



TAMEKA'S  
*Smile*

ZENA WYNN

Tameka's Smile  
Zena Wynn

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# *Tameka's Smile*

A True Mates novel by

ZENA WYNN

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# Chapter One

Tameka Jones squinted in the bright sunlight that flooded her car when she came around the last curve. She hastily flipped down the visor, heaving a sigh of relief when the shade erased the glare from her eyes. County Road 17 was virtually empty. The last car she'd seen passed in the opposite direction three miles back. Today was a scorcher, with the temperature in the high nineties. Only the desperately bored like herself and those whose jobs required it were out in this unexpected, mid-Spring heat wave.

As she came out of the next curve and into a long stretch of straight road, she automatically glanced into her rearview mirror. The police cruiser behind her shocked her into checking her speedometer. She wasn't speeding, thank goodness, but slowed anyway. It must have come from one of the side roads she'd passed, because this was her first time noticing it behind her.

When she glanced back again, the cruiser had its signal light on, preparing to pass. *Good, let it.* She hated driving with the police behind her. She slowed even more. The car moved out and picked up speed. As it drew even with her, Tameka's gaze was curiously drawn to it. It was an annoying habit, the need to look at vehicles' occupants as they passed her.

The male deputy looked hot and tired in his dark uniform, eyes shaded by mirrored sunglasses. Tameka gave him a blindingly bright, friendly smile when he glanced in her direction. It had to be rough, being required to work out here in this heat. That he was in an air-conditioned cruiser didn't mean much. She had her AC on full blast and still felt sweat pooling between her breasts to soak into the elastic of her top.

She was puzzled when the cruiser seemed to hesitate for a moment, then dropped back into place behind her, but let it go. She wasn't speeding or doing anything illegal. With one more

reassuring glance at her gauge, she cranked up the volume as one of her favorite songs came on. She sang along with the CD, her head keeping time with the rhythmic beat through that song and well into the next one, before the sound of a horn blowing behind her caused her to jump and look into her rearview mirror. The deputy's lights were flashing and he was gesturing with his hand, commanding her to pull over.

Her gaze went back to the speedometer. She was under the speed limit. Why was he messing with her? Maybe it was her out-of-state tag. She'd heard about small town cops giving outsiders a hard time. She searched the side of the road, looking for a good place to pull over. There wasn't any. The road was heavily forested on both sides, and there was no emergency lane. When the deputy gave a brief blast of the siren, she reluctantly turned on her signal and slowed down so that she could ease off the road onto the grassy embankment.

She pulled as far off the pavement as she could to be sure the officer had plenty of room. She'd seen televised videos of officers killed by passing vehicles and she didn't want this man's death on her conscience. She stopped the car, put it in park, and watched in her side-view mirror as the deputy approached. He was a big, intimidating-looking man with those broad shoulders and mirrored sunglasses that prevented her from seeing his eyes. His gold-toned nametag read C. Wilson.

He tapped on the window, and she rushed to roll it down. "Is there a problem, Officer?"

"Turn down the music."

"Oh, right." She jabbed the button, cutting it off.

"License, registration, and proof of insurance, ma'am."

Tameka retrieved her license from her purse and reached for the glove compartment to get the rest. She visibly hesitated when the deputy's hand shifted to rest on the butt of his gun. "My registration and insurance card are here, in my glove compartment. I don't have a weapon."

"Just move real slow and keep your hands where I can see them."

Nervous now, she did just as he instructed. "What did I do?"

He took the items from her and cautioned, "I'll be back in a

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minute. Don't move."

She rolled up her window and watched in her side mirror as he walked back to the cruiser and got in. From the motions he made, he was running her license on the computer she'd seen earlier. Again she questioned why he'd pulled her over. She was a good, law-abiding citizen. No tickets of any kind or arrests on her record. She even returned her library books on time.

How long did it take to run a license, anyway? At least she was in the shade, which provided a small respite from the heat. Ten minutes later, he returned. She rolled the window back down.

"Ma'am, turn off your vehicle and step out of the car."

As she turned off the motor, she asked, "Can you please tell me what this is about?"

He removed the sunglasses and tucked them into the front of his shirt. Tameka's eyes widened. The man was handsome enough to make her drool, but his vibrant green eyes were those of a killer. Said eyes narrowed in warning, "Step out of the vehicle. Now!"

Thoroughly intimidated, Tameka got out of her car, leaving the keys in the ignition. Her tank top immediately clung to her curves as a light sheen a sweat coated her, caused either by the heat or her rattled nerves. She pulled at the thin material of her gathered skirt to keep it from sticking to her legs. The high grass tickled her ankles and calves, bared as they were by the flip-flops she wore.

Deputy Wilson lightly seized her arm and moved her from behind the open driver's door, around the hood of the car, to the passenger side of her vehicle. "Spread your feet apart and place your hands on the hood of the vehicle."

"What!" She must have heard wrong. Was she being arrested?

With his booted foot, he nudged her legs apart. "Spread your feet and place your hands on the hood, like this." He took her hands and placed them on the hood, not allowing her to jerk free when the heated metal stung her hands. Their position forced his body into close contact with hers.

"I need to search for contraband. Do you have a husband or boyfriend who can come and get you if your vehicle is

confiscated?”

“Confiscate my vehicle? Contraband? You mean ... *drugs?* *You think I'm a drug dealer?*” Her voice rose with each question.

