



City Wolf 3

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Chapter One

Stacy gripped her glass of white wine between two fingers and the thumb of one hand while crossing her body with her arm and bracing the other hand under her elbow. She resisted slumping against the wall and revealing to one and all how bored she was. Bored? Yeah right. She was lonely, and her feelings were hurt that none of the guys at Zandrea's party had looked her way beyond a glance of appreciation before turning back to their conversations with each other. If she didn't know better, she would have suspected the assholes were gay, but there were other women there beyond her two best friends, and those women had more than one of the guys pushing up on them, trying to get some play. Then here she was, in the corner, alone.

For real, she'd been shocked out of her mind to learn what Zandrea and Nita's boyfriends were wolf shape-shifters. That had bad sci-fi movie written all over it, but it would explain some of the crazy ass stuff that had happened since they had all been dating. Zandrea had told her it was against the rules for humans to know about them, but since Stacy was her girl, she couldn't bear lying to her any more.

So, Zandrea had invited her to her party, but warned her that the place would be jam-packed with other wolf shifters. She had neglected to say every one of them, even the damn women, were physical perfection. Stacy had never considered herself an anecdote. In fact, she thought she was very pretty, with a good body, but she had anger issues and a real attitude problem. Every one of her ex-boyfriends had said the same thing—along with her mother, her teachers when she was still in school, and her boss.

She searched the overcrowded room, straining to pick up bits of conversation around her, admiring the dark suits on some of the guys, and the casual slacks with open collared shirts on the others. Zandrea's house was sweet too. Zandrea had called the room they were in, the party room. The thing looked like it was twice the size of Stacy's entire apartment, and the fireplace, the artwork on the walls, and the furniture just screamed money.

Were they all rich too? *Damn!*

She felt a frown steal over her face, and as hard as she tried to erase it and give off vibes of being available, she couldn't do it. Could they sense what she was feeling, that she had hang-ups with men, that she fought like hell to keep them away from her heart? From the little Zandrea had told her, she was pretty sure the shifters couldn't read her mind, but they did have a keen sense of smell. And real wolves, or the all-animal variety, could sense what a person was feeling by smell. Or was that only when it came to fear?

Hell, they were men, right? Most of them didn't want anything permanent. She didn't either. All she wanted was a little fun, maybe a bed partner for a few months. That wasn't too much to ask. She moved her glass to the side of her body and glanced down at herself. Her dress was smokin' if she did say so herself. The second she'd tried it on, she'd known the dress clung to her body in all the right ways.

With lycra in the deep blue material, it stretched nice over her boobs and hung low enough to show off some cleavage. The length barely reached a half foot past her ass, and she'd caught several of the men sucking in a breath and nudging their friends when they'd spotted her. She had thought the usual look of 'come and get you some' thrown over her shoulder would bring at least one of them to her, but nope. Nothing. What the hell was her problem?

Miserable, she gulped down the last of her wine and then headed over to a server to snag another glass. Maybe if she loosened up enough, she could just walk up on one of the men and take what she wanted.

With her second glass half gone, she surveyed the crowd. One man in particular had been catching her eye all night. He was tall, like they all were, maybe six four or five. His shoulders were so broad, she could see herself either hanging onto them while he worked her, or with her legs slung over them while he... She forced the thought from her mind. First she had to get tall, dark, and sexy-as-hell to look her way.

Feeling her usual boldness returning, she glided in his direction, weaving through the other people in the room, but never taking her eyes off him. He stood in a crowd of his buddies, a drink in his hand and a smile on full lips she wanted to lick and then kiss until her own were numb. His midnight blue eyes sparkled like he was happy with life and everything in it. She wanted them on her, to change that look from simple happiness to all out lust. Damn, she was horny.

She drew closer. He gestured to his friend, shook his head, and then reached up to push back a lock of hair that had fallen on his forehead. Her fingernails tore into her palm. *Don't worry, baby. I'm going to fix that for you soon*, she told him silently.

At last she was in front of him, cutting him off from his friends. She let her breasts brush his chest and tilted her head back to look up at him. His eyes shifted from her face to her boobs, lingered there a while, and then moved back to her face. He grinned.

"Hey," she said, in no hurry to explain herself. After all, her body was saying everything it needed to, and the growing bulge between them was a good answer.

"Hey," he responded.

"Kiss me," she demanded.

One of his dark eyebrows rose. He didn't move, and the smile didn't lessen either. In fact, his eyes seemed to indicate he was laughing at her. All of a sudden, Stacy felt like an idiot. He was going to push her away and talk about her with his friends. But she was always bold. She'd lived her life that way, and she couldn't back down now that she'd come so far.

“Well?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “What the hell.”

She had just enough time to wonder what was up with that, like he didn’t want to but was humoring her, before his mouth descended on hers. She thought he would give her a soft peck, and it would be over, but somewhere she heard a tinkle of breaking glass, and his arms came up around her. He gripped her waist and lifted her up to his body then ran a hand down over her ass. Stacy clung to him. She had to because when he thrust his tongue between her lips and moaned in greedy hunger, it was all she could do not to fall on the floor from all the strength leaving her body.

She’d had a comb in her hair with jewels on it, to hold back her long hair. He threaded his fingers into her hair and pushed the comb away. Stacy ran her hands into his hair as well, loving the silky feel of it sliding between her fingers. She’d never kissed a white man, and damn if she didn’t know what she’d been missing.

The man broke the kiss and ran his mouth down her throat, sucking at her skin and licking her until she shook from head to toe. When he moved to her shoulder and had pushed back the thin strip of material there holding her dress up, someone shouted, “whoa,” and yanked him away from Stacy.

Shrill whistles filled the room, and several of the men clapped. Embarrassment stole over her, but she was still on fire. She’d made a connection. Now all she had to do was get this guy’s number, and they could finish this in private. Turning her attention away from those looking on, she glanced at the man and smiled. “I’m Stacy.”

He grinned in return. She picked up on his easygoing attitude and liked that about him. “I know. Zandrea and Nita’s human friend.”

Relief flooded her. So he knew what he was getting into, and he knew she was aware of them as well. “Yeah. So you want to go somewhere and...uh...talk?” She smirked at the crowd. “Away from nosey folk?”

He shook his head, and she blinked.

“Huh?”

His smile widened, and he leaned out to whisper in her ear, although she knew from what Zandrea told her, all of them had over the top hearing ability. “Stick with your own kind. I’m not interested.”

And with that, his arrogant ass, spun on his heel and walked away, leaving her in the middle of the floor looking like a fool.

Chapter Two

Nash had learned a long time ago that keeping a smile on his face and a joke on his tongue would keep everyone from knowing what was truly on his mind. He was hardly ever, if ever, in a bad mood, and never rude. Well, not much. But just now, he'd told that human woman he wasn't interested, that she should stick to her own kind. He'd felt it like it was a punch to his own gut when her feelings were hurt. Yet, like him, she didn't show it. Anger blazed in her eyes a moment before he turned away. He suspected if he had stayed there another second, she would have told him off with the scathing tongue Lucas had told him she had.

Oh he knew her all right. He'd been right there with all the other guys staring at that sizzling body of hers when she walked in. Every one of them had enjoyed the view, but none of them would go after it because she was human. Least of all him. Lucas had lost his position as Alpha of their pack, and Nash had just gained the position. He was not going to let some chocolate goddess that made him want to rip off her dress and lick her from head to toe, jeopardize that. No way. Not for sex, that was sure.

He cared deeply about the pack. He enjoyed the position as leader. That wasn't going to change any time soon. He would fight to the death to protect his people, and he'd only left the city to come here to Zandrea and Brant's party because he'd missed his friends. They were family, and their lives had gone in separate directions. A rare visit had been in order, so he had accepted the invitation. Who the hell knew Stacy would make him weak with one amazing kiss? Wasn't going to happen a second time.

The elders were calling for him to choose a mate. A woman of his own would keep him out of trouble to some extent as well as satisfy his needs. But when he chose her, she would be wolf. Period. Not a human like Brant and Lucas had chosen. Hell no. Too much trouble.

In the farthest corner away from her, he nursed a drink and kept his eyes on those he was conversing with, pretending that her scent wasn't in his nostrils and the memory of her lips under his wasn't replaying over and over in his mind.

Lucas slapped him on the shoulder, looking like a contented, mated shifter with a new baby boy at home in his nursery and another one on the way. "Hey, what was that about, Nash? Thought you weren't going down that road."

Nash laughed. "Are you nuts, boss? No way. I have no interest in a human woman."

"Didn't look that way to me." Lucas winked. "And drop the boss stuff. You're Alpha now, remember? I'm just a lowly grunt, following my Alpha now."

They both glanced over to Brant standing with his arm around his wife. Brant had always longed for the position, and since they had hooked up with a younger pack who didn't

have a leader, the man had become unbearable with the pups looking up to him like he was a god.

“How’s that going for you?” Nash asked.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “I’ve told Nita to convince Zandrea to let herself get pregnant again. We could all use the break. If his head gets any bigger, it will pop. Or I might have to challenge him just to knock him down a peg. I’m still his big brother.”

Nash laughed. “By what a couple months? Give *him* a break. Let him have his fun. He’ll sober after while. The pups will mature and realize he’s just Brant.”

“Better be soon,” Lucas growled. “Whatever, I’m content at least at home. Nita’s having another baby. Did I tell you that?”

“Only three hundred times.”

Lucas punched him. “Time for you to get your mate. Maybe you should consider Stacy. She’s not bad to look at, and from the kiss, it looked like you two were ready to go at it. In fact if I hadn’t yanked you off her, you would have bitten her. You know that’s the first step in mating.”

Nash waved his hand. “Get real, bud. I’m not taking a human. Forget it. And unlike you and Brant, I will not be driven half crazy in the middle of lust and bite a woman by mistake. When I take my mate—who will be a shifter by the way—I will bite her fully in my right mind having made the conscious decision to do it.”

“That’s what they all say.”

Nash kept his smile in place and forced his eyes not to shift to their darker state. That way he wouldn’t give even the slightest sign of Lucas’ words irritating the hell out of him. What he wanted to do was grit his teeth and bust something up just to take the edge off his anger. His body might want her. Okay, he admitted that. She was a beautiful woman, and he’d be lying if he said he’d never wondered what it would be like to fuck a black woman. All guys thought about it. But he was not the asshole that used women just to fulfill a fantasy. He was better off leaving it as just that—a fantasy.

Whistles rose around the crowded room, and Nash sniffed the air. His wavering smile widened. He knew that scent anywhere. Laila, female shifter to rival all of their females. He’d met her once back in his city, when Lucas was still Alpha. That had been years ago, and at the time, he’d thought she was more interested in his buddy. But Lucas hadn’t recovered his heart from Gloria at the time, so he barely acknowledged Laila’s existence.

Nash threaded through the crowd, trying to get past the horny wolves with their tongues hanging out of their heads looking at Laila. He spotted her near the door, her willowy figure encased in a blinding red dress that was so sheer and so form fitting, she should be

naked. He found himself growing hard. Laila knew what she was doing. The woman was giving off pheromones by the bucketfuls, and every unmated male in the room was responding to the call, including him.

With an extra forceful elbow to his nearest rival, he drew up in front of her. “Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in,” he said with a grin.

She wrinkled a pert nose and pouted up at him, her short, dark curls dancing about her head when she shivered. “Cat? Don’t be gross, Nash. This is a party.”

He chuckled and stepped closer, pretending to search the area around her. “Where’s your mate? Surely you didn’t come all the way here alone?” Her territory was sixty miles away from his, which would make it eighty miles from the city Brant and Lucas now lived in with their mates and children.

She waved a delicate hand. Nash had felt she was insanely beautiful but a little too thin. He had always figured she’d been around humans too long and engaged in constant dieting. The last time he’d met her she hadn’t eaten anything other than salads and fruit. The mere thought of a meatless diet made him want to mimic her shiver from earlier.

“I dragged a friend of mine down here. He’s parking the car. But we’re not mates.” She rested her hand on his chest and locked her gaze with his. “I heard you were promoted. Congratulations.”

“Forget it, fellas,” someone called out. “You know what that means. She’s Nash’s mate now. Laila always did want to land an Alpha.”

Laila let out a low growl in the direction the comments had come from. “Shut your mouth! You don’t know me.”

The unafraid shifters whimpered like puppies and then laughed. Nash wrapped an arm around Laila’s thin shoulders. “Don’t worry about those losers. They’re just jealous. Come and tell me what you’ve been up to.”

While Laila curved her lovely body to his side, they strolled across the room to a sofa. For no apparent reason, Nash’s gaze drifted in the direction he had last seen Stacy. A man who was clearly one of them soon strolled over to her with two drinks in hand and a lecherous smile on his face.

Before he could control his emotions, Nash blurted, “Who the fuck is that?”

Laila raised questioning eyes to his and then glanced in the direction he was looking. “Oh, that’s just Alphons. You’ll love him. He’s all Alpha, but he hasn’t gotten a post yet. Looks like he’s found his next lover. The man’s appetite can’t be stopped. Oh well, let’s talk about us.”

Chapter Three

Stacy slipped into her car and kicked off her heels before turning over the engine and roaring out of Zandrea's driveway. By the time she had made it to the street, her cell phone was ringing. She dug it out of her bag and read the caller ID. It was Zandrea.

She tapped the answer button on the gadget attached to her ear. "Yes?"

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Stacy told her.

"Girl, you know you're lying. You forget we've been friends since they invented the microwave?" Stacy burst out laughing when Zandrea did. Her friend went on. "I know your ass didn't skip out on me and drive back to town when I invited you to spend the weekend with us, so that means you're making a midnight run. Is it ice cream or cookies?"

Stacy grumbled. "Both."

Zandrea sucked her teeth. "Ouch, that bad? Come back, and let me go with you. We can disappear for a couple hours and talk. We can even do like we used to sometimes when none of us could find a man and stay out until the sun comes up. I know the perfect place to do it."

Shifting gears, Stacy took the next corner driving too fast. Her wheels gave a satisfying screech. "That's the problem. I made a damn fool of myself with that asshole, Nash. But you can be sure I won't let it happen again. All those guys in there, and I couldn't get my hands on one."

"Are you nuts?" Zandrea tapped the phone on something, and Stacy had to pull the ear piece off to keep from having an eardrum burst. "Girl, you talk about getting your hands on a man? First of all, the way you and Nash were going at it, I thought he was going to rip your dress off right there in the middle of the floor. And trust me, boyfriend was all up in that. Second, that other guy, what was his name? Alphons. Sexy as shit! He looked like he wanted what you were offering too. Nash is stubborn, straight-laced from what Brant tells me. I bet you could have your pick between both of them in no time."

While Zandrea spoke, Stacy had drawn up into a 7-Eleven parking lot and shut off her car. She strolled with purpose to the door and was soon cruising the short aisles for snacks. She had to work hard to keep the extra pounds from creeping up on her, but she was also an emotional eater. And right now, she needed something sweet.

"I'm not all that sure I'm interested in Alphons. He's a little on the creepy side, like he's up to something. I mean, he's hot and all, but I don't know." Stacy shoved the freezer

door up and leaned down into the bin to grab a Nutty Buddy. “And as for Nash, he can kiss my ass. I won’t even go into what he whispered to me.”

Zandrea was quiet.

“What? Your man heard him, right?”

“Yeah, they have ears like you wouldn’t believe. Brant heard what he said and told me. Don’t let it get to you. Like I said, Nash just doesn’t want to lose his position as Alpha like Lucas did. The pack he’s in is kind of strict, which is why we had to move. They didn’t want us to have mixed kids, half human, half shifter.”

