



City Wolf

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Chapter One

Zandrea heaved another sigh and shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she ran a finger around the edge of her cash register. She scanned the cafeteria just beyond the kitchen door and noted how few customers they had tonight. A Friday night meant everyone who could get off had done so, and those like her were stuck working. Then again it was after nine. Night shift staff had come and gone long ago. She imagined that the emergency room would be jumping with activity. It always was all weekend long, like people didn't have anything better to do than to get themselves injured. If it had been her, she would have been in a club with her girlfriends by now. She blew out another breath and tried not to fall through the floor with boredom.

"Girl, you better stop that sighing and go take your break," her supervisor said as she hustled past. "It's quiet around here. When you get back, you can help Lisa in the pantry."

Zandrea's eyes widened. "Oh you're serious? Thanks! Be back soon."

Before her boss could change her mind, Zandrea closed out her register and practically ran to her locker, freshened her makeup and headed down to the emergency room, her favorite place to troll during break.

"Hmm," she mused on the way, "I should have become a nurse." At that thought, she rolled her eyes. She couldn't stand the sight of blood, probably had a phobia about it. When she saw it, even just a little, all motor function froze in her entire body. She couldn't move or speak. "Yet, I hang in ER. I have serious issues."

The moment she rounded the corner and passed through the automatic doors, chaos seemed to jump out at her. Nurses rushed to and fro, and machines in various places beeped. One of the doctors called out instructions for the patient arriving in less than two minutes with a gunshot wound to the abdomen. According to the paramedic calling in, he had lost a lot of blood, and it didn't look good.

Zandrea's heart beat kicked up a notch. She considered going back to the cafeteria with that news, but if she stayed near the grouping of desks where the staff wrote up their reports, there shouldn't be any problem. As long as she kept her eyes averted if any patients were wheeled by.

"Hey, Bev," she called as she sidled up to the older nurse she'd made friends with in order to avoid being kicked out of the area. "Things are hot tonight, huh?"

Bev frowned. "Oh, hey, Zandrea. Yes, it's a madhouse in here." She wiped a hand over her brow and clutched a clipboard in the other. "The only thing making it worthwhile this time around is our mystery man."

Zandrea's interest perked up. She leaned a hip on the end of the desk and crossed her arms, thought of the gunshot victim having fled her mind. "Mystery man? Do tell."

Bev let go of a laugh too loud given nothing was funny. "I thought that would get your interest up." She hooked a thumb over her shoulder. "Got a guy in a short bit ago. Doesn't remember what happened to him and won't give up a name. But damn if he isn't the hottest thing I've ever seen."

"Where at?" Zandrea was about to search for this Adonis, but Bev grabbed her arm. "What? I was only going to say hi," she complained.

"Yeah right. Zan, you're desperate for a man, and if I didn't say this guy was hot, you'd be trolling for the new doctor."

"New...?" Zandrea frowned, resisting the urge to scan the nearby staff. "I am not desperate for a man. I just come here for a chat once and a while, and—"

"Hello, beautiful."

She glanced up to the sexy Dr. Evans strolling by. His big brown eyes and dark brown skin made her heart skip a beat. In fact, she might need medical treatment if he continued to call her beautiful. But Dr. Evans didn't slow down. He winked and walked on. The man didn't take her seriously, and why would he? She was nothing but a cashier. Another heavy sigh escaped her.

A hand waved in front of her face. "I think I've just been proven right," Bev told her before dropping a hand on Zandrea's shoulder. "Sorry, kiddo. It'll come."

"Whatever." Zandrea spun away and marched back the way she had come. Now she was feeling like crap, and it was all Bev's fault. Sure, she had pegged Zandrea right, but damn, a girl couldn't want a man in her life for a freakin' change? It had been how long since her last boyfriend—a year and a half? She had needs, and her girlfriends were great, but she couldn't curl up with them at night. Besides, she knew for a fact that both her best friends felt exactly the same way.

Zandrea's mind was so focused on her silent justification for being man crazy that she didn't at first see the man lurking around the corner she turned. Instead, she barreled right into him, and sent them both to the floor. His grunt of obvious pain made her rush to apologize.

"I am so sorry. I didn't see you there." From her position of being splayed out on top of him, Zandrea glanced up into electric green eyes. Or were they fevered? Either way, the man was hot. Really hot. She scrambled to get off of him. "You're burning up. Are you okay? Let me help you."

“Nurse,” he muttered while he submitted to her assistance to stand, although she felt weak herself at the tight muscle beneath her hand on his arm. She was in no rush to correct his assumption that she was a nurse.

Now that they were standing, she realized he stretched a good head taller than she was, and with him looking down at her, his blond locks tumbled over onto his forehead, blocking one eye. She resisted reaching up to brush it back.

That quick the atmosphere changed. Instead of the man being apologetic, without making a move, he seemed about to attack. She couldn’t put her finger on why she felt that way, but Zandrea tried to step back from him. One of his hands settled on her hip, and he drew her closer. His lips parted, and she could have sworn she saw his canine teeth lengthening and the rest of his teeth becoming sharper. *What the hell?*

“Food,” he muttered.

“Wha-?” She blinked and shook her head. Maybe she hadn’t heard right.

He lowered his head and gently thumped her chin higher with his nose. His deep inhale of her scent took the strength from her legs. She would have crumpled to the floor, but he held her in place.

“I smell food on you,” he told her.

Can he be anymore unsexy with that statement? she complained silently. “I think you need treatment. Let me go get someone to help you.” He didn’t let go, and Zandrea was torn between wanting to run and wanting to just remain wedged against his hard body. She went with her usual boldness. “What’s your name?”

He leaned up from her neck and snapped his lips together. This must be the patient who wouldn’t admit who he was or what happened to him that Bev had been talking about. Zandrea was about to ask him, when she saw it. Blood. Seeping through the white shirt he wore. On some level, she wondered where he had gotten the clothing and why he wasn’t in the unfashionable hospital gown, but she stood quietly in his arms.

The man tipped her chin up. “I have to go. Don’t tell.”

Zandrea didn’t respond.

“Are you okay?” He glanced down at his shoulder. “Damn! Don’t worry. I’ll heal. Hey, did you hear me?”

His voice came from far away now.

He pressed his mouth against her ear. “You’re afraid of the blood. Don’t be. I guess it’s natural for me. I’m used to it. I have to go. Don’t fall.”

From the corner of her eyes, Zandrea spotted another man, this one all in black. His hair and even his eyes were dark. His eyebrows were low over his eyes, and his jaw was set in an angry expression. "We have to go," he commanded.

The mystery patient propped Zandrea against the wall, began to walk away and then came back. He caught her under the chin a second time and then kissed her full on the lips. As he and his friend disappeared out an emergency exit, setting off the alarm, Zandrea's one thought was why did her first kiss from a white man, which she'd fantasized about in secret, come when she couldn't even kiss him back.

Chapter Two

“Girl, are you serious?” Nita shrieked.

Zandrea nodded and bit into her apple, savoring the delicious sweetness. “Yes, I lie not. He was so fine—*weird*—but fine. He was losing a lot of blood, and I wouldn’t be surprised if Bev doesn’t tell me he was brought back in either dead or close to it.”

“Try not to be so flip about it,” Stacy told her irritably. “Besides, you were no help to the poor man with your phobia.”

Zandrea rolled her eyes. “I can’t help it. If I could have I would. And on top of that he kissed me.” She sighed, her vision blurring with the memory. “I didn’t enjoy it like I wanted to because I was so scared. Then again, I’m not sure what he was.”

Stacy stood up and peeled off her dress for the fourth time. She hadn’t yet decided on what to wear to the club that night. Zandrea had a habit of mentally choosing what she would wear, and Nita couldn’t care less as long as it was comfortable. They always ended up waiting for at least an hour for Stacy.

“What do you mean by ‘*what* he was’?” Stacy questioned her.

A chill ran down Zandrea’s back, and along her arms goose bumps popped out. “He said he was used to blood, that it was natural for him. What the hell could that mean?”

“Maybe he’s a vampire,” Nita suggested.

Zandrea rolled her eyes. She stood, marched over to Stacy’s bed and twitched a skimpy aqua green mini-dress from the pile of clothing. Stacy had the best body of the three of them, and she might as well show it off. Zandrea pressed the garment into her friend’s hands. “Here, wear this, and let’s get out of here. I have a desire to shake my ass on the dance floor so I can forget my troubles.”

Stacy smiled her thanks and slipped the dress on. While she sat applying her makeup, Zandrea arranged her hair. Stacy’s thick long hair that extended down her back was another feature Zandrea admired. She kept her own hair cut short in a simple style that complimented her face. She’d been told her rich cocoa brown skin tone looked great with her large brown eyes. While she knew she wasn’t ugly, she didn’t think she was all that either. If she looked like Stacy, the men would be crawling over each other to get to her. Then again, Stacy wasn’t beating them off. Not one of them had luck with the opposite sex lately.

“So, Stacy.” Nita interrupted Zandrea’s thoughts. “Did you meet anybody interesting on the road today?”

Stacy grunted. “Nope, I only drove with Kevin down to Norfolk, and the customer was this old guy, but he did grab my butt on the way out the door. I resisted slapping him, and that dumbass Kevin made fun of me the whole way back.”

Zandrea laughed. No matter how many times Stacy dropped off or picked up a car in her job of working for Circle Rent a Car, she did not meet any available and interesting men. Yet, Stacy never gave up hope. Zandrea thought the girl should open her eyes to how much her co-worker, Kevin, liked her. If she dated him, at least she could get some, unlike Zandrea and Nita.

“Did you kick his ass?” Nita asked.

Both Zandrea and Stacy stared at Nita in the mirror above Stacy’s bedroom dresser and then burst out laughing. After clutching her stomach on the floor for a while, Zandrea fought to catch her breath.

“Oh no she didn’t just say that.” She glanced at Nita again. Nita’s face, which they called ‘high-yella’ was almost beet red. Zandrea jumped to her feet and pulled her friend into a hug. “Aw, sorry, girl. You know you don’t speak that way. It just sounds funny when you try to get all ghetto on us.”

“Yeah,” Stacy echoed. She stood up. “Okay, girls, I’m ready to go shake my thing on the dance floor.”

* * * *

Half hour later, they pulled up to their favorite club in Nita’s smokin’ red Shelby GT500. Zandrea had to struggle to unfurl her legs without showing the long line of club goers at the front door all her goods because her short skirt rode up. Nita tossed the car keys to a valet, and the three of them strolled toward the front of the line.

Zandrea hooked her arm through Nita’s, and Stacy took the other one.

“It’s so great to have a friend with family connections, huh, Stacy?” Zandrea asked.

“You know it.” Before they reached the front of the line, Stacy pulled them to a stop. “Hey, y’all, look at that.” She nodded toward the corner of the building where a sexy man in black slacks, covering an ass that should be illegal, was escorting a woman around the corner.

They sighed in unison, knowing what was about to happen. With unspoken agreement, they followed the couple into the alley. There was lots of sex going on inside the club these days. Everyone knew that, but sometimes, people liked to really be dirty about it, like fucking outside.

Zandrea shuffled along the best she could in her high heels so close to Nita while trying to move in silence. Not too far down the narrow opening, they found the couple engrossed in each other to the point that they were attempting to swallow each other's tongues. Zandrea and her friends watched.

Nita speculated, "Do you two think we don't get any because we're too immature for our age?"

"Too wild," Zandrea piped up.

"Too stupid," Stacy concluded. "We always run behind these guys who either already have a woman they're devoted to or—"

"We won't be home wreckers even if they aren't married," Zandrea interjected.

"—or we try for men who are too far out of our league. Well out of Zandrea and my league. Everybody can't live off a trust fund like you, Nita. I remember that guy I went after in Jersey."

"You mean the one with the Porsche? Girl, you know damn well you wasn't getting any of that." Zandrea shook her head. "The problem is that we can't find the right combination."

They all commiserated as the couple finished up. With no shame, Zandrea and her friends stayed where they were as the two people moved by. Zandrea had the nerve to toss the guy a look of approval. He winked and wrapped an arm around his girlfriend's waist before they disappeared back around front.

Zandrea sighed. "To find a guy like we like, who is hot, not a loser and doesn't mind a little too much junk in the trunk..."

Nita winced. "Give me a break, Zan. Your butt isn't that big. You shouldn't put yourself down."

Zandrea rolled her eyes and slapped her ass. It jiggled, and she gritted her teeth. "Whatever."

They headed back around front and were soon in the midst of the pounding beat of the music. Near the door, they paused to take in the scene. Zandrea was satisfied to note that there were plenty of people packing the small club, and there was a nice range of social statuses so she didn't feel like she was in the midst of people with money and didn't fit in. That's what she liked about the club. It was higher class but not so high that it was exclusive.

With two dances down and a drink in her hand, Zandrea was able to breathe out the stresses of the week and just relax. With an elbow on the bar behind her and her friends lost in discussion about which guy looked approachable, Zandrea scanned the dim

interior of the club. Just because of her experience the night before, she was starkly aware of all the good-looking white men. In fact, the group to the right of where she and her friends were standing looked especially fine. They were all in dark slacks and white or light colored collared shirts. Stretching at least a half head taller than every man in the place and with well-toned muscled bodies to match, they stood out from everyone else.

Zandrea drifted a few steps in the men's direction, a feeling a familiarity coming over her at the closest man with his back to her. She leaned out a little to her left trying to see his face and hoping no one would notice. The guys threw their heads back and laughed at something funny one of them had said. Zandrea caught her breath.

She backpedaled to her friends, hooked their arms and dragged them along in the opposite direction. When they had almost completely circled the place, Zandrea bothered to respond to her friends' continued complaints of being dragged around.

"Girls, over there." Zandrea nodded with her head. Stacy and Nita turned in the direction that Zandrea pointed. "That guy, the one on the right end facing the others. The blond. See him?"

Stacy let out a low moan. "Yummy. They're all hot. Didn't know you wanted a white boy though, Zan. Guess after last night though, who could blame you. You've chosen the blond?"

Zandrea shook her head. "No, that's *him*!"

Nita frowned. "Him who?"

"The guy from the hospital. The guy who was bleeding all over himself. The blond is him!"

