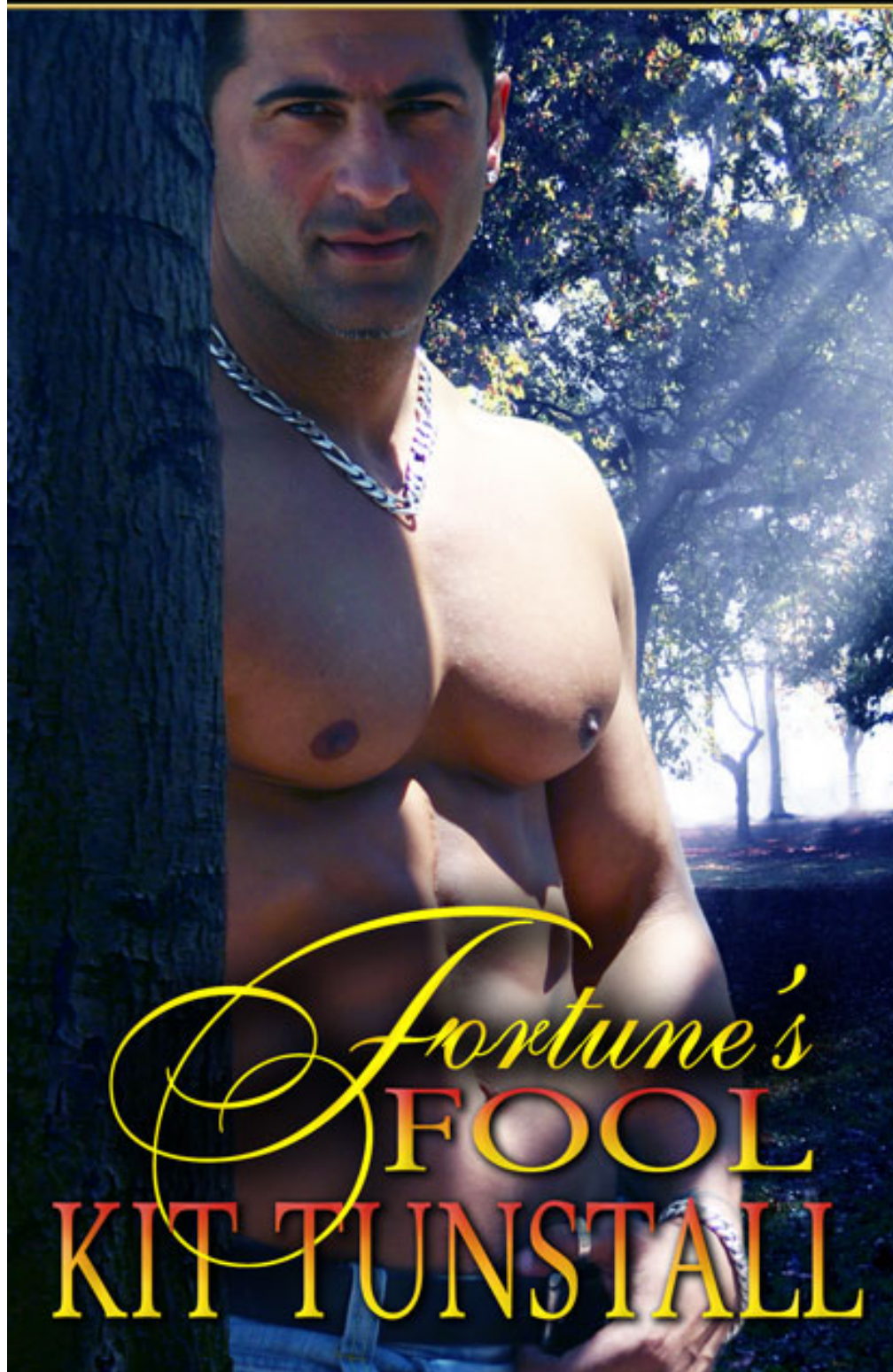


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Fortune's Fool

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# *FORTUNE'S FOOL*

**Kit Tunstall**

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## **Chapter One**

Thrumming with anger, Jared left his car in the garage and stalked toward the house he shared with his parents on Syringa Ridge. His mind insisted on replaying the confrontation that had taken place just minutes before with his promised mate and her lover. He had been so consumed with rage at Elise's choice of Mical over him that he didn't even remember the drive home. The past few minutes were a blur in his mind.

How could she be so irresponsible as to pick her own happiness over the well-being of the Sundown Pack? Without her by his side at the next full moon, less than two weeks away, he wouldn't be able to ascend as the new Alpha. All his life his father had trained him to fulfill his expected duty but it was all slipping away because his betrothed had to think with her heart, not her head.

Standing with them at the dock, he had fleetingly thought of offering to turn a blind eye to their affair as long as Elise married him. Almost as soon as the thought had come to him, he'd dismissed it, knowing he wouldn't share his mate. He didn't love Elise but if she were his wife, she would belong to him. It was then he had accepted defeat and let her go, knowing she would never truly belong to him, even if she stayed on Evergreen Island and became Lupina.

A light in the stable distracted Jared from his thoughts as he stepped onto the veranda that spanned two sides of the large mansion. The faint sound of a horse neighing piqued his curiosity, drawing him to the stables. Nearing the main entrance, he paused, watching.

Alyra stood in Achilles' stall, speaking to him in a low voice as she rubbed his neck. The high-strung stallion stamped his foot and tossed his head but appeared to be calming down, adjusting to his new home.

As he propped a shoulder against the doorframe, Jared couldn't help noticing how the bare bulb above the stall accentuated the warm red highlights in Alyra's honey-brown hair, which fell halfway down her back. She wore capri jeans and a black T-shirt.

He maintained a silent vigil as she soothed the horse. Jared's eyes settled on her long fingers, nails bare of polish, stroking the horse. Each movement was graceful, while clearly projecting an air of confidence. The black stallion was a fierce animal and many people would have found him intimidating but she seemed to regard him as an overgrown puppy.

Jared's breath caught in his throat when she leaned forward to kiss Achilles' velvety nose. He could feel the phantom touch of her mouth against his for the briefest of moments, then his eyes slipped lower, drawn by the way the T-shirt molded her full breasts when she moved. He shifted slightly to take in the view of her buttocks cupped in the snug jeans.

Why had he never noticed how attractive she was? True, his duties to the pack kept him busy but he hadn't been dead. Nor had knowing he would marry Elise kept him from indulging in a healthy appetite for sex.

His sexual encounters were usually brief, used only to slake his lust, and his partners were almost interchangeable. In an abstract way, Jared had expected that to change when he mated with Elise. There wasn't love between them but she was to have been his wife. Surely those feelings would have grown? In the interim, he had taken any interested female he encountered during the full moon and indulged in an occasional tryst with women with whom he interacted on a regular basis. Alyra was hired help. Had he been too much of a snob to really look at her before?

She turned suddenly, jerking in reaction to his presence. Jared straightened his spine when her gaze skittered over his face before moving toward the ground as she bowed her head.

"Mr. Sundown, I didn't see you there." Her tone was composed but bore a faint trace of annoyance. "Did Achilles' unrest draw you as well?"

He shook his head. "No. I saw the light on my way in."

A perfect brow, a shade lighter than her hair, arched. "I hope we didn't disturb you. It's his first night in a new home." Her voice softened and her hands caressed the horse's neck. "Poor baby doesn't know anything about this place, so he was bound to become distraught." She turned her head toward the horse, a look of adoration plain on her face. "I think he's settled now and will soon come to regard this place as home. Isn't that right, sweetie?" Once again, Alyra kissed his nose. If she was self-conscious about her displays of affection for the stallion, she gave no indication.

Jared's cock swelled when he was once again presented with the sight of her breasts straining against the cotton fabric of her shirt. As she whispered love words to the horse, his mind pictured her whispering to him as she lay in his bed. They wouldn't be sentimental words of love pouring from her mouth. No, his imagination supplied words of sexual hunger, demands for satisfaction and breathless cries of delight that would fall from her eager mouth.

In an effort to distract himself from the carnal thoughts swirling through his head, he asked, "What plans do you have in mind for Achilles?"

Alyra shrugged. "We'll get him settled in before studding him. I think he'll make a magnificent horse for you, Mr. Sundown—that is, if you're still interested in one "with spirit", as you phrased it when we spoke a couple of months ago."

He nodded. "How will you settle him?"

"I was going to start today but my brother Mical stopped by before I could get a good start with him..." She trailed off, looking away from him to study the horse's shiny mane.

Jared's stomach clenched. "Mical Edwards? The bartender? He's your brother?" She nodded, still not meeting his eyes. From her demeanor, he knew then that she knew about Mical and Elise. Banked anger fanned to life again and he clenched his hands into fists, muttering curses under his breath. She finally glanced at him and her eyes widened when she saw his expression. He took grim pleasure in the hint of fear that

darkened her expression. At that moment, Mical's image superimposed itself over hers and she became the perfect target. When he blinked, she was Alyra again but she still owed him for what her brother had done.

With a growl of frustration, he spun on his heel and stormed from the stables, trying to cool down before he did something he might regret. He told himself Alyra wasn't responsible for the sins of her brother, regardless of ancient pack laws. She was powerless to stop his actions, just as Elise's parents hadn't been able to stop her, as evidenced by her hasty escape with her lover. Otherwise, his promised mate would be safe and sound in her room right this minute, ready to marry him in a few days' time.

Gradually, his anger cooled as he paced the grounds for a long time without a destination. As he walked, he told himself not to hold Alyra accountable. He was almost back to the main house and had just about convinced himself to accept what had happened when he remembered her impromptu ride that afternoon while he and Elise toured the property with their mothers, searching for a suitable place to erect the tent for their wedding. His eyes narrowed when he recalled the brief conversation the two women had engaged in, and then the way Elise had disappeared within a minute of Alyra's departure. Once more, his rage swelled when he made the connection between the two events and realized the only logical explanation was that she had arranged for Elise to meet Mical somewhere, on Jared's land.

Old-fashioned and barbaric, maybe, but in his eyes she was as culpable for endangering the pack's future as Mical and Elise. They had all conspired to put him in this position, whether or not their motives had been malicious. That didn't matter. Only setting things right mattered.

With renewed purpose, Jared turned from the main house and strode back to the stables. Alyra Edwards was a worthy substitute for the punishment he wanted to direct toward her brother. For the first time in a couple of hours, he wasn't as worried about the future as he had been. Whatever had lightened his mood—his impending meeting with Alyra or having solved his problem—he didn't care.

Even finding she had left the building didn't sour his mood. As he made his way toward her sleeping quarters, he decided it was a fortuitous turn of events that would make what he had planned that much more convenient.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alyra tossed and turned on the narrow bed. The way Jared had torn out of the stables after learning of her relation to Mical worried her. Her fear grew. What would he do if he found out Mical and Elise were involved? Did he already know? Was that why he had left so abruptly? And why had he been livid? Was his anger directed toward her?

Her head throbbed under the onslaught of the thoughts stabbing at her mind and she closed her eyes, trying to relax. Sleep was proving elusive but she would be content just to clear her thoughts of Jared. With a sigh, she rolled over yet again, punching her pillow in an attempt to form it into a comfortable shape.

In the midst of laying down her head, the sound of footsteps on the small porch caused her to jerk upright. Logic told her anyone calling on her after midnight would only come because of a problem with one of the horses. Much as she didn't want any of her charges to be ailing or troubled, dealing with an ill or stressed horse was preferable to the alternative her mind conjured.

Even before the sharp rap on her door, she knew it was Jared. Maybe her increased senses picked up his smell. She fancied she heard his heartbeat in her ears but realized the racing percussion was her own as she slid from the bed. Her mouth was dry as cotton when she started toward the door, forgoing a robe because her flannel pajamas were more than modest. His rapping came again, even briefer and sounding angry. She cursed a vivid imagination, trying to dismiss her fear, but found her heart lodged in her throat when she opened the door.

He stood on her doorstep like a vengeful god, towering over her, though there were only a few inches difference in their actual heights. The angry scowl on his face did

nothing to ease her apprehension. She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to hide her reaction behind a mask of indifference. "Yes, Mr. Sundown? Is there a problem with Achilles or one of the other horses?"

"I think you know what the problem is." He forced his way inside, slamming the door with a resounding thump.

Alyra shook her head. "I have no idea —"

He cut her off. "You helped him, didn't you? Did you arrange all their meetings, maybe even introduce them?" The way Jared closed in on her forced Alyra backward to escape him. "Are you plotting with those who seek to take leadership of the Sundown Pack from me? Or were you merely helping your brother betray the pack because of some misguided sense of family duty?"

Alyra gasped. "You know?" She continued to move backward, her heart thudding in her ears.