“That’s bull—”

“Stacy!”

“Well it is.” She sighed. “Look, I get it. He doesn’t want to lose his job. Hell, my job ain’t crap, but I’d fight to keep it too because for real, I’ve only got myself to depend on. I don’t have money like those guys. Whatever. I’m still not forgiving him for humiliating me like that. I don’t need him.”

“But you want him.”

“Drop it, Z,” Stacy warned.

She stared down at the ice cream and changed her mind. After opening the freezer again, she dropped the Nutty Buddy inside and leaned down to grab an ice cream sandwich. A groan behind her made her freeze, and then she remembered that her dress was too short to be leaning over that much. She frowned and closed her eyes. With a deep breath, she stood up straight and spun around to face the jerk. Alphons stood there with his arms crossed over a powerful chest and running a tongue over his bottom lip.

Before she could say a word, he closed the space between them and put a hand on either side of her hips, forcing her to sit on the edge of the cold freezer. He rested his lips on the ear opposite the one with her Blue Ray clip on it, and had the nerve to blow in her ear. “You look good enough to eat,” he breathed.

She tried to pull back, but there was nowhere to go. “Alphons, this is not the time or the place. How did you know I was here?”

He didn’t answer, and she realized he didn’t need to. He had picked up her scent and followed it. Annoyance made her want to frown, but she resisted it. If she had any sense at all, she would forget her hurt feelings and just take Alphons to a motel so they could both satisfy their needs. It was what she had said she wanted anyway. No strings, just sex. He didn’t have to say so for her to know that’s all Alphons wanted from her.

From his curly black hair, and his olive complexion, she knew he was Italian or something near it. If she slept with him, that would be a first as well, and her body did heat up because the man was sexy, but she hesitated. Like she'd told Zandrea, Alphons creeped her out just a little, for no apparent reason.

He drew back and grasped her hands, almost making her drop her ice cream. "Why don't we find the appropriate place?" he suggested. "I know we can have a good time, and"—he sniffed the air—"you're ready for me."

She jerked out of his hold. "Lay off with that crap. I'm new to this shifter stuff, and the sniffing me out thing is creepy, so I'd appreciate it if you bring it down a few notches." She turned toward the front of the store. "Besides, I got a man."

He followed behind her. "No...you don't."

Stacy gritted her teeth but didn't say anything to that. After she had paid for her ice cream and was back out on the street, she remembered she hadn't picked up any cookies. Either way, now she didn't want anything. Tiredness stole over her body, and she put a hand to mouth to stifle a yawn.

"Look, Alphons, I'm tired. It's been great meeting you, but—"

He pushed her against her car with his hands holding her hips in place. When his mouth came down on hers, Stacy automatically let him part her lips so he could push his tongue into her mouth. Like Nash had done, he groaned while he kissed her, like she was delicious to his taste buds. Were all five of their senses heightened?

Alphons ran his hands along her thighs, shoving her dress higher. He ground his hard on between her legs, and she gasped at his boldness. She couldn't help but be turned on. The man felt like a rock, a *big*, unyielding rock. Her thighs spread wider with no conscious thought on her part. All of a sudden, all she wanted was to get him inside her. She was so wet, she was almost whimpering for him to do it right there. The weird part was that she felt like she wasn't in control of herself, like he had bewitched her or some crazy mess like that.

A loud laugh interrupted them. "Damn, guys, get a room!"

Alphons raised his head, and Stacy caught sight of his eyes. They had gone from deep brown to silver. That was too freaky. She shivered, and then they both turned to see who had interrupted. Stacy could have shrunk through the ground. Nash and the woman who had come to the party late like she was the shit stood there watching her and Alphons. Both of them looked amused, Nash like he was laughing his head off at her, which grated on her already thin nerves.

The woman pounced on Alphons, taking his arm in hers and dragging both men toward the store. “What are you doing here, Alphons? I thought you would have had her in a motel by now. You’re slipping, my friend.”

Stacy stared. Was she for real? So open about what Alphons wanted. She shook her head and spun to face her car, but Nash was suddenly in front of her, blocking her from opening the door. She glanced around him to find that the woman and Alphons had disappeared inside 7-Eleven.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Stacy?” Nash demanded.

She looked up at him. He wasn’t frowning, but he wasn’t grinning like he normally was either. Something told her he was angrier than he let on, which he didn’t have a right to be after he had rejected her offer. “None of your damn business, that’s what.”

She yanked at the car door and got it open a few inches before he slammed it again. “You know nothing about wolf shifters. They’re too much for a woman like you.”

A hand slid to her hip, and she realized her dress was still hiked way too high, but she wasn’t going to stand there in front of him and fix it. “Oh no you did not just say a woman like me! I don’t know who you think you are, but you’re nothing to me. I do what I damn well please, and you can keep your opinions to yourself.”

She had been gesturing to him with a finger pointed. He caught hold of her wrist and jerked her forward to bump his chest. Desire licked over her skin, but she crushed it down.

“You’re playing with fire.”

“Like I’m too stupid to take care of myself, but my friends are just fine?”

His hold tightened, and she resisted a wince, not wanting to give him the satisfaction.

“I can vouch for Lucas and Brant. I don’t know Alphons. From what I sense, I don’t trust him. I’ve never seen him around before and therefore have no idea why he’s shown up now. There must be a reason, and Laila hasn’t been forthcoming about him.”

So in other words, Nash didn’t want her, and he didn’t want any other shifters to want her either. He had been checking up on who Alphons was and where he’d come from. Nita had told her that Nash was a new Alpha, leader of his pack, just like Brant was now. So maybe the position had gone to his head. Maybe he thought he had to control the lives of all shifters and keep them safely away from relationships with humans. Well, he could kiss her black ass.

“You have three seconds to get your hands off of me, Nash. I don’t care what you think. If I want to fuck Alphons’ brains out on the first night I met him, that’s my business. Not

yours.” She jerked her arm away from him, but moved up so she could stare him in the face. “You get made the Alpha of your group and think you’re in charge of everybody. Well, I learned a couple things from my friends, and I know that Alphons isn’t in your group, so you have no jurisdiction. As for me, if you think you’re going to tell me what to do, you’re wrong. I’m not the one.”

She thrust her car door toward him causing him to have to jump back so she wouldn’t slam it into his hip, and she fought hard not to grin at gaining ground on him.

“Why don’t you go in the store and get control of your girl, ’cause it looks like she’s ready to give it up to Alphons herself.”

When Nash turned to look, Stacy hopped into her car, locked the doors, and turned over the engine. In seconds, she was out on the road. Not until she was pulling into Zandrea’s driveway again did she wonder what had happened to her ice cream.

Chapter Four

Frustration raged through Nash's mind and rippled over his muscles, making them contract and ache. No matter how many times he rolled his shoulders and stretched, no matter how many miles he had run in his wolf form, nothing helped. For two days, he had been joking and laughing with his friends, keeping the easygoing persona in place, when all the time, what he wanted was to rip Stacy away from Alphons' side and fill her with his stiff arousal.

Why her, damn it? Why did she have to take away his peace of mind with one kiss, one touch of her body? Why did he have to see her naked beneath him every time he closed his eyes? And even having Laila for the taking didn't help matters. Shifters were highly sexual by nature. They often had several lovers at once. It was no big deal until they were mated, and he was pretty sure that Laila still tossed her long legs over Alphons' shoulders even though he was sniffing around Stacy. Nash didn't care about that.

The problem was Stacy would. She was human. Human women, from what he had seen, did not like sharing their men, and he was pretty sure she would be hurt in the end. The damn woman hadn't listened to a word of his warning. Instead she'd torn into him with her razor sharp tongue.

Later, he had laughed at himself for letting her shut him up so completely. She was bold. He'd give her that. Yet, the knowledge had only fueled his desire for her, and he had started wondering what being her lover would be like. That was a dangerous game. So he had let Laila seduce him. He had let her release her pheromones to make him relax while she went down on him, and later rode him. But although he had released several times, it did nothing to put out the fire Stacy had ignited.

One taste, one good, long, feeding between her legs, and he could move on. Couldn't he? Hearing her cry out, call his name, wouldn't drive him to want more and more. He wouldn't lose himself and find that he had bitten her, halfway to making her his mate, before he knew what was happening. He was nothing like Lucas and Brant. More to the point, he couldn't see himself falling in love with any woman, which he believed was needed for him to take a mate without thinking.

No, when he bit a woman twice, making her his for all time, it would be by conscious decision. Love would have nothing to do with it. She would serve a purpose, meet his sexual needs and bear his children. Nothing more. That's all he could ever let himself feel.

After his second ten mile run, he returned the back way to Brant's house, still in his wolf form. A doggie door had been made into the mud room's entrance, and he took it before changing back to his human form. Naked, he stretched and ran a hand across his sweat-slickened abs. He'd take a shower, have a snack, and find Lucas and Brant. Maybe a game of pool with them would get his mind off Stacy. He could get through the next twenty-four hours before it was time to return home.

He had taken all of two steps when the door to the rest of the house opened, and Stacy walked into the mud room. Nash stopped. When she saw him, her eyes grew round. They grew even bigger still when her gaze lowered to find he was growing hard at her seeing him without his clothes.

“Damn,” she muttered.

He forced a cocky grin. “What, you’ve never seen one this big?”

She rolled her eyes. “Boy, please. Don’t flatter yourself.”

At first he was irritated at her dismissal, and then he noticed how she had trouble looking away, and she had clenched her hands at her sides. Her sweet little tongue was caught between her teeth. In that instant, Nash forgot his resolution and stalked up to her. He placed a hand against the door behind her, causing it to snap closed, and crowded her so she had to step back against it. He didn’t allow his body to touch hers. He wanted her to see what she was missing, what could be inside her right now.

With a raised eyebrow and a smirk on his face, he watched her in silence. The play of emotions over her beautiful face was amusing, or it would have been if he wasn’t heating up from his core being this near to her. His voice pitched low, he quipped, “You know you want it, Stacy.”

She flattened her hands against the door behind her and turned her head away. Temptation got the better of her, and she turned back to stare. “Hey, I made my offer. You turned me down, remember? I’m not going there again. You missed out.”

With a hard shove at his chest, she made enough space between them to turn her back on him. When her hand closed around the doorknob, he laid his on top of it and stroked her soft skin with a thumb. His shaft twitched against her back. When she began to tremble, he knew he had her. He ran a hand around her hip and down across her thigh. She gasped and moaned before clamping her teeth together. Oh no, she wasn’t getting away with that.

He caught the hem of her mini dress and lifted it to rest his hand on her warm center. She cried out. “Nash! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Her words were accusatory, but they lacked heat. He hadn’t missed how her breathing had picked up, and her hips had curved so that she pushed her ass toward him. He took the offering and wrapped himself around her small body. Desire leaping out of control, he wrapped an arm across her chest and molded her to him. Yet, he didn’t pause for a second in his exploration between her legs.

With a deft finger, he pushed her panties aside and eased a digit up into her wetness. Stacy shook hard. “You so shouldn’t do that,” she rasped. “I-I-I don’t want it.”

“Liar,” he accused her. “You want it.” He rested his mouth against her hair, kissed her once, and then whispered, “You want it so badly, you can’t stand it. See how wet you are? Fuck, I could eat you all day long.”

“Nash...”

“I’m going to taste you,” he insisted.

Before she could protest further, Nash whipped her around and dropped to his knees. He watched for her reaction as he lowered her panties and helped her to step out of them. She clenched her dress between stiff fingers. “Here? We can’t—”

He could argue with her, dare her to be wild like the wolves were. He knew it was in her, to have sex in public, even out among the trees like he enjoyed when his inner beast wanted to be free. But that would be delaying his tongue the satisfaction it craved. Instead of explaining it to her he roughly, but without hurting her, shoved her legs apart and thrust his tongue toward her dripping cream.

All thought of helping Stacy to relax and enjoy herself at that point left Nash’s head. All he wanted was to eat her, to suck and lick every last drop until he’d had his fill. He ran his tongue along her folds, stroked her thighs while he fed, and used his thumbs to part her so he could delve for more. Forgetting himself, he slid a hand behind her and splayed his fingers across her ass. With the strength only his kind had, he took her weight with ease in his palm and lifted her higher to meet his hungry mouth. Shoving one of her thighs higher, he began to kiss along her heated skin, capturing the tangy moisture he found there. While he did, he let his nose tickle her swollen bud, and a tremor started in her muscles.

“Oh goodness, Nash. W-What are you doing to me?” He paused long enough to see her head fall back, and then he licked her with more fervor. She was about to come, and he wanted it so hard, she’d be on her knees pleading with him to give her more.

“Mm,” he hummed against her nubbin. “You’re so good, Stacy. Come right now. Cream in my mouth, and let me eat more of you, honey.”

He heard the tears in her voice. “You don’t...deserve. Ah! I’m can’t help it!” Her thighs contracted around his head, and soon she pumped her thick, spicy cream into his mouth. He licked her until she cried out his name a second time with a second orgasm, and then he set her down to rise to his feet.

It took a few minutes before her anger returned, and she balled her fingers into a fist and sent it straight into his jaw. “You’re an asshole. You know that? A big-headed asshole.”

Without another word, she yanked her dress down, yanked the door open, and stomped out of the room. Nash grinned rubbing his jaw. He glanced down to find the wispy

panties she'd left him as a souvenir on the floor. Not even a punch in the jaw and her obvious hatred of him could make him regret what he had just done.

Chapter Five

“Oh damn, girl, he did what?” Zandrea demanded.

Stacy rolled her eyes. “Z, if you didn’t hear it the first time, I’m not repeating it. I feel so embarrassed. I can’t even believe I told y’all. I was like a whore in heat. I practically had my legs wrapped like a vise around his head.” Stacy rolled over on her bed and buried her face in her hands. She continued in a muffled tone. “I can’t face him. I’m not going down to dinner tonight. I can’t do it.”

Nita waddled across the room and patted her back. “It’s not a big deal, Stacy. You said you’ve been wanting some. So he gave you a couple orgasms. So what? I mean you two were close to that when you kissed the first time during the party.” She laid a hand on her rounded belly. “I know from experience that those guys can’t get enough. Shoot, Lucas thinks I’m a baby machine or something, like he has to have as many children, as fast as possible. I even have to beat him off me during that time of the month.”

Stacy sat up and stared at her friend in horror. “Ew! That’s disgusting. TMI, Miss Thing, TMI!” She sighed. “I guess you’re right though. To all of them, what we did wasn’t a big deal. For real, I’m not a virgin. We all know that, but I’ve never gotten freaky in a mud room either, and especially not at someone else’s house. It’s depraved.”

Zandrea burst out laughing. “Oh crap, you’re picking up Nita’s vocabulary. Quick, get this girl some dick.”

“Witch!” Stacy threw a pillow at her friend, but Zandrea jetted to the side like she was a shifter herself. If they hadn’t told her the truth about their boyfriends, she would have known something was up by the changes that had taken place in the two of them. And while Stacy had at first thought wolf shifters was a sexy idea, she didn’t think she’d take to being turned into one, or whatever was happening to her girls. “All right, I’ll go down to dinner, but I’m not talking to that asshole. He used me.”

Zandrea held up a finger. “Correction, he seduced you, and got you off. If he was using you, he would have gotten him some while he was at it.”