Chapter Three

“Don’t look now, Brant, but you’ve got three pairs of sexy chocolate eyes all over you,” Lucas quipped.

Brant turned, ignoring the warning. He spotted the three women in the corner right away. All three lovely faces were frozen in shock, mouths hanging open and eyes wide. When they caught him looking, they grabbed each other and spun away, whispering furiously.

He had a hard time filtering out the noise around him to pinpoint what the ladies were saying, but he did catch one sentence from the biggest, sweetest eyes he’d ever seen. His groin tightening and his attention arrested by the curve of her ass facing him, he almost didn’t process what he had heard. Then it hit him. *“I’m not mistaken. That is the guy I met at the hospital, and he was for damn sure bleeding too much to be here tonight!”*

“Fuck!” He grunted.

His brother sidled up close to him. “So, I didn’t get there in time.”

Brant frowned. “It’s not like she was the only one who saw me. There was the whole staff too. I wouldn’t let them look at the wound. Only the paramedics saw how bad it was, and you took care of them.”

Lucas nodded. “I did, which was why I was late getting to you. They won’t remember a thing, and like you said the other staff didn’t get a close look at the wound. That girl could be a problem.” Brant’s half brother rotated his shoulders and flicked another button on his shirt open. He glanced back to one of the other men and snapped his fingers. “Brant, dance with her, see what she remembers. If she remembers too much, take her and bring her to my place later. I’ll straighten it out. I’ll take the studious one, and Nash can take the other one.”

Brant fought not to grind his teeth. He hated when Lucas got it into his head like he was the leader of their little group. They didn’t run in packs, damn it, and he didn’t need his half brother who was the same age as he was bossing him around. Yet he did see the wisdom in following Lucas’ plan. To deny it was pointless. They were always careful to cover what they were from those on the outside. There was no other choice but to find out what the women knew and to erase their memory of any events that would threaten the secret of the city wolves’ existence.

“Fine,” he conceded. “I’ll dance with her.”

Brant took a deep breath and strolled over to the ladies. He planted himself in front of the woman who had crashed into him at the hospital, knowing he stood too close, but liking the way she smelled and the fear and excitement mingled in her eyes when she looked up at him.

“Dance with me,” he commanded.

Her lips parted. Brant had been feverish from loss of so much blood, but he remembered the taste of those lips. He wanted to taste them again and crush her body to his. The short skirt she wore coupled with the high heels made her legs seem to go on forever, and her blouse was cut so low, it was indecent. Did she want a date or to give it up to whomever asked? No, there was still innocence in those eyes of hers, and she looked like she was no older than twenty-two or twenty-three.

Brant turned, placed a hand at her waist and guided her to the dance floor. As if on cue, the music slowed, and he swayed with her, never taking his eyes off her face. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Zandrea.” Her voice came out in a breathy whisper, and Brant grinned.

“Nice.” He lowered his head enough to make her think he would kiss her, and then he drew back. The disappointment in her expression pleased him. “So, you think you know me?”

She frowned, pulled back a little from him. He ignored the sense of loss and waited for her to speak.

“I don’t think I know you. I saw you at the hospital last night. I’m sure of it, and I know you couldn’t have come in here without a medical miracle or something, because the blood that stained your shirt was—”

She swayed. He caught her close to his chest and waited. A memory came back to him, of how she had gone still, neither speaking nor seeming to know what was going on around her. This reaction was different, but he knew she was remembering the sight of his blood. He’d met one or two people like her in his long life, those that had an excessive fear of blood. If she only knew the truth, that he hunted with his brother and their friends who were also wolf shape shifter. They didn’t do it often, preferring a more civilized lifestyle, but it could get bloody upon occasion. Someone like Zandrea wouldn’t be able to stand it.

That his brother would have to wipe Brant’s memory from this little beauty’s mind didn’t sit right with him. He considered lying, but didn’t dare. Their family was more important than getting into her panties. And boy did he ever want to get a taste of her. Some of the other wolves ached for a mate, but Brant liked his freedom. All he had ever wanted was a woman to share his bed and to move on when it got boring. A woman’s scent was what attracted him first. Of course that was only natural given what he was. So, it must be his imagination that he craved more than to just be intimate with her.

“You’re mistaken,” he said after realizing he had let his mind wonder without responding to her. “I’ve never seen you before. I would remember such sweetness.”

Her eyelids lowered. She rested her soft breasts against his chest, and he grew hard. The small gasp escaping her lips let him know she had felt it. No matter. There wasn't a reason to hide how attracted he was to her.

"Have you ever been with a white man?" he asked boldly.

She rolled her eyes. "So you've got a fantasy, huh? Of checking out the other side, see what it's like? It's not like I haven't met your kind before. Although I don't normally indulge those kind of fantasies."

"Oh?" He smirked. "And here I was drawing the conclusion that you shared my fantasies by how hard your nipples have gone and how you're panting. I had the impression that you wanted me like I want you."

She tried pulling away from him, but he held on.

"Don't deny us both pleasure." He knew his words sounded like a command. He hadn't meant them to come out like that.

"You're used to bossing people around aren't you?" she demanded. "What do you snap your fingers and women just fall in your lap, eager to please you? Sorry, I'm not the one. There are plenty of girls in here willing and able. I don't jump into bed with any man I first meet. And you haven't even told me your name."

She broke from his hold at last and spun away to stomp off the dance floor. Brant darted forward, caught her arm and swung her around to face him. With little effort, he bent her body over his arm and pressed tight against her. Even with all the noise around them, he didn't miss her moan of pleasure.

Brant pulled her tighter still and pressed his lips to her ear. "My name is Brant, and if you don't want to jump in my bed right away, how about going out on a date with me?"

Her expression was one of shock at his boldness. "You're not even going to deny that you only want to sleep with me."

He shrugged. "Why lie? I'm not looking for a girlfriend or a potential mate. I want to lie between soft legs, to please as I am pleased. Does that not interest you at all? You're not attracted to me?"

"Being attracted to someone is not all there is to a relationship."

When he had them moving again, still at a slow rock despite the fast beat of the music, she didn't complain. Brant was enjoying the feel of her body on his. "As I said, I'm not looking for a relationship. In fact, since you don't want to go back to my place now, then I'm not sure we will eventually be lovers."

She blinked up at him. “What’s the rush?”

He waved a hand. “Never mind that. Do you want to leave here and let me buy you dinner? I promise I won’t try to seduce you.”

“Yes, you will.”

He chuckled. “Okay, I will try, but I would never force a woman. I don’t need to.” Brant let his hand around her waist slide lower until he cupped her ass. He waited for her to push him away, but she didn’t. She tilted her head back boldly and stared into his eyes. For a second, he lost focus, drowned in her sweetness. It took some effort to gather control of his emotions, and he blinked a few times to break whatever spell she had attempted to weave around him.

He glared down at her innocent face, wondering if there was more to Ms. Zandrea, but she seemed open enough. Besides, he could sense and even pick up the unusual scent of those who were not fully human, whatever they were. Zandrea had no special ability. She was an ordinary woman. Still, there was something about her that drew him.

In the emergency room, he had been half out of his mind for a while when his fever had reached a certain level. He had thought only of escape, and then he had bumped into Zandrea. The sensation was of... Well, he wasn’t going to think too hard on it. She was a woman, and the same with all of his kind, women were a weakness.

Zandrea was just like every other woman, and there were a hundred more who could share his bed since she had denied him that much. After Lucas erased him from her memory, Brant would find one of those women and take her back to his place. He would spend the rest of the evening working out his sexual frustrations.

“Okay, Brant.” She grinned at him. A flutter tickled the inside of his chest. He ignored it.

He raised his eyebrows in question.

“Okay, we can get a cup of coffee or something. I’ve eaten for the night.”

Brant didn’t even bother informing Lucas of where he was going. They knew the drill. Besides, Lucas had said for Brant to bring her to his place later tonight. He must have figured Brant would get Zandrea into his bed, and his brother never brought women home. It was either the woman’s place or a motel or wherever. In fact, Lucas had happily fucked a woman in the alley earlier and been fine with it. If he knew his brother, Brant figured Lucas would now take one of Zandrea’s friends and get her as well. His brother’s appetite was insatiable.

Just the thought of all the sex took Brant’s strength. While he guided Zandrea out of the building, he took another look at her cleavage and licked his lips. She might not sleep with him, but he was going to taste and feel those beautiful mounds if it killed him.

Chapter Four

Zandrea figured she should tell her friends that she was leaving and with who. They liked to be safe. Stacy had gone so far as to demand a man show her his ID so she could write down his name and address should anything happen, and they had always complied. Somehow, Zandrea didn't want to go find them. She wanted to escape the noise and find somewhere to chat with Brant. A text to Nita and Stacy should be enough.

When Brant led her by the elbow through the crowd and out the door, she wasn't surprised to find he drove a sporty car that looked more expensive than Nita's, but she wasn't that into cars to know what it was. The vehicle was sleek and built low to the ground. Only a two-seater, the black body shimmered despite the dark night. Thick tires with deep treads looked ready to tear up the road, and Zandrea shivered. She'd bet anything, Brant had a heavy foot and would care nothing about doing ninety or more on the road.

He helped her inside and they were soon off. Brant's hands gripped the steering wheel with almost a reverence. Zandrea rolled her eyes. "So where are we going?" she asked him.

"Coffee shop. You said you weren't hungry."

She glanced out the window. "There are like five coffee shops within a block or two of the club."

He laughed. "Where's the fun in that? Let's open it up and stop where the mood strikes."

"You mean after you've worn the tread off your tires." She crossed her arms. "Are you kidnapping me, because I'm going to tell you right now, Nita's people are connected. They can find anyone, anywhere, and they have the money to make anything happen."

"Is that right?" He had the nerve to wink at her, and when he placed his hand on the handle between them to shift gears, Zandrea caught her breath. For some odd reason, she had been thinking of him reaching across to rest that hand between her legs. She shook the thought away. No way in hell was she letting this stranger get between her legs. Not on the first night at least. Then again, technically, this was the second night.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" He asked the question but seemed to know the answer already. Zandrea resisted slapping the knowing look off his face.

"I just remembered what we were discussing earlier. You are the man from the hospital last night. You tried to blow me off, but I'm not stupid, and I would never forget a face like yours."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Thanks."

“And!” She almost shouted to hide the fact that it *was* a compliment. “I want the truth. What happened? You were bleeding bad. I’ve spent enough time in the emergency room and talking to nurses that I know what’s life-threatening.”

“Which proves my theory.”

She gritted her teeth. The man was infuriating. “What theory?”

“That you’re not a nurse as I thought at first when I was feverish.”

“So you admit it!”

He shifted gears, pressed harder on the gas and took a ramp to the highway. Soon they were flying along to God knows where. Despite that, Zandrea wasn’t afraid. She wondered if it was her intense attraction to the man, but didn’t really feel like analyzing it. Just for tonight, she wanted to enjoy it. Men didn’t hang around long in her life, and it had been awhile. She could pretend a man as obviously established and hot as Brant was, was into her for the time being.

He had paused at her declaration and seemed to be considering what to admit to her. At last, he nodded his head and reached out to caress her cheek. “Yes, it was me. I heal quickly. There wasn’t really any threat to my life, just to my secret, and that cannot be tolerated under any circumstances.”

Zandrea stilled. His secret. She wanted to ask him more about that, but courage failed her. She should tell him to let her out of the car, admit that he was out of her league and go back to the club. Her life wasn’t so bad. After all, a little action with her vibrator did the trick more often than not.

A glance at his powerful arm muscles flexing while he gripped the steering wheel, the matching sculpted thigh muscles filling his pants oh so right, not to mention the bulging package between his legs, made her sigh. No way a vibrator could replace that. And conversation wasn’t anything to discount either. Damn it all, she was lonely for male companionship!

Brant seemed to pick up on her fear of pursuing his secret and continued on. “I suspected you were not a nurse by your scent.”

She grumbled. “Oh yeah, the most unromantic thing a man could say to a woman. You smell like chicken.”

He burst out laughing. “I didn’t say that.”

“You might as well have.”

He grinned at her, flashing beautiful white teeth that had probably never needed braces. In her mouth, she ran her tongue along a tooth that was slightly crooked. She'd never minded the imperfection and she didn't now. Just looking at Brant was pleasure. He winked, the second time seeming to know her thoughts. It could be her imagination.

"I thought you must work around a lot of food. That coupled with the fact that you are terrified of blood means there's no way you can be a nurse." He cast her a look of curiosity. "So why would a woman with such a problem hang out in the ER?"

"None of your business." She glanced away from his smirking face to the area where he was slowing down. He had exited the highway in a more middle class area. Zandrea blinked. Not quite what she had in mind, she thought as she surveyed the townhouses they passed, more like humble, simple, not the playboy with money Brant seemed to be. "Where are we?"

"Near my favorite coffeehouse."

"Huh? Are you nuts? This area looks to be all residential. There's no way there's a coffeehouse around here. Besides, a man like you wouldn't hang out in this area unless he had to."

She turned to face him in time to see his eyes darken, and she pressed herself back against the car door, a tremor going through her body. Had she thought he was harmless before, she was mistaken. There was more to Brant than he let on.

Almost immediately, the darkness lifted, and he replaced it with an easygoing smile. "There's more to me than you think," he said, echoing her thoughts. "Come and see."

He parked in front of one of the houses and stepped around to help her out of the car. At the top of the marble steps, he rang the bell, and Zandrea hugged herself against the sudden night chill. This was a mistake. She just knew it.

The door opened, and a woman who looked like the mirror image of Brant stood there, except she must be a good twenty years older. "Brant! My baby!" The woman threw her arms around his shoulders and dragged him into the house.

Zandrea followed slowly, looking over her shoulder and longing for a way to escape. She fingered the side of her purse knowing her cell phone was just inside.

The woman caught sight of Zandrea and sniffed the air. Zandrea stared at her. What was with these people and their sense of smell?

"Who is this, Brant?" The woman's tone held definite disapproval.

Brant wrapped an arm around Zandrea's waist like they hadn't just met. "This is Zandrea. I brought her for coffee."

“She’s hu—”

“Mother!”