“Just answer the question, ma'am.”

“What question!” she snapped, seriously getting pissed. She'd heard about cops harassing innocent people, but she'd never expected it to happen to her. *Drug dealer, my ass.*

“Husband? Boyfriend? ... *Girlfriend?*”

“Girl...no! None of the above.”

“Good,” she thought she heard him murmur. She forced herself to calm down. Her temper would only get her into more trouble and play right into the pig's hands.

He was still standing behind her, his hands on top of hers. She could feel his breath on her neck. Slowly, and so lightly that only the hairs on her arms stirred, he drew his hands up her arms until they reached her shoulders. From there, they slid up the sides and back of her neck, under her hair until they were against her scalp, which he lightly massaged.

Tameka didn't know a woman in the world who didn't love a properly executed scalp massage. This man was an expert. The feel of his fingertips against her scalp caused goose bumps to break out all over her body and her nipples to harden.

When he'd thoroughly “searched” her scalp, his hands glided down her back to her waist. There they circled around to the front of her body and slowly drifted up. The law being what it was, Tameka figured he'd stop before he reached her breasts. She was wrong. He continued until he cupped both of them in his massively large hands.

“This feels suspicious.” He rotated the palms of his hands against her pebbled nipples. “Bears further investigation.” His hands stroked back down and slid under the hem of her tank.

“Officer, I don't think this is ...”

“Shhh, anything you say can and will be held against you.”

The familiar words of the Miranda, along with the memory of those ice-cold, merciless, green eyes halted her protest before it could fully form. His calloused hands gently skimmed her stomach until it reached the fragile elastic barrier of her tank's shelf-bra, which provided little protection against his seeking hands. He dug underneath until his hands cupped both breasts,

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skin-to-skin. Then he rolled, tugged, and toyed with her nipples, “inspecting” them.

He manipulated them until the skin was puckered and tight, and her hips jerked with each pull. Then he released them and continued his search. The sun filtering through the rustling leaves, along with the quiet sounds of nature, gave the whole experience a surreal feel.

His hands skimmed down the sides of her legs until he reached her ankles. He circled them with his fingers. “Dainty.” The word floated up to her. He circled his hands to the inside of her legs and reversed directions. She tensed her legs in preparation of closing them.

“Keep your legs where they are or I’ll haul you down to the station and strip search you.”

The threat, spoken in that no-nonsense tone of voice, kept her still. A bead of sweat gathered between her breasts and rolled down to her stomach as his hands continued their upward journey.

At her knees, his touch shifted. Instead of using the flat of his hands, he used the tips of his fingers on both legs. When he neared the apex of her thighs, he commanded, “Spread them wider.”

Tameka found herself complying, horribly fascinated. Would he touch her sex? He wouldn’t dare, would he? His fingertips continued their journey and stopped a breath away from her thong bikini. She waited with bated breath to see what he would do. He lingered there, his fingers lightly caressing the sensitive skin in the crease of her inner thighs. Tameka’s whole body tightened as tension held her in its grip. Her legs tensed, each individual muscle tautening as she fought against the need to move.

Finally, she felt it. The sensuous glide of a finger against the crotch of her panties. He did it again, only this time there was a light scraping sensation, as though he used his fingernail instead of the pad of his finger. It started at her clit and slowly dragged back until it hovered over the entrance to her vagina. Ignoring the command of her brain, her hips arched, pressing back into his touch.

“I feel moisture.” His voice came out hoarse and he stopped

to clear his throat. It was firmer when he continued. "I need to determine the source."

He rose up behind her until he loomed over her, with one hand still between her legs, lightly stroking the damp fabric stretched taut over her nether lips. He placed his free hand on the center of her back between her shoulder blades and pushed. "Bend over."

He applied steady but firm pressure until Tameka was completely bent over the hood of the car, braced on her forearms. This position placed her butt in the air and left her breasts hanging unfettered. She felt vulnerable, spread out as she was, and tried to rise.

"Hold the position or I'll handcuff you."

She dropped back down on the hood and hung her head. She didn't want to be handcuffed. Then she'd be completely at his mercy.

*And you're not, now?*

He gathered her skirt and drew it to her waist, tucking it inside of her waistband so that it would stay up and out of the way. She could feel him staring at her.

"Your ass is pretty." He smoothed his hand up one globe and then down the other. They clenched involuntarily under his caress. "Back to the business at hand."

The hand between her legs probed at the elastic edge of her panties before slipping inside. He toyed with the lips of her pussy, spreading her moisture around. When she was well lubricated, he parted them and stroked the opening of her vagina. The muscles there clenched and relaxed, as though her pussy was trying to draw his finger inside.

The hand on her hip slid around to her belly and then joined its partner between her legs. It slid down her mound until it rested over her cloth-covered clit. "We've discovered contraband in some amazing places. I would be negligent in my duties as an officer of the law if I didn't check out every potential hiding place," he whispered in her ear.

With those words of warning, he eased two fingers inside her sheath and began stroking in and out, inching steadily deeper while the hand in front pressed hard against her clit. Tameka moaned as her pussy greedily clamped down on his invading

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fingers. They were so big, it felt like a cock, and she hadn't had sex in years. The part of her mind that could still function reasonably was outraged at what he was doing; the advantage he was taking of his position as an officer of the law. But her body, it was screaming, "Hell, yes. Just like that." Her hips surged back, driving his fingers deeper. Her back arched as she rode his hands.

