned that particular man on or not. Just thinking of him made her skin crawl, so she forced him from her mind and concentrated on the gorgeous man in front of her. He stood at least a head taller than her and made her feel so small in comparison.

Stone Blackthorn. Such an intriguing name, and yet it was the only bit of information she really knew about him other than his profession. She hadn't stopped long enough to ask questions. Back at the church her only thought had been escape. Marissa rubbed the tip of her nose against his chest, enjoying the way the fine feathering of dark, crisp hairs tickled with each motion. This man made her feel safe—something no other man ever accomplished, not even her own father. Something about the way he carried himself, so tall and proud and sure of himself. He acted as if he could handle anything, no matter what life tossed his way, and for some reason, he genuinely seemed to care about her safety. Any other man would have tossed her out on the street once he learned her father's name, but not Stone.

"Make me feel, Stone." She pressed a kiss to the hard muscles of his chest.

“Feel what?”

Marissa traced her tongue around one flat nipple and smiled. “Wanted for me, myself. Like a woman. Anything. Anything at all.” Lifting her head, she looked him in the eye. “Make me forget all my troubles, even if only for a little while. Show me that there is more to life than four walls covered in pretty decorations.”

His large hand cupped her cheek and she leaned into him. Heat radiated out from his larger form and enveloped her in its protective shroud. “I won’t hurt you.”

She was not so certain about that. He might not hurt her physically, but she wasn’t sure what this encounter would do to her emotionally. Marissa mentally shook herself from her depressing thoughts. Now was not the time for thinking—it was a time for action and feeling.

Placing both hands on his chest, she scraped her nails down his body to his abdomen where she teased the thicker covering of hair. Her fingertips skimmed along the length of his erection, causing it to jerk and twitch in response. His reactions went to her head, gave her a powerful sense she never knew before. Without a second thought, she sank to her knees and leaned forward to capture his cock in her mouth, bracing her hands against his legs. She swirled her tongue around the tip, capturing a pearly drop of pre-come and swallowing it down.

His fingers speared through her hair, guiding her in a back-and-forth motion that had the muscles of his legs tightening beneath her palms. He tasted lightly of salt and hard male flesh, and his musky, masculine aroma teased her nostrils and heated her blood. Marissa swirled her tongue around the bulbous head of his cock, lightly scraped her teeth against the shaft and sucked him deep into her throat once more.

“Oh God, baby, that feels so good.” The tone of Stone’s voice dropped to a deeper timbre.

Marissa pulled away and leaned back to look up at him. She wanted to see the look on his face—had to know he wasn’t pretending. He cupped her cheek and slid his thumb across her skin.

"Come here." He reached down and helped her to her feet. "Kiss me, Marissa."

His lips brushed against hers, teasing her. She followed his movements blindly, aching to prolong the contact. "Tease," she whispered.

Stone chuckled and closed the space between them. Pressure traced the seam of her lips and she opened to him. Their tongues tangled in a primitive dance that sent heat flooding into her lower body. "Fuck me, Stone."

He guided her back until the mattress brushed against the backs of her legs. She sat down and crawled backward up onto the bed, never taking her eyes off him. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips as she appreciatively took in the sight of his sizeable erection. Just looking at him made her hungry for more.

Stone kicked off his shoes and hooked his thumbs in his waistband. Strong fingers pushed the denim down his muscular legs until he stepped from them and stood naked looking down at her.

Marissa slid her hand down her body, watching him watch her the entire time. One finger slid between her warm, moist folds and circled around her clit. His eyes flashed with desire. A smile curved her lips up at the corners and she added a second finger, moving them back and forth over her sensitive nub. Marissa pulled her legs up and spread them wide, opening herself to his eyes. She pushed her fingers inside her body, pumped them a few times then withdrew and sucked them into her mouth.

Stone's groan was audible. She crooked a finger of her other hand and motioned him toward her. She held her juice-dampened fingers out to him, smiled wider and asked, "Wanna taste?"

"Oh yeah," he breathed, crawling onto the bed and settling between her spread legs. "But I prefer it straight from the tap."

Marissa's head fell back on the bed and a laugh rumbled in her chest. The moment his tongue moved over her heated flesh, a gasp ripped from her throat. Her hands balled around the comforter and her back arched.

Stone sucked her clit into his mouth and gently closed his teeth around the hard nub. She nearly came up off the bed as a bolt of white-hot lightning arced through her at his actions. He licked, laved, swirled his tongue around her sensitive flesh and jabbed it in and out of her opening. The way he fucked her with his mouth had her moaning and writhing in pleasure. In mere heartbeats, he had her reduced to a ball of boneless nerves. Every muscle within her body jerked and quivered in reaction.

“Come for me, baby.” The deep tones of his voice vibrated throughout her.

Marissa released her hold on the bed and speared her fingers through the silky strands of his dark hair. She held him to her, fearing he would stop before she took everything she needed from him. “More,” she demanded, pushing her hips up to increase the pressure where she needed it most.

Warm air washed over her moist skin and sent a shiver racing down her spine. Gooseflesh raced along her skin. Her entire body hummed with pleasure. The muscles in her legs and hidden within her pussy tightened, preparing to tumble over the cliff into mind-blowing bliss. His teeth clamped around her clit once more and tugged, and Marissa flew over the precipice into orgasm. Her climax rocked her body from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. She lay gasping, fighting for air when he moved over her.

“Liked that, did you?”

There wasn’t enough air in her lungs for her to answer. She nodded her head and did her best to smile.

“Tired?”

She shrugged. “There’s always room for more,” she managed to reply.

Stone chuckled. He loved knowing he caused her breathlessness, and he planned to do it again, many times before the night was through. Staring down into her eyes, he brushed his fingertips across her cheeks. She had the most beautiful green eyes. He could get lost in their emerald depths.

Her legs slid against his and her arms moved up to slide over his shoulders, tugging him closer. Stone smiled and allowed her to pull him down. He kissed her softly on the lips and worked his way across her cheek to nibble on her earlobe. From there, he worked a series of kisses, licks and nips down her throat, along her collarbone, and down her chest to the soft curve of her breast. He sucked her nipple into his mouth, causing her to arch her back and thrust the pebbled nub deeper into his mouth.