Zandrea wondered what the woman was about to say before Brant cut her off. “How do you do?” Zandrea nodded, keeping her cool. She was going to beat Brant’s ass for bringing her to his mother’s house on the first freakin’ date. What was he thinking?

A look that must have spoke volumes passed between mother and son, but neither bothered to explain anything to Zandrea. Glory, which is what Brant’s mother had insisted she be called, led them to the back of the house and to some stairs leading down. Zandrea clutched Brant’s arm as they descended as it was dark as anything. She couldn’t believe she was falling in line with this craziness. They might both be insane, and here she was following behind Brant.

They came out in a hall that was longer than it should have been. By her estimate, it had to extend out into the street above. Doors lined both sides and a soft light hung overhead. At the end of the hall, someone opened a door, and music spilled out. Brant led her toward it. The man they passed had eyes so black they seemed to draw Zandrea in. He stared at her and licked his lips. The desire she saw there was palpable, and she let out a little shriek of alarm when Brant growled at him.

What the hell?

Her cell buzzed in her pocket. From the rhythm, she knew it was a text. She pulled it out, but before she could key a reply to Stacy’s message, Brant took it from her hand. “You’re with me tonight. We will enjoy all night together, and then I will return you. Agreed?”

No! her mind screamed. She nodded. “Yes.”

Chapter Five

Brant smelled her fear. Yet mingled with it was excitement. With every step they took into the unknown, she seemed to like it. He had asked her about why she went to the ER, but he could guess. In some ways, Zandrea liked danger. But maybe she hadn't realized it yet. Brant had always thought he lived a quiet life, nothing out of the ordinary, well for a wolf shifter that is. His routine was just that, same old thing each day. Occasionally, things got dangerous as they had the night before, but like always, Lucas was there or one of the others if he needed assistance, and he offered the same to his kinsmen. For the most part, he handled things on his own. Not until he met Zandrea did he realize he was looking for something, too. And if they could only have until Lucas called with a demand that Brant bring her to his house for the good of them all, then Brant would enjoy his time with her.

He had made the decision the second he stepped into his car with Zandrea at his side. He would tell her the whole truth, about what he was. That truth started with the pub his mother ran beneath her house, the place she had refused to give up after she had remarried after finding out about Lucas' birth. Nothing he could do about that, and it had turned out fine anyway given she had divorced only two years later. At least there was only their kind in the community.

Brant swung the door wide to the pub, and while the noise of the music didn't lessen, all conversation halted, and every pair of eyes swung in their direction. The patrons picked up on Zandrea's human scent. She would smell sweet too, a woman, sexually ready for a man. Every male would feel a hunger to taste her. His kind had healthy appetites, and he was no different.

With deliberate care, Brant tugged Zandrea to his side and lowered his mouth to her exposed shoulder. He let them all watch while he sank his canines into her tender skin in the smallest of bites. He licked the small trickle of blood, enjoying her taste.

Zandrea squirmed in his hold, but Brant hung on. When he raised his head, he met his fellow wolves' eyes sending the message he knew they had already gotten. Anyone daring to touch her would deal with him. For tonight. After Lucas erased her memory, he would have no claim over her, at least not for human men. His mark would remain so that the wolf shifters would know she wasn't available to either seduction or attack.

Brant waited for regret to wash over him for his rash behavior. No other woman, shifter or human, had made him want to mark her as his own, and he had done so to Zandrea without thinking, without considering it. Yet, if he had it to do again, he would. *Mine*.

He shuddered at the intensity of his feelings. This was crazy. She would be snatched away soon. No, he needed to focus on having fun for the moment. It would start with a beer or two.

Brant led Zandrea to the bar and took a stool. She set her hands on her hips and glared at him. "You said you were taking me to a coffeehouse. This looks like a place where they sell bootleg liquor."

Brant burst out laughing. "Bootleg? I haven't heard that word in many years. Don't worry. They sell coffee here too, and it's good."

She frowned. "Whatever. I'll take a beer, I guess." She shifted on her stool and glanced around. "This place is bigger than you would think from the layout of the first floor. Does it extend to the street?"

Brant nodded. "Our little secret. Besides, we own all of this land, so we can do just about anything we want here."

"We?"

"My kind."

She gave him a questioning look, but Brant didn't address what he meant. There was plenty time for that. Allowing her a few sips of her beer, he then hoisted her to her feet and tugged her to the small dance space in the middle of the floor. The music slowed, and Brant took Zandrea into his arms. He rested a palm on each of her ass cheeks and tugged her closer.

With her arms around his neck, and no space between their bodies, they rocked side to side in slow motion. Brant's desires ignited. His shaft grew rock hard, and all he wanted to do was seat it inside Zandrea until the desperate need eased.

He found the place where he had nipped her and he gently licked it for a while. He fought the desire to tear off her clothes and explore farther.

"You bit me," she accused him.

"I had to mark you or I would have been fighting over you all night rather than doing this." He pushed into her hips and was gratified to hear her moan. "Tell me this isn't better."

She gasped. "I'm just horny. There's nothing special about you."

"Really?" He kissed her neck, turned her head and then kissed her lips. They parted without hesitation, and he pushed his tongue into the warmth of her mouth. When he deepened the kiss, lifted her higher against his erection and didn't stop for a good ten minutes, she didn't fight him once. "Nothing special? I'm a strange man. I zipped you away from the safety of your friends. I took your cell phone and brought you to a dangerous place like this. You haven't put up a real complaint yet."

Her gaze dropped to the floor. He felt her tremor and hated himself for making her feel that way.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in her ear.

“No, you’re right. I...” She shook her head. Now, Brant regretted reminding her how she had gone trustingly with him. While he didn’t think of himself as a bad person, seducing a woman who might not want to sleep with him on a first date was not a good thing. He couldn’t regret his actions or her trusting him. Selfish, sure, but so be it.

“Come,” he told her. “I’ll take you back to the club.”

She seemed about to protest, but said nothing. The loneliness Brant had dealt with over the last few years—even when he had several lovers at once—descended on him. She couldn’t be his lover.

Outside in the fresh air, she took in several breaths. Brant leaned against his car, arms folded, and watched the rise and fall of her breasts. Her nipples were clearly defined through the thin material, and he craved a stroke or a lick.

“You make me reckless,” she said simply.

He put his head back and stared at the stars. “Truth be told, you make me feel the same.”

“How so?”

Looking into her eyes, he was lost. “I want to tell you everything. I want to tell you why I had that gash in my shoulder and why if you looked now you’d find no trace of it.”

Her eyes went wide and lowered to his left shoulder. With trembling hands, she unbuttoned his shirt and pushed the material aside. Brant bit down on his lip and clenched his fists at his sides to keep from taking her into his arms. Her mouth fell open, and she ran her fingertips along his skin.

“It’s like brand new skin. Never been cut, never scarred. Was it a trick of my imagination? No one could...”

“I could and so can every person like me.”

“Like you?”

“Wolf shifters.”

They stood there looking into each other’s eyes. Brant couldn’t read her mind, but he was excellent at reading emotion from scent and instinct. Even without that ability, he could guess what was running through her mind—should she run or stay?

He turned one hand out, palm facing her. “Stay.”

She laced her fingers with his and leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. “I think that you wouldn’t tell me this if something wasn’t going to happen later to undo it. You said your secret was most important to protect. Will you kill me later?”

“You’re so calm.”

He felt her smile into his shirt. “I might be in shock.”

“In that case let me into your panties.”

“You’re an asshole.”

He tangled his fingers into her hair and tugged just enough to get her to put her head back, and he covered her mouth with his. With hungry kisses, he tasted her, trailing down her cheek to her jaw, up to her eyelids, her forehead, her temple.

Having slipped a hand beneath her blouse, he unhooked her bra and peeled it off. She let him remove it, and he tossed it on the hood of his car. Sliding one hand around to cup her breast, he ran the other along her hip to the hem of her skirt and then up to take hold of her panties.

“Brant!” she gasped. “You’re not going to do it here!”

“Didn’t you enjoy watching Lucas fuck that woman in the alley? He said you gave him a look of approval. I assume you wanted to try public sex.”

“I...well...I’m not sure.” She pulled back out of his arms. “Definitely not in front of your mother’s house. Are you nuts?”

He grinned and re-crossed his arms over his chest. “Trust me, my mother’s done that and more in her time. Right now she’s got three lovers.”

The interest he’d seen in Zandrea’s eyes faded. “So you’re not faithful. How many do you have?”

“None at the moment.”

“And if I were to become your lover?” She had turned away, but with those words, she turned back, pinning him in place with a stare. He didn’t want to hurt her, but she should know what she was getting into if she was to let him into her life. He’d forgotten. This was a one night only deal.

“There are those of us who choose a lifetime mate. In some ways we’re like a regular wolf. However, we do not run in packs unless we choose to or if it’s convenient for a time. Few choose a lifetime mate, and most choose several lovers. Because humans can be picky about that kind of thing, we normally stick with our own kind. A female shifter often has as many lovers as a male one. That’s who we are.”

She sighed, closing her eyes. “I understand.” She shook her head. “Listen to me saying I understand about you being a shifter. It’s crazy. Either way, you’re not the faithful type which is what it boils down to. Well, I guess you had better take me back to the club. No, just take me home.”

Brant would be lying if he said he wasn’t disappointed. He was not usually picky about women who shared his bed. If she was attractive to him, that was fine. He had reserved meaningful conversation for his friends and Lucas. Yet, lately he was always lonely whether with the guys, with a woman or alone. Zandrea was the first to give him a spark of interest, although he couldn’t figure out why. It wasn’t like they had discussed Einstein’s theories or anything else half way serious.

With resolve, he grabbed her bra from the hood of the car, handed it to her and opened the car door for her. He guided her inside with a hand at her hip, his shaft twitching at the contact. Sex. It was just about the sex, and if that was the case, any woman would do.

Chapter Six

Zandrea rested with her head turned away from Brant and her eyes closed. She had slipped off her heels and curled her legs up against her chest. The move had forced her skirt higher, revealing too much of her legs and probably her ass, but she was battling throwing herself on Brant's lap and begging him to let her ride.

She couldn't give into wanting him. That had been her mistake time and again and the cause of heartbreak after heartbreak. Stacy could fuck a man and not lose her heart, but not Zandrea. No, she had to choose a loser who had no intention of caring for her beyond getting her in bed a few times and then giving her some lame excuse why it wouldn't work out between them.

With her hand blocking most of her face, she peeked out between her fingers at Brant. He was drop dead hot. All the men she'd gone out with had been average, in looks and in the wallet. Here she was for the first time with a man she'd bet anything had washboard abs and not an ounce of excess flesh on his entire body. From his car, clothes and even his friends, she knew he had money. That stuff on the whole wasn't a big deal to her, but to have the experience would have been nice.

At least he had been upfront from the beginning so she could make the right decision. And she had made the right decision, hadn't she?

When the car swerved enough to jostle her from her thoughts, she glanced up. "Hey, this isn't the way back to the club. You're doing it again. Hijacking me."

"Kidnap?" He grinned.

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. Where are we going now?"

His lips tightened for a second, and his knuckles turned white while he gripped the steering wheel. "You were right. I cannot let you continue to know about us after tonight."

She let out a small scream. "No, please, Brant. Don't kill me." Searching through her purse for the small bottle of iodine she kept there, she figured she would throw it in his face and jump out of the car.

He reached across and stilled her hands with his. "I'm not. I promise. You'll just forget you ever met me, everything I ever said or showed you."

"How?"

"Don't worry." He squeezed her fingers. "I won't let Lucas hurt you. He wouldn't anyway. That's not what we do. We like to live peacefully among humans, and killing one would not allow that to continue."

Zandrea sat there for a while in silence, wondering if she should believe anything he had said that night. There was no proof beyond the injury, and that didn't mean anything either. She could have mistaken the patient from the night before, and maybe Brant was just having fun at her expense.

"I want to see you change into a wolf."

His eyes widened. "What?"

"Show me. Prove to me that you haven't been lying all this time, just making fun of me."

He frowned. "I can't very well do it while I'm driving. Besides, we're not allowed to let a human see us change."

"I'm sure you've broken all kinds of rules by telling me all you did tonight. All those people back at that bar saw me. They knew what I was like you said by my scent, so they know what you were up to."

"It's not uncommon for a shifter to enjoy playing with a human, especially the females. You're so soft, and your smell is intoxicating." He glanced at her, his gaze dropping to her breasts. She'd forgotten that she hadn't put her bra back on, and her nipples were hard, pushing against her blouse. Yet, she made no move to cover up. He licked his lips. "You saw the reaction of the men back there. You were so wet, they smelled it and wanted you."

She gulped. "You're kidding. They *smelled* it?"

He nodded. "Your sweet cream. It is sweet, isn't it?"

She squeezed her legs together. "Shut up."

His laugh at her expense irritated her. She didn't want him to know how his words turned her on all the more. *Resist, damn it! He's not all that!* She could yell at herself all she wanted, but the truth of the matter was, if he pushed even a little, she would give into him. And tomorrow, she would wake up full of regrets. Then again, he'd said Lucas would erase her memory. That was terrifying. To have slept with the hottest man on the planet and not remember it. But just for that time, she would enjoy every second. Should she risk it?

"This is all so ridiculous. I mean. I'm not too scared of you. I'm a little terrified of Lucas, but you. No."

"It's because you're turned on. It's overridden your fear of me."

She laughed. "Whatever. And if we slept together..."

“It would be wonderful. I would ensure that we both enjoyed ourselves to the fullest. Later, when Lucas does his thing, you won’t remember what we did and would be free to go on like nothing ever happened.”

Brant pulled up in front of a house so big, Zandrea thought it was safe to term it a mansion. The driveway alone was impressive, curving along a tree-lined road and opening out into a patch of grass with an elaborate fountain in front. The two story stone exterior of the house looked well-maintained, and the grounds beside and behind the house must go on for acres.

Zandrea stepped out of the car with her mouth hanging open. “Damn! What does Lucas do for a living?”

“Investments,” Brant said simply. “I do as well.”

She glanced at him. “Do you live like this?”

He grimaced. “My place is less pretentious. But I suppose I *could* live this way if I chose.”