"Of course I know. I left my faithless fiancée and her lover earlier tonight as they prepared to sail away without a care in the world." He took another step forward, pinning her against the wall. "Why did you do it?"

The frustration and confusion in Jared's eyes were enough to make Alyra reach out to touch his shoulder. "He's my brother and he loves her. It wasn't to hurt you." She bowed her head, trying to hide her pain. "I had no idea you loved Elise so much." Did that thick rasp really belong to her? She winced at having betrayed her emotions so blatantly.

Fortunately, he seemed beyond noticing. "I don't love her but I needed her." He shook his head, making his dark hair flip forward onto his forehead. "I have to have a mate by the ascension. You know that, so how could you betray my family, the pack and me to help Mical?"

She lifted her head, squaring her shoulders. "They obviously love each other but no one would let them be together because of the snobbish way our pack lives. Can't you just leave them alone?"

His eyes gleamed. "Oh, I have. I let them go. Not with my blessing but because I have no choice. Mical and Elise are now out of my reach." Jared shifted forward, pressing his body fully against hers with an intimate air that caused her breath to catch in her throat. "But you aren't."

Her eyes widened at the husky pitch of his voice and when he stroked a finger down her cheek, she didn't know whether to flinch or press closer. "What are you going to do?" The question should have emerged with confidence, showing a lack of fear, but the breathlessness in her tone betrayed her.

His answer was silent but earthshaking. Alyra trembled when his mouth slanted over hers with firm possessiveness. She placed her hands on his chest, intent on pushing him away but somehow found her fingers grabbing handfuls of his sweater in an attempt to pull him closer. Daydreams she'd had of this moment for the past four years, while working for the Sundowns, couldn't compare to the reality. A moan escaped her when he parted her lips with the pressure of his to sweep his tongue inside, exploring the moist recesses with thorough efficiency.

A chill struck her and sanity returned. He was so aloof and that wasn't the way she wanted it to be. Being secretly in love with him, she had imagined many times that he might suddenly see her as a woman, instead of just the horse trainer, and sweep her into his arms to take her passionately. Never in her dreams had his actions been motivated by anger. There was no mistaking the way he held himself apart from the kiss and it gave her the courage to push against him while wrenching her mouth from his.

He didn't back up, just stared down at her with brooding eyes. His silence was as unnerving as the kiss had been. Her mouth flew open in an attempt to fill the stillness. "What do you want from me?"

"Restitution."

Eyes wide, she shook her head. "What does that mean?"

"Your brother stole my mate, leaving me in a precarious position." The muscles in his shoulders flexed when he shrugged. "There is an easy answer."

Her mouth was too dry to form the question but her eyes must have done so.

"The solution is simple, Alyra. I'm claiming you."

A hysterical urge to laugh rose in her but she reined it in, knowing he wouldn't appreciate the show of hilarity. *More like incredulous disbelief*, she amended silently. Surely, he was joking—not to be funny but to punish her for her perceived role in his current crisis. *There is no way he truly means to claim me as his mate. He will never accept an Omega for his wife and the pack will never acknowledge me as Lupina*

"Yes." He nodded slowly, emphasizing the word by drawing it out in a sibilant, sexy hiss that incited shivers to race up her spine. He jutted his pelvis forward, pressing his hardened cock into her hip and pinning her more firmly against the wall.

Her eyes widened when she read the sincerity in his gaze. "You're mad." Anger clouded his reason. He had to come to his senses.

"I'm irate but I'm not crazy. I'll admit this is spontaneous but why not? It solves my problem and holds you accountable for your actions."

"So, my punishment is to sleep with you?" She tried to interject a note of mockery but feared her breathless excitement showed through. A devious voice inside her head was urging her to go along with him, to spend a longed-for night in his arms while he wasn't thinking logically enough to consider all the consequences. In the morning, when he came to his senses, that would be the end of it. She would have to leave Evergreen Island and her beloved horses but it seemed like a small price to pay for even a second of the sexual bliss she could find with Jared.

His face tightened. "It won't be a punishment. You'll enjoy it more than you have any right to."

She didn't respond, waiting for his next move. It came without warning as he lifted her into his arms, seemingly carrying her without effort despite their similarity in height. Her hands locked around the back of his neck, both to secure her position and to

stroke the silky black strands resting there. Any thought of protesting died when he lowered her to the double bed in the corner, coming down on top of her. His unfamiliar weight tethering her to the mattress was a welcome burden and her heart pounded against her ribs when his mouth slanted over hers in another deep kiss that seemed to imprint his lips on hers.

His hands fastened around her wrists and brought them over her head, where he held them with one of his, leaving the other free to roam over the buttons of her pajama top. She sighed as his tongue swept into her mouth and tried to meet it dart for dart while his hand dealt with the buttons. Her breath emerged as a ragged gasp against his mouth when he pushed aside the lapels of the top to cup one of her breasts with his large palm.

Excitement surged through her at his touch. It was unbelievable that he was finally touching her. If not for the arousing proof his hand offered, she would have thought it was yet another dream featuring him. The kind of dream that left her wet and aching when she woke.

The nipple beaded as he rolled it gently between his fingers. His mouth continued to devour hers and his hand moving so softly across her breast was a maddening contrast. Alyra arched her hips, seeking his cock with her pussy, wanting to feel skin against skin instead of the barrier of jeans and flannel pajama pants separating them.

Jared thwarted her attempts by breaking the kiss to slide down a few inches and clamp his thighs tightly around hers, leaving her unable to move to find any relief for the pressure building in her pussy. His dark head dipped to taste her breast, eliciting a moan that originated in the back of her throat. It was both delicious and frustrating being at his mercy.

"Jared." What was she asking? Did she want him to stop or to hurry up? Not sure herself, she bit her tongue and vowed to remain quiet. She couldn't risk an impulsive declaration of love escaping her. It would be so humiliating to reveal her deepest emotions—he was only in bed with her because of his anger over losing Elise to Mical.

He suckled the nipple into his mouth while his free hand continued to roll the nipple of her other breast, occasionally pinching it with enough force to almost cause pain while emphasizing the swollen, aroused state of the bud. Driven to share something more but knowing she couldn't express her true emotions, she arched her back, straining against his hand holding her arms over her head in an attempt to offer more. He accepted the gift by taking in more of her breast and his tongue flicked across her nipple with teasing strokes. She moaned at the touch, filled with satisfaction. Did it matter if the satisfaction was somewhat empty, that it lacked emotional depth because he felt nothing for her and it showed?

When he took his time exploring her breasts with his hand and mouth, building her excitement to a fever pitch, she decided it didn't matter. All that mattered was physical sensation. It would have to sustain her for a long time, so she should wring every drop of pleasure from the experience. Jared continued his teasing caresses, making Alyra's impatience grow, as did the wet heat flooding her pussy. He sucked a pert nipple into his mouth, breathing against the bud. She squirmed against him, wanting to feel an orgasm overtake her—one shared with him.

"You're so eager." He rasped his teeth along her nipple, making her cry out with a mix of pleasure and pain. "Were you so eager to help Elise betray me?"

"It had nothing to do with you. Ahh, please..." Alyra arched her back as he sucked more of her breast into his mouth while lavng the hardened peak. "Please, Jared."

He spoke against her sensitive flesh. "It had everything to do with me." Jared's mouth turned rough, and he bit her nipple forcefully, while sucking ever harder. The combination was maddening, and she sobbed, arching her hips in search of anything with which to satisfy the ache in her pussy.

She longed for him to finish what he had started. Only her need for release could rival her need to have him touch her indefinitely. She yearned for him to take her, while dreading the moment when he would withdraw and leave her.

She experienced a spark of hope when he lifted his head from her breast, released her wrists and brought both of his hands to the waistband of her pajama pants. As he stopped straddling her, she lifted her hips to assist him in removing the pajamas and panties underneath. When he didn't return to her but instead stepped onto the floor, her heart dropped. Had it all been a game? Was this her punishment, to be brought this far before rejecting her? Maintaining her silence, she watched with hurt eyes as he walked away from her.

He stopped after two steps and began shedding his clothes. Her eyes widened with appreciation when she saw his muscled torso. He had well-defined abs and his arms rippled with lithe, lean muscle when he moved.

Her eyes dropped to his hands when he unbuttoned his jeans and slid down the zipper. Jared kicked off his shoes and removed his pants slowly, making her mouth water with anticipation.

When he stood completely naked before her, his cock drew her gaze. It was long and thick, stained a vibrant crimson from his arousal. Dark hair shadowed his testicles, from which his shaft jutted forward almost angrily, as if echoing Jared's emotions. Responding to the need to have him fill her, she parted her thighs and reached for him, only then realizing she had left her arms over her head where he placed them earlier. He moved with the same wolfish grace in human form as he did in his other form, each muscle tautening and releasing with his fluid steps. Her stomach quivered when he returned to the bed and knelt by her feet.

Jared's hands were warm and large on her thighs when he pushed them apart. His body filled the space he'd created when he lay on his stomach. His breath wafted over her inflamed pussy and Alyra gasped at the sensations it provoked. He hadn't even tasted her yet but she was ready to come.

He inhaled deeply. "Your scent is intoxicating. Spicy but sweet. I can smell your arousal, how much you want me. Now to taste your need."

Alyra's stomach fluttered at his words, and her lower body tightened with anticipation. The thought of having his mouth on her so intimately nearly made her black out with the expected pleasure. So long had she dreamed of this moment that it seemed impossible he was poised to lick her pussy.

In a second, fantasy became reality as his questing tongue invaded her slick folds. She cried out, nearly climaxing just from knowing he was touching her. His tongue moved with sure, certain strokes over her pussy, eliciting a barrage of sensations that were new to her. Men had gone down on her before, but it had never been like this. She could die from the pleasure, and most of it still came just from the knowledge of who her partner was.

With a deep breath, she tried to quell her girlish excitement and let her body surrender to just the physical feelings overwhelming her. Jared traced her swollen lips before plunging his tongue into her slit. He sought her clit and she cried out at his first swipe across the bud. Alyra arched her hips, wanting more of his magical tongue and receiving it when he swept lower. She gasped when he probed deeper. Convulsions of ecstasy racked her body. Imagining the exact moment when his cock would replace his tongue, joining them as one for a short period, increased her arousal, bringing her to the verge of orgasm.

He spent several moments testing the depths of her opening, plunging his tongue in and out in mimicry of the motion his cock would soon perform, before returning to her clit. This time, Jared drew her clit gently into his mouth. Her heart thrummed in her ears as he continued sucking and heat radiated outward from his mouth, flooding her body with warmth. The warmth turned to fire as release swept over her and she cried out his name, barely able to hold in the words she longed to say as pleasure consumed her. Love and desire swirled together into one intense emotion and she couldn't hope to separate them.

Before she could gather her scattered thoughts, Jared repositioned himself between her thighs, his cock aligned with her pussy. She lifted her hips, wanting to sheath his

cock before the last spasms of pleasure faded away but he eased back, preventing her from doing so. His eyes locked with hers, his expression serious.

"I am claiming you, Alyra. Do you acquiesce to my claim?"

She gritted her teeth, wanting to scream at him to enter her. "Please, Jared..."

"Do you accept me?"

"Oh." Alyra tossed her head with frustration. Her hips inched up but he put a hand on her stomach, holding her down. "Can't we talk about this later?" His cock had to be throbbing for release. Why did he have to ruin the moment with talk of mating when he knew it was impossible? Why did he want to break her heart with tantalizing visions of a reality that could never exist?

"You are my mate. Do you give way?" As he asked yet again, he circled his hips, gyrating the head of his cock around her opening and brushing against her clit.

The sensations were too powerful to ignore. His manipulation annoyed her but she was beyond caring about the consequences. "Dammit, yes. Claim me. Now!"

At her words, he surged inside her pussy, his cock filling her to her stretching point, making her groan. It almost hurt to be so filled but she didn't ask him to withdraw. After wanting it for so long, there was no way she would reject his lovemaking. Sneaky bastard must have realized that, she thought to herself. Still, she was too consumed with bliss to voice her annoyance.

Jared's pace was hard and forceful, staking his claim while pinning her to the mattress. She was so at his mercy that she could barely thrust in return. In fact, she could only hold on for the ride and let his movements sweep her along with him. The pleasure was just as intense as it would have been if she had set the pace.

He rotated his hips every couple of thrusts, rubbing her clit with his cock as he filled her pussy. Alyra clung to him, mindlessly arching against him, not sure if she was moving in synch with him, but unable to slow down and focus on doing so. Each time he surged inside her, his testicles tickled her pussy, and the reminder of how intimately entwined they were renewed her desire, sending her into an ever-increasing frenzy of

need that obliterated common sense and reason. Only they existed, just their two physical forms, temporarily joined as one, straining for completion.