Heat was all around her and in her as well. Her nipples were scorched as they dragged back and forth against the hot metal surface of the hood. Her hands tightened into fists and then flattened as she used them to brace her upper body and give herself more leverage as she thrust backwards into each stroke of his fingers.

Then he added another digit and picked up the pace. Her breathing caught in rhythm with his pumping fingers, turning into breathy little moans. She could feel an orgasm building.

"Deeper."

"Harder."

"Faster."

The words were forced out of her from someplace deep inside. Her mind was mortified, but her body didn't care. It knew what it needed and was driving towards it.

He added a fourth finger and thrust vigorously, the force of his movement driving her forward against the hand that was pressing against her clit, rubbing her against it. She bucked against him and gave a muffled shriek as she exploded. He stroked her clit even harder, prolonging her orgasm until she sank onto the hood of the car, replete.

He withdrew his fingers from her sheath, and over the sound of her panting, she thought she heard him slurping his fingers and growling. Too tired to move, she lay there trying to catch her breath as he straightened her clothes. He put her skirt back into place and smoothed his hands down her legs. He was finished. Good. Maybe now she could go home.

She was wrong. He placed his hands on her hips, and ground his cock into her ass, letting her feel how hard he was. His hands slid up the side of her body, then under her until they were cupping her breasts. Hands on her mounds, he lifted her torso until she was standing. He played with her breasts,

grinding his cock against her until her head fell back against his chest and she was rubbing back against him.

He nibbled on her ear, then whispered, "My apologies. You fit the profile, but you're not the suspect we're looking for after all." One of his hands left her breast and reached down inside her skirt and panties to play with her clit. "I searched diligently and found no trace of any illegal substance."

The motion of his hand sped up and she arched wildly into it. "On behalf of the entire Bradford County Sheriff's department, I apologize for any inconvenience you may have suffered during the course of this investigation."

Without any warning, he pinched down hard on her nipple and bit her neck. The unexpected pain shocked her body and sent her crashing into another orgasm, screaming as she came. All the feeling left her legs and centered in her cunt. He caught her up in his arms as her knees weakened, causing her to slump against him, and carried her to driver's side of her car. Setting her on her feet, he braced her against the side of the car while he opened the door, then helped her into the driver's seat and fastened her seatbelt.

He reached further inside, started the car, and then turned on the air, positioning the vents to blow directly on her. He cupped her cheek and looked into her dazed eyes. "Drive carefully. I'll be right behind you to make sure you get home safely." He lightly stroked her lips with his thumb before straightening to his full height. He reached down and adjusted the massive erection his loose-fitted pants did little to disguise, then closed the door. He brought his fingers to his hat in a brief salute and sauntered away.

Tameka watched him in her mirrors like a woman in a drug-induced haze. She snapped out of it when he was once more encased in the cruiser, his magnificent body out of sight. She put the car into gear, checked for on-coming traffic, then merged back onto the road. Officer Wilson was right behind her. He followed her until she turned off of the road and onto the long drive leading to her grandmother's house where she now resided.

\* \* \* \*

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Deputy Chad Wilson sat in his patrol car and gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles turned white. The smell of her cream on his hands was driving him insane with lust. He fought with everything that was within him not to rip open his door, drag Tameka out of her car, and throw her onto the hood while he pounded into her from behind. He wanted to ride her until she screamed his name. He wanted to fuck her until she never thought of any other cock but his.

He gritted his jaw, feeling it as it began to elongate. His beast rode him hard, trying to get out. It wanted the woman and it wanted her now. *Fuck her! Claim her! Do it now, before she gets away!* Its fury at being denied what it wanted was stunning in its intensity. The rearview mirror caught his attention. His eyes glowed with power. He had to gain control. He couldn't function like this.

Chad snapped to attention when her car eased onto the road. *She's getting away!* He shoved his beast back inside and locked the door. Then he cranked the engine and pulled out behind her, catching her easily.

He snatched up the receiver and radioed dispatch. "This is Deputy Wilson reporting in. I'm finished with the roadside assistance, and escorting the citizen back to her residence now. Tell Rome after this, I'm done for the day."

"Roger. See you in the morning, Chad."

Chad threw down the mike. He was out of his fucking mind. What in the hell possessed him to do something so stupid? If Rome discovered what he'd done, he'd be looking for another job. If Alex found out about it, he'd be looking for another pack. He'd never done anything this foolhardy. He was strictly a no-nonsense, by-the-book type of guy. It's what kept him sane. Rules allowed him to keep his predatory instincts under strict control.

Control that flew out the window the minute she smiled at him. He shifted in his seat, trying to find a more comfortable position with this boner that just would not go down. He brought his hand to his nose and inhaled. An inhuman growl filled the car. *Mine!* The woman had bewitched and damned him with a smile, because at the first opportunity that presented itself, he was going to do it again, damn the consequences. And this time,

he wouldn't stop until she was his.

\* \* \* \*

Tameka walked in the house, shaken by her experience. A sheriff's deputy had molested her. Worse, she'd assisted.

"Harder. Deeper. Faster," she muttered, thoroughly disgusted with herself. "God, Meka, could you have sounded any needier?"

She should have fought, resisted, threatened to sue him and his department for sexual harassment. Even if she didn't follow through, the threat alone would have let him know she wasn't someone to toy with. She'd done none of it; just gone along with whatever he commanded like a good little submissive.