“Show off.” She laughed.

He winked. “You asked.”

He moved around the car and reached for her hand. Zandrea hesitated and then took a step backward. “I’m not sure about this. I don’t want to go in there. Oh goodness, did you cast a spell? I shouldn’t be here. I want to go home.” To her disgust, tears welled in her eyes. What an idiot she had been all night.”

As she retreated, Brant moved closer, his expression calm but determined. “I’m sorry, baby, but you have no choice.”

“No!”

Zandrea spun away, but Brant caught hold of her wrist and hauled her back to his chest. She struggled in his arms, tried to knee him, but he blocked it, catching her legs between his. He tightened his hold and forced her chin up to look into her eyes. If she expected his eyes to be filled with anger or madness, she was mistaken. “I’m so sorry, Zandrea. This isn’t your fault. You shouldn’t have been put in this situation, forced against your will.”

He kissed her lips, and she tried her best not to like it, but that was ridiculous. She craved more of his touch. Brant rested his forehead on hers, and they stood there for a long time. So many words crowded her mind. Her decision not to go farther with him raged back and forth in her mind, and she told herself to break free, to lose him in the trees. After all,

she had been on the track and field team in school. Well, before she had picked up the few extra pounds.

“The last thing I want is to have you forget me,” he whispered.

She let her head lower to his shoulder. He wrapped his arms tighter around her so that their bodies melded together. A shudder went through her. His scent was enticing as well. She didn’t need a super sensitive nose to enjoy the sandalwood and natural male essence.

“Why?” she answered.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Maybe because this is the first time it’s happened to me, I mean having a human needing to forget me, to undergo Lucas’ treatment. It’s happened with the others before, not often, as we’re careful, but a few times in the last few decades.”

“Decades?”

He didn’t address her question, but tilted her chin up. “Are you ready to go inside? We may have some time. The house is dark, and Lucas’ car isn’t here. We can have a drink and talk.”

Swallowing her fear, although she had no reason to trust this man, she nodded. “Yes, okay. Let’s go inside.”

Brant flipped on the lights as he led her to a living area with tasteful decor in earth tones and a brick fireplace dominating one side of the room. On one wall was a ridiculously huge flat screen TV, and Brant used a remote to power it up and switch the channel to an easy listening music station. After that, he moved to the fireplace and soon had a roaring fire going. Although the night had been a little cool, the inside of the house was chilly. The heat soon had the room toasty.

At the bar, Brant prepared two glasses with ice and glanced in her direction. “What would you like?”

“Ginger ale?”

His eyebrow went up.

“My stomach’s unsettled,” she explained. Sinking down to the couch, she let her purse slide off her shoulder, and she dropped her shoes on the floor. The velvet beneath her ass was comfortable, and she wriggled around on it a little, moaning softly.

Brant growled. “Stop that. You’re driving me insane.”

Zandrea looked up to see the front of his pants tented and his eyes dark like they had been earlier. She shivered, in part from fear but also with desire. What would happen if she slipped out of her panties and parted her legs right here?

He seemed to guess at her thoughts and nodded his head in encouragement. Zandrea looked everywhere but at him, breathing deep, forcing her body to calm down. When he set her glass down in front of her, she zipped it up and took a sip. The cold liquid went a long way to soothing her raging hormones.

“You’re afraid of me,” he announced, settling on the couch beside her.

“I am not!”

“Not in the way you should be,” he admitted. “But you’re afraid of what I make you feel. You’re not like other women I’ve met. All of the women I’ve met are ready and willing to make love with me.”

She clenched her hands in her lap when he reached for one of her legs and lifted it to rest on his lap. Zandrea was surprised that Brant’s gaze never left her face, though she was surely flashing him with her legs apart like that.

“So I’m hurting your ego, is that it?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m just wondering what makes you hesitate.”

“Every woman doesn’t have to jump into bed with you.”

“We give animal magnetism a whole new meaning.” He raised a hand and grinned. “Hold on before you attack. I didn’t mean that as arrogantly as it sounds. I mean we give off something, a hormone or some such, I guess. Lucas is into that crap. I just know it works. Anyway, we can make the opposite sex much more excited than human men can. Sometimes with a touch.” He ran his fingertips along her thigh, sliding just past the hem of her skirt but not reaching her heated center. “And sometimes with words, like when I was telling you about how the scent of your cream flowing was driving the shifters insane.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. “Anybody would get off on hearing that!”

His eyes seemed to glitter in the dim lighting. “But can anyone come from those words alone?”

Her mouth dropped open. “Prove it!”

Chapter Seven

Prove it, she'd said. Brant knew without a doubt he could bring her to orgasm with little more than a look and a few choice words, but it was taking an insane amount of his built up self-control to keep from plunging his fingers into her heat. What he had told her was true. Her scent had been driving the shifters out of their minds. And he was no different. She was without question flowing right now. The scent drew images to mind of how thick it would be, how it would taste, even the sound of her cries as she came seemed to fill his ears. He could scarcely put two words together, let alone try to seduce her.

It had been a mistake to come here this early. He should have taken her around town as he had intended to do in the first place and then called Lucas to coordinate a time when they could meet here. The atmosphere with the fire and the lights turned low were conducive to seduction, to all out wild, hot sex on the bearskin rug Lucas had to buy three years ago to complete his pretentious home decor.

With herculean effort, Brant removed his hands from Zandrea's body and moved across the room to stoke the fire. "No, I'm not going to do that. If I don't get to come, neither do you." At her gasp, he chuckled. "I wouldn't be able to resist taking you if you did anyway. Your moans would make it impossible not to spread your legs and take what I want. The expression, 'I'm only human' doesn't apply here."

"Meaning you couldn't be responsible at that point."

"Yes."

He heard her move about behind him, and he imagined she was straightening her clothing, maybe even planning to make another run for it. He sighed. She couldn't escape him. Even if she got a head start, he could outrun her any day or night. For some reason if that failed, his sense of smell would lead him to her. Not now, not ever would he forget her as she would forget him later. The way that thought tore at him boggled his mind, but he didn't examine it too closely. They didn't know each other well.

Her voice came from just behind him, amazing him that he hadn't picked up on her movement so fevered was his mind. "I have a knack for picking up losers who cheat on me. I almost always end up falling in love, and they always cheat, breaking my heart into a million pieces. Stacy and Nita are there to help me through it with pints of french vanilla ice cream, walnuts, whipped cream and a half cherry on top, but still, it's too much."

"Specific aren't you?"

She laughed. "Yeah, well. I know what I like."

A rustle of material and somehow he knew her bare breasts were on his back. "If I turn around..."

“You’ll be able to have me.”

Brant’s mouth went dry. He spun to find her naked from head to toe except for her red bikini panties. He panted at the rich dark chocolate of her skin, the nipples protruding invitingly and her navel pierced just asking for his tongue to dip into it. “Damn it, woman!”

He dropped to his knees and extended his tongue while gripping her hips. Her skin was smooth as he ran his tongue over it. He kissed her belly, and she moaned, arching into him. Brant ran his fingers beneath the material of her panties and dragged them downward. The patch of black curls brought a roar to his throat, but he fought not to release it for fear of frightening her.

“Mine!” he growled instead. “All mine.”

“Brant!”

Roughly, he pushed her legs apart and buried his mouth between them. Her cream coated his tongue with one swipe, and he delved deeper to find her nub. The shout she let out at first contact was the last he heard, for blood rushed in his ears, and all he could focus on was sucking her until she had no more to give. The little swollen bud deserved all of his attention, to force his lover to give him her cream.

He slid his mouth lower and pushed his tongue inside, gathering as much of her juice as possible. He laved and laved then leaned back and pressed a finger up her tunnel. Her muscles tightened. He drove another in and refocused on the nubbin.

Somewhere on a subconscious level, he heard a door slam, but Brant couldn’t pull himself away from Zandrea’s goodness. He wanted to consume her, to eat until he couldn’t move.

“Yum, is it that good?”

Zandrea yelped and would have pulled away to cover herself, but Brant held her in place. He took two more swipes before leaning around her thigh to spot his brother. He stood there arms crossed and interest in his eyes. They had shared women in the past, but Brant would be damned if he ever let Lucas touch Zandrea.

He bared his teeth, pointed and sharp, a rumble growing in his chest. “Touch her, and I will kill you. Get the fuck out and let me have what’s mine.”

Lucas’ eyes narrowed. “For now.”

Brant didn’t wait to see if his brother left the room, and he didn’t give a shit if Lucas did or didn’t. He could watch if that’s what he desired, but Brant was getting inside Zandrea

now. He stood and lifted her in his arms to lower her to the floor. Lucas would have words later about them soiling the bearskin carpet, but Brant didn't care.

Zandrea sat up and braced her hands on his chest when he had ripped open his shirt. "Are you sure this is okay? He...um..."

Brant slipped out of his shirt and flung it. He leaned back and unbuttoned his slacks. She bit her lip while watching his movements. Brant grinned. "Can you turn back now?"

She swallowed and licked her lips. "No, I don't think I can."

"Good." He stood up and slipped out of his pants, took hold of his erection and stroked it while she watched. Knowing she liked what she saw sent his lust into a whole other stratosphere. With forced gentleness, he lowered her until she lay flat, and then he positioned himself between her legs, nudging them wider. Even after he had feasted for so long and with such enthusiasm, she was wet all over again. He paused to watch and stretched a finger out to first dip into her and then to trace over her pearl. Her eyes drifted closed, and she lifted her hips, whining for more.

"You want me inside you?" he asked.

"Yes!"

Her skin puckered with goose bumps. He squeezed her thighs and pinched her nipples. Following his come coated fingers across her breasts, he licked the cream from her skin, savoring it and the tight peaks in his mouth. He pulled back, tugging on the nipple until she cried out his name.

"Damn it, Brant. Put your dick in me now. Please!"

He complied, inching in a little at a time. She was so tight, like she hadn't had a man in a while. Brant gritted his teeth and fought not to slam into her. It would kill him if he hurt her. All he wanted was to please her, to make her come, to hear her call his name and wrap her legs around his waist.

Soon he had all of his thick shaft seated deep inside Zandrea, and he paused to catch his breath, willing himself not to release too soon. When the sensation to come eased a little, he began a slow rhythm in and out of her. She bucked, tightened her hold on his waist and dug her nails into his back.

Brant curled his nails into his palms. Having grown out with his excitement, they would tear at her skin if he wasn't careful. Instead, he clenched them and pressed his hands into the floor while he found Zandrea's mouth and pounded into her.

* * * *

Zandrea couldn't believe sex could be this good. Brant was so big, it hurt going in, but the pleasure of being filled with a man was intense as well. She wouldn't have let him stop if he tried. Her body was on fire after he had licked her like she was his last meal, like she tasted that good. Even his brother had commented when he came in on how Brant was eating her. Men had gone down on her before, but never like that.

Now he pounded in and out of her like he had lost all control. He lifted one of her legs up over his shoulder, and Zandrea thought she would faint. Her bud pulsed, her core muscles tensed, and she forgot the ache, the soreness for the sheer pleasure of being taken in the rough way Brant had.

He pushed her knee toward her chest, and the slight change of position had him thrusting against her ass. She screamed and pleaded for him not to stop. Her fingernails digging into his muscular, hairy thighs, she pulled at him, wishing they could be one and the need she felt would be satisfied.

Without warning, Brant flipped their positions, so that he was on the bottom and she was on the top. He had her facing away from him, but he held onto her hips. He pushed her forward slightly and brought her down hard on his dick. Her head spun. An orgasm rushed through her. She sagged forward having lost all strength, but Brant held on. He sat up, wrapped his arms around her and pushed her head back on his shoulder.

He thrust in and out while he stroked her between her legs. Another orgasm took her. She could do nothing more than moan.

"Again," he demanded.

"I can't."

"Again." His rhythm didn't break for an instant. His massaging of her most sensitive part had her climaxing for the third time and then a fourth. "Come for me." His voice was rough and deep. If Zandrea hadn't been so turned on, she would have been afraid.

She gasped. "Brant, I can't. It's too much."

He slid his hand from between her legs to rest on her belly. She glanced down and noticed how long his nails were. They were sharp, and she wondered if they could have sliced her open. He guessed her thoughts.

"I was careful." He choked off more words, his eyes closing. After some time, he whispered. "Don't be afraid."

She wondered what he meant by that, and then she knew. He growled louder than she'd heard before and then at the point of his release, he bit down into her shoulder. She tried to pull away, but he held on. It wasn't that it hurt so much, because surprisingly it didn't.

The sensuality coupled with his orgasm was insane, but it was violent and wild as well. Brant was nothing like any man she had ever met before.

After a while, he raised his head, his breath coming in heavy pants. His eyes were half closed, but Zandrea trembled at their color, almost black and glowing with the reflection of the fire light.

“I need to have you again,” he whispered.

She gasped and shook her head. “I’m so sore. Everything hurts. I don’t think I can take it.”

He smiled. “Not tonight.” She thought she saw tears in his eyes, but when she looked again, his eyes were dry.

Chapter Eight

“You dumbass!” Lucas shouted. “How could you fucking do that? You’ve made her your mate, and now she doesn’t even remember you. Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

Brant leaned against the wall on the balcony outside of Lucas’ house and turned his face into the breeze which was picking up to the point of a wind. “I didn’t plan on it. I couldn’t help it. I found my teeth sunk into her sweet skin. Once wouldn’t have been a big deal.”

“I know that, but you bit her twice. You admitted to the one in your mother’s bar to mark her, but the second bite sealed it while having sex. You’ve never been this careless before, Brant.”

“My soul has never ached for a woman as much as it aches for Zandrea.”

“Cut the dramatics.”

“Fuck you!” Brant growled. “Everyone is not heartless like you. I don’t know what happened. It shouldn’t have gone the way it did. It was unexpected. Even at the hospital, I was all set to go outside to wait for you, and then I picked up her scent. I followed it. Later, we both figured it was the fact that I had a fever, but now I know something in her was drawing me.”