As his cock surged deeply inside her once more, convulsions built in her pussy, sweeping outward to overwhelm her with a powerful orgasm. With a groan, he gave in to his own need for release and expelled his satisfaction inside her in hot spurts.

After it was over, he stayed inside her for several moments but neither of them spoke. She didn't know what he was feeling and his inscrutable expression betrayed nothing but she knew how she felt—like a fool. How could she have let things get so far out of hand? Making love with Jared was the biggest mistake she had ever made. He didn't want her. He only wanted someone to lash out at and she was convenient.

As if to reinforce the thought, he withdrew from her and rolled onto his side, his back to her. Still, he didn't speak and she refused to break the fragile silence, lest she reveal more than she wanted to about her emotions.

In retaliation, Alyra rolled onto her side away from Jared. The first streak of tears caught her by surprise and she muffled her face with the pillow to mute any sounds she made. Having him catch her crying would be the ultimate humiliation.

No, that was reserved for tomorrow, when he withdrew his claim. She knew it was coming and had to prepare herself for it. That's what she wanted, wasn't it? Tonight had been a one-time thing. She had embraced the idea of having her fantasy fulfilled, even if the opportunity sprang from his anger, but she didn't want to be his mate. She couldn't be his mate. As an Omega, no one would accept her as Lupina. She wouldn't be good enough and without his love, it would be impossible to face such a daunting challenge.

It was much better to let him extricate himself from the claiming, pretend it had never happened and get off the island. It was the cost of getting her dream and she tried to tell herself it was worth never seeing him again to have had one night in his arms. Despite the hollow feeling in her chest, she almost had herself convinced when her eyes finally closed and she slept.

## **Chapter Two**

Jared faced his parents across the breakfast table, finding it difficult to focus on anything either of them said. Thoughts of the night spent with Alyra consumed him, just as uncomfortable remembrances of the way he had sneaked from her house plagued his conscience. What kind of way was that to behave with his future wife? It wasn't right to leave her bed at the crack of dawn, with only a note summoning her to the main house at one o'clock, as his parting. He hoped she had appreciated the time he gave her to collect herself but doubted it. It was more likely Alyra was fuming over his desertion and probably questioning his intent to truly claim her.

His mouth quirked with a hint of amusement when he imagined the glee that idea would give her. She might be convincing herself at this very moment that he was commanding the afternoon's meeting to tell her he had come to his senses. If he withdrew his claim, she would be ecstatic. Too bad for her that he had no intention of doing so.

"Jared, where are you this morning?"

Charlotte's shrill tone of annoyance cut into his musings and he blinked to clear his thoughts. "What, Mother?"

"You've been so quiet, practically ignoring Vasek and me. What troubles you?"

With a deep breath, Jared leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and ignoring his mother's reproving look. They would find out about Elise soon enough and it was better coming from him. "Elise is gone."

Vasek put down his fork, a frown furrowing his heavy brows. A hundred pounds and twenty years ago he had looked much like Jared but now complacency had given him the trappings of middle age. It seemed as though he hadn't considered the

possibility that someone younger or in better shape might challenge him for the position of Alpha. "Gone? Gone where?"

"Has she gone to Seattle to see about her wedding dress? Olivia mentioned she was having some problems with the designer."

Jared shook his head, resting his hands together to appear placid. "No. I mean, she has gone. Left the island and the Sundown pack."

An undignified spray of orange juice escaped Charlotte's pursed mouth. "What?"

His father shook his head. "You're mistaken. Niall wouldn't allow —"

"You're wrong, Father. She ran off with an Omega pack member. I confronted her myself."

Vasek's dark eyes widened. "And you didn't stop her? What's wrong with you, boy? You could have taken an Omega."

His shoulder lifted in a half shrug. "I might have been able to but it wouldn't have mattered. She loved him, not me. I could have forced her to stay but she never would have belonged to me." Jared forced his voice to remain steady. Betraying any hint of the anger and helplessness he had felt at Elise's desertion would make it that much more difficult to convince his father he was pleased with the turn of events. His parents were going to fight having Alyra made Lupina and if he showed any doubt, they would exploit it.

Charlotte shook her head. "That's foolish talk, Jared. Love isn't important in a match like yours. You must get her back before anyone else learns of her exploits."

He shook his head. "I released her from her vow to marry me."

Vasek's jaw dropped and he seemed to be struggling to suppress his anger. "Un-release her. You must marry that girl before the ascension."

"No." A direct challenge to his father was risky but Jared decided confrontation was the only way to get them to listen. Respectful obedience was expected but it

wouldn't do anything to further his agenda in this instance. "I have made up my mind. I wouldn't want Elise now anyway. She has been with another man."

His mother nodded, clasping her chest. Her linen napkin was still in her hand, clutched in a death grip. "That is understandable. As future Alpha, you deserve a pure mate, one who belongs only to you. We must find a substitute." She glanced at Vasek, frowning. "Would Gerard's daughter be acceptable, do you think?"

As his father nodded, Jared shook his head. "For God's sake, Lauren is seventeen. I won't marry a child."

"Unless you can think of an alternative, she'll have to do. Other girls that are suitable for you haven't been trained properly." Color tinged her cheeks. "No doubt many have gone out on full moons."

She didn't need to elaborate. In wolf form, during a full moon, it was almost impossible to stifle the sexual impulse. None of the other girls his mother would consider suitable would be virgins. Not that Alyra had been either but that wasn't information his mother needed.

"As a matter of fact, I have solved the problem. I've claimed a mate and it only requires formalizing via a legal ceremony."

"Who?" Vasek asked the question with an air of tense expectation.

"Alyra Edwards."

His father shook his head, his expression one of confusion, even as his mother gasped.

"You can't be serious. She's the horse trainer and just an Omega." Charlotte fanned herself with the napkin. "This is no time for jokes."

"I'm not joking." He looked his mother fully in the eyes. "By the old traditions, she is now my mate. By the new traditions, a wedding must take place. I leave it to you to organize. I see no reason why we can't use the same date Elise and I had reserved."

"You'll be a laughingstock. You can't marry that girl and certainly not on the day you were supposed to marry Elise." Charlotte's vehemence brought a crimson flush to her cheeks.

He shrugged. "Gossip will die but at least I will be mated by the ascension. You know what happens if I have no mate."

Vasek was nodding, wearing a resigned expression. "It's never been done but there isn't a law that says you can't discard the girl after the ascension." He stroked the stubbly beard on his chin. "Yes, why not? We'll reward her handsomely and she can disappear. With a large enough payoff, I'm certain this Omega will give up her position in the pack. We can put the blame on her for running off. Once a suitable time has passed, you'll divorce her and find a proper mate."

It was a struggle to keep from rolling his eyes but Jared managed not to. He bit down on his tongue to refute his father's assumption, knowing now wasn't the time to continue arguing, since his parents were coming around to the idea. Personally, he didn't need their approval but he knew their support would be invaluable among the pack. It would also make things easier on Alyra if they weren't openly opposed to the match. "She's joining us for lunch."

"Here?" His mother couldn't hide her aversion. "It's bad enough to go through with this farce but you expect me to entertain her?"

Enough. Jared slid back his chair, gaining his feet. He gripped the chair back while alternating his gaze between them. "I expect you to be civil. I expect you to help throw together a wedding and I expect you to maintain a positive attitude, regardless of your true feelings."

Her eyes widened with hurt as his father's voice exploded from the end of the table. "Respect your mother, boy."

Jared nodded. "I do respect her and you. That's why I'm giving you plenty of time to come to terms with this, rather than springing Alyra on you this afternoon. She will be here at one." He turned on his heel to stride from the room, not looking back. A

surge of confidence filled him. Things were going to work out. It would take some careful planning but soon, all would be as it should.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alyra waffled between obedience and open defiance by not responding to Jared's summons. Her decision would be easier if she didn't think he had summoned her to release her. That thought sent a pang shooting through her chest, forcing her to sit on the bed. Absently, she smoothed a hand down her riding breeches, while trying to brace herself for his change of heart. Last night had been incredible, more amazing than she could ever have anticipated, and she didn't think she had imagined Jared's response. It had been incredible for him too but now that he was clearheaded, he surely had realized he couldn't claim her. No doubt that was why Jared had left before she awakened, leaving only a note ordering her to come to him that afternoon.

It would be a relief to have him withdraw his claim. She tried to convince herself of that as she got to her feet to walk to the door. Alyra couldn't refuse him now, after accepting him and mating but he could still withdraw. It was a gray area in pack law but she wasn't going to make an issue of it with the Elders. She wanted him to reject her. It was for the best.

Then why did her heart hurt so much at the idea? Why were tears threatening to spill from her eyes as she navigated the path to the main house? Why couldn't her stupid heart see that she couldn't be with Jared?

Alyra was already stepping through the servants' entrance before she wondered if she should have gone around front. With a shake of her head, she discarded that idea, knowing only visitors used the front entrance. As an Omega and employee of the Sundown family, she wouldn't have been welcomed at the ornate front door. Griffin, the butler, would greet her politely on the grounds if he ran into her but should she arrive via the front entrance, his nose would wrinkle and there would be no mistaking his disapproval.

The mudroom that doubled as the servants' entrance led directly into the enormous kitchen, filled with industrial-sized appliances and every convenience imaginable. Betsy, the day cook, stood at the stove, stirring something that made Alyra's nostrils twitch with interest. Her mouth watered and she paused by the older woman to sniff the contents of the pot. "Smells good."

Betsy jumped and then turned to Alyra, shaking her head. Her girth filled most of the space in front of the stove, forcing Alyra to lean over to get a better look. "What is it?"

"It's a sauce for the duck."

"I wish we lowly servants ate this well." She traded a grin with Betsy. "Have you seen Mr. Sundown?"

"Older or younger?"

"Jared."

Betsy waved her spoon toward the hallway leading to the front of the house. "Last I saw him was at breakfast. I didn't hear the details but he got his mother's feathers ruffled and his father was in a foul mood. I was told to expect a guest for lunch. My guess is he's in the dining room."

A frown pleated Alyra's face. Had Jared forgotten the appointment he commanded she attend? She glanced at the clock on the wall, finding she had only five minutes before she would be late. At a loss, she continued to stand in the kitchen, not sure if she should hunt down Jared, especially with company coming. What he was going to say wouldn't take long but it wasn't something that should be done in front of others. No one needed to know what they had done. It would be easier for all involved to keep last night a secret.

"Did you come to stand over my shoulder, Alyra?"

Betsy's question forced her wandering mind to return and she shook her head. "I was supposed to meet Mr. Sundown at one but I think he might have forgotten. I don't want to disturb him."

"Why not tell Griffin you are here? He can deliver the message discreetly to Mr. Jared and you won't be in trouble for not showing up."

"Good idea. Where is he?"

"Probably in the serving area off the dining room." Betsy rolled her eyes. "He does insist on overseeing the serving of the meals and Griffin isn't happy unless he's inspected each detail beforehand."

After obtaining directions from Betsy, Alyra set off in search of the butler. The house was beautiful, decorated with plush fabrics and carpets in muted tones, a plethora of antiques and *objets d'art* that cost more than Alyra's lifetime salary could ever equal. She didn't take long exploring the rooms but it was a rare opportunity to see how the other half lived. In the four years she had been employed by the Sundowns, she had never been farther inside the house than the kitchen or Jared's office.

The cook's directions were concise and she found the small room without difficulty. Griffin was examining the contents of a silver tray, nodding his approval to the young woman in the maid's uniform, who was waiting for his cue to serve the appetizer. His bushy white brows drew together in a frown when he saw Alyra lurking in the doorway. "May I assist you, Ms. Edwards?"

His expression made her feel like a naughty child who had gone somewhere she shouldn't. She nodded, trying to hide her reaction. "I was supposed to meet Mr. Sundown at one but I think he must have forgotten."

The butler waved a gloved hand. "The Sundowns are expecting a guest."

"I know. Betsy suggested I leave a message with you for Jar...Mr. Sundown, to let him know I showed up, asking him to find me at his convenience."

The butler issued a soft sigh, making little effort to hide his annoyance. "Very well. I shall see to it when an opportunity arises."

Alyra forced a warm smile she didn't feel. "Thank you."

The maid lifted the tray and Alyra turned to go, just as Griffin opened the door for the other woman. Alyra froze when Jared called her name, silently cursing her bad luck. This definitely wasn't the proper time to have the necessary conversation. With a grimace that might pass for a smile, she turned to Jared but hesitated in the doorway upon seeing his mother and father at the table, their expressions ones of blatant disapproval.