She was totally disgusted with herself. Well, only partially. Another part was wondering, if the man made her come twice using only his hands, what could he accomplish if his mouth and cock got involved? Tameka shivered with renewed desire. One thing was certain: no one else could know that this happened.

She was hot and sticky, the air conditioning doing little to cool the fever in her body. She dropped her purse and keys on the counter and headed for the bathroom, stripping as she went. As the lukewarm water saturated her body, her thoughts went back to Officer C. Wilson.

The man was simply gorgeous. Tall, broad-chested, and lean-hipped, his body was that of a man who took good care of himself. He was strong, very strong. He'd lifted and carried her without any strain, and she was no lightweight. And his eyes! They were the prettiest shade of light green she'd ever seen, despite being arctic cold.

Tameka squirted body wash into her hands and rubbed it over her body. As she washed her breasts the nipples tightened, still sensitive from his earlier handling. She caressed them, remembering the feel of his hands as he manipulated them. She pretended that it was still his large, calloused hands on her body, instead of her small, soft ones.

It was nice but didn't compare to the real thing. Moving on, she soaped her way down to her clit and massaged it from its hood. As she stroked herself, she imagined what would have

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happened if he'd have tugged her panties down, flipped her skirt onto her back, and fucked her silly with his massive cock. The muscles of her vagina clenched in response, reminding her of its empty state. She rubbed harder, picturing him slamming into her from behind, each stroke taking him deeper than the one before, driving her crazy as he hit her g-spot over and over.

The orgasm hit hard, her muscles locked and she lurched forward into the spray of the shower. She coughed and sputtered as water streamed into her mouth and nose. She jerked back, almost falling in the slippery tub, embarrassed to be fantasizing about something she should be glad never happened. Who knew how many women the man had accosted? Surely she wasn't the only one. That miserable thought dampened her ardor and chased her out of the shower.

In deference to the heat, she dressed in a yellow sundress that had spaghetti straps, was banded at the breasts, and fell to mid-thigh. Her nether lips were still swollen and tender, so she bypassed the underwear drawer, choosing instead to go without.

Still a little unsettled, she poured a tall glass of iced tea, sweetened to perfection, and stretched out on the couch with the *Cosmo* magazine she'd purchased while out and about. She was going to enjoy what was left of her evening if killed her. There was time enough to eat later, once she figured out what she wanted to cook.

Tameka had only read half the magazine when the doorbell rang, shocking her. She'd only been here a week and didn't know anyone. She glanced out the window and saw a large, gleaming black pickup truck parked behind her car. When she peered through the peephole, she saw the back of a fairly large male with white-blond hair. "He must have the wrong address," she muttered.

Tameka cautiously opened the door. "Can I help you?"

She stared in shock as the man turned around. "I hope you like Chinese. I got a variety of entrees, not knowing which kind you preferred."

Officer Wilson pushed his way past her and into the house. "I'll set these down in the kitchen."

Tameka gaped at him, too stunned to say anything.

"I have pork fried rice, lo mien, sweet-n-sour chicken, moo

goo gai pan, and sesame chicken. I also brought some of those crabmeat wontons to go with our dinner, and of course, no Chinese meal is complete without egg rolls. I didn't get any drinks. If you don't have anything, water's fine," he called over his shoulder before disappearing into her kitchen.

After awhile, Tameka realized she was still standing by an open door, letting all of the cool air out. She pushed it closed and followed him into the kitchen, where she could hear the sounds of cabinets being opened. By the time she entered, he'd already located the plates and glasses and was staring into the fridge.

"Sweet tea. Good. That will go great with our food." He pulled the glass pitcher out and set it on the counter.

"What are you doing here?" She stood in the doorway with her arms crossed under her breasts.

He snapped his finger. "That reminds me. I forgot to give you your license back." He reached into the back pocket of the faded, worn blue jeans he wore and pulled something out. "Here you go. License, proof of insurance, and registration. Got to have them. You don't want to get stopped without them. Come on. Dig in. There's plenty, unless you've already eaten?"

For the first time he hesitated, looking strangely uncertain. Tameka found herself rushing to reassure him. "No, I haven't. I couldn't make up my mind."

She put the paperwork in her purse and took a plate, filling it with food. No sense letting it go to waste. She needed to eat and, as he'd said, there was more than enough. "You've invited yourself into my home. Don't you think I should know your name?"

"My name is Chadleigh Wilson. Since I'm intimately acquainted with the way your pussy feels, call me Chad."

Tameka, who'd just popped a piece of chicken in her mouth, promptly choked and coughed violently.

Chad took the fork from her hand and lightly patted her back. "Food go down the wrong way? I hate it when that happens. Here, drink some of my tea."

Tameka drained half of it before handing back the glass.

Chad picked up his plate and glass and headed into the living room. "You got any good movies?"

Bemused, Tameka just watched him go. If he'd been

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obnoxious, she would have kicked him out, but he was behaving normal, if treating a woman he'd just met like they'd been friends for years could be considered normal. She took her food and drink and followed, wondering when her life had turned into a sitcom—an R-rated one, that is.

“Movies are on the book case.” Tameka didn't read books, but was a huge movie buff. Her floor-to-ceiling bookcase was filled with VHS tapes and DVDs.