Stacy thought about that, and her friend was right. If Nash had been all about getting his, he would have done more than go down on her. He would have pushed for her to let him between her legs, or asked her to go down on him in return. Not that she’d given him a chance since she slapped the mess out of him. He must think she was an ungrateful wench. She laughed. Poor man probably had gone up to wash the sweat off of his chiseled body and at the same time jacked off to get relief.

If she was any kind of a woman, she would go find him and return the favor, but the problem with that was that he scared her. Nash was different from any of the guys she’d been with in the past. Yeah, the obvious physical difference, but also it was how he drew her. Like when she’d been searching the room looking for a likely man to come on to, her

eyes had kept returning to him. And it wasn't like he was the finest man in the room either. They had all been fine, smokin' hot with no flaws she could point out with a microscope. So it had to be all him, who he was.

Not to mention that mouth. Oh man, had he done some things to her body. What he had made her feel should have been illegal in all fifty states. She felt like she had become his slave and all she could do was give him what he wanted. Zandrea had told her they had some kind of ability, but she didn't say what. Could he have used it on her, to make her give into him? All of a sudden, she was angry. If he did use some voodoo on her, she was going to do more than slap him. She was going to kick his ass.

In fact, right now, before they went to dinner might be as good a time as any to find out. She moved to the edge of the bed and dropped her bare feet over the edge. "I'll see y'all later. I have to find out something."

Nita grabbed for her arm. "Where are you going, Stacy? I don't like that look on your face."

"Yeah," Zandrea agreed. "I know that look. It's the same one you wore when you beat down Kevin that time he picked you up for work and grabbed your ass while y'all were headed out the door."

Stacy rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and just like he walked away with a puffy eye, the one I'm looking for is going to have the same thing if I don't like his answers to my questions."

Nita laughed. "Aw, lord, now you know you ain't right, Stacy."

"Nita, stop trying to talk slang!" Stacy and Zandrea told her at the same time.

The mama-to-be poked her lips out and waved her hand at Stacy and Zandrea. Stacy had to fight to hold onto her anger as she let herself out of her room. Nita wouldn't change. She'd keep trying to be more 'black' as they said, and Stacy and Zandrea would keep cracking up at her attempts.

As soon as she closed the door behind her, she forced her mind back to Nash and reminded herself that she was pissed off at how he treated her. She hadn't missed the fact that he kept her panties either. She'd gone back down there after she was sure he had left, and she didn't find them. After he explained what he did to her, she would demand he give her, her panties. She had a thing for panties, and those he had were a part of a matched set. Hell, they were Victoria's Secret. For what they cost, he was damn sure going to return them.

By the time Stacy reached the first floor, she realized what it was she had been hearing all the way down here. Growling. Someone, or more than one someone, was snarling and growling like an animal. Her heart began to pound, and every muscle in her body locked up so that she couldn't move off the bottom step. She gripped the railing until her fingers

ached. Nearby a door opened, and she let out a small squeak, but it was just one of Brant's guests, a seventeen-year-old boy. At least he looked like a seventeen-year-old. When he'd come on to her the day before, he'd said he was fifty-nine. She didn't believe him.

He paused in front of her and held up a hand, his young face crumpled with worry and what she was sure was fear. "You shouldn't come down right now, Stacy. Too dangerous. Why don't you go to your room, and wait until we say it's okay for you humans to come out."

"The hell we will," Zandrea shouted behind Stacy. "What's going on? What's all that growling about? Whatever's going on, they better take it outside. If they rip up my living room, somebody's balls are mine."

Zandrea's attitude snapped Stacy out of her fear. She laughed and moved ahead, brushing by the boy. "Yeah, they better look out. Z don't play messing up her stuff." She followed her friend out to the living room, and they stepped into the room just in time to watch two wolves going at it. The bigger of the two had the smaller by the scruff of his neck, and he yanked him off his feet and threw him through the French doors, splintering wood and shattering glass.

Zandrea screamed, but Stacy knew it was because of the damage to her home and not the possibility of the wolf being hurt. "Brant! What is going on? Why are you letting them destroy our house?"

Her boyfriend walked over and gathered her in his arms to keep her from rushing toward the fight. "It's okay, baby."

"It's not okay!" She wiggled in his arms but wasn't going anywhere.

While they argued, Stacy glanced around at the crowd of men and women present. Most of the guests had gone home after the party, but Brant and Zandrea's closest friends had stayed for the weekend. Stacy found herself searching for Nash among the five or six men standing there, and he wasn't among them. The other man that was missing was Alphons. He and Laila hadn't taken the hint that the rest of the weekend was for family and close friends.

Stacy crossed the room to Laila. The first time she'd laid eyes on the sexy bitch, she didn't like her. She was wild and super thin. All the guys had run up on her when she came in the night of the party, including Nash. Stacy didn't want to admit she felt jealous of the woman, but she didn't like lying to herself even if she did deny her feelings with others. She was jealous all right, and it ate her up to have to ask the wench anything about what was going on.

"So what's up?" she asked through clenched teeth.

Laila didn't spare her more than a glance, but seemed to feel the moment called for drama. She pressed a hand to her chest and sighed noisily. "They're fighting over me. I didn't mean for this to happen, but when you look like I do, men fall at your feet. I admit, I didn't know which of them to choose."

Stacy would have laid hands on the woman right there, and then two fights would be going on. Someone grabbed her arm. She tried to yank her arm free but found it trapped in a steel hold. Glancing back, she found Lucas behind her, anger in his eyes. "Don't," he told her. "We have enough to handle with them." He nodded toward the wolves rolling over each other as their razor sharp teeth sank into thick hides. "Contrary to what you've just been told, they are not fighting over a woman, but over a position."

"A position?"

He nodded. "Alphons has challenged Nash for the position of Alpha, and Nash had no choice but to accept. It's our way, and we knew it was coming sooner or later. I expect Brant will be next."

He glanced over to where Brant was standing watching the fight, with Zandrea clinging to his arm. Brant must have told her the same thing Lucas had just told Stacy. Zandrea must be envisioning some mangy mutt ripping at her man. Stacy wanted nothing to do with that bull crap. Every woman liked a dangerous man, but this was pushing it way too far. They were wild, and from the looks of it, Alphons was doing everything he could to kill Nash. More than once he had lunged at the Alpha's throat with his teeth bared.

Everyone had drifted behind the scuffling animals, and now they were all out in the grass at the back of Zandrea's house. Stacy thought it was a good thing they had bought a secluded mansion with no neighbors close by. The entire property was surrounded with trees. She shivered in the early evening air and dared to take her eyes off the fight to glance up at the sky. The full moon was already high in the sky even though the sun hadn't fully gone down, and she wondered if it affected them. They weren't werewolves, but she didn't know all the rules.

After what seemed like hours, the growls and barks became less frenzied, and the circling with heads low ready to attack had less threat. The smaller of the wolves actually bowed his head to the other one. Stacy blinked. Did that just happen? She had no time to think about it because they both began to change back to their human form, both naked. Everyone behaved as if it was natural, and Stacy had to put a hand up to her chin to force herself to stop swinging her lustful gaze from one man to the other and back again. *Damn!*

She was surprised that no one approached the men though. For real, they had to be cold with the temperature having dropped. The others began drifting back to the house, Brant and Lucas dragging Zandrea and Nita with them. Stacy didn't move, and neither did Laila. At least at first.

Stacy jumped when Laila suddenly cried out “Nash! Are you okay, baby?”

“Laila, don’t! You know better,” Lucas called out.

She didn’t listen, and Stacy watched in shock as Nash growled at Laila. The moment she put her arms up to wrap around his neck, he caught them and squeezed, still growling. She cried out, but Nash wasn’t done. He yanked her to him and sank his still pointed teeth in her shoulder. Laila screamed, but she didn’t fight him off. Lucas and Brant both barreled past Stacy to rip Laila away from Nash.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Brant kept repeating, and Lucas tackled Nash to the ground.

Stacy tried to clear her whirling thoughts to try to figure out what just happened. After all, the wolves healed fast, and Laila despite how delicate she looked, was one of them. Surely, it wasn’t a big deal that the dumb ass had been bitten.

Nita and Zandrea moved up on either side of her, their expressions low.

“What?” Stacy demanded. “What the hell is the big deal?”

Zandrea met her eyes. “Sweetie, that’s how they take a mate. The male bites his woman twice, and it’s forever. She just got the first.”

Chapter Six

Stacy was behind the wheel of her car. Driving was what she liked to do when she had to work out the frustrations that were in her life. She loved handling a stick. The power, the control, under her hand, was a real rush. That rush was what she needed and a highway, somewhere the police wouldn't pull her over if she was doing eighty or more.

Nash didn't have a thing to do with her, and she shouldn't let it mess with her head. She had told herself that over and over as she hurried upstairs to change from the cutesy dress she had intended to wear to dinner, and into a pair of low rider jeans and a T-shirt. She'd slipped her feet into sandals, so she could yank them off the minute she was in the car. Driving barefoot was another way to work out her anger.

She was halfway down the driveway, her lights illuminating the pitch black night, when someone stepped out of the trees onto the road. The light reflected in his silver eyes making her heart pick up its beat and her hands shake. She slowed down to pull alongside him and rolled the window down.

He bent to peer into the car. "Need company?"

She hesitated. Usually she liked to be alone in a time like this, but what the hell. She popped the locks. "Get in."

He strolled around the front of the car and slid into the passenger side. Stacy barely waited for him to shut the door before she was off again.

"So where we headed?"

"Does it matter?" Glancing over at him, she was struck with how fast he had healed. When the fight was over and he'd transformed, his face had been riddled with small slashes like Nash had torn him to pieces. He would have been so messed up if he didn't have that ability. Women liked a man's scars, but that would have been ridiculous. "So what was that about, Alphons?"

He shrugged. "Simple. I have one goal in life. That's to be an Alpha. Nothing else matters."

She shifted to a higher gear and directed the car toward the highway. "What about Laila?"

"What about her?"

"Look, don't play me, okay? I'm not stupid. You've been up in my face, but I know you're still hitting her too."

He raised an eyebrow. "And you're innocent?"

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He didn’t answer but tapped his nose. She focused on the road, disliking him and regretting ever picking him up. If his attitude had anything to do with why he wasn’t leader of his own pack, then she could understand. Alphons didn’t care about anyone or anything. She didn’t have to know him longer than two seconds or have special powers to pick up on that.

So he had smelled Nash on her. Didn’t a shower mean anything? She guessed not, but whatever. He had only come on to her, and they hadn’t even progressed past that first kiss. Alphons acted like he was hot to get in her panties, but in all the times he found her wherever she was in the house over the last couple of days, she hadn’t lost all reason like she had at the 7-Eleven, and that relieved her big time. Being that out of control was too much. And yet, she had spread ‘em wide and fast for Nash.

Her anger coming to a boil again after it had simmered down, she shoved thoughts of Nash out of her mind. He was mated now. Or halfway there. From now on, they wouldn’t have anything to do with each other beyond casual interaction when they were around Zandrea and the others at the same time. That’s how she wanted it anyway. When she got a man to share her bed for a while, he would be someone she couldn’t fall for, someone who couldn’t break her heart. That man was not Mr. Big Shot, Nash.

Out of the blue, Alphons reached across the space between them and stroked her cheek. Stacy resisted pulling away. His hand fell lower to rest on her chest, his knuckles grazing her nipple. She bit her lip when the small peak pebbled beneath his touch. She was still horny as hell.

“We could go somewhere to be alone,” he suggested.

“I don’t know.”

“What’s there to know, Stacy?” He massaged her breast while she squeezed her legs together. “You’re a woman. I’m a man. We’re not attached to anyone.” At her frown, he continued. “Not seriously anyway. See, there’s a motel.”

Stacy took control of herself. Too much this past weekend, she felt like these men were jerking her around. She was not that type of woman, and Alphons needed to get that straight right now. “Look, you’re fine and all that, Alphons, but I’m just not feeling it. If you jumped in my car hoping we were going to be intimate tonight, you’ve got another thought coming. I’m sorry.”

She had figured her words would piss him off, but instead he grinned. He reminded her of Nash with his incessant smile in every freakin’ situation. Alphons moved his hand from her breast to her lips and tapped lightly. The intensity in his eyes made her nervous, and

for the first time, she wondered how well Lucas and Brant knew this guy. *Great, Stacy, this is the first time you thought about that? Way to go.*

“Why don’t we head back,” she suggested. “I’m tired, and—”

Something came over her. She didn’t know what it was, but out of nowhere, she longed for Alphons with every fiber of her being. The pull was so powerful, she’d even turned her head away from watching the road to watching Alphons, but he forced her head straight. “Watch the road, Stacy, and then take exit twenty-five. That’s a good girl.”

Stacy didn’t want a thing in the world except to please Alphons. He was her everything. When she pulled off the highway and directed the car to the parking lot he had pointed out, Alphons told her to shut off the engine. She did and then unbuckled herself to climb onto his lap.

Alphons laughed and kissed her. “Now, beautiful woman, you’re going to do exactly what I want you to do, aren’t you?”

Her lids drooped heavy over her eyes, and she nuzzled into his chest to rest her head on his shoulder. “Of course. Whatever you want, Alphons.”

Chapter Seven

Alphons checked on Stacy, still sleeping at his side, and then rolled off the bed. He strolled to the door and stepped outside into the early morning. He couldn't suppress the grin that spread over his face. How he loved being born a wolf shifter. They could release pheromones to the opposite sex and have them eating out of their hand. Of course, Alphons had taken it to new heights with a little genetic manipulation and some friends in dark places. He could push a woman to the point that she not only craved his touch, but she actually longed to obey his every command.

He supposed he should have more ambition for his life than to aim for an Alpha position. After all, he could seduce and enslave the richest, most powerful women in the world, and soon he would be the one with all the money. However, he wasn't limitless in his ability which was why he had tanked last night after manipulating Stacy. Eight hours of sleep had never felt so refreshing. Now he was alert enough to carry out his plan.

After one last stretch and a few more deep breaths, he turned back into the room to wake Stacy. He shook her, and the covers fell back to expose a bare shoulder, reminding him of what Nash had done last night. What an idiot. He'd bitten Laila, and just one more would make her his mate. But that little sexy she-wolf had jumped the gun. She hadn't trusted Alphons to get the job done, to move Nash out of the way of his goal. Sure, he had been humiliated to lose the fight to that ass, but he was not giving up by any means. Laila should know him well enough by now to know he always had a backup plan. And that plan involved the sweet human in front of him.

"Come on, Stacy. Wake up," he snapped, shaking her again.

Her lids rose, and her deep brown eyes focused on him. She was beautiful. He had to give her that. And her body! He grew hard just remembering how she looked under the covers.

Stacy blinked at him and then looked down at the bed. He saw the realization come into her eyes that she was naked. "What the hell?" she screamed, and sat up. A hand raked through her tangled hair. "Did I...Did we...?"

He grinned. "Of course, baby, and it was so good." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. It took everything in him not to burst out laughing at her horror, which he expected was more from her not remembering what had happened than anything else. After all he was a shifter. He knew he looked good, especially to the imperfect human. Damn, he was arrogant, and he loved it.

They didn't fuck, of course, but she didn't need to know that. He had taken her clothes off only so she would be more accepting of him when he wasn't using his control over her. He much preferred a female shifter because he liked sex as hard and wild as it could be. The ability to heal was important, and Stacy wouldn't do him any good if she was torn apart, unable to go after Nash.