Jared got up from the brocade-upholstered chair and came to meet her. Alyra's eyes widened and her stomach dropped when he put his arm around her shoulders to draw her inside the room. Automatically, she shook her head but he paid no attention, forcing her along. Realization dawned that the fourth plate at the table was for her. Oh, God! He wasn't changing his mind. He hadn't come to his senses. Even worse, he had told his parents. There was no escaping now.

"Mother, Father, this is Alyra."

Vasek nodded but his expression held no trace of warmth. "Alyra."

"Mr. Sundown." It was ridiculous. She had spoken to his family many times but always in capacity of a servant while fetching their horses or answering their questions about the stock.

Charlotte's nose twitched as though she smelled something unpleasant. It couldn't be the dish the maid was about to serve because it smelled so good it made Alyra's mouth water, even in the present circumstances. No, it must be Alyra she found so disagreeable. "Mrs. Sundown."

"I'm pleased you feel so comfortable with us, Alyra, to dress casually. What an unusual statement."

She swallowed down a retort at the criticism, while resisting the urge to look down at her riding outfit. Instead, she forced her tone to remain neutral. "I didn't realize we were having lunch. Jared's invitation was brief." And terse, his words leaving little doubt of his reaction had she failed to show up. Now she knew why. He wouldn't want to be embarrassed in front of his parents. Not any more than he was already.

Jared led her to a seat, assisting her by pushing it in once she sat down. As she sat at the massive table, eyeing the delicate china, gold-rimmed crystal goblets and silver flatware, Alyra's inadequacies assailed her. She cast a surreptitious glance at her future mother-in-law, noting the perfection of Charlotte's manicure, the excellent cut of her gray morning jacket and the precise way she had tied the lacy collar of her white shirt. Glancing down at her own hands, she quickly hid them under the tablecloth, hoping no one would notice the jagged edges of her unpainted nails.

An arc of electricity sparked between Jared and Alyra when he sat beside her, patting her thigh for a second before leaning back in his seat. He gave every indication of being relaxed and his presence soothed her nerves a bit. She forced her spine straight, until it hurt, and raised her chin.

Her false bravado lasted through the first two courses, mainly because she wasn't required to say anything. They ate in silence, the air thick with tension. She prayed it would be a quick meal but her hopes were dashed when Charlotte waved to Griffin after the maid had served the main entrée. Her heart skipped a beat when the butler closed the door, leaving the four of them in the opulent dining room, with the illusion of privacy.

"How do you propose to pull this off, Jared?" Charlotte shook her head. "Look at her. She doesn't know anything she needs to in order to be Lupina."

"She'll learn."

"There's no time before the ascension. You must reconsider."

Alyra admired Jared's restrained way of setting his fork on his plate. She wondered if the deep breath he drew, audible to her, calmed him any.

"Mother, this is not open for debate. I could use your assistance but if you won't give it, we will manage."

Charlotte sighed. "I will do what I must for the good of the pack." Her eyes bored into Alyra. "You must think you have it made now, girl, but you will soon find you

have undertaken more than you can handle." Before Alyra could reply, she said, "When will you be holding the ceremony?"

Jared shrugged. "We already have the minister scheduled and the invitations sent. It shouldn't be a problem to send them again, with Alyra's name instead of Elise's."

Vasek's mouth opened and closed a couple of times before he cleared his throat. "You can't mean for the ceremony to be so public."

"It's indecent, Jared. Really. Everyone will know your bride was a last-minute substitute but you can't make it so blatant if you expect those in the pack to follow her. You must do this discreetly."

"Mother—"

"I agree." Alyra didn't know where she found the courage to speak. "Your mother is right, Jared. If you insist on doing this, I want it done quickly, without the pack witnessing. I don't want Elise's castoff wedding date or dress. Let's just get it over with."

He tilted his head, seemingly considering her words. Finally, he nodded. "If that's what you want. What do you suggest?"

Although he addressed the question to Alyra, Charlotte answered before she could compose her thoughts.

"We'll ask Reverend Cooley to come out to the house tomorrow evening. Your father and I will be the witnesses. After the deed is done, I will tell a select few of the change in plans. By the time of the ascension ceremony everyone will know, without the necessity of a public spectacle."

Jared shrugged. "Is that fine with you, Alyra?"

Left with no choice, she nodded. What could she say to the plans? Common sense told her to object loudly. If she mentioned having any doubts, Charlotte and Vasek would immediately side with her. Jared would be under tremendous pressure to reconsider. That's what she should want but her heart urged a different course of

action. A tiny part of her rejoiced in being chosen as Jared's mate. Not because she wanted to be Lupina, but because she would finally belong with Jared as she had dreamed of during the past few years. Did it really matter that she was only a substitute for Elise? Hadn't last night shown her that Jared could please her physically, as she could him? Wouldn't the rest follow in time?

She looked up at Jared, concentrating on the furrow in his brow as he and his mother discussed arrangements. Her heart stuttered with a combination of hope and fear, not knowing what the future held as Jared's mate.

## Chapter Three

Alyra's head spun at the speed with which Charlotte made the arrangements. She had passed the rest of the afternoon in silence in the stable after escaping the dining room, hiding out in Achilles' stall, hoping to calm her nerves. She was adjusting to the change in circumstances but still hadn't grasped all the ramifications the next morning, when the maid roused her at six with an *invitation* from Charlotte.

Now, a few minutes since answering the thinly veiled summons, she was glad she had dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, deliberate choices designed to annoy her future mother-in-law, because she found herself at the mercy of a militant little seamstress named Aria. She had seen the woman around Evergreen Island many times but had never had occasion to converse with her. There was no conversation now as she was poked, prodded, turned and measured by Aria's assistants while the seamstress and Charlotte stood off to the side, discussing styles.

"Is this really necessary?" As she asked the question, one of the women poked her with a straight pin, as if in retaliation for inquiring.

Charlotte looked up from Aria's sketchpad, her brow wrinkled with annoyance. "Of course it is. The ceremony is private but there will be photographs in the paper and you'll have a painting hung in the gallery. You must have a proper dress."

"Will it be finished in time for tonight?" She eyed the bolts of silk, organza and lace stacked on a chaise lounge in the corner of Charlotte's sitting room and shook her head at the magnitude of the project.

"Of course." Aria said nothing else to her during the course of the next three hours. Alyra did as she they told her, finding her quiet resentment simmering ever closer to the surface as they treated her like a mannequin rather than a person. They allowed her no input on the design of the dress and ignored or dismissed any questions she asked.

By the time she was allowed to sit and eat for a few moments, she was beyond caring about the dress. Instead, her mind circled with the worry that this would set the pattern for her life. Would she always be expected to bow and scrape to Charlotte's commands? Could she ever be worthy in the eyes of her mother-in-law and thus not require guidance on every little thing? Was Jared really worth facing a lifetime of suppressing her personality to be what the others thought she should be?

As the hours passed, the dress took shape, until finally, in the early afternoon, she stood in a silk sheath. Touches of lace around the décolletage and hemline gave the silk dress a bridal feel and the simplicity of the style, necessitated by the lack of time, suited her. Although there were a few things left to finish, she could see it would be a beautiful dress. Some of her anger at the day's events flowed away and she gave Charlotte and Aria a warm smile. "It's lovely."

"Yes." Charlotte's terse answer revealed nothing and she immediately returned her attention to Aria, making Alyra feel rejected anew.

A knock on the door interrupted all progress and Charlotte went to answer it. Vasek entered, accompanied by Rodney Sewell, the only attorney on the island. Alyra watched with narrowed eyes as Rodney, Charlotte and Vasek conferred over paperwork the attorney spread out on the Victorian writing table. She clenched her teeth to avoid saying something rash when Vasek waved her over, not even extending the courtesy of using her name.

She stepped away from the mirror and swept toward them, finding the dress gave her a bit of confidence. Perhaps because it allowed her to meet them as an equal, if only in the fashion department. "Yes?"

"Sign this." Vasek stabbed a finger against a solid line. "And here and here." He indicated two more forms. "Initial these."

With a frown, she leaned over the desk, intent on examining the papers. "What is it?"

"A prenuptial agreement."

She gasped. "What?"

"It's standard. Just sign." Charlotte's attempt at reassuring her lacked any sincerity. "Once you sign, Jared will sign as well."

"Do you have an attorney, Miss Edwards?"

She shook her head, her heart jumping at the pleased gleam that entered Sewell's eyes when she divulged that information. "I never expected to need one. What am I agreeing to here?" She let out another startled gasp when Vasek pushed a chair against her knees, forcing her to sit down or fall down. The three of them stood over her, intimidating her with glares of reproach at her slowness. She swallowed down the urge to mindlessly obey, focusing her gaze on Sewell. "What are the terms?"

"You'll be generously compensated when you divorce. As long as you don't act in an inappropriate manner during the marriage, you will receive a monthly stipend and a home anywhere in the world, provided it is not on Evergreen Island."

Charlotte interrupted Sewell's oily recitation. "Please understand it would be awkward to have you remain on the island after a divorce."

Sewell didn't wait for Alyra to respond. "If you should have children, they will remain with their father. Again, you will be generously compensated for any inconvenience."

Alyra shook her head. "No way."

"Be reasonable. This is all standard."

She turned her head to glare up at Vasek. "Somehow, I doubt that clause is standard. I want to speak with Jared."

He couldn't seem to hide his pleasure in saying, "He's not on the island. I sent him into Seattle to handle some business for me."

She nodded. "I see. What else is in here?"

"You will maintain proper decorum at all times. Should you cause a scandal, you immediately agree to a divorce. If you refuse, you lose all compensation."

"Look." Vasek took the paper from Sewell, slamming it down on the desk. "This is the most important thing. We've set the time limit on the marriage at two years. You behave and you'll walk away from this arrangement wealthier than you can imagine. Provide Jared with an heir before the dissolution and you'll be set for life. That's all you really need to know."

"Time limit?" Alyra looked at Charlotte, trying to hide the desperate confusion swirling through her. "I don't understand."

"You didn't think this was permanent, did you?" Charlotte blinked, as if baffled by the concept. "Jared only needs to be mated to ascend. After he takes his place and everyone settles in, he'll have no need for you. We're merely making certain there are no ambiguities in the arrangement, such as the issue of children. Vasek and I prefer you not be the mother of our future grandchild but we want that contingency covered."

"I assure you, it's all fair."

She shook her head at Sewell, denying his assertion. "Your assurance means nothing. I know who you work for." Alyra slid away from the table, gaining her feet. "I won't do this. Jared didn't tell me anything about this."

"Unless you sign these papers, there will be no ceremony."

She lifted a shoulder. "I don't care." Anger propelled her to the doorway. She didn't even stop to gather her clothes as she stormed through the house, ignoring the chidings issued from behind her. Not too loudly, she noted sourly. Mustn't have anyone gossiping about what was happening at the Sundown place.

The rage carried her to her small home and lingered while she packed two suitcases. She was in the middle of filling the third when her door slammed open and Jared stalked inside. A look in his direction revealed he wasn't pleased but she was beyond caring. She continued packing, dumping in toiletries without regard to neatness.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jared asked.

"I'm leaving."

He took two steps toward her, his expression one of disbelief. "I thought we had settled all this. It was a shock to have Mother tell me you had changed your mind. I was barely off the plane when she came running out to tell me, making no attempt to hide her pleasure." He snorted. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm just saving us two years and you a pile of money. Oh and, of course, avoiding tainting your precious bloodline with my genes." She slammed shut the case, zipping it so fast that her fingers stung. She heaved it beside the other two and paused to glance around, making sure she had retrieved everything that belonged to her.

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm confused. What are you babbling about?"

She turned on him, her eyes flashing. "I'm 'babbling about' that damn prenup agreement which spells out exactly what you expect of me and for just how long. I guess it slipped your mind to mention it, huh?"

"Shit. I forgot all about that. Father mentioned it last night but I left early this morning and didn't have a chance to see you." Jared's brow furrowed. "What's the big deal? He told me it was all standard."

She sniffed. "Read it and tell me that."

"There really isn't time —"

"Go to hell. I've had enough with being bossed around and told what to do. I'm done." She made a slicing motion with her hands. "This was insane. I knew it from the start but I ignored it. I never should have let emotions get the best of me."

"What do you mean?"

She bit her tongue as punishment for saying something she had never planned to reveal. Her mind racing, Alyra pretended to misunderstand his question. "I'm talking about your mother and her mission to mold me into whatever she thinks I should be. She treats me worse than a child, Jared. She doesn't respect me and worse, she makes no effort to hide the fact." A wave of exhaustion swept through her and she sagged forward, hugging her middle. "I don't want to be your mother's puppet the rest of my life...or even the next two years."

Jared shook his head, his irritation clear. "Whatever has you so upset, I suggest you get over it. I know Mother can be difficult but she only wants what is best for the pack. You're not what she had in mind but she's doing her best to help you. Frankly, I'd expect a little gratitude, not all this complaining. It isn't every day an Omega becomes Lupina. Did you think it would be easy?"