“Holy hell, woman! Look at all of these movies. You've got a great collection.” He went through the titles, pausing every now and then to pull one out and read the cover.

“*Speed!* I love this movie.” Chad pulled it out and stuck it into the DVD player. Grabbing both remotes, he came and sat next to her on the couch. Once the movie played, he picked up his food and began eating.

Tameka ate, dividing her attention between Chad and the television. He wasn't joking. He really liked this movie. He was totally engrossed.

When she was finished, she rose to put her plate in the kitchen.

“Babe, while you're up, will you pour me some tea?” he asked distractedly, holding out his cup.

Tameka took the cup with a faint, “Sure.” When had she become his babe? *When he gave you two orgasms*, her libido taunted. “Oh, shut up,” she told it under her breath.

Tameka refilled both glasses and grabbed the wontons before returning to the living room. After placing them on the coffee table, she sat and nudged Chad. “Want one?”

“Thanks.” He took the bag, selected a wonton, and handed the rest back to Tameka.

She ate one, and then another before handing the bag to Chad to finish the remaining. When he was done, he balled up the bag and tossed it on the table. Then he reached out and tugged until she was leaning against his side, his arm around her shoulders.

After the liberties he'd taken earlier, it would be foolish of her to complain about something as simple as this. So, deciding to just go with the flow, she relaxed against him and watched the rest of the movie. Her attention fractured when his thumb grazed

her nipple. She thought it an accident until he did it again, and again. A quick glance showed him to be still engrossed in the movie. By then, her nipple was puckered. Chad toyed with it, by all appearances, unaware that he did so.

By the time the credits were rolling, Tameka was a shivering bundle of arousal.

“Thank you for a nice, relaxing evening.” Chad lifted her chin and slowly lowered his mouth to hers. His lips brushed hers, seeking, tasting, and learning its shape. He suckled the upper lip before claiming her lower one. Then his tongue swept out and licked the seam of her mouth, requesting entrance.

When she opened, his tongue dipped inside in teasing forays, engaging her tongue then fleeing, advance and retreat. He taunted her until she found herself trying to capture his tongue with her own.

She failed. He was too quick. She clutched his head, holding him to her and thrust her tongue deep into his mouth, seeking more of his distinctive flavor. He stopped playing and allowed her to kiss him, then he took control.

He plundered. There was no other word for it. The force of his possession drove her back until she lay underneath him on the couch, her head lightly resting on its arm. She tilted her head to the side to give him better access as his mouth traveled from her lips to her neck, while mindlessly tugging on his t-shirt. “Take it off. I want to touch you.”

A shudder went through his body. Chad drew the t-shirt over his head and tossed it to the side, then dove back in for another kiss. Tameka ran her hands over his shoulders and back, then every bit of skin she could reach. She pressed kisses all over his face and nibbled his ear lobe, running her tongue around the edge before dipping briefly inside.

His breath hitched. Then his hands grasped her hips and pulled until she lay flat on the couch. “Open up,” he instructed with a pat on her thigh.

Tameka didn’t think twice. She raised her left leg, allowing him to settle between and wrapped her legs around his waist once he was in position.

Chad yanked the straps of her dress down to her elbows, baring her breasts. He muttered something that sounded

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suspiciously like a prayer for strength and closed his eyes, his head thrown back, giving her an excellent view of the strong column of his neck. When his eyes opened, they blazed down at her. Had she thought his eyes cold? They burned as though lit from within.

He palmed her breast, lifting it before latching on and suckling like he expected milk to flow. Tameka captured hold of his head and arched her back, clutching him to her breast. His suckling was causing a reaction in her womb, and her legs tightened around his waist. She rubbed against him, resenting the fabric that kept her naked cunt from his bare skin. "Fuck me, please."

"Soon. I'm not going to rush. There's so much I want to do, I don't know where to start."

That's not what Tameka wanted to hear. It had been so long since she had a man, and she'd never had one that made her feel like this. She was so consumed by lust, she vibrated with it.

Chad popped her other breast in his mouth. He drew strongly upon it, causing Tameka to yelp.

He let go. "Too hard?"

"No, just right. Don't stop."

His eyes glowed. Tameka blinked and looked again, but his head was down, mouth already tugging while his tongue laved her nipple. Must have been a trick of the light. His hand reached between their bodies and palmed her slit. She forgot his eyes, her name, and everything else that didn't involve what he was doing to her.

He parted her nether lips and probed inside with a finger. "You're so wet. I want to taste."

Chad scooted down her body until his mouth was level with her pussy, leaned forward and inhaled. "You smell so good." His voice was guttural.

Tameka thought he'd ease into it. Maybe a lick here. A swipe of the tongue there. Chad didn't. He dove in. He opened his mouth over her slit and pushed his tongue into her channel, slurping. "Mmm, delicious. More," he demanded and like a slave, her body obliged. She actually felt the gush of fluid that rushed forward in response to his command.

Oral sex wasn't her thing, but my God, the things this man

did to her. She bucked under him, trying to throw him off even as her hands pulled his head closer. He growled and the vibration went straight to her core and gathered in her clit, feeling better than any vibrator she'd ever tried.

"Mine." He clamped down on her hips, prohibiting all movement. Something sharp scraped her mons.

*Teeth*, she thought with her last functioning brain cell.

"Come!" All thought processing ceased as her body exploded in immediate compliance with his demand.