That was his real use for her. He had done his homework before he showed up uninvited at Brant's party. He'd known about the third unattached human woman and guessed that because of the successful mating of Brant and Lucas, she could be used to tempt Nash into breaking his pack's rules. Joy had surged through him when one of the guys told him all about how Nash and Stacy had been practically fucking in the middle of the floor. The knowledge had given him an added certainty that his plan would work.

Soon enough Nash would make Stacy his mate, and the elders of his pack would toss him out on his ass. That would leave the field wide open for Alphons. He couldn't wait. Now that he had things in motion, nothing could go wrong. He didn't spend the last few decades learning how to bend people to his will for nothing. This was going to pay and pay big. Only then would he consider making Laila his on a permanent basis.

"Now, we really should get back. We're heading home today. I can ride with you if you want."

"Hell no!" She slung the sheet around her body and rose. "I mean, no thank you. I need the peace to think about some things, get my head right. I'm going to tell you the truth, Alphons, I don't remember a thing about what happened between us, and seriously, if what you said is true, I regret it."

He touched his chest in feigned offense. "You wound my pride."

She rolled her eyes. "Get real. You don't give a crap. You got yours, and that's all that matters." He watched her swaying ass while she walked over to the bathroom door, and then she turned to look at him. "I'm sorry. I'm not a morning person, and it ticks me off that I can't remember. I guess...we can talk in a couple days, okay?"

Just as he thought. She was more open to him thinking they had already been intimate. It was scary sometimes how well he could read people. He nodded. "Sure, baby. Whatever you want."

* * * *

"What is she thinking?" Nash murmured while he watched Stacy unfold her curvy figure from behind the wheel of her car, and that bastard Alphons sliding out of the passenger side. He'd known they were out all night. Zandrea had whined to Brant, and Brant had come to him, as if Stacy was *his* responsibility.

Lucas was unfazed. "She's thinking she's a single woman with the right to sleep with whomever she chooses. What's it to you? You've got more important issues to deal with. Have you forgotten about Laila?"

He gritted his teeth and slammed his fist on the windowsill. The noise caught Stacy's attention, and she glanced over toward the window where he was looking out. His first instinct was to duck out of sight so she wouldn't think he had been watching for her

return, which he was. Yet, he resisted hiding. Maybe she would realize that she couldn't make foolish decisions that made her friends worry. Not him, but Zandrea. He tried to see the humor in this situation, enough to make him smile, but failed. "As far as I'm concerned there's nothing to discuss regarding Laila." He closed his eyes a moment, and finally calmed enough to plant a smile on his face. Then he turned around and joined Lucas for a cup of coffee, taking a seat across from his old boss. "I briefly considered taking Laila as my mate, but after what she pulled, I don't think she'd be the right woman."

"You think?" Lucas frowned before taking a sip from his cup. "She's manipulative, and every time she enters a room full of men, she amps up the pheromones. No one likes to fight off that level of sexual pull every second of the day."

Nash managed a laugh. "That's funny, because you act like you're not fighting the pull at all with Nita...*all day*."

"That's different."

Nash shrugged.

"Anyway," Lucas continued. "Laila knows the rules. A wolf just coming out of a fight is still too pumped up on adrenaline to think straight. He should not be touched, because for a brief window, he'd even attack his own mate should he deem her a threat. Laila should not have gone anywhere near you until you calmed down."

"Like she didn't know that?" Nash thought about what Laila had done. All it would take was once more. The humiliating thing was he had already been boasting that he was not like Brant and Lucas. He would never be out of his head enough to bite a woman. He'd never thought it would happen after a fight. All of them had more sense than that. "But then it wasn't lack of sense that drove her. She tricked me."

Lucas grunted. "Yup, and if you're not on your toes, my friend, she's going to do it a second time, and you'll find yourself shackled to her for the rest of your long life. She's sexy as anything, but..."

"But I don't want my right taken away from me. My choice."

Nash picked up on the sound of a door opening and Stacy's voice echoing through the house. He didn't excuse himself from Lucas before he stood up and rushed from the room. Rounding a turn in the hall, he came upon them together, Alphons' hand on Stacy's chin while his face was less than an inch from her soft lips. Nash clenched his fists but forced his expression to remain impassive. He hesitated to walk past and wound up freezing in place, unable to take his eyes off them.

Alphons whispered something to her, and Nash, not wanting to pick up on lust filled words or reminders of what they had enjoyed the night before, made sure he didn't tune

in. Stacy nodded at whatever he said and leaned in to kiss his lips. Nash couldn't watch anymore. He turned away and decided at that moment to pack and go home even though Brant had asked him to stay and leave later. He had wanted to discuss one of his pups with Nash and Lucas. Nash was sure Lucas could handle it and give Brant the advice he required. Nash's pack needed him back where he belonged.

While he stuffed clothes in a haphazard way into his suitcase, grumbling under his breath, a knock sounded at his door. He sniffed. She was there. Her sweet voice calling out to him confirmed it. Annoyance at his body's reaction to her made him stomp across the room and yank the door open.

She jumped. "Hey, Nash."

He cocked an eyebrow up at her. "Hey."

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned her weight into one hip. He let his stare follow those curves until he realized she hadn't said anything more.

"Was there something you needed?"

"Yes." She hesitated.

He reached out for her hand and tugged her inside the room. At least he could take the time to warn her off of Alphons. He didn't know the guy very well, but coming out of nowhere to challenge him when he didn't even know the pack he wanted to be in charge of did not sit well with Nash. A good leader developed a deep bond and a knowledge of his people before he felt he was ready to guide them. Alphons seemed to care about no one but himself.

Stacy's shoulder brushed his chest when she walked by, and he actually lifted a hand to touch her before he caught himself. Clearing his throat, he shut the door. "So?"

"Something's wrong with my car," she rushed out. "I was wondering if you could give me a lift back to town when you go, and I'm going to call triple A to send a tow truck for it. They'll haul it back home to get my mechanic to look at it."

Nash narrowed his eyes at her. He'd never heard anything that sounded more like a lie, and yet, Stacy didn't strike him as the kind of woman who would be sneaky about trapping a man. She was direct. If she wanted something, she would let it be known. "Didn't look like anything was wrong with it when you drove up."

"I know, right? I'm not sure what is going on. Whatever, I need a ride. I know Brant or Lucas would give me a ride, but they live out here. I don't want to make them take me all the way home and then have to drive back. You and I live in the same city. So what's the big deal, Nash? Will you do it? Please?"

Suspicion crawled over his skin. After all she'd only just stepped in the house, and Alphons had been whispering to her. Could he be up to something? Could he have put her up to getting him to take her home? For what purpose? Nash would have thought a man like he seemed to be would have his head swelling to have two beautiful women share his bed. Which one of them wouldn't get off on that? Nash'd had multiple lovers in the past, and they had all known about it.

He scratched the back of his head thinking it over. A reason to tell her no didn't come to mind, and really home wasn't all that far, not the way he liked to drive. Opening it up on the highway was a rush. Also, if he kept the conversation to a monotone, he just might avoid saying something he would regret like "Let's pull over and do what's on both our minds."

Before he could say another word, she had her body pressed to him and her hands running down his sides to his legs. He tensed when she reached around to grab his ass. *Fuck, there goes my resolve.*

"When you asked for a ride, Stacy, I thought you meant in my car."

She smirked up at him and tilted her head to the side, her eyelids low and her eyes full of sensuality. "You know you want it."

"Wanting it and accepting the offer are two different things." He removed her hands from his body and stepped back. "I'll take you home, but I am not getting trapped into anything. Not a second time."

Her hands went to her own hips. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Nash moved past her, grabbed his suitcase from the bed and headed for the door. "It means the only riding we'll be doing is in my Aston Martin."

Chapter Eight

Stacy tapped her fingers on the armrest in Nash's car until she felt like she was going to lose her mind. She didn't even know how she had gotten into this mess. One minute she was set on driving home alone so she could think through her actions this weekend, and the next she was convinced something was wrong with her car, and she needed Nash to take her home. To make things worse, the jerk acted like she had a virus he didn't want to catch. Even when her fingers had accidentally brushed his on the armrest, he'd flinched in disgust. Yet, that damn pleasant look had never left his stupid face.

"What's your problem?" she finally demanded after a long silence.

He spared her a glance before focusing on the road again. "Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said." Stacy leaned out and located the volume on the frickin' elevator music he had playing on the radio and turned it down. "You always have this sunny day look on your face, even when I know you're pissed off."

"Oh you can read minds now?" His eyebrows went up.

"Cut the bull, Nash. You're pissed way off, and you know it." She so wanted to point her fingers in his face, but she didn't dare. "I ask you for a ride, and you act like I'm trying to attack you. Last time I checked, I've never raped a man, so you can knock off the fear."

He laughed, and she thought it was at last genuine. "Trust me. I am not afraid of you."

"Oh yeah, then why are you scared to share more than two words of conversation with me? I'm not Nita. I didn't bother going to college, but I don't consider myself a total idiot either. You high saditty guys think you're better than us common folk. Is that it? You hate it that you're attracted to me?"

"Is that the card you're playing?" he demanded. "That I think I'm better than you? So I can't just not want you. I have to think I'm better not to want you? Whose nose is high in the air? It's not mine."

For some whacked out reason, Stacy felt stimulated. They were arguing, but she was enjoying herself. Usually when she told guys off, or anybody for that matter, she always won the argument and shut them down. Something told her Nash wasn't about to back down. Maybe because he thought that would mean admitting she was right about him. "Oh your nose is definitely out of joint, boyfriend, because I've got your number. Yeah, you like to pretend you're all happy go lucky, but for real, something is eating you up inside. You're just as messed up as the rest of us."

His knuckles went stark white on the steering wheel, and his palms made a squeaking noise, he held on so tight. She was riling him up. That was for sure. But she wasn't

backing off either, even if she didn't give it all she had, not knowing how a man like him would respond to her pushing his buttons.

"What, no comeback?" she teased with a half smile.

Nash responded with his own grin, but didn't bait her. Stacy sighed and sat back in her chair. "So you think you'll win the argument by not answering. Is that it?"

"You like to argue."

"So what of it?"

"I like peace," he told her.

"In other words, we're too opposite and can't be together."

He shifted gears, his preference for a stick denying that they were too different. "Was that on the table? Our being together."

"Bite me, Nash."

For just an instant the look on his face told her he wanted to, and she gasped, remembering that he already had bitten a woman, and it damn sure wasn't her. Not that she wanted to be his mate. She didn't want any mate, not to be tied to a man.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. You're already taken anyway."

She couldn't have ruined their playful banter faster if she'd thrown a bucket of cold water on his head. His expression grew dark, and he tightened his hands on the steering wheel. For the next few minutes he didn't say a word or look her way. Stacy wanted to dig at him again to get him to play with her, but she didn't dare. Apparently, he wasn't happy about what had happened.

"So if you didn't want to make her your mate, why did you bite her? Z told me about the whole two bite thing," she admitted.

"Zandrea should keep her mouth shut about my people's business."

She crossed her arms. "Maybe you should be more careful where you put your mouth." She had so not meant that to sound like it did. The words reminded her of Nash's mouth between her legs, licking her until she wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor. She chewed her lip, pressed her legs together, and stared out the window. With any luck, he wouldn't pick up on how turned on she was right about now. His loud sniff told her otherwise, but he didn't address the issue.

“You were out all night with Alphons, and now you’re here with me.” He glanced at her and then focused on the road again. Irritation that traffic had slowed to a crawl was etched on his face. “What game are you playing, Stacy?”

“Everybody said you never let anything get to you. When Brant and Lucas were panicked over bonding with Zandrea and Nita, you were the one to keep them in check. But I’m not seeing it. Ever since I met you, you’ve been grumpy. Come on, loosen up and have a little fun, Nash. It won’t kill you.”

She reached across the space between them and laid a hand on his chest. He jumped so much, one would have thought she had scorched his skin, but feeling bold and determined to get him out of whatever dark place he was in, Stacy didn’t draw back. She ran her palm down over his rigid form until her fingers curled around the swollen piece in his pants. A small moan passed her lips.

Nash kept her from stroking him. “Tell me.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Tell you what?”

“Tell me why you would jump out of his bed this morning and try to get into mine now. I don’t know you very well, but I think you’re not the type of woman who sleeps around that much.”

She drew away. “You’re right. You don’t know me.” She didn’t want to tell him a thing, but for some reason she did open up. “My father abused my mother for years, as far back as I can remember. When I was ten, I pleaded with her to leave him, for us to just go somewhere and forget him. At least then there would be no more late night arguing at the top of their lungs, no more broken dishes or whatever he got his hands on, and especially no more crying. Me and my mother.”

When she paused to take in a few calming breaths, he reached out to stroke her cheek. She turned her face into his palm and closed her eyes, but only a moment.

“You know what she said about why she wouldn’t leave him?” He shook his head, and she went on. “Because she loved him. She loved him more than her own life, more than my life. Can you imagine a mother saying that shit to her ten year old child? I vowed right then that I wasn’t going to let a dumb ass man into my heart.”

She thought he would try to convince her that the right man was out there for her like everyone else had said who knew her past, but he didn’t. He nodded in understanding and uttered, “Makes sense.”

Stacy blinked. “Are you serious?”

He shrugged. “I’ve made a similar vow for other reasons. Love is overrated. Unfortunately, for my people it’s different. I won’t love my mate before I bond with her,

but I will need her like I need my next breath after we are mated. The good thing about that is that she will have the same radical change in her emotions toward me.” He rubbed his chin. “Then again, I could simply marry like regular men and never actually bond. That’s an option. Never been done though.”

Stacy turned to face him. “What? You’re crazy. Your people are unique and interesting. To know someone couldn’t ever hurt you or they’d be screwing with themselves is way more than enough to mate. We don’t have that luxury. And you’re out of your mind if you think a regular marriage will work. What about when she meets another guy and jumps him. What about when this guy gets her pregnant, but she claims it’s your baby, and you have to foot the bill for a kid that looks nothing like you, and everybody knows it.”

Nash burst out laughing. “Wow, you are cynical. More so than I could ever be.” He shook his head. “All of that, huh?”

“Boy, please. That kind of drama and more happens in this world. You just don’t know it.” She slipped her shoes off and put her feet up on the dash. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the annoyance in Nash’s expression, but ignored it. She could so rile him whenever she wanted. It was sad...and funny. Then she sobered. “You know what the scariest part is, Nash?”

“What’s that, baby?”

She stiffened. The pleasure that rippled through her at the endearment shouldn’t have even happened, and she didn’t think he realized what he said, so she didn’t make a big deal about it.

“The scary thing is that I’ve punched guys before, when they pushed me too far. I did it to you. I did it to the guy I work with. I mean he had it coming since he thought he could just grab my ass, but...”

“But you’re scared you’re following in your father’s footsteps?”

“Yeah.” She dropped her head on her knees. “If I were a man, I would have really hurt a woman by now, just like him. How sad is that?”

“Stacy.”

“What?” She didn’t look up.

“Look at me, baby.”

She hesitated and then twisted her head to the left to peek at him over her arm.

“You’re not him. You’ll never be like him because I can see no matter how hard you try to hide it, you have a lot of heart. If you feel like you need to talk to someone about it, you should, to work through it. And if you need a sparring partner”—he winked—“I’ve been known to hold my own with kick boxing.”

“Kick boxing? Ah, man, I’ve wanted to try that. You know how? You could teach me.” She grabbed hold of his arm and bounced. His gaze dropped to her breasts.

His usual grin spread over his full lips. “I might. But for now, let’s scratch a small itch, shall we?”