His hips rubbed against hers. The need to be nestled within her, claiming her overwhelmed him. "I need," he began.

"Inside me," she finished for him.

He planted a kiss between her breasts then pushed himself up with his hands to look into her eyes. "Oh yeah."

Her smile lit up her entire face. When he felt her fingers brush against his erection, the sensation caught him off guard. She guided him to her opening and he thrust his hips forward, impaling himself within her wet, hot channel. Marissa's head pushed backward against the mattress, exposing the long, elegant lines of her throat to him. Bending his head, he sucked on her soft flesh and scraped his teeth over her pulse point.

Deep within him, the wolf howled in excitement. Stone repeatedly pounded his hips against hers, driving for fulfillment. Her fingers clawed at his back and her legs wrapped around his. Beneath him, she moaned and writhed in pleasure with each thrust of his hips. His muscles tightened, preparing for his release. When it came, he cried out from the sheer overpowering pleasure of it. Marissa's nails scored his back and she cried out.

Stone leaned his forehead against hers and worked to catch his breath. She pushed at his chest. Lifting his head, he looked down at her with an unspoken question burning in his eyes.

"I can't breathe."

He chuckled and rolled off her, landing on his back on the mattress alongside her and threw an arm across his eyes. His chest heaved with each deep breath he drew into his lungs. The experience had been remarkable. His body was sated, yet the wolf continued to slink around just beneath his skin demanding more.

Sitting up, he glanced at Marissa and said, "I'm famished. How about you?"

She slid her hand onto her stomach. "Food sounds good."

Stone retrieved the shirt he loaned her from the floor and tossed it over his shoulder to her then stood and tugged on his pants. An uncomfortable silence fell over the room. He left the fastenings on his pants undone and padded into the kitchen to dig through the cabinets and fridge for sustenance. Even the wolf within couldn't deny his body's need for food.

Pulling a milk carton from the fridge, Stone opened the container and held it up to his nose. He quickly jerked back and tossed it into the sink. Milk was definitely out of the question.

"Find anything?" Marissa's soft voice asked from the kitchen door.

"Sour milk and dried-out bread." He reached for the phone. "How's pizza sound?"

"Pepperoni with extra cheese?"

He winked at her. "You got it." Punching in the number for the local pizza place, he put in their order. When he hung up the phone, he turned to look at Marissa and said, "It'll be here in about twenty minutes."

"So what do we do in the meantime?"

Stone took her small hand into his larger one and guided her into the living room. "Sit," he ordered, moving to the entertainment center to pop in a DVD. "Hope you like action movies. I'm afraid I don't have any chick flicks."

Marissa laughed. "Good thing I enjoy action movies then, isn't it?"

He grinned and plopped down on the sofa next to her. On the TV screen, the opening credits rolled across the screen naming off the stars. Stone stretched his arm

out across the back of the couch and behind Marissa's head. She surprised him when she snuggled close against his side, resting her head on his shoulder and her hand on the center of his chest. He closed his eyes a moment and enjoyed how good it felt to have her so close.

The wolf shifted beneath his skin. He glanced down at the top of her red-gold head and wondered what it was about this woman that stirred the wolf into such frenzy. It took every ounce of his control to keep the beast in check. Sliding his arm off the sofa's back, he wrapped it around her slender form and held her close. She stirred primal instincts to life in him, and he wasn't sure how to handle it.

The softness of her body pressed so intimately against his made his cock harden all over again. His fingers moved over her body, found the soft swell of her breast and massaged her in small, circular motions. She moaned and shifted her position, allowing him easier access to her supple flesh. He helped her to roll onto her back and leaned down to press a kiss to her lips.

While they kissed, his fingers worked at the buttons along the front of the shirt she wore. Stone needed to feel her smooth skin against his fingertips. His cock hardened further as need arose within him, bringing the wolf along with it. Carefully, he maneuvered out from under Marissa's head and slipped onto the floor. One hand cupped the back of her head as he kissed her deeply and the other pushed its way beneath the waistband on the boxers she wore. Moist heat enveloped his finger, letting him know he found his mark.

She arched beneath him, pressing her body closer to his and thrusting her hips upward to increase the pressure of his finger against her clit. Her hands worked to remove the barriers between them when the doorbell rang and he froze in place with his heart beating so hard it shook his entire body. Stone lifted his head, breathing deeply, and looked around the room, momentarily dazed. The doorbell rang again. He drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly as he gained his feet. Marissa worked to

rearrange her clothing and sit up while he went to answer the door. Had twenty minutes gone by already?

Opening the door, he found a pizza delivery guy standing on the front porch with a boxed pizza in hand. "Hi there," he said to be polite.

The guy nodded and chewed on his gum. "Hey, back. That'll be fifteen dollars and ninety-five cents.

Stone patted down his pockets looking for his wallet. When he didn't find it, he quickly scanned the room. He spotted it on the kitchen table and hurried to grab it, pulling out a twenty for the pizza as he moved. Returning to the door, he handed the cash to the man, who then handed off the pizza. "Keep the change." Stone watched the man walk away before closing the door.

Marissa jumped up from the couch and rubbed her hands together. "Food."

Stone chuckled and slid the pizza box onto the table then went to retrieve plates and napkins from the cabinets. "Hungry?"

Her cheeks reddened. "Just a little."

More like starving if the rumbling coming from her stomach was any indication. "Here," he said, sliding a plate onto the table in front of her.

She grinned. "Thanks!" The box top flipped open and cheese strung from the slice she held back into the box.

"Stretchy stuff."

Marissa giggled. "Just a bit." She took a bite off the end of her slice. "But it's really good."

Reaching out, Stone wiped the grease and a bit of cheese from her chin, before leaning forward to lick all traces away with his tongue. "Yes, it is."

Marissa swallowed the bite of pizza in her mouth without choking – but just barely. His move was so unexpected that she wasn't certain what to say in response. Therefore,

she said nothing. Loading a second slice onto her plate, she turned from the table and padded back toward the sofa. Her teeth nibbled at her lower lip as her thoughts raced. *What am I doing?* She glanced over her shoulder to where Stone worked to fill his own plate. *Having the time of my life with a man I barely know.*

A sigh escaped her lips. By now, they knew she was missing. It would only be a matter of time before her father and his goons figured out where she was hiding, or would it? How could they possibly know where she ran off to and hid? Nothing tied Stone to her, so she was safe. At least, she hoped she was safe.