"Mmm," he moaned between slurps. "Again. Come again." He growled, then bit her clit.

The vibration, combined with the pinch of pain, sent her over the edge and she screamed.

Before the sound faded, Chad had her flipped over onto her belly. There was a ripping sound, and then hard hands jerked her ass up into the air. Something smooth and round brushed against her vulva the barest second before she was deeply impaled.

He pounded into her, his balls slapping against her mound. The force of his strokes pushed her forward until her head was jammed against the arm of the couch. Wet, suctioning sounds competed with the smack of flesh upon flesh as his hips repeatedly slammed against her behind. Chad's fingernails dug into her hips a second before he gave a mighty roar. He drove in to the hilt and she felt his cock pulsing inside as his seed was released into her body.

He slumped over her back, gulping air as his cock slowly softened and oozed out of her body with a flood of moisture. The nails biting into her flesh eased as his grip loosened. "Damn, that was..."

"Incredible," she completed, the weight of his body pushing her further into the cushion.

"Yeah. Incredible. Are you all right? I didn't hurt you, did I? I don't always know my own strength." His hands stroked from her hips to her belly.

"I'm fine. I think I'm locked into place, though."

"What?" His body stilled. She couldn't even hear him breathe.

"I don't think I can move. My knees feel like they're locked into position."

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“Oh. Give me a second and I’ll help.” She felt his chest expand against her back as he took a deep breath. On the next inhale, he braced his hands beside her head on the couch and pushed up. Wiry hair brushed against the sensitive folds of her sex as he sat up and pulled her with him, his arm a band around her waist.

She flopped back against him, head lolling on his shoulder, body boneless. “Just leave me. I’ll sleep out here. I don’t have the energy to move.”

\* \* \* \*

“You’re not sleeping on the couch.” He stood and tipped Tameka back until he could lift her into his arms.

Following her scent, he headed straight for her bedroom and laid her on the bed. In seconds he had her stripped and under the covers. She gave a soft sigh and was out like a light.

He headed back out front to lock up. He hadn’t been invited to stay, but he wasn’t leaving. His wolf wouldn’t allow it even if he wanted to go. He checked the locks and windows, put up the food, and turned off the lights. In the dark, he walked back to the bedroom. Beside the bed, he pulled off what remained of his jeans and toed off his shoes and socks before climbing into bed beside his woman. She may not agree when morning came, but for tonight, she was his.

Being human, she might not accept what he was. He’d cross that bridge when it was time. In the meantime, he’d marked her with his teeth and his seed. His scent was all over her. Any shifter that came near her now was asking to die. She was his and he didn’t share. Not now. Not ever.

He pulled her into his arms and inhaled deeply. Yes, she belonged to him. Now he just needed to convince her.

\* \* \* \*

*I can’t believe it. Who knew the old bitch had relatives. No matter. I’ll get rid of the interloper. By the time I’m finished with her, she’ll be happy to sell.*

## *Chapter Two*

At eight the next morning, Chad walked into the sheriff's department, his mind still on the woman he'd left sleeping in bed. He wanted to be there when she woke. Hell, he wanted to wake her with his body, deep inside of hers. Instead, he was here, reporting for duty. Today was the first time in the history of his career that he'd hated reporting to work.

He walked past dispatch. "Morning, Deputy Wilson."

"Ms. Hannah. Bull." He nodded at them both before continuing to his locker.

Bull followed. "Hey, Wilson. Where were you last night? Me and some of the guys met up at the Cock & Bull. I came to see if you wanted to join us, but you'd already high-tailed it out of here."

"I had something to do."

"Yeah. Okay. Listen, last night some of the guys were talking. Did you know Ms. Emma had a granddaughter? She's here. Took over the old homestead. From what I heard, she's a hot piece of as..."

The words were abruptly choked off as Chad erupted into two hundred and forty pounds of bristling werewolf. He had Bull slammed up against the locker, his forearm in his throat before he could blink. Bull's eyes bugged out and his face turned red as his brain was deprived of oxygen. Chad got right in his face. "Show some respect when you talk about her."

"Wilson! In my office. Now!"

Chad hesitated a minute longer to make sure his point had been made.

"Deputy."

He released Bull, allowing him to drop to the floor and stepped over him towards the doorway where Rome waited.

"Bull, you okay?"

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“Yeah, boss. Just fine,” Bull wheezed.

Chad brushed past Rome and preceded him into the office, standing at attention while Rome passed him and sat on the edge of his desk.

“Close the door, Deputy.”

The door closed with a snap, sounding overly loud in the tense silence of the office.

“You want to talk about it?”

“No.” When Rome’s eyes narrowed in warning, Chad added, “Sir.”

“How long have you been with this department?”

“Two years...sir.”

“You’re a good officer. You were a little standoffish at first, but that’s understandable considering your background. You followed the rules, and never stepped outside of the lines. If there’s a problem, I hope you know you can talk to me about it.”

Chad remained silent.

Rome sighed. “Go make your rounds, deputy. I’ll let it go, this time. If it happens again, I’ll have to take disciplinary action. We can’t have any division in the ranks. Understood?”

Chad gave a brief nod.

“Dismissed.”

Chad opened the door. Before he could leave, Rome had one more thing to say. “Chad, if there is a problem and you can’t talk to me, at least speak with Alex. You’re not a lone wolf anymore. That’s what packs are for, to help each other.”