Chapter Nine

What had he been thinking? He knew. When she had started telling him about her past, the pain in her eyes had made him want to pull over and take her into his arms. She had kept her voice low, steel running through the pitch, but he had sensed the betrayal there as well. Stacy had expected her mother to provide a safe environment, and when she didn't, and then admitted that Stacy's life meant nothing, Stacy had crumbled inside. Only her tough exterior, what she showed to the outside world kept her going, he guessed. Maybe they weren't so different.

He knew what heartache was, and he knew he didn't want to experience that level of torment again. Besides love, Nash had never denied the rest of his needs, and that had included sexual needs. He could admit now that he wanted Stacy. And knowing how she guarded her heart, he figured they could have a small affair, not lasting too long where emotions would creep in, but just long enough to enjoy each other's bodies a few times.

So he had suggested the motel. He should wait a few days, let her get Alphons out of her system, but he didn't want to. Ever since he'd tasted her, he craved more, much more. He needed to have himself stuffed inside of her with her legs wrapped around him and her crying out his name as he pounded their pleasure home.

"Stacy!" he growled.

She scrambled out of the car and around it to take his offered hand. He drew her to his side and allowed his palm to skim her round ass. He was used to smacking his lover's ass when the mood struck him, but he hesitated with Stacy. Even though plenty of people engaged in spankings that could take the sexual experience to new heights, he wasn't sure if it would upset her, and the last thing he wanted to do was make her afraid. So he settled on stroking her instead. While they strolled over to the motel office to check in, he traced the crack of her ass and then lower to her entrance there. His shaft tightened. He was going to get some of that as well.

Once they were inside the room, he kicked the door closed and nodded toward the bathroom. "Strip down and go get in the shower. I'll join you there in a minute."

She gave him a look that said who did he think he was bossing her around. He responded with a raised eyebrow, daring her to disobey. After a few moments, she rolled her eyes and followed his order. He chuckled under his breath. Stacy was fiery all right, and he enjoyed teasing her, getting her worked up, whether it was pissing her off or getting her hot. Both gave him added excitement in his life that he hadn't experienced in a while.

While he was removing his clothes, his cell phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and saw that it was Laila. She had programmed it into his phone before all the craziness began. Letting the call go to voicemail, he waited and watched to see if she left a message. She did. He retrieved it and listened to her smooth recorded voice.

“Nash, call me. We need to talk. I’m...I’m already having symptoms from your bite.” After a few beats of silence, she left him several numbers where he could reach her, along with a brief outlining of her schedule over the next week. Then she hung up.

He sighed and powered off his phone before sitting it on the nightstand. Truth be told, he was feeling the changes as well. A pull toward Laila. He wanted to see her. A connection had begun between them because of his bite, and Laila would be experiencing it as well. But there was no fucking way he was going to tempt himself or her that way. She wasn’t going to be his mate. Not now, and not ever. If he maintained miles between them for the next fifty years since he didn’t intend to break the connection by taking another mate, then that’s what he would have to do. Laila would just have to accept that fact. After all, she knew the risk she was taking.

Right now, Nash was going to focus all on Stacy. He checked the doorknob to the bathroom half expecting it to be locked, but Stacy wanted him as much as he wanted her. He hadn’t missed her suggestive words earlier in the car, about him being careful where he put his mouth. He had smelled her arousal. She had been wet, and it had driven him nearly out of his mind. The years of hiding his true emotions had been well worth it.

The moment he spotted her long, curvy body, glistening wet and golden brown, he lost any thought that had been tumbling around in his head. All he could focus on was stepping in the shower with her and taking what he wanted, what he craved.

* * * *

Stacy had seen guys lusting over her before. Hell, that dumb ass Kevin had it in his eyes every time he laid eyes on her, but the emotion in Nash’s eyes made her weak with want and scared her at the same time. When he opened his mouth, she expected to find sharp teeth that would tear her to pieces, but his teeth were normal. The tips of his fingers grazed her nipples, and she couldn’t imagine what his mate would feel because this sensation had her wanting to let him boss her whenever he wanted to.

He plucked and tugged her nipples until she whined, trying to get closer to him. That was impossible because she’d already lined her body with his huge, muscular one. The man’s form was made for her pleasure. She actually tilted her head up to take a lick at the water beading on his shoulder. She shuddered.

“Stacy, what have you done?” His voice was ragged, like he had been running miles without stopping, and all moisture had left it.

“What do you mean?”

He gripped her arms, staring down at her. “How can you...? How can I...?” He seemed unable to complete a sentence. The next thing she knew his tongue was down her throat, and he had lifted her up in his arms. Stacy encircled his waist with her legs almost crying when the tip of his shaft pressed her soaking wet entrance.

Nash broke the kiss. “I need to be in you. Say yes, Stacy. I’ve got to have it now. I can’t wait for foreplay. I promise I will please you.”

“Yes, yes, please, yes!”

He was in her. Oh man, it hurt so good. He was too big and more than enough. She spread her legs wider and tried to get them higher. He bumped her against the shower wall, and with the lukewarm water streaming over them, he pounded deep inside her. His rhythm was fast and hard. Stacy screamed his name, dug her nails into his shoulders and tried her best to angle her body so she could take more of him. Let him not stop. Let him never stop!

Nash held her beneath her ass with one hand and grasped one of her ankles so he could lift her leg higher. Her head lulled to the side, her mouth dropped open, and her eyelids drooped closed.

“You’re so strong, Nash,” she muttered. “What a turn-on. Make me come, please.”

“As often as you want, baby. Hold on.” He drove harder and faster. The friction, the tension, and Nash calling out encouragement to her made her inner muscles begin to bunch, pushing her closer to an orgasm. Nash released her leg and moved both hands behind her, forcing her body forward so that his would brush her small engorged bud. She fell against him but he never stopped pushing into her. “Come on, my sexy little, goddess, give me your sweetness,” he grumbled. “I know you like what I’m doing to you, don’t you?”

He ran his teeth over her neck. She couldn’t think straight. He licked her wet skin, and she shivered. All the strength left her body. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t finish it. But Nash kept guiding her up and down his thick, long shaft, pushing her to ride him, demanding her climax to obey him.

And then it came, it came with power to take over her mind. She wanted to cry out, but the words didn’t move past her throat. A soft gasp was all she could manage when an orgasm slammed through her core, powerful enough to take control of her body. While it pulsed over her, Nash used his middle finger to massage her ass. He pierced the tight hole just a bit, and she came again, this time screaming his name.

Gasping for breath, she collapsed on his shoulder, and Nash jerked himself out of her. She whined. “What are you doing? You didn’t come.”

He turned her so her back was to him. “Tell me you’ve had it here.” He rested his hand on her ass.”

She nodded and didn’t have to say another word before he soaped her rear with gentle fingers. In the next instant, like he could not contain himself, he entered her from behind.

Stacy went up on her toes, shocked at how she ached but amazed that Nash still made her body sing after she'd come twice.

He crushed her body to him with one hand and rested the other on the wall ahead of her. He panted, and the noises in his throat made her shiver. "Please," he rasped out, "keep very still and stay quiet. I-I have to make sure I don't hurt you, and it's hard because I need to come bad. I should have brought a condom in here. You're squeezing me so tightly, Stacy. Your ass is so good, baby."

His slow, agonizing strokes didn't make it easy on her to keep still. She chewed on her lip, kept herself on her toes with her hips arched. Nash's huge body was curved over hers, plastered them skin to skin. He nuzzled her neck and again ran his teeth over her flesh before he followed it with his tongue. Stacy could not figure out what he was thinking beyond his physical desires, but she had never felt so wanted, so cherished in the same instant that a man was getting his pleasure from her body.

Nash glided his palm down lower until he rested it between her legs. Gently, he tugged at her bud, massaged it with the pad of his thumb and then threaded fingers inside her. The moment Stacy slammed into a third orgasm, Nash let go of his own. His hot seed filled her ass, and he picked up his pace until he pounded her from behind. His curses of pleasure filled her ears while he worked her body over. By the time, he was done, she didn't have the energy to wash herself, let alone climb out of the shower.

With gentle touches, Nash washed them both, and after drying her body at the side of the tub, he carried her into the bedroom to tuck her into the queen size bed. Stacy yawned, watching Nash through half closed eyes as he prepared to join her. By the time, he had turned all the lights off and slid beneath the thin sheet which was all she had allowed him to cover her with, her body was coming alive again.

Chapter Ten

It took three days for Nash to crawl out of bed with Stacy. By then, she was so sore, she stumbled when she stood up, and he'd hurried to catch her before she hit the floor. He should feel guilty for working her over so much, but he didn't. She'd come way more than he did, and he had thoroughly enjoyed himself, exploring her delectable body. Even while he knew he needed to get back to the pack, he didn't want to leave her. The emotion was so strong, earlier he had searched her small body for evidence that he had bitten her, but he found none. That had made him sigh with relief.

The two of them were just sex starved. That was all. And they were a perfect fit for intimacy. Not that it took much for him to enjoy sex, but with Stacy, it was hard for him to think past her luscious breasts, her sweet lips, and the curve of her hips.

"Stop it," he growled at himself. If they didn't get back on the road now, they never would, and he'd be ousted from his position as Alpha. For a moment he considered if that's what Stacy was working toward all along, but then he dismissed the thought. She had nothing to gain from it.

He stretched his aching muscles and grabbed his cell to power it up. Fifteen messages waited for him. "Damn."

Ten were from Laila, and one was from Lucas telling him that one of the elders had phoned him about a small crisis that needed to be resolved back in the city. He sighed as he listened to the three from the elder. Teenage pups having run-ins with humans. Yeah, he had to get back, now.

By three that afternoon, he was in his apartment, relieved to be home and out of Stacy's presence. Already his mind was clearing of her intoxicating scent, and he could think straight about making a decision not to see her again. The last few days had been perfect. He wouldn't deny that, but shirking his responsibilities was not something he could allow in his life. Stacy was a rare breed of woman, no matter how he looked at it. She was too much for him.

He ran a hand over his chin while he stared unseeing at the junk mail he had brought in with him. "That's a hard pill to swallow. That a woman is too much for me." Ah, well, it couldn't be helped. She'd understand. He would call her in a few days and tell her it had been fun, but that was it.

Nash showered, changed clothes, and jumped back into his car to head over to Brant's mother's house. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why their favorite meeting place was the bar beneath her house. The place was in the heart of the city, not the best part of town either. Elders, he supposed. Brant and Lucas' father was the first generation of shifters to come into money. Good investments and so forth had set him up, and those under him had followed. Nash had money himself, but he didn't splurge on anything other than his car. His apartment was modest. He had always told himself he would get

something bigger, something outside of the city when he found a mate. Thoughts of both Stacy and Laila passed through his mind, but he suppressed them.

He pulled up to the curb, parked, and hopped out of the car before clicking a button to activate his alarm system. After one of the younger ones let him in, he headed straight for the lower level. A scent of alcohol tickled his nose. He had no idea why they drank so much. The stuff didn't affect them long. Then again, maybe that was why. Everyone wanted the buzz to last, but the body nipped it quickly. So they drank more.

The elder who had contacted him stood up from a small table in the corner when Nash entered the bar area. Nash nodded his head in respect. "Sir."

Sabelli snapped his fingers to the woman at the bar. "Gloria, a drink for Nash, please. What will it be, Nash?"

His eyes widened, and he turned to spot Gloria stomping over with a napkin and a small bowl of nuts in her hand. Her wide beautiful eyes dared him to make fun of her, and he pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. Gloria had been the woman to almost destroy Lucas a few years ago when she had broken his heart. How low had she come in the world to be working here?

"Don't even start with your smart ass remarks, Nash. I own this place now. I bought it off Brant's mother a couple days ago. I'm settling down." She held up her left hand, displaying a plain gold band with a small diamond ring alongside it. "I'm mated and married now."

Nash tapped a finger on the table top. "Shouldn't I have known this since I am Alpha? What happened to me blessing your union?"

She remained silent. Nash turned to Sabelli, and the old man had the nerve to look guilty. Suspicion rose in Nash, but he forced a grin on his face and rose to hug Gloria. "Congratulations, I'm sure the guy considers himself very lucky. If you don't mind, I'll have a light beer."

Gloria nodded and spun away to get his order. Nash sat and waited in silence for an explanation.

Sabelli scratched at the scraggly beard on his chin and didn't meet Nash's eyes. "Look, Nash, Gloria's husband happens to be my grandson. I approved and blessed the marriage in your absence. You know how she can be once she gets something in her mind. She doesn't like to wait, and at first I wondered if she'd be too much for Shep, but well..." He indicated the man with eyes clouded over as he watched Gloria work. "He loves her, and surprisingly enough she loves him."

Nash wasn't impressed. Mating did that to them. Whatever feelings they started out with quickly became distorted into obsession. That was something he could do without. Aside

from that, Shep looked whipped if you asked him. Gloria was still the sexy seductress who flirted with every man who entered the bar, but her eyes turned to Shep often enough for Nash to be convinced she did it only to challenge his love for her. Gloria was weakened now that she loved and needed Shep.

“Okay, I get that,” Nash told Sabelli. Makes sense. However, there’s something else you’re not telling me.”

Sabelli seemed to toss caution to the wind and blurted out what was on his mind. “I’ve heard rumors that the reason you stayed down there at Brant’s, neglecting your duties here is because you are having an affair with a human. Is that true?”

What the fuck? He’d just left Stacy that morning, and already rumors were spreading? Nash leaned back in his chair, and grinned at the man across from him. “When I took the position as Alpha, I vowed not to take a human as my mate, never to procreate with a human, and to defend my people with my life if necessary. As far as I know, I’ve not missed on any of these things. So who the hell I fuck is none of your damn business.” The pleasant expression never left his face throughout this tirade.

He stood up and dug out money from his pocket to pay for his beer. Then he started for the door before calling over his shoulder, “I’ll take the pups for a ride to straighten them out. The next time you decide to keep information from me regarding my pack, you will find your ass looking for a new one yourself.”

Out on the street again, he unlocked his car and commanded the two young shifters to get inside before he slammed the door closed and pulled his cell phone out. No better time than the present to cut all ties with Stacy. He might have been flip in there talking to Sabelli, but the inquiry had lit a fire under him. After he broke with her and dealt with the guys in his car, he would find out who the hell was passing information on his doings, and he’d deal with him next.

He dialed Stacy’s number. After two rings, she answered. “Hey, you.” Her voice was pitched low and husky. His dick hardened, and a longing rose inside him so strong, he had to brace himself against the side of the car. Lust. That’s all it was. Not affection, and it damn sure wasn’t love.

He shut his eyes, dragged in a few breaths, and cleared his throat. “Hey. I was just calling to say it was good. Very good between us. But my obligations are great right now. I don’t have time for anything...or rather *anyone* in my life. We both knew it was just physical and temporary. So let’s call it quits here. Okay? I know you understand.” He paused a millisecond for her to respond, and when she didn’t he went on. “So...good-bye.”

He snapped his phone closed. Behind the wheel of his car and roaring down the road with gritted teeth, he prepared to rip into the two shifters in his back seat. They would be punished partly for what they did risking the exposure of the shifters’ existence, and partially for the suffocating pressure Nash was feeling in his chest after how he had

roughly and cruelly dumped Stacy. Later, there would be plenty of time for the torment he suspected would result in his own mind when he was alone in the dark.

Chapter Eleven

“Stacy, come out to dinner with me. Just the two of us,” Kevin asked for maybe the billionth time on their way back to the car rental agency. “I can show you a good time.”