“A destined mate is rare among our kind. You know that.” Lucas still looked doubtful. He had been questioning whether it was just lust Brant was feeling, but deep inside Brant knew it was different. Yeah, *now* it was different. Zandrea was his mate, and he’d find it impossible to live his life without her from here on out. Yet, she would not know him from Adam if she saw him face-to-face. That knowledge, though it wasn’t his fault, cut him deeply.

Brant shrugged. “Whatever the case, I need to see her. Last night, I don’t know what I was thinking. I walked out when you started your thing.” Brant eyed his brother in suspicion. “You didn’t touch her, did you? Make her forget that you did it. I remember how excited you looked watching us make love.”

Lucas’ nostrils flared. “Make love? Give me a break. No, I didn’t touch her. I don’t go after humans that often. Too tame for my taste. I can’t believe you got enough just sleeping with her last night. You’ll want to get the edge off tonight. I hear one of the Eastern female shifters has come to town looking for fresh meat. I can’t imagine she’d turn down my little brother.”

Brant clenched his fists. “Don’t patronize me. You know a true mated wolf cannot be intimate with anyone but his mate. Damn it! I’ve fucked up. How the hell am I going to have my needs met if my mate doesn’t know me?”

Lucas's expressed showed not the least bit of sympathy. "Give it some time. See the other shifter like I suggested, and let me seek out a couple of the elders to see if there's a way to break the bond that I don't know about. It's possible since we rarely follow old customs in the first place."

"Yeah, it's the elders who said we'd get into crap like this if we left the old ways. First thing we did was toss aside running in packs, now one of us is trying to break away from a mate. I can imagine the outrage that will cause with the old-timers." Brant sighed. "Fine. One week. I don't think I can hold out much longer than that. But, Lucas, hurry! I *will* not take a lover that's not Zandrea. Period."

* * * *

Six days was all that Brant could keep himself away from the woman whose soul called to his whether she knew it or not. He hadn't slept more than a couple hours at a time, and when he did, his mind was filled with flashes of her beautiful face, her sexy body beneath him, her crying out his name as he brought her to climax after climax. Unfortunately, the hot dreams didn't translate to him getting his satisfaction. Even using his hand meant nothing. His bottled up sexual desire was nearing boiling point, and seeing Zandrea on a date with another man was not helping matters.

Seated at a nearby table so that he was within earshot of Zandrea and the asshole who should have his throat ripped out, Brant watched them with his hands clenched in his lap. He ignored the waiter who came by twice to ask if he was ready to order. Brant could have sat across the room and picked up their words, but he didn't want to have to filter out everyone else in the room. The process would only annoy him more.

Damn, she moved fast being with him just six days after they had been wrapped around each other. Then again, she didn't remember that. Frustration made him growl low in his throat, and he turned his stare back to his waiter for the third time. With eyes wide and smile frozen in place on the man's face, Brant could guess his own eyes had gone dark and threatening. Good, maybe that would make him fuck off.

The waiter spun on his heel and bolted. Brant turned his attention back to the couple at the next table. He lifted his water glass to his mouth but only managed to shatter it in his hand.

Control gone, he stood and stomped over to the table to confront Zandrea. "Why the hell are you with this loser? He only wants to get into your bed." Brant sniffed. "I can smell it. What I don't pick up is a desire from you."

"What the hell? Who are you?" Zandrea demanded. "And what business is it of yours if my date wants me? Wait, you said..." She stopped, her eyes widening and lowering to the table.

Brant noted the embarrassment on her date's face. He hauled the guy to his feet. "That's right, she doesn't want you." Relief at the knowledge flooded through Brant's body. "Get lost!"

"Hey!" Zandrea jumped to her feet and shoved Brant. "You need to back off my date. You don't know him, and you damn sure don't know me."

"You are mine!" Brant insisted, knowing he sounded like a maniac. He wrestled with his emotions, but gained no control over himself.

"You've lost your mind!" Zandrea squeezed past him and grabbed the man's hand who had not said anything yet. She dragged him toward the exit, and Brant stood there for a second before starting after them.

A waiter and the manager blocked his path. "Sir, who's going to pay for this meal?"

Brant glanced at the table of unfinished food. He himself hadn't ordered a thing. "It's not mine. Let that loser pay."

The manager remained in place. "It seems to me, *sir*, that you harassed them until they had to leave. Now in the police report, I will be sure to mention—"

"Fine!" Brant yanked his wallet from his back pocket and peeled off a few bills to toss onto the table. "That should cover it. Now get out of my way before I give you a lot more to report to the police."

Cowed, the manager and waiter stepped aside, and Brant took off for the exit. By the time he reached the street, there was no sight of Zandrea or her date. Brant slammed his fist into a lamp post and growled low in his throat. Several patrons arriving and leaving the restaurant eyed him warily.

After slipping into his car in the parking lot, he sat in silence trying to calm down enough to think of his next move. He hadn't handled things in the restaurant correctly. While at home, he had practiced what he would say and planned to walk up and meet her all over again. Instead he came off like a raving lunatic. It was doubtful she'd forget that and ever let him within two feet of her.

He punched the steering wheel. "This is not happening!" His cell rang, and he slipped it from his pocket to see who was calling. It was Lucas. He hit the answer button. "What?"

Without preamble, Lucas announced, "There's no way to break the bond unless you or she dies. I can arrange for someone to do that."

Brant's chest tightened. "Do what?"

"Kill her, of course."

Brant disconnected the call, but Lucas called right back.

“Don’t be stupid, Brant. I spoke with not two but five elders. All of them have said mating with humans is a mistake. Few have done it, but it has resulted in weak wolves and other issues. If I believed in it, I would say nothing but heartache would come from taking a human mate. If you were thinking with anything other than your dick, you’d realize that.”

“It’s not just that,” Brant insisted.

“Oh, it isn’t?”

“You wouldn’t know. You’ve never had a mate. You’ve never loved anyone other than yourself.”

His brother didn’t deny it. “What’s your point?”

Brant sighed and closed his eyes. In the rearview mirror, he picked up blue and red flashing lights. So the manager had phoned the police. He didn’t need trouble. Brant started his car and eased out of the parking lot, headed in the direction of Zandrea’s apartment.

“My point is,” he said when he had put distance between himself and the police, “that yes, it’s physical. I don’t deny that I want to fuck her brains out. Contrary to what you think, I was more than satisfied with her. And I never ever wanted to take a mate. I loved having several women at once. But the moment I bit her, no before, I felt like she was more, like I could never walk away from her even if I tried. That sounds corny to a cold-hearted bastard like you, but it’s true. Now that we are mates, I don’t think—no I know I can’t—be without her. So, one way or another, I’m going to have Zandrea. You can help me or stand aside. But if you fucking lay one finger on her or have someone else do it, I will kill you without hesitation.”

This time it was Lucas who cut the line, and Brant tossed his phone on the passenger side seat. Fifteen minutes later, he pulled up to Zandrea’s apartment and parked his car. Rolling his window down, he sniffed the air. Yeah, that jerk was either here or had been recently. Brant stepped out of his vehicle and stood glancing up and down the street. He stretched out his tense muscles and crossed the road.

Chapter Nine

"I had a good time, Zandrea," Ronnie told her. "You know. At first. Before that guy..."

Zandrea paused in sticking her key in the door of her place. All the way back home, her mind had been filled with that freak who acted like he owned her when she'd never met him. He was hot as hell, but the man had a screw loose.

"Um, yeah, sorry about that."

Ronnie stared at her. "You didn't know him, did you?"

"No." She fiddled with her key in her hand. She'd been about to let Ronnie come in, knowing Stacy would be out until late. But crazy guy had been right about one thing. She wasn't the least bit attracted to Ronnie, and she had no desire to prolong seeing him. Truth be told, she had been off her game all week. Something had changed inside of her, but she couldn't pinpoint it. "I didn't know him, but that incident messed up my mind frame. Why don't we call it a night, and I'll call you?"

Ronnie stood there unmoving, and Zandrea wasn't about to open her door so he would think she wanted him to come in. She waited him out.

He shuffled from foot to foot, giving in at last. "You're not going to call me, are you? And if I call you, you won't answer or will have your roommate give me some lame ass excuse."

She didn't deny it. "I'm sorry."

Ronnie spun away and stomped down the stairs to the first level and out the door. Zandrea thought she heard someone laugh, but when she peered over the railing, she didn't see anyone on the first floor. She shrugged and opened her door to let herself into her apartment.

Stacy was curled up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn. Zandrea parked on the back of the couch and reached for a handful. "I thought you said you'd be out late. It's a rare occurrence when we all three actually have dates at one time."

"Yeah," her friend muttered. "But it's not a rare occurrence for those dates to suck." She rolled her eyes. "That guy was so freaking boring, I can't even imagine why I went out with him."

Zandrea flipped around to sit down correctly and kicked her shoes off. "I hear that. You won't believe what happened to me tonight. But hold up, I'm just remembering something."

Stacy shoved the popcorn bowl into Zandrea's lap and took a swig of her soda. "What?"

“Remember that night at the club. You know last Saturday?”

Stacy yawned. “Not really. We got smashed or something, and it’s all a blur.”

Zandrea nodded. “Except for the part where we met those three guys at the same time while we were coming out. And I think I saw this other man nodding to them just before they approached us, a man any of us would have jumped at. Who do you think he was?”

“Zan, like that has any bearing on the fact that we’re losers.”

“I’m not a loser thank you very much!”

“Then your date was wonderful, and he was just too much of a gentleman to keep you out late. Is that it?”

Zandrea flared her nostrils. “Smart ass! Ronnie wasn’t bad, but I just wasn’t into him. But this other crazy dude, my body sang like a freaking soprano for.”

Stacy’s eyes lit up. “Do tell.”

* * * *

Zandrea stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around her body. She swiped a hand over the mirror and stared at her reflection. Running fingers through her hair, she considered her love life, or the fact that it was non-existent. So desperate was she for a man, even a nutcase had turned her on.

Not that she had fantasies about a dominant man trying to control her. She liked being in the driver seat of her life, but the way he had said she was his had her body going wild. While she searched her mind for a flicker of recognition, there was nothing. She’d never seen him before in her life, but her body acted like it knew him.

Shaking her head, she moved into the bedroom and dropped the towel before rubbing lotion on her body. She ran her palms over her breasts, annoyed that her nipples were erect. Between the sheets and the light turned off, she thought about last Saturday night. Nita and Stacy had shocked her when they admitted that there were hours missing from their night and none of them could remember where the time went or what they had been doing. Zandrea hadn’t confessed to the other two, but she had been sore between her legs, and there was a mark on her shoulder that still ached a little.

She ran her hand over it and closed her eyes waiting for an image to slip into her consciousness that would explain what had happened, but none came. A couple nights later she had gone back to the club to question the bartender, but the man claimed she and her friends had drank like fish in the corner for hours. He had remembered, he said, because he had thought they were too pretty to be alone. She’d snorted and thanked him.

“But did something happen?” she whispered to the dark room. “Did someone slip us a mickey and Nita and Stacy are like me, too scared to admit that they were sore like they’d had sex?”

Shocked at the thought, Zandrea sat up in bed. She shook from head to toe. Please, no, that couldn’t be true, could it? They’d been stupid and took chances way too much with their wild lifestyles, but rape?

She slipped into her robe and rushed to her bedroom door. With her hand on the knob, she stopped. She couldn’t do it. If she asked Stacy about it and Stacy hadn’t experienced the soreness, then she would know Zandrea had. Chewing on her lip, she thought about what to do. An idea formed in her mind. An examination would show if she had been violated, and because it was her doctor, no one would have to know anything until she was sure.

The decision made, she turned and headed back to bed but stopped when she heard a sound outside. On shaky legs, she walked to the window and pulled the curtain back to peer out. The balcony off the living room was just to the left of her bedroom window. On it was a huge dog, bigger than she’d ever seen. He howled in anguish at the moon.

“What the hell?” she whispered. “Did Stacy get a dog? Idiot shouldn’t leave him on the balcony biggest he is.”

She slipped back into her robe and knotted it before hurrying out to the hall. Used to strolling in the dark to get a midnight snack or drink, she didn’t turn on any lights. Instead, she headed straight to the sliding doors leading to the balcony and peered between the blinds. The animal was still there. She dropped to her knees to look into his eyes. Never having a fear of animals, she wasn’t afraid now, but she wanted to be sure he wouldn’t attack. He looked like someone had broken his poor little heart.

Zandrea opened the door. “Come inside, baby. What’s wrong? Stacy leave you out there all alone?” She wrapped her arms around his neck and nuzzled his furry neck. The dog whined and pulled back to lick her face. When he tried work his way inside her robe, she gave his nose a light smack. “Stop that.”

His tail thumped, and he sat down watching her with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Zandrea glanced down at herself noting how her robe hung open a little showing the swell of one breast. She smirked.

“Dirty animal.” She fixed her clothes and stood. “Okay, you can stay inside. I’ll talk to Stacy about not leaving you out on the balcony. She should know better than to get a pet as big as you. Besides that, our lease says thirty pounds and under. Your ass is way over that.”

Zandrea turned and headed back toward her room. A bark stopped her.

“Shut up, idiot. You’ll wake the whole building.” She tried leaving again and another bark. “All right, come on. You can sleep in my room, but only tonight. Your master can handle you after that.”

The dog followed Zandrea into her room, and when she had shut the door, she turned to find he had jumped on her bed and lay there.

“I think you’ve bumped your head, dog. Get down.” He ignored her. Zandrea stomped across the room, shoved the massive animal to one side and pulled her covers back. “Your ass better not have fleas or something.”

She dropped her robe and climbed into the bed. She thought she heard a moan that sounded suspiciously like delight, but she was too sleepy to investigate. In the morning was soon enough to tell Stacy to deal with her pet.

That night, Zandrea dreamed of the man from the restaurant with his body molded to hers and his arms wrapped around her waist. She had never felt so safe, so cared for, and she slept soundly until morning.

Chapter Ten

“Are you for real, Stacy? He’s not yours?” Zandrea sat on the edge of her chair feeding chunks of chicken to the dog. “Then how did he get on the balcony?”

Stacy shrugged. “Beats me. What’s more it’s not a dog. It’s a wolf.”

Zandrea shrieked. “A wolf?”