Chad waited to see if Rome had any more to say. When nothing more was forthcoming, he continued out the door.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid! Are you trying to get yourself fired? Because if you are, you’re certainly going about it the right way. What the hell is the matter with you?* He castigated himself as he headed outside.

Bull caught him when he was almost to his squad car. “Hey, Wilson. Wait up.”

Chad stopped, knowing he owed the man an apology, but was loathe giving it.

“Hey man, I’m sorry. You’re right. Ms. Emma was much too nice for me to be talking about her kin like that. She’d have been the first one to knock some sense into me had she heard.

Thanks for not saying anything to Rome. We cool?"

"Yeah." He held out his hand to Bull and they shook hands.

"You hit the road before Rome comes out to see what's keeping you. Keep howling and I'll catch you on the flip side." Bull saluted him, turned and walked off.

Chad drove off, glad he hadn't needed to provide an excuse for his behavior. The last thing he wanted to do was explain about Tameka. It was all too new and he didn't completely understand himself why she called to him the way that she did. He only knew that he couldn't back off. Couldn't let her go. Once she understood that she was his, he'd tell the world about them.

\* \* \* \*

Tameka lifted her arms above her head, yawned, and languidly stretched herself semi-awake. The move shifted the covers down to her waist. She slumped back into the mattress. The cool air felt good on her bare breasts.

She sleepily cupped her breasts, rubbing the nipples with her thumbs. Mmm, that felt good. She felt good. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so well rested. Her hands slid from her breasts to her waist, gliding on smooth, bare skin. *Bare skin?*

She jerked to a sitting position and looked under the covers. Her whole body was bare. Where was the big, floppy t-shirt she usually slept in? She never went to bed naked. What if the house caught on fire and she had to run out in the middle of the night? She didn't want to be worried about finding clothes if the worst were to happen.

Not only was she naked, but her body was all sticky, especially between her legs, like she'd recently had intercourse. Sex. Chad. Oh lord, she'd slept with Officer Handsome. Shaking her head, she corrected herself. She'd had sex with Deputy Wilson. She smacked herself upside the head since there was no one there to do it for her. "God, Meka, what were you thinking?"

She had sex, unprotected sex, with the officer who'd molested her on the side of the road. God, was she that desperate? Apparently, she was. She should have closed the door

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

in his face when she saw who it was. *But that would have been rude. After all, he brought me dinner.* Okay, maybe not then, but after they'd eaten. *But he was still watching Speed, his all-time favorite movie.* Alright, definitely after the movie finished. She should have hustled his butt right out the door. *Then you would have missed his kiss.* The man did know how to kiss.

“Arrrggghh! Just face it, Meka. You were putty in the man’s hands after the first orgasm. He could have stripped you naked and took you in the middle of the road and all you would have said is ‘more, harder, please.’ You are so pathetic.”

She rolled out of bed and headed for the shower, determined to wash the memory of his touch off of her body. She had things to do today and sitting around mooning over Deputy Chad Wilson was not on her to-do list.

She needed to find a job. She was a licensed hairdresser, so she wasn’t worried about finding work. She just needed a location to set up shop. Her home was located almost halfway between Refuge and Colbyville, although Refuge was closer. She’d start with the shops there. With gas prices the way they were, she’d much rather drive the fifteen minutes it took to reach Refuge than the twenty-five minutes it would take to take to reach Colbyville.

She dressed and paid special attention to her hair. You could tell a lot about a hairdresser simply by the way they styled their own hair. Then she headed for the kitchen to pour a glass of juice and toast some bread before leaving. On the refrigerator was a note.

*I’m sorry I had to leave this morning before you woke. I have duty today. I programmed my numbers into your cell and home phone. If you need me, just call. Otherwise, I’ll see you after work. Chad.*

He wouldn’t. She rushed to her purse and grabbed her cell phone. He did. In the directory was three numbers: Chad cell, Chad work, and Chad home. Same thing with her cordless phone. She stared at the phone, mightily tempted to erase them, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it. The man had some kind of hold over her.

*Yeah, and we know right where it’s centered, don’t we?* her libido whispered.

“Oh, shut up!” she told it and walked out the door.

In Refuge, she parked in front of Miss Lulu’s House of Style. Although the shop was open, there weren’t any customers. Typical Monday. No matter what the location, Mondays were always slow business days for hairdressers.

The bell on the door tinkled when she opened it, and a voice called out, “Be right with you.”

Tameka took the opportunity to study the shop. To the immediate right of the door was a waiting area with seating for twelve. That was a good sign. It meant she got plenty of customers. To the left was the register. Behind a half-wall with plants hanging from the ceiling was where the stations were located. There were four, each with its own barber-styled chair, a huge mirror, and plenty of storage space and outlets for supplies. In the back and to the left were two bowls for washing hair, and along the wall on the right were the dryers, of which there were five. Beyond that were three doors, one of which was closed, containing either an office or supply closet. Tameka guessed the former when an elderly, African-American lady entered the room through it.

“Hi, I’m Ms. Luella. My friends call me Lulu. What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering if you needed any help, or do you rent out your stations? I’m new in town and looking for a place to set up shop.”

Ms. Lulu slid her glasses to the tip of her nose and gazed at her with sharp, intelligent brown eyes over their rim. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Tameka Jones.”