“If you knew the mood I was in right now, Kevin, you wouldn’t ask.”

He pouted. She ground her teeth. Men who pouted were not sexy. That was a woman’s thing in her book, and she hated how that fool Kevin thought she’d be convinced to do anything for his ass when he pouted at her.

“Is it because of that phone call you just got?”

“Shut up!”

“Come on. You can talk to me. We’ve been coworkers for years, and I’d like to think friends for almost as long.” He laid a hand on her arm, and without thinking she grabbed it and jammed his fingers back. He howled, and Stacy let go. She almost lost control of the car pulling to the side of the road. She threw the car in park and jumped out. Before she came to herself, she had run a good ways down the road with Kevin yelling for her to come back.

Oh no, oh no, oh no. She was like *him*. She was like her father. She hadn’t even thought just now. She had reacted. Nash had said she could work out the anger with him—and the fears too—because she had admitted to it sometime during the night when she had been laying in his arms. The problem was she had been the one doing all the opening up, and he hadn’t shared jack with her. How could she have missed that? How could she not have noticed that he had lain there, stroking her arms, encouraging her, comforting her, but never opened his heart? Of course not. Didn’t he say right from the beginning that he didn’t believe in love?

Or had that been what she said? She should have known she was fooling herself from the start. Nash had caught hold of her the moment he touched her. And he had sealed it, in just three days. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. It had all been one-sided, proven by the fact that he kicked her to the curb—over the phone!

Kevin came running up waving his hand in the air. “Hey, why’d you run off? Look, my hand’s fine. You smacking me around is nothing new. Why the overreaction now?” He leaned in close to her with a lecherous grin on his face. “Wanna make it up to me?”

Stacy just stared at him. Was Kevin what they called an enabler? A few years ago, she’d read everything she could get her hands on about abusers and the people they always got away with hurting. Stacy had thought then that no one like that was in her life. Zandra would have definitely kicked her ass if she laid a hand on her, and even Nita would have forgotten all her education and beat Stacy down. That left Kevin who Stacy had been stuck with most of the time when they drove from place to place delivering and picking

up rental cars together. She loved driving and had never let Kevin's goofy tail get to her too much, but sometimes he pushed her too far, or something in her life set her off, and then this. She remembered the times she had punched him, but she'd thought it was just her defending herself against a coworker who got a little grab-happy sometimes. Yet, maybe it was more.

No, she didn't want to believe it. Believing that would make her... Her cell phone rang in her pocket, and she was disgusted that she hoped it was Nash calling back to say he was sorry for what he had said. She'd tell him where he could stuff the apology and have the last word. But it wasn't him. While shuffling back to her car knowing her next step was to find a therapist to talk to, she answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Stacy."

She stopped walking just in front of the car and waved Kevin away. She watched in silence as he grumbled his way to the passenger side and slipped in before slamming the door closed.

"What do you want, Alphons?"

He tsked. "Is that any way to talk to the man who cares most about you, baby? I thought we had something going? Remember, you said you'd call. I haven't heard from you, and I threw my pride out the window and decided to call you instead."

She frowned. "Cut the crap, Alphons."

His voice grew more serious. "You've disappointed me, Stacy."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've heard rumors. That you've been sleeping with Nash. From what I've heard, I expected you to tell me there was no chance for you and me because you and he had mated."

"What?" she shouted. She swung away from the car, hoping no police would happen along to find out why she was parked on the side of the road without car trouble. Shortly after she'd gotten home, her mechanic had phoned to say her car was fine as usual, since Stacy made sure she had it checked regularly. She had no idea why she'd thought something was wrong and had had it towed. To find out that someone was running their mouth behind her back about her business was worse. "I don't know who's been all up in my business, but I don't appreciate it. And as for you, I can sleep with who I want to. You and I have not made a commitment to each other. Like I said, I don't even remember what happened between us. Look, I've got to go. I'm not in the mood for this crap."

“Stacy, be quiet!”

She opened her mouth to tell him what he could kiss, but something came over her. Dizziness hit her so hard, she sank to her knees. Somewhere nearby, she heard a car door open, and Kevin was there beside her asking if she was okay. She tried to answer, but couldn't. The phone slipped from her fingers, and then everything went black.

Kevin yelled in the distance. “Stacy! Stacy, answer me.”

* * * *

Stacy opened her eyes to a pounding headache in a darkened room. She attempted to sit up but found her hands bound above her head and her ankles tied to something, with her legs spread. She shifted her body and realized she was on a bed. “Where am I? Hello? Can anyone hear me?”

There was no answer. She yanked against her bonds but only managed to hurt her wrists and ankles. For a minute she thought about giving in to the fear welling up inside her, but she stomped it down. Holding her breath, she struggled to pick up any noises whatsoever beyond the room, but it was as if whatever house she was being held in was empty. There was no telling how long the person who had tied her up had been gone, or when they were coming back. If she was going to get out of this, she was going to have to do it herself.

Discovering that her feet were bare—the ass had even taken her socks off along with her sneakers—she used her toes to feel the space below her and found the baseboard. The piece was made of wood. Stacy remembered thinking how strong the leg muscles were that a person could kick a door in if the adrenaline was high enough. If the fear that had her almost shaking could be considered adrenaline, she was going with it.

A couple deep breaths, a prayer, and a few stretches, and she began to kick at the wood below her feet. After the first blow, she stopped to see if someone would come bursting in, but the house remained quiet. Blow after blow seemed to do nothing at all. Stacy started cussing up a storm. “Give, damn it! I’m not sticking around here to get my ass killed. Give!”

A deafening crack filled the room. She whooped and longed to take a breather, but she couldn't risk it. A few more kicks, and the baseboard snapped away from the posts at each end. Stacy jerked her tired and achy legs up over the posts, and the rope slipped off to hang limp from her ankles.

Her throat was dry. She'd give herself no more than a minute, and then she would work on her wrists, which would be trickier.

* * * *

Nash pulled into the parking lot outside of his apartment and stepped out of the car. He slammed the car door shut and started toward the building. He would grab some paperwork he had meant to look over for a new investment and then take it with him to the restaurant where he planned to have dinner. Not that he had much of an appetite tonight, but he knew better than to ignore fueling his body. What he should do was get out of the city and run until he dropped. That might release some of the tension that had settled like a fifty pound rock between his shoulder blades. If not, then at least it would exhaust him enough to sleep through the night.

He reached his door and slipped his key into the lock. Pausing, he waited for her to greet him. He'd picked up her scent well before she had settled some feet away, leaning against the wall.

"Hello, Nash, baby. Miss me?"

"Laila." He turned the lock and opened the door. She followed him inside, and he shut the door behind her.

"Well?" she demanded. "Did you?"

He shrugged. "I bit you once. That makes me miss you."

She shrieked in frustration. "You don't have to say it like that. It takes away all the enjoyment of knowing you want me."

"And you tricking me takes the enjoyment out of choosing my mate. That makes us even, so get over it."

Her tone turned to pleading. She pouted and strolled over to him to rest a hand on his chest. "Come on, baby, be nice. You know it's inevitable. If I promise to behave myself, we can have a lot of fun tonight. Don'tcha think?" She rubbed her breasts against him, and while Nash enjoyed the sensation, he couldn't help but compare her to Stacy. As sexy as Laila was, she came out lacking.

He grunted. No, he had to forget Stacy. Half forcing himself, he laid a hand on Laila's lower back and jerked her closer. She squealed and grinned up at him. Her soft lips parted in invitation to him, and he lowered his head toward hers. Her warm breath met him before her lips touched his. Excitement coursed over his body. He brought the other arm up to cup the back of her head, and he tangled his fingers in her hair. With a vengeance, he kissed her, shoving his tongue into her mouth, and crushing her beneath him. The low howl in her throat matched the one forming in his.

I want Stacy.

He blinked and drew back to stare down into Laila's face. "I..."

“What?” She tried to pull him in again, but he resisted. When he would have turned away, she grabbed his shirt and jerked him around. He’d forgotten how strong a female of his kind was. Stacy, though bold and headstrong, was small and delicate, and he had relished carrying her from the shower after he had washed her. Longing gripped his chest.

Laila seemed to guess at his thoughts. “You’re thinking about her, aren’t you? You know you can’t have her, Nash. Not her and the Alpha position. I know your buddies mated with them, but it will never work in the long term. You know that.”

He grumbled. “I know that, damn it. I don’t need you reminding me.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Apparently, you do need me to remind you because you’re standing here thinking about her when you could be fucking me.” She moved back a step and ripped the front of her blouse open. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Her erect breasts bounced into view, giving him a painful hard-on. He sighed and raised a hand to stroke what she offered him, but he stopped just short of connecting with her warm flesh when his front door banged open and smashed against the wall.

Nash swung around. “What the hell?”

Brant stood in the doorway with Lucas right behind him. Brant scowled seeing what he was doing. “You idiot! I’ve been calling you for the last four hours.”

Nash shrugged. “I turned off my phone and drove all over creation. So what? I needed to clear my head. What’s the big deal with smashing my locks just because I wouldn’t answer your call? And coming all the way out here was a bit much, don’t ya think?” Nash presented his usual smirk to his friends.

Brant stormed across the room and dug a thumb into the soft spot just inside Nash’s collar bone. He howled and tried to shove Brant away, but his friend held on. “Fool, you’re here with this”—he gestured to Laila and flared his nostrils like he smelled something bad—“when Stacy is God knows where.”

Nash stopped struggling against Brant’s hold. “What do you mean by that?”

Lucas elbowed past Brant and held up a digital camera. “This.” Before Nash could ask for an explanation, Lucas pressed a button, and the tiny device began to play a short clip. No picture was visible, but the sound was crystal clear. The recording was of Stacy yelling and pleading for Kevin to stop hurting her. The unmistakable sound of a whip cracking against skin followed by Stacy’s screams of pain ripped the sanity right out of Nash’s head.

One roar, one guttural cry of bloody vengeance tore from his throat, and he was fully in his wolf form, charging out of the door.

Chapter Twelve

Nash's nose didn't rise far from the ground for a good forty-five minutes while he hunted. He threw in all of his strength and experience running and chasing down his prey from years of being the beast that he was. He'd find her. He'd find that bastard that dared to put his hands on Stacy, and when he did, Nash was going to tear every inch Kevin's skin from his body. No one had the right to hurt her. Stacy might not be his mate, but he'd be damned if he was going to stand by and let her be abused.

For a moment he had considered why Kevin would do such a thing. From what he knew of Stacy's coworker, he had assumed that the man was in love with Stacy. At least that was the conclusion he had come to when Stacy had told him about the man during that three days they spent together. That is, when they weren't wrapped around each other's bodies.

Remembering their time together, regret rolled over him. Each time he had opened his mouth to share with her about his past and why he didn't believe in love, he'd only shut it again and let her do all the talking. He'd seen the frustration in her eyes at his not opening up like she had been doing, but at the same time, he'd seen how being able to talk to him had a healing affect for her. The relieving of some of the pain in her heart had seemed to have a scent, and he'd picked up on it. At least that's what he'd told himself, because only when a wolf shifter mated could he be so attuned to his partner. There was no other way that he could know Stacy so deeply without biting her.

Lucas darted up beside him, followed by Brant. Both were in their animal form. "You picking up Kevin's scent?" Lucas called out to him while they dodged screaming humans and avoided being hit by cars.

"Yes," Nash bit out. "I know his scent. It was strong at her place when I took her home, and the only other male scent there. We're close. When I get to him, don't stand in my way, Lucas."

His former boss growled. "Don't do anything stupid, Nash. You're an Alpha now. You have to think of your pack above all else. No one must know about our existence. And we never attack humans."

Nash sprinted faster. "He will die. Don't tell me you wouldn't do the same for your mate."

Lucas was silent for a moment. Finally he answered. "I won't kid you. I'd mutilate the bastard if he so much as laid a pinky on Nita. However, you're forgetting that Stacy is not your mate. You haven't bitten her, and unless my eyes deceived me just a while ago, you were about to fuck another woman."

Nash launched himself at Lucas, unable to see him as anything but someone standing in his way of getting to Stacy. Lucas side-stepped him, and Nash missed in his attack. He

circled around and came at Lucas again, but his friend slammed a paw across the side of his head and sent him flying into a car tire. Lucas pounced and pinned him down. Nash fought hard and would have gotten loose if Brant didn't come down hard on his chest with sharp teeth bared.

"I'm not your enemy, Nash," Lucas snapped. "Find her and figure out what the hell you want at that time."

Brant began to bark like a regular dog, and Nash glanced around to see several humans staring in their direction. *Fuck*. Some of them might be wondering if they were losing their minds having heard wolves talking with human voices. Nash barked as well, and Lucas followed. Relief slid into the people's expressions as if they were glad it had all been a trick of their imaginations after a long day at the office. They moved away, still leery of the wild animals.

Lucas and Brant climbed off of Nash's chest, and he stood up to sniff the air around them. Kevin was close, and where Kevin was, he would find Stacy. Fifty feet from the location of their fight, they paused in unison at an alley, and Nash didn't hesitate to take the dark entrance. Head low, ears pricked up to catch any sounds, he padded on quiet paws down the narrow passageway.

Brant behind him began to growl. Nash had smelled it too. Blood. Lots of it. When his paw came down in something thick and wet, he knew he'd found what he was looking for. Even in the darkness, he could make out the man's form as if it was twilight. Kevin's sightless eyes stared back at him from the concrete.

"What the hell is going on here?" Lucas demanded.

Nash shook his head. "I don't know, but one thing is for sure. Kevin was murdered by a wolf, and there's no fresh scent of Stacy's anywhere around here. Where is she? Where the hell is Stacy!"

* * * *

Stacy landed on the floor, curled in a ball. She swallowed repeatedly to keep from throwing up at the sharp pain in her wrist. She'd gotten out of the bonds, but in the process had hurt her wrist. She prayed it wasn't sprained, or worse, fractured. Her throat dry, and her heart pounding, she pushed with the other hand up off the floor and then felt around in the dark. This was no time to pause to catch her breath or to feel sorry for herself. Whoever had taken her could come back any second. She had to keep moving.

While she fumbled one tiny step at a time, she tried to recall the last thing that had happened to her before she woke up tied to the bed. The side of the highway. She'd pulled over because she had been freaking out over hurting Kevin...again. And then she had started feeling dizzy, like she couldn't keep her eyes open. Had Kevin slipped her something to make her sleep and then brought her here? Would he do such a low thing?

She didn't give him any play like he wanted, so would he go this far? Impossible. She'd known Kevin for years. He might stoop to tricking her or getting a free feel of her ass sometimes, but kidnapping just didn't fit his personality. That boy would be too scared. So who then? Who would do such a thing?

Then it hit her. Alphons. She had been talking to him on the phone at the time, and for that matter, she couldn't remember them sleeping together at that motel either. It fit. And then shock and terror took control of her. Her fingers had just closed around the bedroom doorknob when the possibility that Alphons might have drugged and raped her hit her mind.

Tears poured down her cheeks, and the nausea she'd fought off minutes ago, returned with a vengeance. Her legs grew weak. She shook her head and covered her mouth while she swayed side-to-side, struggling to remain on her feet. All this time, with Zandrea and Nita's experiences with the shifters, Stacy had thought it was sexy. She'd been happy for her friends but jealous too because she wanted a man. Someone for when loneliness hit or an urge needed to be dealt with. But they were...they were...dangerous. They were animals who took what they wanted, when they wanted it.