Her friend nodded. “Yup. He’s beautiful though, bigger than I’ve ever seen, and he acts like he’s in love with you.” Stacy laughed. “Damn, why couldn’t he be a man, huh? Nita’d be so jealous that we have a man living with us.”

Zandrea laughed. “Whatever. He just likes me because I let him sleep in my bed and fed him. Oh wait, yeah most men would like that.” They both burst out laughing. Her canine admirer growled in annoyance. Zandrea stuck out her tongue at him. “So I guess it’s to the pound then.”

The moment she said it, Zandrea knew she couldn’t part with the dog. There was something about him. She cleaned her hands and knelt down in front of him to take hold of his face. His big dark eyes that looked almost black bore into hers as if he was begging her not to send him away.

“You want to stay with me, don’t you, baby?” she asked him.

Stacy laughed. “Did he just nod?”

Zandrea buried her face in his neck. “We’d get in serious trouble trying to keep you, and I’ve got an appointment this afternoon so I can’t be here to take you out for another walk.”

“Appointment?”

Zandrea could have bitten her tongue off. She hadn’t meant to say anything about her doctor’s appointment. Dr. Stevens had agreed to squeeze her in as a walk-in because she was concerned about injury during her last sexual encounter. She hadn’t told him her suspicions, which probably was a mistake. She could straighten it out at his office if he confirmed that she’d had sex in the last year and a half. Hopefully he could tell one way or another.

“Yeah, I won’t be long.” She didn’t explain, and Stacy didn’t press her. “Can you take him out, Stacy? No out of town deliveries today, right? Please? I promise I’ll figure something out later. Maybe take him to Nita’s or something during the day.”

Her friend sighed. “Fine. I don’t want to let him go either. He’s a good boy.” Stacy scratched the wolf behind the ears and called out her good-byes before heading out to work.

Zandrea stood up. “Well, come on. You can keep me company while I shower and change. I’ll think about a name for you while I’m at work, and if you behave and not rip the apartment to shreds, I will bring you some hospital cafeteria food.” She laughed. “Won’t that be good?”

Her new pet didn’t look impressed, but seemed too eager to follow her into the bedroom.

* * * *

Brant stepped out of the shower and toweled dry. He couldn’t get the smile off his face. Last night had been wonderful. He’d taken a huge risk shifting back to his human form to wrap himself around Zandrea’s soft body, but he couldn’t resist. She’d let him stay, and she had moaned her pleasure at having him hold her all night long. The only time he had pulled away was to go and get his clothes from his car to hide inside her room. That way, he would have something to wear when he left.

Slipping his shoes on his feet, he paused when his cell phone buzzed. He clicked on. “Yeah?”

“You sound chipper,” Lucas said accusingly.

“I am. I slept with Zandrea last night.”

“What!”

Brant laughed. “She took me in as a stray, and while she was asleep, I shifted back to hold her in my arms.”

“That is not a solution, Brant.”

“It’s the only one I have at the moment. If I can spend even an hour in her presence, I’m happier. You’d know that if—”

“Stow it! So you’ll live the rest of your life in wolf form?”

Brant hadn’t thought that far ahead, but he considered it now. If he had to choose between never seeing Zandrea again or allowing someone to end her life, living as her pet was not such a bad thing, especially if he got to hold her and to watch her dry her naked body fresh from the shower. His shaft had gone rock solid seeing her with water droplets glistening on her smooth skin. Her sweet scent had made him pant and long to taste her.

Seeing his unwavering stare, she had only laughed and shook her head, calling him a dirty dog. But she had made no move to hide herself, so he got to look his fill of her.

“If living as a wolf is what it takes to always be with Zandrea, then I suppose I will. However, today, I’m going to go out, because I’m worried about her. She said something to her roommate about an appointment. When her friend asked her about it, Zandrea was vague. I need to make sure everything is okay, so I’m going to follow her. I’ll check in later.”

“Brant,” Lucas called out before he hung up.

“Yeah?”

Lucas sighed. “Be careful. I don’t pretend to understand, but you’re wrong about me. I care about some people other than myself.”

Brant grinned. “I love you, too.” He clicked off.

* * * *

Zandrea sat on the edge of the hospital bed and waited for her doctor to come back in the room. She chewed a nail while reading and re-reading the various posters around the room. They were boring the first time she scanned them, and they were boring now, but she couldn’t stop herself from considering the ad for a new drug on one wall, heeding the signs of high blood pressure on another, and noting that it was rude not to call twenty-four hours in advance if she was going to break her appointment on a third wall.

Finally, a soft knock sounded on the door, and Dr. Stevens strolled in. “Zandrea, good to see you again.” The doctor sat down on a stool and flipped a chart open. “I do see the signs of vigorous sex, but not so rough that you caused any damage. Just be sure to let your partner know when it’s too much.”

Zandrea’s stomach knotted. She swallowed a few times hoping she wasn’t about to throw up.

“From the last time I saw you, you indicated you hadn’t been sexually active for a while. I’m hoping you took precautions...”

“Precautions,” she muttered. Of course, safe sex, protection. She was on the pill, but a condom? She wasn’t aware she had been with anyone. Fear tightened her chest. She doubled over. In another second, her doctor would see her crying if the commotion outside in the hall and a scream didn’t capture his attention.

He stood and opened the door. “What’s going on?”

“A dog!” someone yelled.

Zandrea gasped. “Impossible.” She scrambled off of the table, held her gown together and rushed to the door. At the other end of the hall, her wolf sat calmly staring at her. “Shit!”

Zandrea scrambled into her clothes and rushed out into the hallway at full speed. Assistants and patients were pressed against the wall unmoving, their eyes wide and their mouths hanging open. Zandrea was struck again at how big the wolf was. She imagined if she didn’t know he was gentle, in this setting it would freak her out as well.

She grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. “I’m so sorry. He’s mine. I didn’t know he followed me. I don’t know how he got out of the house. Please forgive me.”

Dr. Stevens stood pale on one side of the massive desk that looked ridiculous out in the hall across from the room where he had examined Zandrea. “Don’t worry about it. Settle with me later. Please take him out of here.”

Zandrea dragged the wolf outside and shoved him into her car. She jumped in on the driver’s side and had to suffer more embarrassment when her car didn’t start on the first six tries. She slammed a fist on the steering wheel, trying not to cry. The wolf whined and nuzzled her arm.

“Oh goodness, Wolf,” she cried out, the tears pouring. “I just found out I was raped. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

With her face pressed into her hands, Zandrea sobbed. She didn’t hear anything around her so she had a moment of shock when fingers touched a small space on her shoulder. Gentle pressure there, and she lost consciousness.

Chapter Eleven

Zandrea shut her eyes tight against the sunlight shining in the window and moaned before shifting to her side. Without thinking, she slipped a hand beneath her pillow and cupped it closer to her face. Feeling like someone was watching her, she opened her eyes to come face-to-face with Wolf.

She threw back the covers and sat up. “What the hell? When did I get...” She glanced down to find she was naked, and memories of what she had learned at the doctor’s office came rushing back to her. “Oh no, Wolf. This can’t be happening. It *couldn’t* have.” A hand pressed to her lips, she rushed to the bathroom and fell to her knees to empty the contents of her stomach in the toilet.

When she had no more strength, she collapsed on the floor and curled up in the fetal position sobbing and rocking.

“Don’t. Please don’t, Zandrea.”

She gasped and rolled over. A man stood in the doorway, the one from the restaurant who had claimed she was his, and he was as naked as she was. “You,” she squeaked. “Was it you? What are you doing in here?” She draped an arm across her breasts and looked around for a way to escape.

He leaned out and held a hand toward her. “Don’t be afraid. Baby, you weren’t raped, I promise you. If you’ll get up off the cold floor and come and sit down, I’ll explain everything.”

“Don’t call me baby!” she snapped. Like that was the least of her worries. Had he attacked her again after she left the doctor’s office and brought her here? That meant he knew where she lived and had broken in. “What did you do to Wolf? Come here, boy! Attack!”

She had no idea if her pet understood that he had let an enemy come in to hurt her, but he was so huge, he was sure to intimidate this man despite him being monstrous in size as well.

“Come and sit down. Put something on,” the man said more firmly. “You’re shivering.”

She wanted to tell him what to kiss, but she was at a disadvantage crouched on the floor and him blocking the exit. On unsteady legs she stood up, watching so he wouldn’t make any sudden movements toward her. He backed up but not too far, a look of concern in his eyes. The man seemed to care about her, although she couldn’t imagine why.

“Turn your head!” she demanded. An eyebrow went up, and he was about to say something but changed his mind. He turned his back. Zandrea darted out of the bathroom and scooped up the clothes she’d worn earlier in the day. She slid into her pants at record

speed and screwed up the buttons on her top, but didn't stop to fix them. She wanted to be fully dressed in case she had to run.

When she pulled the laces on her sneakers in place, she looked up. "You put something on, too."

He faced her, making no move to cover the huge package he displayed. Zandrea averted her eyes, and he grinned as if he was proud. "I'm sorry, I can't. I left the clothes I wore out of here in someone's yard about a mile away. I had to hurry to meet you."

"What?"

He sighed. "My name is Brant. We met last week at the club—"

"You're the one!" She stumbled backward and would have run out of the bedroom if he didn't rush to take her hand, holding her in place. He pushed the door closed, and the soft click might as well have been a vault slamming shut for all the fear it sent through her body that she was trapped with a madman.

"Please, calm down. Let me explain."

He kept his voice low and steady. Zandrea forced herself to swallow and take deep breaths. Panic would not help her.

Brant continued. "We met and hit it off. We were intimate." He rushed ahead. "It was mutual consent. But I made a mistake. I admitted my family's secret, and because of that, my brother insisted on removing the fact that we had ever met from your memory. That's why you don't remember that we made love, that I made you my mate."

Zandrea eyed him like he'd lost his damn mind. "You think that makes sense, don't you? Or that I believe you."

"It's the truth." He ran a hand down the side of her face, but Zandrea ducked away. "Baby, you are my mate. Now and forever. I claimed you fully that night, and I realize that was wrong, but it cannot be helped now."

"What are you talking about!" Zandrea shoved his chest, and it was like pushing against a wall for all the impact it made on him.

"I am a wolf shape shifter. The wolf you have had as a pet was me." He ran a hand through his hair and offered a guilty grin." Without telling her what he intended, his body began to change. The eyes that intrigued her turned dark, and his bones cracked and popped. Hair sprouted everywhere.

Zandrea threw herself back against the door, a hand over her mouth. In seconds the man who had been standing before her was now the wolf she had let sleep in her bed, had let

into the bathroom when she showered. He had watched with avid attention while she put lotion on her naked body.

This couldn't be happening. It wasn't real!

Zandrea threw open the bedroom door and slammed it behind her, trapping the wolf inside. She sprinted across the apartment, grabbing her purse and keys on the way. When she hit the stairs, she jumped several at a time and ignored the twinges in her ankles. Out on the street, she opened up her run and bolted for her car. The doorway of the apartment building was still empty when her tires screeched as she turned the corner.

Half hour later, Zandrea let herself in Nita's dorm room and threw herself on the bed to cry. At least she wanted to cry, but the shock had not only sapped her energy, it seemed to have dried her tear ducts. Zandrea lay on the bed face up and stared at the ceiling.

"Shape shifters don't exist," she mumbled. "That stuff is for the movies."

For a while she lay there calming her breathing, directing her thoughts to more peaceful circumstances. There would be no more problems. Nita's last class for the day would end in forty-five minutes, and they would laugh about the huge misunderstanding. No big deal.

A knock sounded on the door. Zandrea went still. Her heart thumped in her chest, making it hard to hear. Still that knock seemed to drown out everything. Nita's fellow students and the staff knew Zandrea. As long as Nita had been going to school, refusing to leave really, they just ought to. She had often come here to escape her life and pretend she had no issues. So who would be knocking at this time?

"Who is it?" Zandrea called. No one answered. The knock came again. With caution, she moved toward the door and then opened it slowly. The second most gorgeous man she'd ever seen—second to Brant, she had to admit—stood at the door.

Where Brant might have been crazy, he had gentle eyes. Compassion and warmth was reflected there. This man's stare was cold, and his mouth was pressed into a harsh line. He raised a hand and took hold of Zandrea's arm.

"Get your fucking hands off me," she demanded.

"Let's go."

She glared at him and yanked on her arm to no avail. His hold tightened until it was painful.

"I have no wish to hurt you."

"Could have fooled me."

He growled. “You can come with me quietly, or I can knock you out. It’s your choice.”

“W-Who are you?”

“I am Brant’s half-brother.”

She gasped.

His hold loosened. “Which will it be?”

What choice did she have? Pointing with her chin over her shoulder, she indicated her purse and keys. “I have to get my stuff, and I won’t make a fuss.”

He stared at her as if to gauge if she was telling the truth, and then he released her. Zandrea wracked her brain to come up with a way of escape, just like she had done with Brant, but nothing came to mind. This man wouldn’t hesitate to crack her head, she thought. He’d get her to whatever place he had in mind one way or another. What had she gotten herself into?

In his car, Zandrea sat still not saying a word. She watched the scenery closely so she could tell the police where to find this jackass that is if he didn’t kill her. She trembled at the thought. Not one time in her life had she gotten into a fight. She’d always been the one to joke her way out of everything, and if that didn’t work, she had Stacy to kick ass. Stacy didn’t take crap off of anyone. Later, they had met Nita who could probably buy her way out of stuff if the need ever arose and if she hadn’t blown through her trust fund allowance by then.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked him. “And what’s your name?”

He didn’t bother answering her questions. “I would have insisted Brant bring you to me again, but the fool left his clothes somewhere, and he couldn’t very well chase you down the street naked or track you in daylight as a wolf.”

She stared at him. “H-He really is a wolf shape shifter?”

He didn’t answer.

“Tell me something, damn it,” she yelled. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“What’s going on is I’m going to clean up the mess my brother has made and make you forget you ever met him—again.”

Chapter Twelve

Brant kicked the door to his brother's house open at the same time Seth, one of the other shifters was opening it. They met face-to-face growling at each other.

"Back off, Brant," Seth told him.

"Like hell I will. Lucas has my mate. I'm coming in to get her."