"That must be some problem you're working out."

"Huh?" She looked up at him, uncertain she heard him correctly.

His fingertips traced across her forehead. "Your brow is all crinkled up like you're thinking too hard. Something troubling you?" He placed a can of soda on the coffee table in front of her and then lowered himself down beside her.

"Oh no, not really." She popped the top on her soda pop. "Well, I am a bit worried about Daddy." Taking a sip from the can, she replaced it on the table and shifted to face him on the couch. "How much do you really know about my father?"

His jaw worked at chewing his food, drawing her attention to the firm lines and the way his throat worked as he swallowed. "I know he has a dark reputation."

"One he's earned." Marissa stared at him without blinking. Stone had to know what he was getting himself into because he didn't seem to understand the danger her father posed. "I've never actually seen him kill anyone, but I know if someone crosses him it's not long before that person is dead or has vanished without a trace."

Stone reached out to stroke her cheek with his thumb. "Baby, don't worry about me. I'm not afraid of your father."

She leapt to her feet and paced the floor. "You should be. Didn't you hear what I said?" Marissa stopped and faced him. "Even if he doesn't pull the trigger himself, he has people killed if they so much as disagree with him. He'll view this as theft of personal property. How do you think he'll react to that?"

He set his plate aside and stood, taking her by the arms. "There's no way he could know where you are. The parking lot was empty when we left. I certainly wasn't on the guest list, and we didn't know each other before this afternoon." He sighed and hugged her close. "I think you're worrying too much."

"And maybe you aren't worrying enough," she murmured against his chest. She liked the clean, masculine scent of his that wafted up to surround her in his heat. "I just don't want to see you hurt because of me."

He leaned back and placed a finger under her chin, tipping her head back. "Baby, I won't let anything happen to you. Stop worrying about me, okay? I'm not the one who will be forced to marry a man I don't love."

She quirked a brow. "Implying that there *is* one that you love?"

His brow furrowed and his lips pulled down into a frown. "No," he quickly denied.

Marissa couldn't help herself, she nearly doubled over with laughter. "The indignant look on your face is so funny. Priceless, even."

"How did you get that I loved a guy out of that statement?"

She shook her head and laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks. "I have no idea." She waved a hand in the air. "It just came to me, but you've got to admit that it's funny."

"No, it wasn't."

With each denial, Marissa laughed all the harder. He finally threw up his hands and sat back down. "I give up."

Marissa pouted at him, though it was difficult to maintain a frown throughout her laughing. "You're too easy."

Stone quickly tossed aside his plate and he was on his feet in record speed. He pulled her close, leaning her back over his arm, and put his mouth to her breast right through the fabric. Her fingers dug into his upper arms, holding on for fear of falling.

"I'll show you easy," he murmured, yanking the shirt she wore open and sending buttons to zinging all over the room.

Marissa gasped at the unexpectedness of his actions. He was so forceful and take charge that it took her breath away. How a man could be so in-your-face demanding and gentle at the same time, she would never figure out. Her womb clenched with need when he licked the length of her throat. "Take me, Stone. I need to feel you inside me." Not that that would take much since she felt like she already belonged to him.

He growled against her throat, sending vibrations echoing over her skin. "You *are* mine." His hand brushed down her side and over her hips, taking the boxers she wore with it.

Her nails bit into his arms when he pushed a finger into her channel then quickly followed it with another. Her head fell back and he leaned her over his arm, sucking one taut nipple into his mouth. His tongue laved the hard nub until the muscles within her pussy contracted around his fingers and she gasped for air.

"Take me," she gasped, needing so much more than what he gave her. "Fuck me, Stone. Please fuck me."

He pulled her up, pressing her chest against his, and whispered, "I like it when you beg." His hips brushed against hers, allowing her to feel his heavy erection. "It makes me so hard and hot for you."

Every muscle within in her body contracted at his whispered words. The effect she had on him went straight to her head, and the effect he had on her shook her to her very core. "I can't wait any more, Stone. Please, please ease the ache."

He lowered her to the floor. The soft carpet tickled against her back. She spread her legs wide and held her arms out to him. She watched him remove his clothing through heavy-lidded eyes and smiled in satisfaction when he lowered himself into the cradle of her thighs. Marissa wrapped her legs around the backs of his and pulled him close until she felt the head of his cock brush against her folds.

Her arms slid beneath his and around his chest, hugging him close. "Fill me, Stone. Fill me now."

He held back, just out of reach no matter how hard she pulled against him. She nipped at his jawline. "Fuck me," she pleaded.

His hand slid down her side and over the curve of her hip until his fingers dug into her skin. His hips surged forward and his hard length slid inside her, stretching and filling her in the most glorious of ways. Her breath rushed from her body and a sigh of pure pleasure escaped with it.

Stone chuckled close to her ear. "Like that?"

"Oh God, yes," she sighed. "Harder. Faster."

He lifted his head and brushed the hair from her face, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. "Anything for you, baby. Anything at all."

Marissa felt thick hair brush against her palms and jerked in reaction. Stone froze over her with furrowed brow. "Are you okay?"

She breathed heavily, certain she had lost her mind and nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." Her mind had to be playing tricks on her in light of all the stress she had been under lately.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured.

Marissa blushed. "You make me feel beautiful."

His lips pressed against hers and his tongue pushed between them to tangle with hers. Stone pulled back. "Trust me."

Marissa stared up at him and swallowed hard. Those two little words usually led to something bad. She licked her suddenly dry lips. "I don't know."

Stone kissed the tip of her nose. "I won't hurt you – ever. I promise." He rubbed his stubbled cheek against hers. "You can say stop any time."

Marissa slowly nodded. "Okay, Stone, I'll trust you." He helped her to roll onto her stomach, and she was uncertain of what he had planned.

"Lift up," he whispered, touching her side.

She pushed herself up from the floor and a couch cushion slid beneath her.  
"What—"

"It'll make things easier. Trust me."