Stacy remembered how Lucas was when he first met Nita back at the club. He'd been all over her, and Stacy had to practically beat him off and argue until she was hoarse to make him leave Nita alone. Yet, in the end he'd gotten her. So now what? Alphons wanted her, and she didn't have any say in the matter? What about Nash? No, he didn't want her, and that was for the best. She didn't want anything more to do with any of them. Not Alphons, not Nash, and not even Lucas and Brant. It was a good thing that her friends lived in a different city now. That was best for all of them.

A thunderous crash sounded on the other side of the door. Stacy screamed, turned, and ran across the room blind. She tripped over something and fell flat on her face. Before she could regain her feet, the bedroom door opened, and feet shuffled across the floor. Hands grabbed at her, and she shut her eyes and began to kick and scream. That asshole Alphons wasn't getting any more of her body if she had to dig his eyes out or die fighting him off.

"Stacy!" Nash cried out. "Baby, it's okay. It's me. Calm down. I'm here to take you home."

He tried to take her into his arms, but she kicked harder and swung her fists at him. Pain ricocheted through her sore wrist, but she ignored it. "Don't touch me, animal," she shouted. "Get you filthy hands off me. I hate you. I hate all of you. Don't touch me ever again!"

Chapter Thirteen

Nash sat on the couch in Stacy's apartment, dressed in a pair of slacks, bare feet, and his shirt hanging open. He had slipped into clothes only for the sake of Zandrea and Nita, but he would take them off again soon, so he could hunt down Alphons and end his life.

"What are you going to do?" Lucas said.

"You don't need to ask."

Lucas perched on the edge of the couch and folded his arms over his chest. "I'll go with you when you go. I know you wanted to be sure she was okay. It couldn't have been easy putting her out like that so you could bring her home. You did the right thing."

"Don't patronize me," Nash growled. "I know I had to use a pressure point to get her to sleep so she wouldn't hurt herself. I know she doesn't trust any shifter after all of this. What I don't get is why the bastard faked the beating. He didn't lay a hand on her that we can see, but he went and killed Kevin. What is he up to?"

Zandrea came out of the back room, anger simmering in her dark brown eyes. She almost exuded the aggression of the wolf. More and more she was like them. If he didn't know any better, he'd say she was becoming a wolf shifter. She crossed the room and stopped in front of Nash. Before he could blink, she slapped him hard across the face. "You son of a bitch! Why did you let this happen to her? Why didn't you protect her?"

Nash stood up, crowding her. He was angry, but he wasn't about to hurt her. Brant nearby, still went on the defensive. Nash moved out of reach of Zandrea's hand. "For your information it's not my responsibility to protect her. She's not my mate."

Zandrea shrieked and would have come after him if Brant hadn't caught her around the waist and held her against his body. "I want him found and killed," Zandrea screamed. "Stacy said he raped her. She doesn't remember anything about sleeping with him, but he says they did after the party at a motel. How could she not remember? What did he do to her? Do you hear me, Nash? You'd better *make it* your responsibility and find Alphons and kill him for what he did to Stacy!"

Nash had gone still, as well as his friends. Stacy couldn't remember being intimate with Alphons? He recalled his time with her in detail, how tight she'd been, how perfect. He remembered thinking that even though she wasn't a virgin, she felt like one, and he couldn't believe how good it was being inside her. If Alphons had spent the entire night having sex with her—and being a wolf shifter, he would have—then Stacy would have been sore as hell and definitely *not* tight.

He exchanged glances with Brant and Lucas, and both his friends nodded. Nash crossed the room and entered the bedroom. Behind him, Zandrea was still ranting, and he guessed, still fighting to get free of her mate so she could slap him again. She couldn't

cause any real damage, but then he wasn't in the mood for her attitude either. He knew what he needed to do. He knew that even though Stacy wasn't his mate, he'd kill for her in a heartbeat. Beyond that, he would do what he could to protect her.

When he entered the room, he found her lying across the bed, her face buried in a pillow. Nash picked up small sniffing sounds coming from her while Nita rubbed her back.

Nita glanced up when she heard him and gave him the same accusing look. Why did they both blame him as if this was somehow his fault? He felt the same way, but they didn't have a right to. His lips compressed, he could barely push words past them to ask her to leave him alone with Stacy.

"Why should I?" Nita snapped. "She doesn't trust shifters, and if I wasn't mated to Lucas, I wouldn't either. All it's produced is trouble, and poor Stacy doesn't deserve this. What do you want, Nash?"

He neared the bed knowing his face was impassive, not giving a clue to the emotions churning inside him. "That's between Stacy and I. Leave."

"You bas—"

"Honey, come here," Lucas called from the doorway.

Nita gave Nash another harsh look, but without hesitation, she walked to obey her mate, and the two left the room, closing the door behind them. With a sigh, Nash moved to take up the warm spot beside Stacy that Nita had left. He reached a hand out to touch her but changed his mind and drew back. Putting space between them was safer, so he shifted to a chair at the side of the bed.

"Stacy, turn over and talk to me, please."

"You know what you can do for me, Nash," she responded in a muffled voice.

"I want to talk about you sleeping with Alphons."

She sat up. "You cannot be serious! Damn, you men are all the same. Always in competition with each other. Don't want anyone to one up you? Are you worried about me preferring him over you? Well don't worry about it because you dumped me over the phone, remember? Besides, I'm never getting involved with your kind ever again. Got that? Ever!"

He had sat quietly while she ranted, but then he stuck a hand out and grabbed one of her tight fists agitating the blanket around her waist. She had been trembling uncontrollably when he had brought her home, even fully dressed and unconscious. Seeing her that way had torn at him in ways he did not want to explore.

Before he could make contact with her hand, she drew back, and fear filled her eyes. Nash's throat closed with anguish at making her afraid. "Don't," he whispered. "I would never hurt you, Stacy. I promise you that."

She looked away. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

"I don't believe Alphons ever had sex with you."

"What are you talking about?" She would have stood up, but he pushed her back down and jerked his hands from her shoulders when she shuddered. However, she didn't try to rise again. He had to be satisfied with that.

"When we were first together, the experience was..." He did not want to admit how good it was, that he couldn't get the memory out of his head. "You were almost like a virgin, tight... There is no way you had sex with a shifter before me and was not worn out afterward. Remember how you were after you and I were together for one day?"

She gasped. Her eyes widened, and then hope entered the deep chocolate pools. "Do you really think so?"

He nodded. "I do."

She chewed her lip thinking about it, and it was all he could do not to run his tongue over that soft flesh and taste her until he was drunk from her sweetness. How could he have told her he wouldn't see her anymore? How could he think he could live with that? Every atom of his being ached to possess her and make her his. He closed his eyes. *No!* He would never take a mate. Not even Stacy.

"But why?"

Her words jerked him out of reverie, and he was grateful for it. "I'm not sure, but I suspect it's because he wants my position. He wanted me to make you my mate, and Alphons strikes me as the kind of wolf that loves it so rough, he would tear his lover. You could never be with me if he damaged your body. Being human, you wouldn't heal so easily."

She shivered. "Are you for real? That's depraved! How could he like hurting his partner?"

Nash shrugged. "It's the animal in us." He narrowed his eyes on her. "The animal in *all* of us shifters."

Some of the usual boldness came back to her expression, and she rolled her eyes at him. "Uh huh, you think I don't know what you're trying to say, Nash? Don't even worry about it. I have never chased after a man, and it's for damn sure, I'm not chasing after

you.” She stood up and dropped the cover to walk over to the window. Nash had trouble keeping his eyes off her ass. After a few moments, he didn’t try but enjoyed the view.

“I wasn’t playing when I said I don’t want anything to do with any of you. The fact that Alphons never touched me doesn’t change that.” He thought he caught a small sob before she went on. “He didn’t want me, and neither do you. I’m just some kind of tool for shifter games. Whatever. I’m a strong woman, and I can take care of myself. If you didn’t come after me, I would have found a way back home on my own.”

Nash rose and strode over to stand behind her. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t let her think he didn’t want her. Thinking that she wasn’t desirable had hurt her deeply. He could almost feel the emotions ripping through her. He rested his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to nuzzle her neck, grateful that she didn’t flinch or try to move away. “Silly woman, you are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. My body comes alive just hearing your voice, and my shaft tightens painfully when I touch you.”

He moved in close so their bodies were molded together. “Tell me, does this feel like I don’t want you?”

This time she shivered and arched her back so that her ass pushed into his hard-on. He suppressed a howl of need but grinded into her.

“Stacy, I want to be buried so deep inside you that I can’t find my way out. I want you to scream my name as I make you come again and again. Do you understand that?” His voice had grown harsh with his control nearly unhinged.

“Y-Yes.”

“Don’t ever think I don’t want you.” He turned her in his arms and dragged her tight to his chest. He spoke against her soft lips. “Just because I have decided not to make you my mate does not mean I don’t desire you or that I can’t get enough of this luscious body. It’s incomparable, without a doubt.”

A tear rolled down her cheek, and he wiped it away.

“Baby, don’t be afraid. I promise. I’ll find him and kill him for hurting you.”

She didn’t meet his eyes but stared straight ahead, her plump lips curved in determination. “I know you will, and I’m not scared anymore. But I want to know one thing, Nash. And I mean it, don’t you lie to me.”

He stiffened, sensing what she was going to ask. “What’s that?”

“Why don’t you want a mate? Why don’t you believe in love?”

Chapter Fourteen

She watched his eyes drift away, like he was both remembering something from his past and avoiding talking about what his issues were. His hands slid down from her hips to land at his sides, and he turned away. Stacy suppressed a whimper. Just like she told him, she wasn't begging for his attention even though it hurt for him to turn away from her. She thought if she confronted him on the fact that he hadn't shared anything about his past with her, that would make him talk, but apparently not.

"Okay, fine. Whatever, Nash. You can kiss my ass." She moved to walk by him, but he caught her and held her in place. She didn't say a word, but waited for him to speak.

"I had a mate."

She gasped. "For real? Where is she?"

His face was like stone. "Dead."

Stacy couldn't believe the jealousy that rose up inside her. He still loved this woman, and it was wrong for her to hate that, but she did. She was sorry she had asked and felt like crap for pushing him when it still hurt him so much. "I'm sorry. Just pretend I didn't—"

"She was human." At her expression, he smiled. "Yeah, hard to believe, isn't it? And cruel that fate would hand me another human woman who makes my blood boil?"

Warmth washed over her. So the man wasn't immune to her. She had to admit she liked the sound of that, but he didn't seem like he was going to give in to those feelings any time soon. She wondered if Alphons had suspected as much, had known Nash was stubborn as hell and that it would take him kidnapping Stacy to push Nash to make her his mate as a way to protect her. Stupid. He hadn't counted on Nash not falling in love with her.

Nash could have her body to satisfy his lust, but only love would drive him to make her his mate. Even *she* knew that. Alphons thought he was all that, but he hadn't planned on Nash being this hardcore, or that whatever pain he was still experiencing over his former mate wasn't letting him go so quickly. Figuring it out made Stacy want to cry all over again because it didn't give her any hope either. She had run her mouth talking about she was done with them, but the fact of the matter was, she loved Nash. Fool that she was, she loved his stubborn ass with all her heart.

After some time, Nash went on. "Funny as it might seem, I think I would have handled it all better if she had been killed. I could have moved on and found another mate after some time. But being human and not having our healing ability, Sondra contracted a human disease."

Stacy sank to the bed with a hand over her mouth. She swallowed and then reached to pull him close beside her so she could hold him. He didn't resist, and she kissed his cheek and rubbed his back. "Cancer?"

He nodded. "Pancreatic cancer. I watched her grow weaker with each passing day, and I cared for her until the end. It took everything inside me to let her go and not go with her when she passed. From then on, I decided a smile was all I would ever show to the world. No one would know how losing Sondra had destroyed me. I am still fractured, and nothing could fix that. No *one* could fix that."

Stacy blinked. She dropped her hands to her sides, realizing that he was emphasizing yet again that his heart wasn't open to her. How many times did she need him to rub it in, that she wasn't going to be the one? "I'm sorry. I-I hope you'll find happiness in some small way in your life, Nash. I really do." She moved over a little, putting a foot of space between them.

"You mistake me."

She frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

He reached out to stroke her cheek. She ached to let herself sway into his touch and resisted closing her eyes to bask in the way it felt to be so close to him. Nash was silent for a moment, and then he heaved a sigh as if he'd come to a decision.

"I'm not going to make you my mate, but if you want, we can be married in the human sense."

"Say what?" She would have moved her face from his hand, but he trapped her in place with both hands.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Stacy."

"In the most unromantic way imaginable! The hell!"

He dropped his hands to her waist and hauled her onto his lap facing him. A hand snaked around her so she couldn't get away. Nash found her lips with his and kissed her until she stopped struggling. She couldn't help herself. Just tasting him was so satisfying and so unsatisfying at the same time. One kiss made her want to do whatever he wanted and to go on kissing him for the rest of her life.

At last he raised his head, and he guided hers to his shoulder. "Physically, we're perfect together. I'm not going to deny that I want you all the time. I'm as much into you as a human man would be, and as much as I can be without biting you. Can't that be enough for us, Stacy? Can't you accept me as your husband and have my children?"

It was all she could do not to cry. "But I want to be loved."

“You said you didn’t believe in love anymore than I do. You said after your father…”

She shook her head. “Don’t.”

“Stacy,” he almost pleaded, making her half believe that he loved her somewhere deep in his heart where he didn’t recognize it. “Don’t deny us the small happiness we could have together for the sake of an antiquated term like ‘love’.”

“Antiquated?”

He didn’t respond. She grumbled. What was she going to say? One minute the man had dumped her. The next he wanted to marry her. Even Zandrea and Nita weren’t married yet, and they were popping babies left and right. Brant and Lucas didn’t really believe it was necessary as they considered the mating all the bonding that was needed. Funny, an actual marriage offer made Stacy feel cheated somehow.

Then she remembered Alphons. “What about your position? Zandrea said you can’t be with a human and keep your job.”

Nash smiled. In her emotional state, Stacy wasn’t sure if it was genuine or one of his practiced fake ones. “I’ll work it out.”

“How?”

“Don’t worry about it. What’s your answer?”

“Damn it, Nash. Give me time to think about this. You don’t spring this kind of thing on a woman five minutes after you meet her, especially when you haven’t even told her you love her.”

He seemed about to explain, but she placed a finger over his lips.

“Don’t even. I don’t want to hear it again. I know how you feel. You’ve made it crystal clear. I need time. Can I get that at least?”

He kissed her and lifted her up to sit her on the bed. Another kiss, and he stood up straight in front of her. “Okay, take all the time you need. After my business is done, can I come back here tonight?”

She wanted to tell his ass no, but couldn’t resist him. “Yes, I guess. There’s an extra key on the hook over the kitchen phone. Used to be Z’s. Take that to let yourself in if it’s late.”

“All right. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Nash?”

“Hmm?”

“Be safe. Please. I...” She swallowed back the tears.

“I’ll be back. I promise.”

* * * *

It was after two in the morning when he came back. Stacy lay in bed waiting for him to join her, but he went straight to the bathroom. The moonlight glistened off his pale skin. He was naked, and she knew wherever he’d gone, he’d been in his wolf form. She wondered if he’d found Alphons and if he killed him. She wondered how he would take what she had to say to him. The shower came on, and she shut her eyes, sniffing up the last tears she would ever again let herself cry over Nash.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, she stiffened and waited for him to come to bed. He dried his body and tossed the towel to a chair before climbing up from the bottom of the bed. Hovering over her, he took hold of the sheet spread over her naked body and dragged it downward.