Seth shook his head. Two other shifters stepped up, both beefy and able to take on Brant if they needed to. "You know the rules," Seth reminded him. "Our existence must stay a secret from humans no matter what. Just be happy we're not killing her."

"Fuck you!" The pain at that thought cut through Brant until he thought he would faint. He clenched his fists and tightened his jaw to keep focus. He needed to see her, had to hear her voice and breath in her sweet scent. She was his, damn it. They knew that. "I'll fight whoever I have to, to get her."

"You'll take us all on?" Seth indicated the men.

After a stare off that lasted several minutes, Brant took a step back. "Don't hurt her. Please, just tell Lucas not to hurt her. Clear her memory of me if he has to, but, Seth, don't let him make her cry."

Seth dropped a hand on Brant's shoulder. "Don't worry. Your brother's a first class son of a bitch, and he doesn't like humans much, but he won't deliberately hurt one. Your mate will be safe. You just concentrate on getting used to the fact that you'll live the rest of your life without her. We've agreed that even staying with her as a pet is too risky. You can't have any contact with her whatsoever."

Brant considered bucking against the decision made without consulting him but decided against it. What would be the point? None of these single men could understand what it was to find a destined mate, to feel her even when she wasn't there, calling for him to join her. Zandrea might be human, but their connection was spiritual. No doubt about it. She was his through and through, and Brant suspected, although she would never be able to pinpoint it, Zandrea would suffer without him if they stayed apart. He didn't care who didn't like it, he would not permit her to suffer.

"Fine," he said at last. "I'm going. But if I find out—"

"Yeah," Seth interrupted. "I got it. Heads will roll or something equally clichéd." The door slammed in Brant's face.

Brant turned his back on the house and glanced up at the darkening sky. First he would return home, and then he would begin to plan his next move. *It won't be too long, baby. Don't worry. I'll be with you soon.*

* * * *

Zandrea went over the want ads for the third time and sighed. She didn't qualify for squat, and she began to wonder if she should go back to school like Nita. Too bad she couldn't borrow one of her friend's advanced degrees to get a nice paying job. Nobody wanted just a high school diploma anymore.

Stacy strolled into the room. "Why are you even looking for something new? You have benefits, and you always liked working in the cafeteria."

Zandrea rolled her eyes. "Don't get crazy. *Like* is a strong word. I tolerated it."

"Well visiting the ER always seemed to satisfy you," Stacy told her. "What changed?"

Nita paused in polishing her toenails on the loveseat across from Zandrea. "Yeah, you used to tell us stories about the people you met there and all their issues. The hypochondriacs were the funniest."

"It doesn't mean anything anymore." Zandrea whined and threw herself down on the coffee table, sending magazines and Stacy's centerpiece flying. "My life is crap!"

Stacy smirked. "Girl, I know you better straighten up that table after I killed myself cleaning up. Your ass didn't do anything except complain. What's gotten into you? You act like you lost your best friend, which is impossible because I'm right here."

"Funny, Stacy," Nita snapped. "I'm her best friend."

Stacy held up a hand and went to picking up the magazines herself. "What's up, Zan?"

Zandrea shook her head. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel like something...or someone...is missing. I feel like I'm all alone, which is crazy because like you said, we've all been together forever. I've always been generally happy."

"Maybe you need to talk to a therapist," Nita suggested.

"Or my pastor," Stacy offered.

Nita jumped up and swiveled her hips with her toes splayed to keep from touching while her polish dried. "What you need is to get your swerve on, girlfriend!"

Zandrea and Stacy burst out laughing.

"Girl, you stupid," Stacy cried, wiping her eyes. "Nita, you need to stop talking like that before it becomes real and all those stuck up lawyers and accountants that run your life get worried and send you off to Upper Crust Ville."

Zandrea snorted. "Okay, okay. Now I feel better. You girls are crazy. I'm going to take this paper and look at it while I take a nice relaxing bubble bath."

Stacy snatched the paper away. "That defeats the purpose. Go relax. It will be here when you get back."

Taking her friend's advice, Zandrea left the paper and headed for her room. She undressed quickly and glanced warily around the room like she expected someone to be watching. There was no one there. After running the water and pouring in her favorite lavender scented bubble bath, she slipped beneath warm surface and settled back. She jumped a few times until her back and the water warmed the porcelain, and then she closed her eyes.

As had happened so many times when she relaxed or lay in bed with her eyes closed, a shadowy image came into her mind. She knew it was a man but not what he looked like. At first she'd assumed it was a memory, but then it seemed too alive, and unless she was going insane, he spoke soft words to her, words that were too low to be clear, but soothing all the same. He wanted to ease away her loneliness and help her not to be so depressed all the time. More and more, during these odd sessions was the only time the ache receded. She hadn't shared with her friends the depths of her despair so as not to worry them, but if something wasn't done soon, Zandrea was fearful of what would happen to her. What was it that was missing? Was it this man?

"Who are you?" she asked him in her mind. "Why do I feel so lost except when you're here like this? And yet even then it's a temporary relief. What's wrong with me?"

He responded, but she couldn't make out his words. Hot tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

"Come for me soon. Please," she said in desperation.

* * * *

Zandrea stood at the perfume counter demonstrating the newest fragrance and fighting against a splitting headache. What had made her decide to take this job she didn't know. She was not big on wearing fragrance—or makeup, which had been the counter she had covered the day before. She hated how they used her as a floatie, switching from position to position, wherever there was a need. But she was the low man on the totem pole, she guessed, and that's how they did things at this department store.

A powerful sneeze, followed by a low growl caught her attention. She glanced up into the watery eyes of the sexiest man she'd ever seen. The poor thing whimpered with a hand pinching his nose. She wondered how he could breathe.

Rushing around the counter, she held up a tissue. “Are you okay? Allergies, huh? We get people walking by here all day complaining of the smell. They forget to detour through another area in order to get out to the mall.”

She was aware that she was rambling, but just being near him lifted her spirits, and it seemed so right. She grinned in his face like an idiot.

“I’m great,” he muttered. “Now.”

Zandrea blinked. He stared at her as if he was feeling the same relief from the fog she’d been locked in for the last three months. “Um...” she began. “You should probably move away from the perfume counter. If you pass by the shoe section, the smell won’t reach you, and you can get to the mall out through the men’s section.”

He didn’t move although it was clear he was still suffering. Zandrea took his arm to show him the way. She found herself clinging and fought to get a hold of herself. In front of the store, on the mall side, she stopped.

“Have lunch with me,” he blurted out.

“Yes.”

Forgetting everything else, Zandrea strolled at his side down to the food court. They drifted from place to place, looking for something to eat, neither saying a word. When they settled on a slice of pizza and had added a coke, they sat down side by side. Zandrea couldn’t believe what she was doing, and with a stranger.

“I’m Zandrea. What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Brant.” He looked hopeful. “Do you know it?”

She frowned. “What, the name Brant? No, I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone by that name.” She tilted her head to the side and gave him a coy smile. “But I’d like to get to know you.”

His breath seemed to catch in his throat. He nodded and stuffed his pizza into his mouth. Zandrea watched him chew. He was all hard muscle, big chest and powerful arms. She imagined it would be incredible to be flat against that chest with him stroking and kissing her. When his eyes met hers, she blushed, feeling like he knew what she had been thinking.

“I’m not opposed to it,” he whispered.

She stared. “Opposed to what?”

He shrugged. “You looked like you wanted to kiss me just now.”

“Oh.” Zandrea ducked her head and continued to eat her pizza, anything to keep from jumping onto his lap and begging him to make love to her. This was so strange. All this time, she’d barely been in her right mind, lost and scared. Now here this strange man came along, and she was over the sadness. Unlike before, she didn’t even feel the pain around the edges of her consciousness like when that man in her mind appeared to help her get through another day.

“Zandrea.”

She glanced up. “Yes?”

“I know this will sound strange, but hear me out, okay?” Brant’s eyes were pleading. She nodded. “I want to date you. I want to keep it a secret from everyone, even your girlfriends.”

She stared. “My girlfriends?” How could he know? Of course, he would assume she had girlfriends. Most women did. But wasn’t it dangerous to just go out with a man like this, especially when he didn’t want anyone to know. “Are you married?”

He took her hand. “I am for you and only you. Say you’ll date me.”

She nodded. “Yes. Without hesitation, yes.”

Chapter Thirteen

Brant felt like he was going to burst. He and Zandrea were going away to a cabin owned by his mother's friend. The extra precautions for secrecy were important. Because he had stayed away from Zandrea and only visited her in her mind for three months, Lucas had called off the wolves that had been following him around.

His abilities were not like Lucas' so he found it hard to connect with Zandrea on a mental level when he was not with her. And knowing she was still not comforted enough had torn him apart. If Lucas hadn't backed off when he did, Brant didn't know what he would have done.

And now, he was going to be able to freely hold her in his arms, to make love to her for the first time in forever. His shaft hardened at the thought.

"What are you thinking, mister?" Zandrea demanded, pointing at the tent in his pants.

He grinned. "Nothing. Come on, you." He gathered up their bags after removing them from the trunk of his car and wrapped an arm around her waist. His shaft twitched in anticipation. He didn't want to do a damn thing when they got inside other than to rip her clothes off and lick her from head to toe.

She rolled her eyes at him and laughed. "I know you have dirty thoughts in your head, Brant. What if I don't want to sleep with you? We've only been going out a couple of weeks. That's soon, and I made a vow not to jump in the bed too soon with any man. I've been used in the past doing that."

Brant stopped, his eyes wide. He hadn't even considered that she would turn him down. A woebegone expression must have been on his face, because she burst out laughing and dragged him into the cabin.

"Don't worry, baby. I've been hot for you ever since I laid eyes on you in the mall." She winked. "Isn't it weird? It feels like we've known each other longer. It feels so right." She blushed and looked down at the floor. "That sounds lame."

He dropped the bags and took her into his arms. Nuzzling her neck, he breathed in her heady scent and pulled her head to his shoulder. "Not lame at all, and it's true. Everything about us together feels right." Could he get away with not telling her what he was? Maybe somehow it could work. The thought of her running from him again was too much to bear.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back out of his arms and looked him in the eyes. "Well, in that case, let's not pretend we're not out here for one thing and one thing only. She lifted her hands to her T-shirt, and with a look that dared him to follow suit, lifted it over her head. The hot pink bra cupping her perfect breasts nearly brought him to his knees.

Brant reached out to stroke her soft brown skin, reveling in the way it felt beneath his fingertips and the way she trembled at his touch. Zandrea often had defiance in her eyes like she dared anyone to judge her, but she was sensual and loving too. This woman was strong and independent, yet at the same time, he felt her need for him, and it warmed him.

Rather than undress, he stood there frozen in place, watching while she peeled off the layers of clothing. Her jeans followed the T-shirt to the floor, revealing matching panties. She kicked off her shoes and flicked away her socks. Brant stilled her in front of him, studying the rounded curves of her body. He turned her around and ran his hand down over her ass before moving close to rub against her. A rumble started in his chest. "Your ass drives me nuts."

She peered back at him, a coy look with lowered lashes and her bottom lip caught between her teeth. He growled again. "You like that, huh?" she asked him. "All that ass."

"Every bit of it. Take off your bra and panties. Let me look at all that is mine."

His lover obeyed, but now she looked nervous and hesitant. "It's more than..."

"No, don't do that." He laid a finger over her lips. "You're incredibly beautiful. I love looking at you naked."

The confusion was plain on her face. "This is the first time, goof."

"I've seen you a million times in my head." That was true. He'd been fantasizing about her ever since he'd first laid eyes on her, thinking that she was little more than a lay like every other woman, but unable to get her out of his head or his heart. He paused at that thought. He loved her. For the first time in his life, he loved a woman, one sweet woman. "Zandrea."

"Yes?"

He swallowed. "I love you."

She gasped. Her eyes widened, and she put her hands up over her mouth. Maybe he had spoke too soon and scared her. He wanted to take it back and not allow her to fear or be hurt, but he couldn't. It was true. He loved her with all his heart.

"Are you sure?" she said at last. "You're not just saying that to sleep with me. I mean we were going to do it anyway."

Stepping close and drawing her into his arms, he forced her to look into his eyes. "I love you, baby. So deeply. I know it's fast—"

“No, it’s not too fast.” She shook her head. “I can’t explain it either, but I love you as well. I want to be with you in every way.”

Brant followed as she led him toward the single bedroom, and quickly he slid out of his clothes. The appreciative scan she gave his body made him harden all the more. With a boldness that was more likely because her body remembered their night together than anything else, she took hold of his shaft and stroked it from the base to the top. Her thumb glided over the head, smearing his pre-release around.

“Ah, Zandrea,” he breathed.

She dropped to her knees. He thought about telling her she didn’t have to suck him, but the words wouldn’t come out. When her lips enclosed around him, taking him deep, he refused to deny himself the pleasure her warm mouth offered.

Tangling his hands in her hair, he pulled her head gently forward. “Take me deep, Zandrea. That feels amazing, baby. You’re so good.”

“You taste amazing,” she told him when she drew back a moment. As he had instructed, she took him deep into her throat, moaning and sucking until he was sure he would burst forth any second.

When he couldn’t take it any longer, he pulled away and helped her to her feet. “I need to come inside you. I want to feel you wrapped tight around me when I release.”

They lay together on the bed. Brant guided her to her back and lifted one of her legs while pushing it outward. Her sweet center drew his attention, so wet and ready for him and him alone. Driving a single finger up her tunnel, he watched her face. Her eyes drifted closed, and she arched her back, pushing out her stiff nipples. He leaned down and captured one in his mouth, sucking while pumping his finger into her.

“Brant!”

He drew back just enough to flick his tongue over her tight little peak, but he paused in his stroke in and out of her. “Do you want me to stop, baby?”

“Never!”

With a grin, he continued to dip his finger into her and added another, then another. When he couldn’t bear waiting any longer, he shifted his weight to lie between her legs and hoisted her knees up higher. Her sweetness opened to him, and he watched with his desires threatening to make him lose control because her cream was running heavy for him before they had even gotten started.