Again with the *trust me* line. His fingers slid between her folds and sent a shiver racing over her skin. He pushed first one digit and then another into her channel. Stone pumped his fingers, building a pressure within her with breathtaking speed. She neared the edge of the chasm only to have him pull away. Marissa groaned in frustrated need.

"Stone," she moaned, aching for more.

His stubbled cheek rubbed against her ass, scraping her flesh. "I've not even begun." He pushed her legs farther apart and speared into her with his tongue.

Marissa's fingers curled into the plush carpet and her breath sucked in. "Stop teasing me."

His chuckle vibrated throughout her body. "Who says I'm teasing?" He dipped his fingers inside her again, pumped for several strokes and withdrew.

Marissa tensed when his fingertip circled around her rosette. "What are you doing?"

"Relax, Marissa. Trust me."

She willed her body to relax and his finger pressed farther into her body. It stung and burned, but she remained still and silent. Slowly, he pumped his finger in and out with increasing ease. The more he moved, the more Marissa relaxed until she moaned with the pleasure of it. A second finger joined his first, increasing the pressure building within her.

Stone leaned forward, pressing against her back. His breath washed over her ear and temple. "I'm going to fuck you from behind." His words sent ripples of pleasure chasing down her spine. "First, I'm going to fuck that wonderful little pussy of yours, and then I'm going to claim this tight, hot little ass and make it mine."

Her womb clenched at the husky tone of his voice and the things he said. "Yes," she moaned, wanting desperately to experience the things he promised.

He withdrew his fingers, bringing a sound of protest to her lips. "Shh," he soothed, thrusting his hard length into her pussy. His hips pounded against her ass, sliding his cock in and out of her channel in a frenzied series of rapid motions. Each time his hips made contact with her flesh, her breath rushed out of her lungs. Harder and faster he moved, taking her to the very rim of the precipice only to pull back at the last possible second. He was killing her, slowly but surely.

Stone dug his fingers into her softly rounded hips, pulling her back to meet each forward thrust of his pelvis. It felt so good the way her hot body wrapped around his as if made just for him. They fit perfectly together. He felt the wolf just beneath his skin, knew how badly it wished to surface. Keeping the beast in check grew more difficult with each forward thrust. His heightened senses allowed him to know each time she reached the brink of orgasm. He used the knowledge to his advantage, to draw out the experience for her.

He nipped at her shoulder. His cock slid from her body and he reached down with his hand to dip his fingers into her wet heat to moisten them. With the damp tip of his finger, he prepared her rosette for his claiming.

Marissa rocked back and forth on her knees, pushing his finger deeper inside her and withdrawing in a steady rhythm. "More," she moaned, lowering her upper body closer to the floor and pushing her well-rounded little ass up into the air.

Stone couldn't resist the temptation any longer. Removing his finger, he positioned the tip of his cock at her tight little rosette and rubbed it over the puckered flesh. He intended to take his time with her, ease her into the experience, but her frantic movements and quiet pleas drove his control to the edge and pushed him over into the abyss. Marissa rocked backward at the same time he thrust forward, burying his cock deep within her tight, hot channel.

“Oh God, Marissa. You feel so damned good.” He tightened his grip on her hips, pulling her to him with growing force and speed as he strove for fulfillment. The wolf within took advantage of his loss of control and surged to the surface. It snarled and growled at Stone’s attempts to leash the beast. Animal instincts urged him on, increasing the speed and power of his thrusts.

Marissa cried out when her orgasm overtook her, sending her body into convulsions around his erection. Stone pulled back and thrust forward one last time, spilling his seed into her welcoming body.

He leaned forward, gasping for breath before withdrawing from her body and rolling into the floor on his back. His head turned to the side to find her smiling at him, looking very well loved. Reaching out a hand, he trailed his fingertips over her cheek. “You are so amazing.”

She nipped at his fingertips and laughed. “You’re rather phenomenal yourself.” Her eyelids fluttered closed. “I’m so tired.”

He didn’t doubt she was, but he wanted to at least put sheets on the bed before he took her in there for the night. “Stay right here. I’ll be right back.” He managed to climb to his feet and hurried down the hall to dig out a set of sheets and make the bed. When he returned to the living room, Marissa lay in the floor on her stomach fast asleep.

Stone leaned down and scooped her up into his arms, enjoying the way she snuggled up against him. He brushed a kiss across her forehead and carried her to his room where he gently placed her on the bed and pulled the covers up over her. He stood there staring down at her for a long moment before crawling into the bed beside her. What would he do when she decided it was time to leave? He wasn’t sure he could let her walk away – at least not without trying to convince her to stay.

## Chapter Three

Marissa wrapped herself around the warm body beside her and snuggled closer. The mingled scents of male, sex and sweat teased her senses. Her eyes popped open and she sucked in a deep breath. Where was she?

Her eyes peeked open and the night before came rushing back to her. She ran away. Marissa McRae defied her father's wishes and fled the church with a total stranger. Was she insane? Stone's fingers brushed against her bare breast. *Obviously*. Insanity seemed the only logical explanation for her current predicament, not that the situation was all *that* bad. The man in bed with her was drop-dead gorgeous.

She opened her mouth to ask him the day's plans when a loud bang echoed through the house. Stone was up and out of the bed, pulling on his clothes before her surprised gasp fully left her lips. Marissa scrambled from the bed and pulled on a shirt she found in the floor. Quickly buttoning the shirt, she raced down the hall to the sound of loud, angry voices – voices she knew all too well.

"Marissa, run!" Stone shouted.

*Run? Run where? And how in hell did they find me?* She wanted an answer to that last question but wasn't about to stop and ask. She darted into the nearest room and slammed the door shut behind her, locking it with shaking fingers. Marissa quickly scanned the small bathroom for any means of escape. One tiny window filtered the morning light into the room. Climbing onto the tub's edge, she forced the window open and shoved the screen free of the frame. Hoisting herself up wasn't easy, but the adrenaline rushing through her veins with each frantic beat of her heart gave her the extra bit of strength she needed.

Briefly, the thought of how she seemed to have made a habit of climbing through windows crossed her mind as she managed to get her upper body outside. The door

burst open behind her to the sound of breaking wood and hands clamped around her waist.