“I know you’re awake, baby,” he whispered.

“How do you know?”

She guessed that he was grinning in the darkness. “By the sound of your breathing. I also sense your fear. You have nothing to fear from me, Stacy. I promised that I wouldn’t hurt you, and I won’t. Our time together will be just as good—no better—than it was that first three days.”

“Confident, aren’t we?” She smirked.

“I’m sure we can please each other.”

He pulled her legs apart and gently settled between them. Stacy moaned at the sensation of having him hard against her core but not slipping inside even though she was soaking wet. Instead, he surprised her by threading his fingers with hers at her sides, and he kissed the tip of her nose with a tenderness she had never seen in him. The ache in her chest threatened to choke her, and she was finding the vow not to cry hard to keep.

Nash pushed farther between her legs. His hard shaft pierced her moist center. Stacy gripped his arms, gasping for breath. “Nash,” she almost sobbed.

“You’re... You’re going to leave me, aren’t you?” he answered. Before she could say a single word, he pushed into her. She cried out at the intense pleasure, the perfection of

being one with him, even if it was destined to be on a physical level only. Nash pumped deep inside her and pulled back. He glided in again, and she felt herself slipping. Muscles in her core clenched in response to his invasion. The man was everything, absolutely everything. How could they not be mated the way this felt, the way she wanted to die for him, die without him.

She grasped her knees and hauled them higher so that if possible she could get him deeper still. Let him possess her, take over and make her scream his name. Let her come until she fainted and couldn't take another second. She even longed to be sore because that meant he'd given her everything he had if not his heart.

Nash pulled free of her body and turned her to her belly. He followed her down to the bed, trapping her beneath his strong length, and he entered her again while he brought his arms around to crush her to him.

"Tell me the truth," he begged while he drove forward. "Tell me, Stacy."

"I love you," she cried out. He drove harder and faster. She whimpered in response. "I need you so much, but I can't. I just can't..."

"Stacy."

She was going to come right now. Hard and so good. "Yes! Please, Nash. Please!"

He filled her, hot and so good she shook all over. His mouth branded her his forever even if they were apart. She cried, and he must have tasted her tears, but he didn't say a word. For the rest of the night, they made love, until Stacy couldn't go on. She collapsed in his arms and fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

“Who is she, boss?” one of Nash’s men asked him. He didn’t consider these guys friends. They were subordinates in his pack. He was still Alpha, and they did what he said at all times, but he had not allowed anyone to get close to him. He never would again.

“Who is who?” he responded, knowing who Josh was asking about.

Josh nodded toward the sexy African American woman nursing a drink at the bar while she watched couples dance. Nash had known the second she entered the club and hadn’t removed his eyes from her since then. He wanted to tell Josh that she was no one, but he didn’t want to insult Stacy by saying the words. He wanted to tell Josh to mind his damn business, but he couldn’t manage that either. In fact, for a long time now, he couldn’t even slap on a smile to hide his feelings. All he could do was remain silent to keep from biting off everyone’s head.

After a few moments of deep breathing, he stood up from the stool he occupied. “She’s my daughter’s mother.”

Josh’s eyes grew round. “What the hell? I didn’t know you had kids.”

“Correction. Not *kids*. I have one daughter. Perfect just like her mother. If the elders knew, I’d lose everything, but what do I have? Huh?” He looked at Josh who stood there with a blank expression on his face. “Nothing,” Nash told him. “I have absolutely nothing.”

Nash strolled across the club’s floor, weaving around swaying bodies and avoiding a few advances from women. He came to a stop in front of Stacy and her fiancé, a human who Nash had checked out thoroughly to make sure he was both strong enough to protect her and good for her. The man had passed every test Nash had thrown his way without knowing what Nash was. At last, with reluctance, Nash had accepted him for Stacy, knowing he had no other choice in the matter. Stacy was stubborn. She had put up with his interference only because of their daughter, but she’d laid down the law right from the start. Now Stacy was getting married in three days, and there wasn’t anything Nash could do about it.

While he stood over her, she watched him with wide, beautiful eyes that drew him in. “Dance with me,” he commanded.

Her fiancé frowned. “Hey, buddy, we put up with you because of Stacy’s daughter, but don’t push it.”

“*Our* daughter,” Nash snapped, indicating Stacy and himself. “Mine and hers.” He raised an eyebrow at her, and she dropped her palm in his before they stepped onto the dance floor. Nash pulled her close, but she resisted allowing him to crush her small figure to

his. His entire body ached to have her under him, longed to be buried to the hilt inside her.

“Don’t even go there, Nash. Every few weeks, you get all possessive and interfere with my relationship, and it’s not going to work anymore. I’m getting married in three days, and I’m sure you haven’t forgotten that.”

He sneered. “How could I?”

“Where’s the nice guy I used to know? You’re all grouchy and mean all the time now.”

“He’s dead. You killed him.”

She gasped and would have jerked out of his arms if he didn’t tighten his hold. He was hard as a rock, and with her now molded to his body, he knew she felt it.

“Asshole! Let me go, Nash. It’s over, remember? I’m getting married.”

“Don’t remind me. If you think for one second he’ll replace me—”

“Come off of it,” she snapped. “You don’t give a shit about our daughter, so don’t even go down that road again. I’m tired of hearing it, Nash. The same old bull all men spout when they don’t want the responsibility, but they don’t want any other man taking responsibility either.”

“I support the both of you.”

She tried for the hundredth time to put distance between them with her hands pressed to his chest, but he wouldn’t let go, and she gave up. “Yeah, you give me a check every month. I gave in to your bullying and didn’t work for two years, but that’s over now. After the wedding, I’m getting another job.”

He ignored her declaration of getting a job. She wasn’t tossing his daughter in some stupid daycare whether she liked it or not. He was going about all this wrong, but he couldn’t think straight. Everything pissed him off, Stacy, her fiancé, his pack. Even Lucas and Brant were riding his ass lately.

The music changed to a faster pace, but Nash’s only response was to flip Stacy around so that he could cup her body from behind with his. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close while he buried his nose in her hair. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of her fiancé weaving his way through the dancers with a pinched look on his face. Nash narrowed his eyes in Josh’s direction, and his subordinate moved without hesitation to head off the jealous lover.

“Why didn’t you choose me?” he demanded of Stacy. “If you were going to get married anyway, you could have been with the man you love and not some loser. Because you can’t convince me that you’ve stopped caring about me and that you love him.”

She grumbled, struggling against him. “Do you hear yourself? You’re so sure of my love for you, but you’re blind to what you feel for me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She forced enough space between them to put her head back so she could look in his eyes. “You love me, Nash. And that’s what hurts me more than anything. You don’t care that you love me. You don’t care that I love you. You just refuse to risk coming to that point again when you have to lose me. And you would lose me. I can’t outlive you not being a shifter. Yes, I would begin to change like Zandrea and Nita are changing, but there’s no guarantee that will include age and healing ability. In life no one has those assurances. But all that doesn’t mean anything because you’re too stupid to realize you’re living through that pain of loss right now instead of years from now when we’ve had a life together.”

Nash was stunned. So much so, he forgot to hold onto her, to keep her flat against his chest. She wiggled free and faced him.

“If you won’t accept me, Nash, then let me go. Holding on hurts too, and you promised you wouldn’t hurt me.”

When he didn’t respond, she turned and walked away. He reached out to grab for her but pulled back just before his fingers made contact. She was right. He couldn’t hold on any longer. He had to let her go.

* * * *

Nash stood like a statue against the wall during Stacy and her husband’s reception. He held a cup of punch he didn’t remember getting. The only reason he had come was to pick up his daughter. He should have taken her and left so he wouldn’t have to see how happy Stacy was and remind himself that she was about to go away on her honeymoon.

By now, he was pretty sure that the elders knew about his little girl, but they hadn’t said anything. Probably because he didn’t mate with Stacy and because she was marrying a human. They were ready to sweep it under the carpet as long as Nash didn’t claim his daughter before the shifter public. They would have a rude awakening, because Nash had every intension of doing just that. It was too late for Stacy, but he would not lose his sweet daughter, not for anyone.

Lucas moved up beside him. “What are you doing, Nash?”

“Nothing.”

His friend shook his head. "You're staring at her. You're the fool who let her get away. Now it's too late. Stop tormenting yourself. What you should be focusing on is doubling your efforts to find Alphons. It's been years, and I can't believe he's fallen off the face of the earth."

Nash never took his eyes away from Stacy. She was so damn beautiful in that bright yellow dress that hugged her soft curves. The shade complemented her creamy brown skin to perfection. He longed to run his hands over her hips and to kiss her lips. Instead, that bastard would get that pleasure, the sheer privilege of stripping her out of her clothing until he got to feast his eyes on what should be Nash's.

A growl ripped from his throat. "He's here again."

Lucas gasped. "You're serious?"

"Yes, I got word a couple days ago that he's been spotted in the area. He screwed up when he killed that human who was trying to defend Stacy. Now, he's wanted for murder by the humans and the shifters. He'll never gain an Alpha position. So my guess is he wants revenge even though it's his own fault. He'll make his move, and I'll be ready."

Nash watched Stacy pose with her husband behind her. The two of them stood smiling for the camera while holding the cake knife. His gut turned, and he had just spun away, intending to leave, when the sound of glass shattering filled the reception hall. Nash picked up on the scent right away. He was about to change, when Lucas caught his arm.

"No, there are humans here. We have to do this as we are."

As if in slow motion, Nash watched Alphons come through the window, swipe a clawed hand across Stacy's husband's throat, and then grab Stacy. All thought of protecting their secret fled Nash's mind as he changed, ripping from his shirt, slacks, and shoes, and ran after them.

"Lucas, protect my daughter," he called over his shoulder. In full wolf form, Nash leaped over the body of Stacy's dead husband to follow Alphons and Stacy out the window. This time the bastard wouldn't get away. Nash would kill him, and Stacy would never leave his side again.

Chapter Sixteen

Stacy did a little biting of her own and chomped down hard on Alphons' cheek while he ran with her. He howled, and when he was distracted, she elbowed him in the stomach and ripped out a chunk of his hair.

"Damn it, woman, are you nuts?" he yelled.

"Get your hands off of me, Alphons. I know what you did. I'm not going to end up like Kevin." She tried to take advantage of his loosened hold and get away, but he wasn't going for it. His fingers digging into her arms, he lifted her like she weighed nothing and tossed her upside down over his shoulder.

He doubled his speed, and when Stacy looked back to see where they were going, her heart sank at the sight of the car at the end of the alley they ran down. Nash would never catch them even in his wolf form.

"Don't be stupid, Alphons. Nash will kill you. Put me down now, and you can get away."

He laughed. "Nash, huh? Funny you didn't say a word about your husband. He'd dead, you know."

Guilt hit her hard. Zandrea and Nita had warned her not to do it, not to get married. Both of them knew she didn't love her husband, even as good to her as he was. Back on that club dance floor in Nash's arms, her body had sang, like it had missed its mate and recognized him as Nash, not the man she had said I do to just a couple hours ago. And now, just because she had been selfish, thinking to protect her heart from further damage from Nash's rejection, an innocent man was dead.

Her throat thickened, and she began to cry.

"Oh, now you cry. Save the tears, baby. You'll need them for later. Let Nash come. I want him to watch while I kill his mate. I'm not going to kill him though. No, losing a second mate in his life will be enough to drive him out of his mind."

Stacy gasped. "You knew? About his mate?"

"I do my homework."

They were coming up on the car. This was her last chance to get free before they were too far from Nash. "Anyway, I'm not his mate. Nash never bit me. He bit Laila. In fact, I'm surprised he hasn't taken her completely by now."

If she thought she would bait Alphons talking about Laila since the man seemed never to have let her go, she was wrong. Alphons only laughed and stopped at the car. He tossed

her on the ground like a sack of potatoes, and shoved a foot in her stomach to hold her down while he opened the car door. She cried out.

A growl behind them made Alphons swing around with a gun in his hand. Stacy had no idea where it had come from, but he didn't pause for a second. He squeezed off two rounds, and the animal's howl in pain reached her ears in the dim lighting in the night. Stacy knew it was Nash. She cried harder, but she wasn't going to be the weak thing that couldn't defend herself.

With one hand she reached up toward Alphons' crotch, and with the other she grasped his ankle. At the same time she squeezed the mess out of his goods, she sank her teeth in his calve. Alphons screamed. He brought the gun down on her head, but she wouldn't let go. Even when her vision blurred and her head started spinning, she squeezed and bit harder.

Alphons went over onto his back slamming to the ground. Stacy didn't give an inch. She crawled up his body and began to pound at him as hard as she could, her fists flying everywhere since she had no idea how to fight or control them. She thought the gun went spinning away, but she couldn't be sure. Hands came up from behind her, and she twisted to attack whoever it was, but her arms were sealed to her sides.

"It's okay, Stacy. We've got him." It was Brant.

She wiggled to get free. "Where's Nash?"

Brant released her in time for her to turn around and see the wolf she knew was Nash get up from the ground, and with a burst of energy rip Alphons out of the man's hands who was holding onto him. Before she could see the finishing blow, Brant covered her face and forced her head to his chest. Shivering from head to toe, the reality of what she'd just experience finally sank in, and she didn't fight him.

After what seemed like an eternity, more hands were grabbing for her, and Brant let her go. She looked up to find Nash tugging her into his arms. He was naked in his human form, and someone she didn't recognize came up to drop a blanket around him. In the distance, police sirens blared.

"This might be a dark street, people, but it is the city. We need to move. Now," Brant instructed.

Soon, Stacy was tucked on Nash's lap in the back seat of someone's car. She was relieved to spot her little girl pass the car being held in Lucas' arms. Her baby adored her Uncle Lucas and was not worried about Mommy or Daddy, especially with cake in her hands. On a shaky sigh, Stacy turned back to Nash. He had not taken his eyes off her the entire time.

"Oh no, you were shot, Nash. We have to get to the hospital." She tried to search his body under the blanket.

He shook his head, his face grim. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll be fine when Lucas takes a look at it.” He paused staring at her.

“What is it, Nash?” She wondered if he was thinking of her husband, and guilt washed over her again realizing that she had dismissed him from her mind yet again. She’d have to stay up half the night, she was sure, talking to the police, explaining things. Oh no, she shouldn’t have left the scene. What would the human guests say?

As if he guessed her thoughts, Brant glanced in the rearview mirror at her. “Don’t worry, Stacy. Lucas will take care of the humans, and we’re used to cleaning up messes. I’m sorry about your husband, but I have the feeling it’s for the best.”

She didn’t answer, but Brant’s words did settle her mind about how they were going to explain it all. Fear gripped her for what she was getting herself into dealing with the shifters, but in spite of it, she clutched the blanket around Nash and leaned closer to him.

“I’m sorry, Stacy,” he whispered in a hoarse voice. She thought he was crying, but when she looked at him, his eyes had gone so dark they looked black.

“Nash?”

“I’m sorry, that I cannot allow you to be apart from me again.” With those cryptic words, he came down on her shoulder, and his sharp teeth cut into her skin. Stacy cried out, but didn’t pull away. Nash’s arms tightened. He moved back an inch and came down again. A second bite. She was his!

Tears flooded her eyes, and she sobbed on his chest while he licked away the small trickle of blood from her wound.

“Stacy?”

She shook all over, and her teeth chattered as she clung to him. “Yes?”

“I love you with all my heart.”

The End