With deliberate care, he pressed his shaft’s head against her opening. Her folds parted, and she stretched to fit him. It felt so incredible, he panted to hold on until he was seated

inside her. Inch by inch he slid deeper. Zandrea whined and squirmed. Her fingers clenching the sheets, she raised her hips for more. "Come on, Brant, don't make me wait. Please, put your dick all the way in me. Now!"

"Easy, baby. I have to take it slow or I'll come too soon. Wait for me, Zandrea. I promise I'll do everything I can to please you."

At last he was buried to the hilt, and he collapsed on top of her, breathing hard and willing his body to wait. The sensations eased, and then he lifted himself on an elbow in order to stare into Zandrea's face while he pumped in and out of her. He watched the ripple of emotions in her expression, how her mouth fell open, and she alternated between licking her lips and biting them. How one minute she grabbed hold of his ass, forcing him to pump harder and the next she seemed to lose all energy to move.

Brant's climax raged forth. He couldn't hold back much longer, but he fought to hang on. Zandrea's screams and her trembling told him she was near to her orgasm. He wanted to wait for her. He nibbled her neck and bent to capture a nipple between his lips. Sucking it brought on more of her screams, and then she wrapped her legs around his waist, squeezed and then shouted her release.

Not hesitating for a moment, Brant picked up his pace until he was pounding into his lover. He reached around to grab her ass and drag her tighter against him. His growl grew deeper, and his teeth extended into sharps points. Before he realized he would do it, he bit down into her shoulder, but Zandrea was too lost to the pleasure to feel the pain. In another second, Brant released, and he had to clamp his mouth shut to keep from allowing the beast in him to howl all the way through it.

After swiping his tongue across the small wound on Zandrea's shoulder and making sure he changed fully back to his human form, he rolled to her side and pulled Zandrea close to him. "I'm sorry. I got carried away."

She snuggled into him. "Don't worry. I have to admit, I don't come easily so coming twice with you in me was amazing."

He glanced down at her like she was crazy. During that first night they had spent in bed, Zandrea had come at least half a dozen times. She must be mistaken.

She laughed. "You look like you don't believe me. Trust when I tell you, there have been countless times I had to do it myself afterward."

Brant narrowed his eyes. "You will never have to do it yourself with me, even if I have to use my fingers. It's my job to please you sexually."

She moaned. "Promise?"

"Promise."

“And what do we have here?”

Brant jerked at the sound of his brother’s voice. He looked around to find him standing in the doorway, arms crossed and brows lowered. Several other shifters were behind him, but Lucas blocked their view, stepped into the room and shut the door.

Zandrea yanked the covers up over her body, and still hid behind Brant. “Who the hell is that?”

“My brother,” he muttered. “So you found out, Lucas. What are you going to do?”

Lucas shrugged. “Me? Nothing. I wash my hands of you. But you will stand before your peers and give an accounting of why she is more than all of us, our safety.”

“Shit!” Brant spat.

“So I advise you to get dressed and get your fucking story straight, because whatever happens now, that’s the end of it. For good.”

Chapter Fourteen

Zandrea scooted to the edge of the bed and grabbed her clothing that Lucas had gathered from the front room and tossed at them before going back out and shutting the door. She hated dressing right after sex without taking a shower, but the urgency in Brant's demeanor didn't brook any arguments. She had no idea what was going on, but those men, his brother and the others she had spotted behind him, looked like they meant business. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

Brant grabbed her hand when she would have moved past him to go to the door, and he gently pushed her down on the bed again. When he had drawn a chair up close and straddled it, he let out a heavy sigh. The fear in his eyes had her shaking.

"What is it? What's going on, Brant?"

He closed his eyes a second and then seemed to force them open, training his dark gaze on her. "I wanted to keep my secrets and pretend everything would be okay between us. But no relationship could be built on lies. Not a good one anyway."

"W-What do you mean?" Her stomach knotted. She didn't want to know that there were secrets, and his words sounded too much like he was going to leave her. Did he set up this elaborate scheme of his brother showing up in order to break up with her after she'd slept with him? No, that would be over the top. At least, she hoped it was.

He took her hands in his and squeezed them before taking them to his lips one at a time and planting gentle kisses on each. "Remember above all else that I love you. I didn't think I could ever feel this way about a woman, but I do with you, Zandrea. You are my mate, but I don't love you just because of that. Or maybe I do since that means we're right with each other. I don't know."

"You're confusing me, Brant. Just say it." She pulled her hands from his and clutched them in her lap. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Never!" He stood, moved the chair aside and sat down beside her, but he didn't attempt to take her hands again. "Zandrea, this will be hard to believe, but I am a wolf shape shifter. That means I can change my body form into that of a wolf. I was born that way, and I can do it at will. There are others like me, and it is against our rules to let humans know of our existence."

Zandrea just sat there unmoving, staring at the floor. "Humans," she whispered.

He explained other facts, that all of the men out front, including his brother, were like him. That they had met and made love before, that he had spent time with her in his wolf form living as her pet, and worse of all, that Lucas had erased her memory of everything not once but twice.

Zandrea surged to her feet and paced away from him. “How can I...Why should I...” She spun around to face him and then turned away again. She couldn’t look at him. Her love for him warred with the pure insanity of what he was telling her, of how if it was true, he had manipulated her. “So you made me love you, bit me...used me?” She touched her shoulder where it was still tender.

“No, never.” He stood as if he would come to her, but she backed away. His shoulders slumped in defeat. “I can feel it, your longing to run away from me. If it would help, I would take you away from here, far away and let you live your life, but you would never survive.”

“What the hell does that mean?” she demanded, whirling around to face him. “What fucked up thing did you do to me, Brant?”

For a moment desperation filled his eyes, and he reached for her. But then he dropped his arms to his sides, his eyes darkened, and all the warmth she had seen in them before was gone. He looked almost exactly like the ice king his brother had seemed to be when he walked in earlier.

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing else I can say. I screwed this all up big, but you will have to stand before my people, and we both will have to accept their decision whatever it may be. So, let’s not delay our fate any longer.”

Zandrea put her hands on her hips. “I don’t have to do a damn thing and...”

The door opened. She fell silent at Lucas standing there, a look of impatience on his face. “Ready to go? Good. Let’s move. You’ll both be riding with me. Jed will take your vehicle and gather the rest of your things.”

When Lucas would have taken her arm to guide her out, Brant growled, and he backed off. Zandrea shivered. They really were animals. She thought back to the day she first met him. No, that wasn’t the first day. Lucas had erased the first time from her memory. But that day at the perfume counter, Brant couldn’t stop sneezing, and he had covered his nose with an expression on his face like he was about to die. Now, she knew. His heightened sense of smell. That perfume must have made him feel like he was dying.

Zandrea didn’t know if she hated him for his lies, for tricking her and for not being human, or if she still loved him. The emotions were there, beneath the surface. They weren’t going away. Yet, this was too unreal, too much like a dream from which she’d wake up soon.

And what was Brant feeling now? She glanced at him after they were inside Lucas’ Jeep headed back out to the main road. Brant’s expression was closed. She couldn’t detect any feeling at all from him, least of all love. But he had said, just before he explained everything, that he loved her. Was that still true now that the full impact of what he was about to face came through to him? Did he resent her?

* * * *

When they arrived at a small townhouse in a not so great neighborhood, Zandrea thought maybe they were making a stop over before heading on to wherever they would meet with Brant's people. Somehow she had imagined a grand hall that could hold five hundred people or something, somewhere out in the suburbs or the country where no one would see the goings on.

Instead, she slipped from the Jeep to be hit in the face with the smell of good cooking somewhere and blasting rock music coming from the house next door. Several houses up, a young girl was riding her tricycle while her mother sat on marble steps watching and chatting with a girlfriend. This was all too regular city folk-like to Zandrea, and again she questioned whether this was a dream.

Lucas walked up to the door and rang the bell. A woman with blonde hair and eyes that looked like Brant's opened the door. Her mouth had smile lines at the sides, but her expression was serious. She took a step back to let them by. "Good to see you again, Zandrea."

Brant frowned. "Mother, she doesn't remember you or coming here."

Zandrea gasped. "I've been here before? This is a trick, right?"

"No, come on." He placed light fingertips at her elbow and led her to the back of the house, down some stairs, along a hall that seemed too long for the style of house and then into an open area. The scent of alcohol filled her nostrils, and a bar stood in the far corner. She imagined the lights were normally somewhat low, but right now, they were turned up high, making her feel like she was on display.

Two chairs sat in front of the bar, and a small crowd of people were standing around talking. When Zandrea and Brant had entered, they fell silent and stared. Zandrea scanned the crowd and spotted only one woman other than Brant's mother, who brought up the rear of their little group.

Lucas indicated for Zandrea and Brant to take a seat in the chairs, and he moved to the side. "Let's get right to it. I have business to take care of."

Brant grunted and stood his ground. "Who the hell put you in charge?"

His brother narrowed his eyes on Brant. Zandrea thought they were about to fight right there, and all she wanted to do was bolt. After a while, Lucas spoke. "If you were not busy with your human, you would have known that we've voted to reinstitute the old ways and that is to have an Alpha lead. The unanimous decision was that it be me. You have a problem with that? Would you like to challenge me?"

Alpha? Zandrea looked from one to the other. They were like animals, and the men watching gave off just as wild an aura as the brothers did. Zandrea inched toward the door, but Brant reached out and drew her to his side.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “I won’t challenge that decision. I have no wish to lead. However, I’ll be damned if anyone thinks they can decide whether Zandrea and I remain together.” He swept the room with his gaze. “She is my mate. Period. Nothing can change that.”

An uproar broke out in the crowd. Zandrea caught “human” and “weak” in the murmured comments. She still had no proof that what Brant had told her was true. As if on cue, one of the men stepped forward and dropped a hand on her shoulder. Zandrea screeched in surprise.

Brant let out a growl that was pure animal, and Zandrea’s eyes widened so much they hurt when his canine teeth grew longer than the others and all of them sharpened to points. His eyes shifted to black, and hair sprouted on his body. Brant tore the man’s hand from Zandrea’s shoulder and slammed him against the wall. In seconds, the man changed as well, growling and snarling like he wanted to rip Brant apart with his teeth alone.

“Enough!” Lucas bellowed.

The fight was over before it started. Brant released the other shifter and turned to glare at Zandrea as if this was all her fault. She took a step back, but his eyebrows lowered, and he snapped. “Come here.”

She wanted to smart off, telling him to kiss her ass, but she didn’t dare with the mood he was in. Instead, she shuffled over to him, praying he wasn’t about to rip her apart like he seemed to want to do to his own kind.

Surprising her, Brant wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her close. He whispered in her ear, “Remember what I told you.”

He loved her. Warmth spread throughout Zandrea’s body. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on his shoulder a moment. Despite what she had just seen, and what she felt like doing, which was running far and fast, she realized that she loved Brant still. None of this situation was clear, but one thing was, she couldn’t leave him. The pain, the longing, she had felt was because Brant wasn’t with her. From what he had said, she was his mate even when she didn’t know him. Her emotions knew, her heart knew. And that’s what she would follow.

Zandrea cleared her throat. “I don’t know what your rules are and what you are thinking about doing. All I know is that I love Brant with all my heart, and I cannot, I *will not* live my life anymore without him. So do what you will. We’re staying together, and even if I have to fight a pack of wolves to stay with him, I’ll do it.”

For what felt like hours, no one said a word. Zandrea was waiting for them to all burst out laughing at her thinking for one minute that she could take them all on let alone one of them. And then it occurred to her that they could also just take her out back and kill her, and no one would be the wiser. Then Brant could get a new woman and forget all about her. She clung to his arm, hoping the latter had not entered anyone's mind.

"What say you?" Lucas asked them all. The murmurs rose, and Zandrea willed them to hurry before she fell on her face in a dead faint.

They seemed to come to a consensus, and Brant's mother stepped forward. "You will be allowed to stay with Brant, but you are sworn to secrecy about our existence. You cannot share it with anyone, including Nita and Stacy." At Zandrea's gasp, she nodded. "Yes, be assured we know everything about you. And if you tell anyone about us, you will be killed. Period."

Zandrea sagged into Brant, and he held her up, tightening his hold on her. He kissed the side of her head and released a shuddering breath.

His mother grinned. "For me personally, you better not hurt my baby, or I will hunt you down. Got it?"

Zandrea squeaked out, "Got it."

"Beer for everybody!" the woman yelled, followed by cheers all around the room.

For a long while Zandrea didn't raise her head from Brant's shoulder, and he didn't loosen his hold. If he did, she would have fallen, but she suspected he held on with just as much desperation as she did. Brant's words were strong, that he would defy anyone who would try to separate them, but he would have enough common sense to know he couldn't win against that many shifters, let alone Zandrea.

At last, Zandrea raised her head to look into his eyes. Where they had been angry, cold and at some point troubled, now they glowed with joy and warmth. Zandrea grinned. "What?"

"I'm wondering how quickly I can get you moved into my place," he told her.

"What?" She rolled her eyes. "I didn't say anything about living with you. I'm an independent woman, thank you very much."

He chuckled and squeezed her. "We'll see about that."

She flared her nostrils and smirked. "Whatever. Can we go now? Our little vacation was interrupted. Maybe we can zip back out to the cabin?" She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Brant touched her lips in a feather kiss and then drew back. “Sounds wonderful, but the meeting’s not over.”

Zandrea glanced around. “They’re all drinking like they’re celebrating. It seemed to be over. Quick, but over.”

He shook his head. “No, these bums will grab any excuse to drink. But you really must swear to keep our secret, and”—he gritted his teeth—“since they are instituting the old ways, we’ll have to be officially united in a ceremony presided over by Lucas.”

“Sounds like you have a problem with Lucas being the Alpha, whatever that means.”

Brant didn’t comment on it. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.” He tossed an annoyed look in the direction of his brother and then focused again on her. “First things first. We become official mates before the Alpha and elders, and then we figure out how best to spend many hours locked in each other’s arms. Naked!”

Zandrea laughed and smacked his arm. “I’m ready when you are, baby.”

He kissed her. “Love me?”

She nodded. “With all my heart.”

“And I will love you always and protect you with my life. That’s a promise.”

The End