A bitter laugh escaped her. "No. I didn't think at all. If I had, we wouldn't be in this situation."

"No, if your goddamned brother and my faithless fiancée had done any thinking, we wouldn't be in this situation. It's up to both of us to make the best of it." His tone lost the sharp edge of anger and he seemed to be trying to calm down. "I'll go read the paperwork to see if anything is unfair. Just get ready for the ceremony. We're getting married in two hours."

She didn't bother to respond, other than to sink into the nearest chair. The resounding slam of the door behind him revealed he was still angry. Alyra wanted to be angry but her heart ached too painfully to allow anything to intrude besides the hurt she was feeling. It wasn't a secret that Jared didn't love her. He had made it plain from the start that she had earned her position as future Lupina because of Mical's betrayal. So why did it hurt so much to have him make it so clear that he had no love for her? Damn her treacherous heart and damn Jared for making her feel this way.

Jared's stomach turned over with disgust when he read the prenuptial agreement spread out on his mother's writing table. His disgust wasn't just with his parents and the attorney. It was also directed toward himself for the harsh way he had spoken to Alyra. He'd had the nerve to tell her she should be grateful for what his parents were doing. After reading the conditions of the prenup, he was amazed she hadn't done more than simply refuse to go through with the wedding.

Sick, he shook his head. "What were you thinking, to do this?"

"We're protecting our family."

"You're sabotaging everything." He glared at his father, daring him with his eyes to repeat his words about protecting the family. "No wonder she tore out of here. I wouldn't sign this damn thing. You're predicting our marriage will fail before it even begins."

"Be practical, Jared. It's obvious your union can't work. It's better to have the terms of your deal set forth before you make it official." Charlotte attempted to touch his shoulder but he shrugged away her hand. That didn't deter her. "It might have been a shock for the girl but she had to realize upfront that this is finite and that she won't be a Sundown just because she's maneuvered you into having to take her as a mate."

"I maneuvered her, if you must know." With a snort, he tossed the papers at Sewell's feet. "Get out. Now."

"I have to be present for the signatures—"

Jared took a step toward him. "There aren't going to be any signatures. I was amenable to a basic prenuptial agreement because I knew Father would object otherwise. I didn't expect this assault on Alyra. There's no way in hell I'd make her sign that." He turned his back on the attorney to stride to the door. "I'll be lucky to get Alyra to go through with the ceremony. It's going to take a long time to earn her trust again."

"Why do you care, son?"

He paused in the doorway to stare at his father. "Because she's my mate."

"She's trash, nothing more. If it weren't for pity getting the best of me, she and that hooligan of a brother wouldn't have gotten you into this mess. I never should have allowed their mother to become part of the Sundown pack."

"And I never should have allowed you to talk me into that damn thing." Jared turned away from them, ignoring the tears welling in his mother's eyes and strode through the house, making his way to Alyra's. Words circled through his mind as he walked but he couldn't decide what was the best way to begin. Should he apologize immediately, or first agree the terms stunk? Would it be best to smooth over the situation with the news he wouldn't force her to sign a prenuptial agreement? Or

should he tell her that he had no intention of limiting the terms of their marriage to two years? After last night, he had no intention of letting Alyra go.

With a nod as he knocked on her door, he decided that was the first thing he should make plain. She needed reassurance that he wasn't using her. In his anger last night, she had been a convenient substitute but that had changed as he had made love to her. Alyra inspired feelings in him that no woman had ever kindled. He had felt indifference for Elise, accepting their union because he had to but taking no joy in the idea. With Alyra, he couldn't wait to get the ring on her finger and make their mating legally binding in every way. He just had to convince her to go through with it and he hoped he could do so in a gentle way rather than resorting to pressuring her. But whatever means it took, he wasn't releasing her from her vow. She was his mate and she would accept that before the night was through.

She had thought about running. The suitcases had been in her hands and she had opened the door then changed her mind and closed it. After what Mical and Elise had done, she had no choice but to go through with the marriage. If Jared demanded two years from her to pay for Mical's sin of falling in love with Elise, then she would give it to him. By the ways of the pack, the sins of the father became the son's. Using that reasoning, her brother's crimes were hers. She would even sign that foul contract because it didn't matter. There would be no children because there would be no sex. If he wanted a business deal he would get it.

He couldn't expect it to be both ways though. If Jared wasn't willing to give their union an honest chance then she refused to sacrifice her love and pride on the altar of sexual desire night after night in the hopes of eliciting a spark of emotion from her husband. It was better to be businesslike from the beginning, to force herself to accept that their mating meant nothing.

When he knocked on her door, she cast another glance at her reflection in the mirror, deciding she looked passable. She had brushed her hair straight, letting it fall

down her back. A careful makeup job hid most of her strain and Visine had cleared up the red in her eyes from the storm of tears she had indulged in after accepting her fate. At another impatient knock, she rose from the vanity table and crossed the room to open the door. "Is it time?"

His eyes widened and he seemed at a loss for words. "For what?"

"Has Reverend Cooley arrived? He should be here shortly and there are a few things to finish on my dress." She swept past him, closing the door with a click. Alyra took a few steps before realizing he wasn't following. "Have you changed your mind?"

He shook his head, evidently stupefied. "I read the prenup—"

She pulled a face. "I overreacted, didn't I? It makes sense to have the details of our partnership spelled out in writing. I should have enough time to sign it while the seamstresses finish the dress." Once again, Alyra started walking, unsurprised when Jared caught up with her. His hand on her back caused a shiver of awareness to go through her and she clenched her teeth, determined to ignore the frisson of sexual attraction.

"You don't have to sign it. I sent Sewell away."

"That was silly. He'll just have to turn around and come back." She marveled at her icy façade, amazed at how well she was maintaining it, all while managing to keep her feet moving as she walked toward the main house. "As your father said, it's just standard."

"I'm sorry about Father and Mother ambushing you that way."

She shrugged. "I should have expected it. It just caught me by surprise but I'm fine now. I'm grateful they're looking after our interests." A small smile of satisfaction tried to break across her lips when she saw Jared wince but she forced it back. If she was going to be professional about this, she couldn't toy with him.

He walked beside her into the house. Alyra dismissed her discomfort at passing through the front door and continued on to Charlotte's sitting room at a militant stride, determined to get through the rest of the evening. After the ceremony, in the privacy of

whatever room Charlotte assigned her, she could give in to the tears that threatened to fall but not before then.

They seemed discomfited by her reappearance and neither Charlotte nor Vasek met her gaze. Alyra ignored their lack of welcome and walked with purpose to the writing table. She saw some of the forms spread out still and a stack of papers on the floor. Sewell hovered in the background and she was not surprised to see him. Until the ascension, Vasek was still Alpha and he wouldn't have allowed the attorney to leave, regardless of Jared's orders.

With brisk efficiency, pretending it didn't hurt, Alyra signed all the forms without speaking once. When she was done, she laid the pen on the desk and turned to Charlotte. "There is still a bit of trim to add to the dress. Where is Aria?"

With wide eyes so like her son's, she nodded. "I'll fetch her."

Alyra went to the chaise lounge that had previously held the bolts of fabric and settled into what she hoped was a serene pose, avoiding the gazes of Jared, Vasek and Sewell. Her stomach tightened into knots when Jared bent over the desk to sign the contract. She forced herself to ignore his obvious reluctance, not wanting it to soften her. She was proud that her face remained frozen in an icy expression.

When Charlotte returned, seamstresses in tow, Alyra walked past them to the other women, addressing her questions to them. She no longer felt intimidated by her mother-in-law. Having her role spelled out for her eased her need to impress Charlotte. Why bother when she would never earn her respect? Did it matter for two years? She would endure whatever the other woman threw at her.

She moved to stand on the stool so the women could finish the dress, letting her gaze focus on the mirror, though she didn't see her image. Instead she saw herself in two years, bitter and hardened from the experience of being Jared's business partner. It wasn't an attractive picture and she forced the thought from her mind, not wanting to dwell on how she would change in the next two years. By the time it was over, she

would be a completely new person. Whether a better or worse person would emerge remained to be seen.

The chiming of the doorbell interrupted her thoughts and sent the seamstresses into a flurry of activity. Vasek, Sewell and Jared had left the room and Charlotte followed suit, presumably to answer the door to the reverend, as Aria secured a veil to Alyra's hair. She placed it over her face, smiling with satisfaction. "You make a beautiful bride."

"I dress for success." With the flip remark, Alyra stepped off the stool, pausing only to thank the women for their hard work before leaving the sitting room to go in search of her errant groom and the waiting minister. Following the sound of voices, she navigated her way to what appeared to be a study a few doors down the hallway. What a romantic place for a wedding, she thought, rolling her eyes.

As she entered the room, Charlotte and Reverend Cooley stopped speaking abruptly. From the flush on the celebrant's face, whatever they had been talking about involved her and it probably wasn't flattering. She squashed the self-pity that tried to flare and marched over to Jared, while nodding to the reverend. "Can we get this done?"

The old man's eyes widened in his gaunt face and he floundered, as if searching for a response. Vasek nudged his elbow and Reverend Cooley nearly dropped his Bible. Upon clearing his throat and flipping open his Bible, he seemed to regain a measure of composure and his voice was rich when he began reciting the traditional opening for the ceremony. "Dearly beloved..."

Alyra put up her hand. "Do you have a condensed version of that, Reverend? It's been a long day."

He looked to Charlotte for guidance. Her lips were so tightly pursed as to almost have disappeared into the depths of her mouth but she managed a tight nod, her eyes spitting fire at Alyra.

With a sigh, he began again. "Jared, do you take this woman..."

Alyra let his words flow over her, drifting in a pleasant state of disbelief, only realizing it was her turn to agree to the sham of a marriage a couple of minutes later when all eyes focused on her. "I'll do my best...for a while."

"Alyra, for God's sake."

She turned to Jared, an innocent smile on her face. "I'm sorry. Wasn't that the answer you wanted?"

His mouth tightened and he looked too much like his mother for her comfort. "Could you please be serious? I know you're upset —"

"I'm not." She didn't let him finish his words, not wanting an audience and not wanting to acknowledge the hurt she still felt. Instead she squared her shoulders, forced a solemn expression and said, "I do."

Looking mollified, the cleric faced Jared. "Place the ring upon her finger."

A low groan escaped Jared. "I didn't even think about it and I was in Seattle today."

Charlotte was tugging at her snug ring and Alyra stepped forward before the other woman could get it off. She didn't want her ring. "We can skip that part, can't we, Reverend?"

"Just until I get her a ring tomorrow," Jared added.

It was clear the minister had no idea what to say as he closed his Bible with deliberate movements. "Very well. I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

When Jared dipped his head to brush his lips against hers, Alyra turned her head at the last minute and his mouth touched her cheek instead. It would have been easier to accept the traditional kiss but her heart rebelled at having anything in the charade of a ceremony resemble how it should really be if they were in love. She had to keep it all businesslike in her mind or she wouldn't get through what was required of her. Her heart ached at the way Jared stiffened at her rejection before withdrawing, a grim expression on his face.

"We're finished?" Upon the reverend's nod, she turned to Charlotte. "Which room is mine?"

Jared's fingers bit into her forearm as he pulled her against him. "I'll show you our room now, darling."

She hoped it was a bluff for the sake of Reverend Cooley as she followed behind him, struggling to keep up with the pace he set. If it wasn't, the confrontation she had hoped to put off until the following day would be happening much sooner than anticipated. Jared probably wouldn't care that she wasn't going to sleep with him, unless he had some old-fashioned notion of husbandly rights. If so she would set him straight quickly if her traitorous body would cooperate and not give in to the desire still thrumming between them.

## **Chapter Four**

Her heart sank when he led her into a room that was so masculine it had to be his. The chocolate-brown carpet seemed to turn to mud under her feet, sucking her down so she couldn't move. The sand-colored walls seemed to close in around her, forcing her nearer to the massive four-post rosewood bed with its navy and taupe spread. Her breath caught in her throat as panic welled inside her. Alyra's plan to be rational about the marriage was evaporating under the heat of standing so close to Jared.

A quiet moan escaped her when Jared cupped her upper arms, pulling her back against his chest. Darts of desire shot through her at the contact and her eyes moistened at the tender way he kissed the top of her head. Squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to regain her focus, she tried reminding herself of the decisions she had reached before marrying him. Her mind was stronger than her body—it just needed some convincing to realize that.

"Alyra."

The husky way he said her name caused her to shiver and her resolve further weakened when he repeated it, adding, "I'm sorry you've been hurt by this. My parents handled things badly and I didn't help by going to Seattle for my father." He shook his head, his chin rubbing against her hair. "When he sent me, I suspected they had planned something. In fact, I almost hoped they had because I didn't want to face the aftermath of my announcement. I'm sorry for that."