Marissa screamed and fought against her captor but to no avail. He was just too strong for her. A large, rough hand slid over her mouth and the arm around her waist tightened its hold and lifted her feet from the floor. *What will Daddy do?* She never had reason to fear her father before, but she'd also never defied him as she did by running away. Would he resort to violence against his only child? In that moment, she realized she didn't know her father at all.

The man holding her — she couldn't recall his name — tossed her into the back of a dark-colored van and slammed the door shut behind her. The blacked-out windows in the vehicle prevented sunlight from penetrating the darkness inside. The overhead light came on when the man climbed into the passenger's seat and gave her just enough light to see Stone lying unconscious next to her. Marissa ran her fingers over his face, memorizing each and every inch of his features to memory. What her father did to her no longer mattered. What concerned her even more than her own safety was Stone. If even a fraction of Hector McRae's reputation was accurate, Stone wouldn't live to see nightfall and it would be all her fault.

Stone didn't move. What had they done to him? She should never have forced him into helping her. The fact that he hadn't put up a fight mattered little in easing her conscience. Marissa cradled his head in her lap and leaned back against the side of the van, running her fingers through his hair. She wouldn't think about what-ifs anymore. A way out of this mess had to be found if either of them stood a chance of surviving this. She would agree to marry Randall if that was what it took to save Stone. He was innocent in this. Taking her from the church had been her idea, not his, and she wouldn't see him lose his life because of her impulsive act. Marissa would prove she was nothing like her father by doing the most selfless thing she could — sacrificing her happiness for Stone's life.

When she felt the van slow, she lowered Stone's head back down to the floor and eased away from him. She didn't dare let anyone see how much she cared about his well-being. If they thought he mattered to her, it would be even worse for him than it already was. "I'm sorry," she whispered moments before the back doors flew open and a man grabbed her by the arm, dragging her from the vehicle.

Marissa couldn't see where they took Stone as they dragged her through the mansion's front doors. The house felt colder than usual, or maybe she was just more frightened than normal. Either way, a sense of dread settled in the pit of her stomach as she moved up the stairs toward her father's second-floor office. This wouldn't be good.

Hector McRae stood at the large window with his back to the door when she entered the room. He stood there a long moment without speaking before he turned to face her. "Glad to see you are safe and unharmed, Marissa."

His tone was flat and even, and that in itself was more frightening than if he had screamed at her. "I'm fine." She crossed her arms over her chest. "How did you find me?"

He nodded his salt-and-pepper head. "Yes, I figured you would be." He waved a hand dismissively at her. "Finding you was easy." He stared at her with his emotionless eyes. "I have many, many contacts in this city. I called in numerous favors to bring you home. Did you have fun on your little vacation?"

Vacation? The man was insane. "I needed to get away."

He moved around to the front of his desk and leaned back against the cherry wood piece of furniture. "All you had to do was say so, Marissa. There was no need for such drastic actions. I could have sent you down to the island for a few days to calm your nerves before the ceremony."

"There won't be a ceremony," she informed him in a voice that was far smoother than she expected. "I refuse to marry a man I don't love."

One thick, bushy brow rose over a fathomless pale gray eye. "What does love have to do with anything? If one had to be in love before marrying, no one would ever go through with the thing."

"As I said, I won't marry him."

His gray eyes flashed fire and he straightened. "You will marry Randall, Marissa, or else," her father raged, beginning to pace the room.

Marissa watched him pace and run his hands through his short hair. She had never seen so much rage filling his face while directed at her, but she refused to let him bully her anymore. Lifting her head high, Marissa balled her hands into tight fists at her sides and narrowed her gaze on her father. "Or else, what?"

Hector ceased pacing and turned on her so quickly she backed up a step. The wild look in his eyes sent a jolt of fear slicing through her. He reached out and clamped his hands around her upper arms like twin vises. "You really don't want me to answer that."

"I'm your daughter. Your only child."

His fingertips dug into her flesh and his grip tightened. "Why do you think I kept you around? You are mine and you will do as I say." He released the grip of his left hand on her arm and brushed her hair from her face. "You will do everything you are told or you will pay the price. Or do you want to end up like your mother?"

Marissa gaped at him. "Mother?"

Hector threw his head back and laughed. "She served her purpose and was no longer needed."

How could this man be so cruel, so callous? Why had she never seen him as the monster he truly was? She shook her head and tried to back away but his hold on her wouldn't allow the movement. "I won't marry him." Her pride wouldn't let her agree to the marriage, yet her survival instincts screamed at her to agree—anything to live.

He fisted his hand in her hair and yanked her head back—hard. Hector leaned in so close she felt his hot breath wash over her face. “You *will* marry Randall. I’m not asking.”

Hector released her and nodded to the men at the door. “Take her until I send for her.” His pale gaze bore into her, chilling her to the core. “Randall will be here shortly, then we’ll have a quick little service and you’ll no longer be my problem.”

Problem? She was his problem? It was good to finally know just what she meant to the man. One of her father’s henchmen grabbed her by the arm. Marissa jerked free of him and confronted Hector. “Why is this so important to you?” Hector McRae never did anything without good reason and gain.

She watched him pour brandy into a glass and take a drink. “The Thayer family is the largest of our rivals. I tried making deals with them for years, but they don’t share well—that is, until Randall saw you.”

“So I’m a bargaining chip.”

He took another drink. “That’s one way of looking at it. Once your union is complete, I’ll be in control of both territories.”

“There are other families.” She didn’t know much about what her father did, but bits of information she once thought irrelevant clicked into place. Marissa had to make him see reason. Even if he did gain control over the Thayer territory, the remaining families would rebel.

He stared at her from where he stood in front of the office’s mini-bar. “They are nothing to concern yourself with. Even if they all worked together, they would be no match for me.”