His words annoyed her and she pulled away. Maintaining a cool expression as she turned to him took every ounce of her will but she didn't falter. "I would have preferred you tell me the terms yourself, Jared." She shook her head. "Why last night's charade and all that business of claiming me in the old way? All you had to do was tell me you needed a fill-in until things settle down after your ascension. I would have

agreed. After all, it's my duty as Mical's sister to pay for his sins." The bitterness in her tone revealed more than she wanted but she couldn't call back the words now.

His brow furrowed as she spoke. "I might have handled things differently if I hadn't been so angry last night but I won't apologize for how I claimed you."

She allowed her lips to twist. "Of course not. I wouldn't expect an apology from an Alpha, Jared. I'm merely an Omega."

"Now you're Lupina."

His eyes were stormy with emotion but she didn't break contact with them. "Only for a little while. Now where is my room?"

Jared seemed on the verge of arguing for just a moment but then his shoulders slumped. "There's a room adjoining mine."

Her heart sank at being so close to him. Having him farther away would have allowed her brain to override any urgings her body wanted to indulge in. "That will work fine." With squared shoulders, she followed him to a door. Behind was a huge dressing room, larger than the small house that had come with her position as stable master. Jared's possessions barely filled up one wall and he had more clothes than any man she had ever known. Someone on staff had fetched her things from her house and had taken the time to unpack her bags. The hangers took up little space on her side.

Through the dressing room, there was another door that led to her suite. Despite her turmoil, Alyra couldn't contain the rush of pleasure when she saw the chamber. "It's lovely." The steel-gray and delicate pink should have been too harsh a contrast but they melded together to form a solid, feminine space. The furniture was sturdy but softened with elegant etchings, and an antique mirror in a black metal frame drew the eye, becoming the focal point of the area.

Before she could think of something inane to say, he was behind her again, his proximity stealing her breath. Alyra tensed when Jared wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against him. His cock pressed into her lower back, revealing the depths of

his desire. She wanted to protest, to remind him theirs was a business arrangement, but couldn't find the words.

Somehow her body was supple and cooperative as he turned her around. Alyra closed her eyes as his head lowered, parting her lips to meet his. The kiss was gentle and undemanding, despite the forceful hardness of his body. He held her tightly, as if showing her she couldn't escape him even as his mouth coaxed her lips apart. She sighed against his tongue when it probed her mouth.

Melting against him, Alyra tugged at his shirt with restless hands, anxious for something to occupy her. Her brain was trying to intrude on the hazy passion clouding her thoughts but she forced herself to ignore all the reasons why they shouldn't be doing this.

She gasped when he cupped her breasts through the dress, kneading the soft flesh firmly. His thumbs stroked her nipples confidently, making her squirm. The silk dress was suddenly too confining and she ached to be rid of it.

As if he had read her mind, Jared slid his hands from her breasts to her back, his fingers lowering the zipper in a smooth motion. The dress gaped, revealing the slip underneath. He stripped the cloth from her shoulders, letting it pool at her waist.

His mouth claimed hers again, this time with fiery intensity. His tongue breached her lips, sweeping around the moist recess behind them. Her breath was a ragged exhalation as he jerked her close, lifting her onto her toes. His cock dug into her belly insistently, just inches from the slick opening below. She arched against him, closing the distance even more. Alyra lifted one leg to wrap around his thigh, wanting him to touch her even as a small inner voice derided her lack of control. Her resolution to maintain a business partnership with Jared had been nothing but internal ramblings, apparently. How had she ever thought she could resist him?

His hand was hot on her thigh when he pushed aside the skirt and slip to touch her bare skin. There hadn't been time to think of niceties like pantyhose, for which she was now grateful.

He slid his palm up over her skin with excruciating slowness, as if determined to torture her. Alyra looked up, meeting his gaze for the first time, and saw it was costing him plenty to go so slowly. His gritted teeth, harsh breathing and dots of sweat on his forehead belied his steady hand. His tenuous control reinforced her own somehow, allowing her to keep from begging him to hurry.

A sigh escaped her when he found her pussy through the scrap of cotton shielding it. Alyra bit her tongue to hold in a cry of pleasure, reluctant to break the silence and ruin the moment when his fingers invaded her opening. She was wet with need, and he slipped two fingers into her channel without difficulty. Alyra bucked her hips, riding his hand. The center of her universe was suddenly between her thighs. Her entire body twitched in reaction when Jared thumbed her clit as he thrust his fingers deep inside her. She hovered on the edge of coming, breath trapped in her throat, every nerve in her body tensed with anticipation of the approaching release.

“Do you still think you can deny me what is mine? You belong to me.” He withdrew his fingers and pushed them inside her again, causing her to cry out. “I know it. Your body knows it. Only your foolish pride is making you refuse to accept what we are both entitled to. Two years is a long time to go without this.” His expression was almost angry as he drove his fingers into her again while circling her clit in a rhythm that seemed designed to drive her mad.

The beginning tide of an orgasm rose but she resisted. His words echoed in her head and she stiffened, forcing her hands up to push him away. She took a step back, unable to stifle a small sob of longing. “Get out of my room.” Was that husky rasp really her voice?

He stared down at her, visibly stunned by her withdrawal. “You don’t mean that.”

Jared seemed at a loss and it was almost amusing to watch him. If she hadn’t felt the same uncertainty inside, combined with the physical ache of denied satisfaction, she might have been able to send him away with a cold dismissal. Instead the silence deepened until he abruptly straightened.

"This is ridiculous. You're my wife. What kind of marriage can we have with you in one room and me in the other?"

"The temporary kind." Was that pain she saw flare in his eyes? No, surely not. It must be anger that he wouldn't get all the benefits out of his fake wife as he would from a real one.

His fingers, still coated with her juices, seemed to shake when he ran them through his hair. "Dammit, why are you doing this? That was my parents' idea. I had nothing to do with imposing a time limit."

"That's too bad, because I like the idea."

Eyes narrowed, he said, "Your body tells a different story."

She ignored his comment, unable to refute it. Alyra forced carelessness into her voice, which she was far from feeling. "Really, you can't expect me to spend the rest of my life paying for Mical running away with Elise, can you? At some point I'll want to marry a man I love."

All emotion left his face except for the tight grooves around his mouth that betrayed a hint of tension. "If you feel that way, I won't try to change your mind."

"I do." The irony of repeating the words that had bound her to him such a short time ago to confirm she didn't want to be with him forever didn't escape her. It brought her that much closer to weeping and she prayed he would leave quickly so she could indulge in the tears threatening to fall.

He spun on his heel, issuing an aloof, "Sleep well," over his shoulder as he strode from her room, slamming the door behind him. Alyra maintained her rigid posture for a long moment until she was certain he wouldn't reappear. Then she crumpled to the floor, allowing the tears to fall. The thick carpet muffled her sobs and she allowed the grief to pour from her, already mourning a relationship that would never exist, had never existed, except in her childish fantasies. The ache in her pussy was nothing compared to the pain in her heart.

Jared paced the balcony of his room, uncertain how to rid himself of his pent-up emotions. Frenetic energy thrummed through him—the kind to facilitate reckless actions, like last night. He paused in his pacing, gripping the balcony rail in a white-knuckled grasp and stared up at the moon, hoping to find calm. The half-full orb did little to soothe him though and, with a sound of disgust, he turned away.

The cool November air blew into his room from the open door as he stripped off the white shirt he had worn to the wedding, having found no time to change. Alyra had been eager to rush through everything and no wonder. The sooner she got it over with, the sooner she would be free.

A pang in his chest caused him to sink into a wingback chair near the fireplace. He rubbed the spot without thought, mulling over why her rejection stung so badly. Aside from the unbelievable ache in his groin from not having sunk his cock deep inside her pussy, he hurt in other ways too. Confusion and rejection were unaccustomed emotions and he had no idea how to deal with them.

He had what he needed from her, which was a mate. Why did it matter that she didn't want to give their marriage a real try? He shouldn't care that she wanted to put no effort into it. After all, as Alpha he would be too busy with his new duties to spend time trying to woo her. It was much more practical to keep things as a business arrangement.

So why did his heart hurt each time he thought about Alyra leaving him, whether it be in a month or a year? It was disconcerting to realize he was developing feelings for her when she clearly wanted nothing to do with him. Even last night, what he considered the most passionate night of his life, had been nothing but a mistake to her. She must think he had used it to trick her into agreeing to be his bride.

A long sigh escaped him and he vowed he would act as she wished. If Alyra changed her mind and decided her bed was too cold and empty without him, she would come crawling to him, by God. He wasn't about to sacrifice his pride for a woman who had only agreed to be his mate because her brother had wronged him. He

didn't want her because old customs of the pack demanded she accept the punishment in Mical's stead. He only wanted her if she wanted him. Gnashing his teeth, he ignored the spasm from his cock that sent a jolt of discomfort through his body, contradicting his decision.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jared?"

He looked up from the stack of papers in front of him. His eyes had blurred from the hours spent reading the business documents and it was a relief to take a break. A grin spread across his face when he saw Orion standing in front of his desk. In the past six days, since Charlotte had told a select few about his marriage to Alyra, at least half the pack had tromped through his office, all wanting to know more and most not bothering to hide their disapproval. It was good to see a friendly face for a change. "Hey, have a seat." The other man settled his large frame into a normal-sized chair that looked like a kid's under his frame. "What brings you by?" Casting his mind back Jared realized it had been weeks since he had seen his best friend.

"I wanted to talk to you about..." Orion hesitated, looking uncomfortable. "About the rumors going around."

Jared leaned forward, his fingers forming a steeple on the cherry desk. "You're talking about those kids who plan to challenge me for leadership?" He shrugged. "I'm not worried. Not one of them does an honest day's work on the island. All they do is sit around, play video games and plot to prevent my ascension so they can overthrow my father." He laughed, expecting Orion to do the same but his friend's concerned expression lingered. "You aren't worried about them, are you?"

With a shrug, he said, "Worried enough to have a talk with the three ringleaders." His lip curled. "Did you know they planned to attack you together? Three against one, as if the pack would accept the leadership of an Alpha who gained it so underhandedly."

"What did they say?"

"I think they're going to back off." He flexed a meaty hand, causing his biceps to contract. "I made them understand their way is corrupt and should they manage to defeat you, I would challenge them."

Another laugh escaped Jared as he imagined that confrontation. "I bet that scared them straight."

"Let's hope." Still appearing troubled, Orion leaned forward, dropping his voice. "But that wasn't the rumor I was referring to."

"Oh?" His stomach dropped and he braced himself for the only other reason his friend would be here. Alyra. Now that word had reached the other islanders, he seemed to have seen almost every member of the pack the past few days. They dropped by for various reasons but all subtly – or not so subtly – probed to see if it was really true.

"Is it true? Elise really ran away with an Omega?"

He nodded.

Orion shook his head. "What is the pack coming to?"

Jared held his tongue, knowing he couldn't condemn his ex-fiancée's actions without looking like a hypocrite, since he had married an Omega.

"Is it true you've taken the Edwards woman as your mate?"

Without allowing a hint of doubt to appear in his voice or expression, Jared nodded again.

"Why?"

A slew of answers waited to spring from his tongue but Jared hesitated. As good a friend as Orion was, he wasn't the person to confide in, at least not about what weighed on his mind. If he hadn't sorted out his conflicting feelings for Alyra in almost a week, there was no way his friend could help him with the problem in just a few minutes. Instead, he gave a flip answer. "She was expedient."

His friend blinked, seeming to take a moment to absorb the reply. "I see." He frowned. "Have you thought about the pack's reaction? They won't want an Omega as their Lupina."

Steel underscored his tone. "They'll adjust."

For a moment Orion looked like he wanted to argue but his tone was mild when he asked, "So, you think this is best for the pack?"

With a nod, Jared said, "And for me."

Slowly, Orion leaned back in preparation to stand. "Now I know all I need to."

Jared stood with his friend to walk him to the door. When Orion stepped outside, Jared clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks for handling the situation with those kids."

Orion wore a solemn expression. "I do what's best for the pack, my friend."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alyra, standing naked on her balcony, stared up at the now-full moon. The walls separating their rooms were thick, preventing any sound from transmitting to her, so she often lay in bed at night, curious about what he did all by himself in the room that was so close but too far away.

She knew he must be nervous about the ascension ceremony. He had seemed increasingly tense the few times she had seen him in the past two weeks. Alyra spent most of her time in her room but had heard from some of the servants that someone definitely planned to challenge Jared's ascension. Each time she heard such talk, she had to resist the urge to go in search of Jared, to touch him and reassure herself he could defeat anyone who challenged him.

The moon was approaching apex, reaching its full glory tomorrow night, but it was nearly full enough now to allow easy transformation. When the moon wasn't full, it took more energy to transform and the process was painful. But with the moon in its current state she would be in wolf-form in minutes and then loping through the forests

of the island, seeking out a measure of serenity. She hoped changing would soothe the longings in her heart and body that urged her to ignore the stupid contract and try to make a go of her marriage with Jared. But knowing he wouldn't have chosen her if Elise had kept her word always held her back. She refused to be second best and she would always be a means to an end for him. How could he love her if he regarded her as an expedient solution and how could they have a real marriage if he didn't love her as much as she loved him?

Tingling started in her body, indicating the transformation was beginning. Alyra tossed back her head, letting her hair fall to her waist. She was prepared for the change—ready to leap from the balcony and charge into the night as soon as she attained wolf form.

The tingling of the conversion started like a mild itch before progressing to a burning sensation. It was almost painful but in a good way, like stretching muscles that had cramped. The process increased the awareness of her own body and she could almost feel every cell growing, shifting and changing. She enjoyed communing with herself on a cellular level and always marveled at the freedom of being in wolf form. During the three days of the month when it was the easiest for their kind to transform, she tried to spend as much time as possible as a wolf.

In the process of sinking into the heady sensation of alteration, Alyra paused, aware of a difference in her body, one she had never experienced before. She stilled her mind, forcing back the reckless pleasure that had been about to consume her and focused on what was different. A gasp escaped her and she reeled back a step when she recognized the spark—two, no, three sparks of life within her. With a tentative hand, she touched her stomach, feeling the urge to transform fading away in the marvel of the moment.

In human form, she wouldn't have known for weeks to come but as a wolf, her body told her she was pregnant and there could be no mistake. The essences inside her were foreign, yet familiar at the same time. Her heart seemed to melt into a warm

puddle and tears blurred her eyes as she stumbled back into her bedroom to drop onto the bed.

Shock filled her, mingled with delight. It was a miracle she and Jared had created these fragile lives with their single night of passion. Suddenly the tears in her eyes threatened to become an onslaught when she remembered the circumstances of their conception. It had been magical but had happened for all the wrong reasons.

Her babies deserved two parents who had a real marriage and she knew then that she would go to Jared. Walking to the door that separated them, she hoped he hadn't given in to the urge to transform because her courage might falter if she had to wait for him to return.

Uncertainly, her hand hovered on the knob on the door to his room. Should she knock? No, she didn't want to give him time to prepare himself. Maybe she could catch him off guard and seduce him. The news of the babies wanted to burst from her mouth but she knew she would have to guard that secret for the time being because he couldn't afford any distractions tomorrow night. Hopefully, a night of lovemaking wouldn't be too much of a disruption to his concentration. She needed a physical connection to him to reinforce the emotional one that had formed despite her best efforts. Learning of her pregnancy made her yearn for him, made her want to be in his arms and know they were together because they both wanted it, not because he was angry over what Mical and Elise had done. In her mind, this was the act that she would associate with the conception of the children, not the first night when they made love for all the wrong reasons.

She opened the door quietly, poking her head through to observe him for a moment without his awareness. He sat in a chair by the fireplace, reading from a leather-bound book that looked ancient. Reading glasses perched across his nose softened the furrows in his forehead, making him more approachable.

With her first step into the room, his head jerked up, his expression revealing surprise. "Alyra?"

She nodded, finding her feet not so bold at taking her forward now and she had to force herself to keep moving toward him. When she reached his chair, he tilted his head back to look up at her, just as she knelt on the floor, laying her cheek on his leg. The submissiveness of the pose was deliberate. Had she been in wolf form, she would have rolled onto her back but that was over-the-top in her current state.

“What is it?”

“I need you tonight.” The request humbled her even as his hand stroking her hair bolstered her.

There was a tinge of melancholy in his voice. “Just for tonight?”

“No.” She couldn’t be certain he heard her reply as he slid from the chair, joining her on the soft Persian rug, now her equal. Her hands trembled when she framed his face and she leaned forward to kiss him before courage could desert her. His lips were pliant and eager against hers, meeting her with an intensity identical to her own. His tongue swept inside her mouth, probing her depths, while she attempted to catch it with her own. The passionate duel heightened her already charged nerve endings and her pussy flooded with arousal, aching to once again experience his possession.

Tears burned her eyes when he stroked her tongue gently while cradling her against him. His embrace was a haven and she felt cherished. Unlike the first time, his emotions seemed to come through with each touch. Was she imagining he was experiencing more than desire? If it was only in her mind, she didn’t want confirmation, preferring to exist in the fantasy, at least for the night.

Why had she spent so much time fighting this? It seemed stupid to have wasted the last two weeks because of her hurt feelings and sense of inadequacy. Yes, she was his second choice but she should have been doing everything in her power to show him she was the right choice, rather than hiding from him and the emotions he inspired. It shocked her that she had been planning to passively drift through marriage to this man whom she had loved for years. That wasn’t her. She worked for what she wanted and

she should have been trying to get him to acknowledge she was more than a means to an end. How could he ever change his thinking if she gave him no reason to?

Rational thought fled when Jared cupped her breasts in his hands, kneading the soft globes with firm pressure. Her face flushed hot when she realized she had come to him naked, her need to reach him so great that she hadn't even thought about practicalities like a robe.

Her lack of dress emphasized that he was wearing too many clothes. His jeans chafed her thighs when he pulled her lower body closer to his, urging her legs around his waist. The soft cotton of his T-shirt did nothing to diffuse the heat of his skin when she pressed her palm to his chest while grasping a handful of his hair with her other hand. Eagerly, she pulled his head closer to hers, anchoring him, wanting to melt into him.

He must have had other plans, because his mouth broke free from hers to wander down her chin and neck, where he nipped her. Alyra tossed back her head, squeezing her eyes shut as he sucked on the skin while his fingers pulled gently on her nipples.

She was wet and ready for him. It seemed to be happening too quickly but she had spent the last two weeks in a constant state of arousal, tense with anticipation each time she was near him, only to be let down when he never reached for her. "Jared, I want you. Now."

"Soon, baby."

Her hands sought out the hem of his T-shirt and she pulled it up as far as she could with his hands still on her breast. She tugged insistently and he relented long enough to let her rid him of the garment before his hands returned to her breasts.

Alyra allowed her hands to wander over his smooth, warm flesh, squeezing and stroking alternately. She arched her hips, bringing her pussy directly against the bulge in his jeans and her hand traced a path from his stomach to his cock, which she stroked through the faded denim. "Now," she said again, more demanding than ever. His

teasing caresses and kisses weren't inflaming her senses because she was already hot to the point of boiling over. All he was doing was accentuating her frustrations.

In response his mouth left her neck to slide down her body, pausing to draw in a plump nipple. He laved the bud at a leisurely pace while one of his hands settled on her hip. Her stomach clenched with anticipation when he trailed his fingers over her stomach, moving lower with the same slow pace as his mouth on her breast. She arched against his hand when he reached her pussy and she couldn't keep from crying out his name when he nipped her nipple at the precise moment his thumb and forefinger tweaked her clit.

Jared's fingers moved through her pussy in slow, sensuous strokes as his tongue swirled her nipple in ever-increasing circles until he was circling the dusky-pink areola. One of his fingers slid into her opening, pushing in as far as he could. At the same time, his mouth moved to her other breast and he suckled on that nipple, giving it fastidious attention.

She was tense with frustration and aching for release. As much as she enjoyed his touch, she needed completion. Perhaps he just wasn't as ready as she was? With that thought in mind, she unbuttoned his jeans and slid down the zipper, not missing the way he froze for just a second until her hand found the hard heat hidden there. When she grasped his cock tightly in her palm he groaned against her nipple, expelling a tantalizing breath against the engorged peak.

With the same teasing movements he had used, she stroked the length of his cock, applying firm pressure. His breathing shifted, becoming ragged and his mouth slackened on her breast even as he pushed a second finger inside her. She had to fight back a grin, knowing she had broken his concentration.

For both his satisfaction and her own need she increased the pace of her hand, pleased to note he did the same. At some point her steady pace faltered as she got lost in the sensations his fingers aroused between her thighs. His cock was hard and heavy in her hand and when she thumbed the V beneath his cock head, Jared arched his neck,

his expression one of pleasurable agony. In retaliation he circled her clit with his thumb while increasing the force of his fingers. What had started out as a way to bring him around to her point of view was quickly bringing her to the peak of orgasm.

Wanting to come with him, not with them separated as they were, she asked, "Now?"

Perspiration beaded his forehead and he nodded, seeming not to be able to speak through his gritted teeth. At confirmation she removed her hand slowly, experiencing a combination of withdrawal and anticipation when his hand left her pussy.

Jared guided her backward, resting his hand against the back of her head as he lowered her to the carpet. The change in position necessitated a momentary separation and she whimpered at the parting even as her eyes devoured the economical motions he used to dispose of his jeans and briefs.

When he was kneeling between her thighs she arched her hips, seeking his cock. He held off, his eyes scanning the room. After a moment, he muttered a curse.

With a frown, she sat up slightly, bracing her weight on her elbows. "What's wrong?"

"I don't have any protection."

It hovered on the tip of her tongue to tell him about the babies but she held back, knowing he didn't need the added pressure when facing any adversaries tomorrow night. "Live dangerously. We did before."

Apparently Jared had no problem with doing so. As he surged forward, Alyra allowed herself to fall back again. His cock probed her entrance, stretching her deliciously before filling her. She gasped at the familiar sensation, marveling that she had resisted this need for two weeks. "Harder, Jared. More."

He thrust his cock into her as deeply as he could go as Alyra strained to take in more of him. With their bodies fused, their heartbeats thundering in time with each other, they were one. As she arched against him, close to coming, she met his eyes and swore she saw love reflected there. It loosened her tongue and as she achieved

satisfaction a harsh cry escaped her, followed by a declaration she might not have given so soon if she hadn't been over the edge of reason already. "I love you, Jared. Oh, how I love you." Any reply he might have made was lost in the crescendo of her orgasm as she came with a force she had never known, almost losing consciousness with the pleasure.

He didn't speak when she returned to herself but his arms were warm and comforting around her, holding her close with her ear pressed to his chest to hear his heartbeat gradually slow. The soothing sound lulled her to sleep and she was only briefly aware of Jared lifting and carrying her to his bed. She might have imagined his words to her as she slipped back into a dreamless void but chose to believe she hadn't.

"Now you're where you belong, my love."

While Alyra slept, snoring softly, Jared lay beside her in the bed, holding her close. He needed his sleep in preparation for tomorrow but his mind wouldn't stop whirling. Thoughts he had shied away from, emotions he had denied, were coming to him faster than he could force them away.

He drank in the sight of her face, noting the small smile of satisfaction curling her lips even in slumber. When he reached out to brush a lock of hair from her face, his heart skipped a beat at touching her soft skin. She turned her face toward his hand, nuzzling his palm. Warmth spread through him. Not the heat sexual need inspired but something softer, gentler and more enduring.

How had it happened? How had Alyra worked her way into his life so quickly? In just two weeks, she had become part of him. He couldn't imagine living without her. His stomach churned with nausea when he contemplated the day she would come to him for her freedom. He wouldn't be able to deny her request for a divorce. After all, she had made restitution for Mical's actions and she was guaranteed an end to her term by that stupid prenuptial agreement. If only her brittle attitude hadn't overruled his common sense the day of the wedding, he would have shredded it instead of signing it.

But when he saw her so anxious to accept the contract, anger had won out and he had agreed to the terms.

His stubbornness was going to cost him his mate. It was inevitable she would leave him. He held no illusion that tonight had been anything except sex for her. Jared wasn't going to fool himself into thinking she loved him as much as he loved her just because she had come to his bed one night. During a full moon, the wolf side of their nature took charge, strengthening all their animalistic drives. Passion no doubt...

Love! Where had that word come from? He didn't love her. Yes, he liked and respected Alyra. True, she could carry a conversation when she didn't run from the room as soon as he entered. When they made love he hadn't failed to notice how well she fit against him when he put his arms around her but that didn't prove she was made for him. He couldn't fall in love with her. It would be bad enough to lose her when she left him but he refused to let her rip out his heart and take it along. He had to resist those foreign emotions. It was as simple as that.

But not so simple, he acknowledged with a sigh when she shifted in her sleep, cuddling closer to him. How was he ever going to let her go?

## **Chapter Five**

Alyra stood beside her mother-in-law, picking up on the other woman's tension. She knew Charlotte's nervousness didn't come from the forthcoming ceremonial passing of Vasek's duties to Jared as the pack watched. No, like Alyra, she was worried about any challengers he would face first. She almost offered a bracing hand to Charlotte for comfort but dismissed the notion before her arm could rise, knowing the other woman wouldn't appreciate the gesture.