*Arrogant bastard.* She hoped they took him down, knocked him from the pedestal he placed himself on, and she wanted to be there to see it. Marissa wondered if Randall was aware of what her father had in mind. The men working for her father took her by the arms again and dragged her from the room. She glanced around her at everything she could see. Where had they taken Stone? The urge to voice the question lingered on

the tip of her tongue, but she didn't dare ask it for fear they would hurt him—if they hadn't already.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This is going to hurt.* Stone knew it would, but he had no other options left to him. If he didn't get his hands out from behind his back, he couldn't change. If he couldn't change, he didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of saving Marissa and himself. Of course, by shifting, he stood a very real chance of losing her anyhow. It was a no-win situation, but it was a risk he was willing to take. *Anything for her.*

Stone gritted his teeth, twisted his arm and popped his left shoulder out of its socket. Pain raced down his arm and radiated throughout his body. An anguished groan slipped through his tightly compressed lips. *God, that hurts like hell.*

Breathing deeply, he paused for a few heartbeats to shove the pain to the back of his mind. He didn't have time to allow something as trivial as the gut-wrenching, knifelike stabbing pain shooting down his left arm to slow him down. With nothing more than the sheer strength of his will to aid him, Stone worked his body around until he maneuvered his arms over his legs and back in front of him.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. His skin itched. Before the change took full control over him, he stumbled to his feet and slammed his shoulder against the wall, forcing the joint back into place. He ground his teeth together to keep from making a sound.

With his mind still clouded with pain, the change seized control over him and held him tight within its steely grasp. Stone dropped to his knees and fell forward, catching himself with his hands. His back arched. Clothes ripped and fell from his body. Fur sprouted from his skin while fangs erupted through his gums. Bones popped, cracked and twisted. The shifting from man to beast always hurt, but this time he focused on Marissa and the thought of protecting her, lessening the pain.

As the wolf rushed to the surface, his animalistic instincts swamped his mind and body. The cuffs around his wrists clanged to the floor as his arms shifted, allowing him

to step free of them. The beast grabbed hold of Marissa's scent from Stone's memory and lunged at the door. Hair rose all along his back. Backing away from the door, he lowered his head low and prepared to attack whoever owned the footsteps he heard racing down the hallway.

The door opened and Stone wasted no time. He leapt upon the man and sank his fangs deep into the stranger's throat, severing arteries in the process. The tangy, metallic taste of blood rushed over his tongue and fueled the wolf's wildness into a fever pitch. He thrust his nose up into the air, inhaling deeply. It took mere seconds for his mind to zero in on Marissa's lovely fragrance.

Her scent led him to a door guarded by two men. *Divide and conquer*. He backed up down the corridor and bumped a table, knocking a vase from its resting place to shatter against the tile floor. Footsteps sounded and one of the men rounded the corner. Stone leapt forward, catching the man by the throat before a scream had a chance to leave his lips. As the lifeless body fell to the floor, he made his way toward his next prey. The second man fell just as easily as those before him did. Stone quickly shifted back to human form, unlocked the door and stepped inside. He narrowly missed the candlestick aimed at his head held by Marissa's small hand.

He grabbed her arms, wrenched the candlestick from her hands and tossed it aside. "Whoa there, baby. It's me." He smoothed his hand over her face, trying to calm her.

"Stone," she whispered, leaning against him. "I was so afraid they had hurt you."

Placing a finger beneath her chin, he forced her head back so he could look into her green eyes. "It's harder to get rid of me than that."

He released her hands and she hugged him tight. "I still worried." She stepped back and her brow furrowed. "Why are you naked?"

Now there was a question. "I don't think you'd believe me."

"How did you get free?"

Again with the questions. "I don't think you'd believe that, either."

Her head shook. "You're not making any sense." Stone glanced around the room. "You wouldn't happen to have something I could cover up with, would you?" His nudity never bothered him before, but being around her with the wolf so close to the surface made him hard—and he didn't think it appropriate given the situation. Stone thought it best to hide his erection until they were safe and could do something about it.

"Just this. Afraid I'm fresh out of men's clothes."

He flashed a lopsided grin at her. She'd used his words against him, though with a slight twist. He took the throw she held out to him and wrapped it around his waist. It was better than nothing, he supposed. "Any idea how we get out of here?"

Marissa shook her head again. "He's got men everywhere and there are bars on the window. Father's very determined the wedding go through. Randall's on his way here now."

Stone stared deep into her eyes. "I won't let anything happen to you, Marissa."

"I'm not worried about me. Not really, but you. Do you have any idea what they'll do to you for this?"

He had a pretty good idea. "Don't worry about me. I'll get us out of this mess, but—"

From the look on her face, he knew he had her full attention.

"But what?" she asked.

"Whatever happens, don't hate me for it and never fear me."

"Why would I fear you? Or hate you for that matter? I don't think I—" He pressed a finger to her lips to stay her words.

"Just trust me, okay? Know that I would never hurt you no matter what form I'm in."

"No matter what *form* you're in? Stone, you're not making any sense."

He moved to the door and peered out through a crack. "I know, but I need you to promise me that you'll trust me no matter what."

She moved up behind him and pressed her body against his. "You know I do."

"Promise me, Marissa."

"I promise."

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Then let's get out of here."

She grabbed his hand and tried to keep him in the room. "They're armed, Stone. I can't let you walk out there and get yourself killed."

He stared down into her eyes without blinking. "You promised to trust me."

"I do, but this is insane. You're not bulletproof."

No, he wasn't, but he did heal fast—so long as it wasn't a mortal wound. "Come on, we can't stay here."

He opened the door and led her out into the hallway. There was no one to be seen, and his heightened senses didn't pick up anyone close by, though that certainly didn't mean there wasn't someone hidden someplace. Marissa's fear and womanly fragrance distracted him far more than it should have given their circumstances, but the wolf was drawn to her unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

Stone paused on the landing. "Is there a back stairway?"

Marissa nodded and pointed to their right.

"We'll go that way. It'll be less open, and hopefully there will be fewer obstacles."

"But where will we go? They know where you live."

That was a good question and one he didn't have an answer to. "Let's just get out of here first." He rounded the corner and froze. A faint click sent chills racing up his spine and caused the hairs at his nape to stand on end. Stone made certain to keep Marissa safely shielded behind his body.

"Don't move," a male voice growled.

Stone scanned what he could see of their surroundings without moving. A man stepped from the shadow—a man he recognized as Hector McRae, Marissa's father.

"What's a father to think when he finds a naked man leading his only daughter through the halls of his own house?"

He felt Marissa tense behind him and try to step around to face her father, but he made certain to keep her behind him. "Think what you will, but I'm getting her out of here."

"Oh, so noble a thought, but I'm afraid she's due to be married any minute now." The doorbell rang. "That would be the groom arriving." He leveled the pistol he held at Stone's chest. "Head downstairs."

Stone backed up, keeping himself between Marissa and her father. How had the man snuck up on him? The wolf slid beneath his skin, begging to come out and play, giving him the answer. The wolf's attraction to Marissa had distracted him to the point he put them both in danger. He turned, taking Marissa by the arm, and guided her down the stairs to where Randall Thayer waited for them at the bottom with a raised brow and a frown on his face.

"Have I interrupted something?" Randall asked, lifting his gaze to Hector.

"Not at all. We just have a party crasher. Everything is set up in the den." He motioned to their left with the pistol.

"Daddy, don't do this," Marissa pleaded.

"Shut up and get in there. The sooner this wedding is over, the happier I'll be."

Who cared if the man was happy? Stone just wanted out of there with Marissa safe and sound. The gun trained on his back made the entire situation sticky at best, and Marissa's presence put him in an awkward position. His only prayer of escape was to shift, and to do so in front of her would give her a shock from which he was not sure she would ever recover.

"Remember when I asked you to trust me?"

## **Chapter Four**

Marissa nodded. She did trust him, even if she had no clue what he was planning.

"Now would be that time." Stone turned his gaze to her father and said, "This is the only chance I'm giving you to let her go."

Hector tilted his head to one side. "You're giving me a chance?" He looked at Randall. "Can you believe this guy? He's giving me a chance. What do you think of that, Randall? He's trying to steal your bride away – again."

"I think he needs to learn some respect." Randall stepped forward and punched Stone in the gut.

"Stop!" Marissa screamed. "I'll marry you, just leave him alone."

Stone straightened. "No, Marissa. They'll let you go."

"I don't think he's learned anything yet, Randall."

Marissa glared at her father. Stone fell to his knees and Marissa tried to reach him, but Randall wrapped his arms around her waist and prevented her from going to Stone's side. "Let me go." She kicked at him and struggled against his hold, but the man refused to release her.

Stone's hands pressed against the floor and the muscles in his arms strained beneath the pressure of his weight pushing down on them. His back arched and muscles rippled beneath his skin. She gasped. "What's happening to you?"

He lifted his head and stared up at her. Icy eyes filled with pain, regret, and sorrow watched her. "Stone?" she whispered, uncertain of what she witnessed.

Hair rose from his skin. The sounds of bones cracking and popping filled the room. The men standing around watching backed up several steps, eyes wide in horror. A few of the men turned tail and ran.

Randall released her and turned his attention to her father. "Don't just stand there, McRae, shoot the thing."

When her father just stood there, Randall crossed the distance between them and took the gun from her father's hand. He leveled the pistol at Stone and tried to steady his shaking hand.

"No," she screamed, stepping between the men and Stone. She would protect him, no matter what it took.

"Move, bitch," Randall ordered, waving the shaking gun at her.

She shook her head. "No. I won't let you hurt him."

"It. Not him, it. Can't you see the man's a monster?"

Marissa glanced over her shoulder to where a wolf pushed itself up on all fours. It looked up at her with Stone's icy eyes and she knew the man she had come to care for resided within that fur-covered body. "No, he's not."

She dropped her arm to her side and held her hand out. Her eyes closed just briefly when she felt the beast's furry head press against her palm for a heartbeat before it disappeared again. The creature lunged at Randall before he could steady his aim on it. Randall fell back against the tiled floor, screaming as the wolf went for his throat. Marissa squeezed her eyes shut tight and turned her head. She would not mourn the loss of such a horrible man.

"Marissa," her father called. "Please, Marissa. I'm your father. Don't leave me to this thing."

"You could try running," she spat at him. Why would the man just stand there? Was he really so arrogant as to think the daughter he never saw would take pity on him and intervene on his behalf?

She turned away, ignoring the plea in her father's voice and eyes. He wouldn't help her if the tables were turned. She had seen him for the monster he was and wanted nothing more to do with him. Holding her head up high, she ignored the sounds

coming from behind her and left the room. Moving through the kitchen, she exited the house and made her way down the long driveway to the road. She just wanted out of there and as far away from this place as she could get.

Marissa walked for what seemed like hours. It took quite a while for the things she witnessed to work through her mind. In the end, she realized the things she saw had to be true, for no other logical explanation came to her. The question was, could she live with a man who was so much more than a man?

She paused in the middle of the street with the streetlamps illumining the area around her in a soft, yellow-orange glow. Uncertainty held her in place. Could she live without Stone? No, she couldn't. She had not known him long, but already he meant more to her than any other person ever had. She had to find him, but she had no clue where he lived. Turning circles in the street, she tried to figure out what to do when a pay phone caught her eye. Someone had to know how to find him, all she had to do was try.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stone dragged himself into his house before shifting back to human form. He needed a shower in the worst of ways, but he needed a drink first. Anything to get the horrible taste of blood out of his mouth. With heavy heart, he stumbled into the kitchen and opened the fridge, reaching for a cold bottle of beer. He popped the top and threw his head back, taking a long swig of the liquid. Pressing the cold glass to his forehead, he made his way to the bathroom and sighed over the splintered door. It didn't matter. Come morning, he would be somewhere new starting a new life. After the events of the last couple of days, he knew he couldn't stay here any longer.

He turned on the shower and allowed the water to heat up before climbing beneath the stinging spray. The desire to be clean outweighed and overpowered every other desire within him. The wolf was abnormally quiet as he washed the blood and sweat from his body, and his mind drifted to thoughts of Marissa. She disappeared from the house before he killed the men and he hadn't bothered to track her. The shock of seeing

him transform was probably more than she could handle. He couldn't say he blamed her for running away. Hell, if he were able, he would run away too.

Once he was clean, he turned off the water and stepped from the tub. He grabbed a towel and dried himself off as he headed for his room to find a fresh change of clothes. Then he would pack what few belongings he had and disappear into the night.

He was cramming the last of his clothes into a bag when a knock sounded at the door. A dejected sigh escaped his lips. If it was the cops, they could have him. Nothing mattered anymore.