The members of the pack had formed a rough circle around the clearing where Jared stood in the nude, with his father off to his side. The moon lent his skin a silvery sheen that made Alyra's fingers itch to touch it. With mental scolding, she forced her thoughts from his anatomy to the moment at hand. As Jared raised his hands for silence her breath lodged in her throat.

"It is time." The words were simple but no one needed clarification. "Are there any who challenge me for leadership?"

The words had barely left his mouth when a young man stepped forward. Alyra didn't know his name but recognized him from the lumberyard. He was tall and lean, with corded muscles but appeared to be no match for Jared. "I challenge."

With a nod of assent, Jared transformed into a wolf as his opponent did the same. The breath she had been holding released raggedly when the young man jumped at Jared. With an apparently casual move, Jared brushed him aside. Undeterred, he rose again, attacking lower this time, trying to slice Jared's belly. With a roll and flip, Jared pinned the other wolf to the ground, his teeth at his challenger's throat. He held the pose for a long moment until the other wolf went limp. As soon as he submitted, Jared released his hold and backed away, not changing back to human-form until his challenger had done so first.

With a slight bow to Jared, the other man walked out of the circle, clearly not wounded, except for his pride.

"Is there another?"

"I challenge." Susan Blockmoor stepped away from her mate, and he watched her with pride. She was more of a threat to Jared than the boy had been. She kept her sturdy body at maximum performance with vigorous exercise and stringent nutrition. No one seemed surprised that she had offered a challenge, because Susan had never been subtle about her desire to lead a pack of her own. If she lost, Alyra knew the other woman and her slighter mate would probably leave the Sundown pack to start her own group. Pack dynamics had changed enough over the years that a female could lead her own pack, or even challenge for an existing group. For the first time, Alyra realized how silly it was that their pack was modern enough to accept female leadership in the Alpha role, but still old-fashioned enough to require the Alpha, male or female, to be mated.

They greeted each other with respectful bows of their heads before changing. Once again, Jared allowed his challenger to make the first move. Susan came at him hard and fast, tackling him and sending both of them rolling around the clearing. Alyra tightened her hands into fists as they growled and snapped at each other. She winced when Jared swiped Susan across the muzzle with his paw and couldn't contain a gasp of horror when she tore into Jared's haunch, leaving a bloody gash when he managed to throw her off.

They circled each other warily as everyone in the pack watched in silence. Alyra had to restrain the impulse to rush forward and assist Jared when Susan went after him again. Once more, her teeth ripped into his flesh, this time his chest. Jared endured the pain without so much as a whimper, continuing to struggle all the while. When Susan leaned in closer, clearly attempting to fasten her teeth on Jared's neck from underneath, he spun, kicking her in the muzzle with his uninjured hind paw, while forcing her onto her side. While she was temporarily unable to move, he grasped her throat with a sudden lunge.

When Susan relaxed, Jared released her. Together, they returned to human form, with Susan bowing to Jared. Genuine respect reflected in both their gazes and when she returned to the circle of pack members and her mate's embrace, Susan kept her chin high, clearly unashamed. She had given Jared a true challenge and he had withstood it, increasing both his status and hers in the eyes of the rest of the pack. Should she choose to break away, Alyra knew the woman would have little trouble finding followers to go with her to form the core of her new pack.

Sweat gleamed on Jared's body, betraying the toll of his exertions. There was a hint of breathlessness in his tone when he spoke again. "Anyone else?"

"Me." A big man, four inches taller than Jared, with rippling muscles and a tight physique, stepped forward, wearing only a pair of jeans.

Alyra clapped a hand to her mouth in disbelief. Orion was Jared's best friend. They had grown up together as neighbors in similar large homes on Syringa Ridge. Despite Jared's duties as future Alpha and Orion's busy schedule as a day trader in Seattle, which limited the time he spent on the island, they still got together as often as possible. She was shocked his friend would betray him.

Apparently, Jared was just as stunned because it took him a moment to respond. "I see." His tone was emotionless but Alyra could have sworn his eyes darkened with hurt. "Shall we then?"

Orion held up a hand. "Wait. I must speak first, my friend."

Jared's brow arched. "You still call me friend while plotting to steal my birthright?"

"You have it wrong. It wasn't I who plotted anything. You know when I heard of the plans of some to challenge you in an unfair fight, with the three of them setting themselves up as co-leaders after your defeat, I put a stop to it."

Alyra's eyes sought out a crowd of shifty young men and women, those who often grumbled about the structure of their society while reaping full benefits of being members of the Sundown pack even as they gave little in return. From the uncomfortable expressions on their faces, it was clear they were the ones who had

planned a coup by using such underhanded tactics. Fools though they were, even they should have known the pack wouldn't have allowed three to challenge Jared at one time.

"Then why are you challenging me?"

"Because I cannot trust your judgment now, Jared. I was content to be your beta as I had agreed when you asked me years ago. I do not want to lead but I can't allow the pack to fall into the hands of one who isn't thinking straight."

Jared shook his head, his confusion evident. "What the hell are you rambling about?"

Orion turned to stare at Alyra, pointing his finger. "Her. How can you take an Omega as mate? Surely, you know the pack will not answer to her as Lupina and she has neither the status nor strength to demand their respect. She weakens you and if you, our Alpha, are weak, the entire pack is weak."

"That's crazy. My mate has nothing to do with my position of Alpha."

"Don't be naïve. Of course she does. We follow you and your mate. I will not defer to an Omega." Orion's shoulders slumped but Alyra felt no pity for the awkwardness of his situation. All she could feel was a cold ball of anger burning in her stomach, coupled with a sinking sensation of dread. "But I don't want to challenge you over this, Jared. I still think you are the best person to lead us. Becoming Alpha would mean making changes in my own life that I don't want to undertake but I will if I have to."

With narrowed eyes, Jared said, "We are at an impasse, for it is done."

"Yes, to ensure your ascension." Orion waved a hand around the circle. "It's no secret Elise broke her word and ran off with an Omega." He spat the word with such disdain that Alyra's skin crawled.

"You know nothing—"

"Assure me you will sever your mating and I will stand down from my challenge."

A growl issued from Jared before he managed to speak any words that were intelligible. "Go to Hell."

His friend looked sad as his eyes skimmed the circle, passing over Alyra without even a flicker of his eyelashes. "It is what the pack wants. Return the Omega to her rightful position and we will overlook the fact that you aren't mated."

"But I am mated and no one will tell me to part with her. You don't dictate my personal life, Orion. None of you do."

"Jared, don't be stubborn." Charlotte rushed forward. "Tell them about the contract."

"Mother, stay out of this."

"What contract?" Orion asked at the same time.

Charlotte ignored Jared, turning to his challenger. "The marriage is for just two years. As you said, he only married her because he needed a mate. You must understand his position."

"I do understand." Orion's stance relaxed. "In light of that, I withdraw my challenge." As he turned to go back to the circle, Jared took another step toward him.

"Don't be so quick to back down, *friend*. I have no intention of honoring that stupid contract. Alyra is the mate I have chosen, the mate of my heart." His eyes focused on Alyra for just a second and she thought she saw love in his gaze. "If you can't accept her, then you can't accept me either and the challenge stands."

With a single nod, Orion turned back to Jared. "Very well."

Alyra examined Jared, noting his ebbing strength and the profuse bleeding of the wounds on his chest and left leg. He walked with a limp. In top shape, he might have been an equal match for Orion. As he was now, she didn't think he would last long and it seemed impossible he could win.

Her mouth firmed and she thought of how her mother had ended up in a similar situation, turned out of the Rodesia pack after her father lost to a challenger. She had

been alone in the world, pregnant with twins and forced to find another pack that would accept her. With new admiration for her mother's strength, Alyra stepped forward, swallowing the bitter taste in her mouth. "I'll leave the pack."

"What?" Jared surged forward, only drawing up short when his leg started shaking, appearing near collapsing. "You don't mean that, Alyra."

She couldn't look at him, instead choosing to focus on Orion's shoulder. "I will bow to the wishes of the pack and walk away from the mating. I never wanted to be Lupina." Her eyes blurred and she tried to force away thoughts of the unfairness of what she was doing. Would her children ever forgive her for taking them from their birthright? Could they ever understand she had done it to save their father's life, not just his position as Alpha? "I only wanted to be his." That, not the ancient ways of the pack, had been why she had agreed to the sham of the marriage. Any other reason had been convenient justification to avoid acknowledging the pathetic truth that she wanted him any way she could have him.

The assemblage was silent when Alyra turned her back to walk away. She had gone only a few steps when a hand fell on her shoulder. She recognized Jared by his touch and scent and it took every ounce of strength not to turn around and bury her face against his chest, despite the bloody wound.

"If that is how the pack feels, so be it. I renounce my claim to ascend as the next Alpha."

She whirled so quickly a wave of dizziness assailed her. "You can't do that. You're meant to be the Alpha, Jared. You've been reared for this."

He stared down into her face, his expression solemn. "It's true I've expected this all my life but I find it means nothing without you. How I could be so blind to your presence for so long is a mystery but now that I have you, I won't let you go." He turned his back on Orion and his sobbing mother, grasping her upper arms. "You are the most important thing in my life now."

Her resolve weakened under the sincerity in his eyes and voice and she leaned forward, resting her weight lightly against him. "Can you live with this? Will you one day hate me for costing you the position of Alpha?"

"I can live with it and quite easily, because I'll have you. This is my choice and the choice of the pack. You have no reason to blame yourself."

When Jared claimed her mouth in a passionate kiss, Alyra gave no thought to refusing. Instead her heart sang with joy even as the urge to weep got the best of her. Tears flowed from her eyes but she ignored them, lost in the moment with Jared, assured of how much she meant to him.

When he lifted his head, Jared pulled her close to his side and together they turned to face Orion. Jared inclined his head slightly. "Congratulations, Orion. I hope the pack prospers under your leadership."

Alyra remained tense, knowing it still wasn't over. If the pack accepted Orion as the new Alpha, he had the option of ordering the death of all the Sundowns, or at least their banishment from the island.

In a surprising gesture, Orion bowed at the waist to Jared. "I withdraw my challenge. I thought you had made an impulsive decision that would lead the pack to ruin. I didn't realize she was what your heart truly wanted. You are the same man you have always been and you are the one who should lead us."

Jared seemed on the verge of declining but then nodded, a soft sigh escaping him. "You will treat my wife with all the respect she deserves. That goes for every member of the pack. If you can't accept Alyra as Lupina, you will either challenge me or you will speak as one and tell us to leave. Make your choice."

Deep silence filled the clearing, stretching interminably. Alyra held her breath as the pack appeared to think over his ultimatum. Her tension grew until the first members of the pack bent into bows. Cries of, "Lupina," issued from the crowd and she realized with a start that the bows were for her, not Jared. A sensation of panic swept through her and she took a deep breath to fight it back. Mimicking the nod Jared had

issued to his vanquished challengers, hoping it was an appropriate response, she tried to project an air of confidence. Her mate's arm around her waist bolstered her and she was almost positive she wasn't visibly trembling.

Orion had just returned to his place in the circle when Jared spoke up again. "You're wrong about one thing, Orion."

"What's that?"

"I'm not the same man. I'm a better man because of Alyra."

Perhaps it wasn't dignified for the newly acknowledged Lupina to hug her husband so vigorously but she couldn't restrain herself. Alyra pressed kisses to his chest, careful to avoid the wound that still bled too freely. Countless emotions whirled through her, chief among them joy at knowing Jared loved her, that she wasn't what he had settled for. Her children would grow up secure in their birthright and all was right with her world. He had given her the precious gift of his support and acceptance and later tonight, after the ascension was complete, she would tell him about the future arrival of the three gifts they had created together.

"I love you, Alyra." The words were whispered, meant only for her ears.

"I love you too, Jared." It was amazing to be able to freely utter the words she had buried in her secret heart for years and even more amazing to have heard them from his lips first. As she kissed him again, she reminded herself to thank Mical and Elise the next time she saw them. Without their love, hers and Jared's wouldn't have come to fruition. If Mical and Elise hadn't been brave enough to defy convention, Jared never would have been forced to do so either. Thanks to her brother, she was getting her longed-for happy ending.

## **About the Author**

Kit Tunstall lives in Idaho with her husband, son and dog-children. She started reading at the age of three and hasn't stopped since. Love of the written word, and a smart marriage to a supportive man, led her to a full-time career in writing. Romances have always intrigued her, and erotic romance is a natural extension because it more completely explores the emotions between the hero and heroine. That, and it sure is fun to write.

Kit 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).

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