He slowly made his way down the hall, as the pounding on the door grew more insistent. Unlocking it, he swung the door open and froze in place. Marissa stood on the porch looking disheveled and relieved at the same time. She fell forward and wrapped her arms around him. Stone dragged her into the house and quickly closed the door.

"Marissa, what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you." She straightened and looked into his eyes. "I don't know what happened today and I don't care. I had to be sure you were okay."

He turned away and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm fine." He glanced at her over his shoulder. "You shouldn't be here."

"Why? Will you hurt me?"

Stone spun around and looked at her through wide eyes. "No, never."

"Then I should be here."

He shook his head. "No, you shouldn't. Not after what happened."

She reached out and brushed her fingers against his arm. "What did happen, Stone?"

"I killed them," he whispered.

"And I would have if I'd been able. You did what you had to."

He eyed her carefully. She sounded a bit too calm after everything that happened. "Marissa, I'm not normal in case you missed that."

She shrugged. "I've always loved wolves."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. He had to be hearing things. "Men don't turn into wolves."

Marissa crossed her arms over her chest and stared at him without blinking. "You did."

Stone nodded. "Yes, I did. You don't seem shocked by it, either."

She shrugged. "I've had a while to think about it." She glanced around him down the hall and straight into his bedroom, no doubt. "What's that?" Marissa headed down the hall with him hot on her heels. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I thought it best if I leave town."

"Why?"

He ran a hand through his still-damp hair. "I didn't figure you'd want anything else to do with me, and I didn't think I could handle being so close without touching you. Not to mention that if anyone else saw me change..."

Marissa took his hand and pressed it to her chest over her heart. "I want you to touch me, and who would believe someone spinning wild tales about a man turning into a wolf?"

His free hand ran through his hair again. "You have no idea what you're saying. You're in shock or something."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not, Stone. I'm in love. There's a big difference."

His breath rushed from his lungs and he stared at her like an idiot. "You're what?" he whispered, uncertain he heard her correctly.

"I said I love you."

"Impossible." This couldn't be happening, could it? Had he died earlier and not realized it?

"Why? You showed me the most wonderful time, took care of me, and when I needed you the most you were there for me instead of running and saving yourself, as you should have done."

"And what about what I am?"

"What about it? You don't have rabies or something, do you?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "No, I don't have rabies."

"Then we don't have a problem."

Stone pulled her close and hugged her tight. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"I have to be. My boyfriend's a dog."

"I take offense at that. I am not a dog; I'm a wolf. Big difference there."

"Oh well, excuse me. Wolf. Happy now?" She stepped back and looked up at him with green fire in her eyes. "How long have you been like this?"

"For as long as I can remember. Born this way, I think."

She tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes at him. "You can't infect me, can you?"

Stone hugged her close and breathed in her fragrance. "I honestly don't know." He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "I've heard rumors of others like me up north."

She pressed a kiss to his throat. "Why haven't you gone to them and asked questions?"

He shrugged. "I guess the answers never mattered before."

Marissa sighed and reached up to pat his cheek. "Then maybe it's time we find them and ask."

Stone pressed a kiss to her cheek. "What if I can infect you? What if I have already?"

She shrugged. "Then we'll deal with it."

He lifted his head. "You're sure about this?"

"More than I've ever been about anything else."

His smile melted her heart and she knew she did the right thing by calling every newspaper in the city until she found him then coming after him. If she had let him walk away, she would have regretted it for the rest of her life. Her fingers slid across the waistband of his jeans and slid the button from its hole. "I want you, Stone."

His groan had her heart hammering in her chest. He was so sexy, and so what if he was a wolf? So long as he didn't bite or change at inappropriate times, she could get used to the idea.

"I want you, too, but I think we need to decide what to do next."

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "I don't suppose it would be a good idea to stay around here after what happened today."

Stone shrugged his wide, sexy shoulders. "It will look like a wild animal attack."

"True, but I don't want to live in the shadow of my father's reputation. The other families can have the territory and do with it as they please. I just want to start over, try something new."

His arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her close. "We can do that. We'll pick up and move on to someplace new, but first, I'm going to show you just how much you mean to me."

She smiled and rested her hand flat against his chest, loving the way his heart beat so steadily beneath her palm. "Where will we go?"

"We'll know when we get there." He nuzzled her neck.

"No biting," she warned.

"No biting," he murmured against her skin. He scooped her up into his arms and carried her down the hall toward the bedroom.

Marissa wrapped her arms around him, feeling safe, secure and loved for the first time in her life. No matter what the future held, they would face it together. One day,

perhaps she would have him make her like him, but until then, she would bask in the glow of his love and his protection.

Stone placed her on the bed and she made short work of removing her clothes. "In a hurry?" he asked.

She grinned up at him. "Yes, a very big hurry. After the day we've just had, I need you inside me now."

He did away with his own clothes and fell onto the bed next to her. Marissa tackled him, rolling him onto his back and straddling him. Lifting up, she positioned herself over him and lowered her body down, impaling herself on his hard cock. She rocked her hips back and forth with increasing speed. Stone's hands dug into her hips, helping to guide her movements. The tension within her built with blinding speed until it unexpectedly broke. The force of her orgasm shook her from head to toe and left her breathless. Marissa fell forward, leaning her head against his shoulder as she gasped for breath.

"That was quick," he murmured against her ear.

Marissa chuckled. "I couldn't help it."

Stone rolled, pinning her beneath him against the mattress. "My turn to drive, and this time will be slower."

With a thrust of his hips, Stone joined their bodies together again. He loved her the entire night, and the next morning they set to work beginning their life anew.

## **About the Author**

Born and raised in the south, I'm about as southern as it gets. I've always loved to tell stories, but for some reason waited until I was grown and had my kids to start seriously writing. My husband is wonderful and very helpful when it comes to the things I write, even going so far as to help me figure out a plot line. I love writing paranormals, futuristics, contemporaries, and fantasies, because when my imagination is running free is when I'm happiest. Vampires, Lycans, and Cowboys—OH MY!

Heather welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).

## **Also by Heather Holland**

The Beauty Within

The Drigon's Fall



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)