A big grin filled her face. “Land sakes. Meka? Give me a hug, honey-child. Me and your grandma Emma were great friends. Told me all about you. I feel like I know you myself. Too bad you couldn’t get this way to visit while she was living, but she’ll shole be glad you’re living here now.”

Tameka found herself gathered against the large bosom of Ms. Lulu in a bear hug.

“Come over here and sit a spell. Tell me ‘bout yourself. You doing hair? I thought Emma said you went to school and got some big, fancy degree? Some kind of doctor, weren’t you?” She

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

pulled Tameka over to the waiting area, pushed her into a chair and sat beside her.

A bit overwhelmed, Tameka wasn't sure where to start. She decided to answer the last question first. "Yes, ma'am. I got a degree in psychology and practiced for a while. I studied cosmetology in high school, got my license and used it to support myself while in school. I discovered I'd rather be doing hair. It's less hassle, less headaches, and I still listen to people's problems. Only now, no one's paying me to give them my opinion and I can't be sued if they don't like what I say."

Ms. Lulu threw back her head and laughed while slapping her thigh. "Ain't that the gospel truth," she exclaimed, wiping tears from her eyes. "When do you want to start?"

"Ma'am?" The abrupt switch of topics left her off balance.

"Not ma'am. That's my momma, God bless her soul. Call me Lulu. Everybody does. I said, when can you start?"

"You don't want to see pictures of my work first? I have a photo album in the car."

"No, baby. You're family. Of course I'll hire you. I know you're good and you'll breathe new life into this shop. I can't do a lot of the newer hairstyles. These old fingers just won't cooperate. But once word gets out that you're here, a lot of the youngsters that go into Colbyville to get their hair done will come here instead. You just let me know what days and hours you want to work and I'll schedule you in."

They discussed salary and came to an acceptable arrangement. Tameka would draw an hourly wage until she built up her clientele. Afterwards, she and Lulu would discuss a price list for services and Tameka would pay her a set percentage for each. The rest, as well as any tips earned, would be hers to keep. She scheduled herself to come in tomorrow, get her station set up, and be ready to start taking customers Wednesday.

She spent another couple of hours with Lulu visiting and getting to know her better. From there, she headed into Colbyville to stock up on supplies. Lulu told her to expect plenty of customers. Fridays and Saturdays were always busy, plus there would be the curious—those who came in just to see what she could do. It would be up to Tameka to turn the inquisitive into regulars.

It was a little after three when she finally made it home. With keys in hand, arms loaded down with packages, her mind was focused on leftover Chinese when she almost tripped over something on the porch. Shifting the packages to one side, she saw a box at the top of the stairs, the kind flowers came in.

Tameka stepped carefully over the box, opened the door, and set down her things. Then she went back outside to retrieve the package. It was flowers, according to the Flora's Flowers logo on the box. Chad sent her flowers? How sweet.

She took the box into the kitchen and hunted for a vase. Once she found it, she set it on the counter and turned to the box. The white box was tied with a lovely yellow bow. She worked the bow off and set it to the side. She'd put it around the vase once she had the flowers arranged inside. She lifted the top off and took an involuntary step back in shock.

Instead of the beautiful, long-stemmed roses she was expecting, the box was filled with ugly, dead-looking roses of an indeterminate color. "Is this supposed to be a joke?" If so, she wasn't amused. She took a knife out of the drawer and used it to poke the flowers, looking for a note. There was none.

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed Chad's number, but hung up before he answered. He couldn't do anything about this. There was no note, no indication of whom it was from or even whom it was for. For all she knew, it could have been delivered to the wrong house.

She laid the phone on the counter and jumped when it rang. Caller's ID read Chad cell. "Hello?"

"Why did you hang up? Your voice sounds shaky. What's wrong?"

"Somebody left me a present. I thought it was you until I opened the box."

"What was in it?"

"Just somebody's sick idea of a joke. A bunch of dead flowers."

"Don't touch anything. I'll be right there."

"It's no big deal. Chad?" He'd already hung up.

\* \* \* \*

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

Chad checked the traffic, then made a u-turn in the middle of the road. He was on the other side of the county. If he pushed, he could be at Tameka's house in fifteen minutes. He hit his lights and gunned the engine.

"Dispatch, this is Deputy Wilson. I need to take care of some personal business. I'll be out of radio contact for the next half-hour."

"Roger. Take your time. It's slow. We have enough deputies to cover."

"Thanks, Hannah. Out."

That done, his focus switched back to Tameka. She assumed the flowers were some sort of prank, but he knew better. Maybe in the big city it would be, but here in Bradford County where everyone knew everyone else, it wasn't. He pulled up in front of her home with the lights flashing and gravel flying.

Tameka stood in the doorway waiting. "It's not that serious." She gestured towards the lights that were still flashing.

"I'll be the judge of that." He reached in, flipped off the lights and threw his hat on the seat. As he walked towards her, he hooked his shades on his front pocket. "Show me the box."

"It's in the kitchen. Chad, I don't know why you rushed over here. I watch enough cop shows to know there's nothing you can do. There's no name, no card, and nothing to indicate that those were for me except that they were left on my front porch. I don't even know anyone here other than you and Lulu. It must be a mistake."

"Like I said, let me be the judge." In his heart, he knew that she was right, but he had to see for himself. He walked into the kitchen and spotted the box on the counter still opened. Tameka followed and stopped in the doorway.

"You said the box was left on your porch? Where at, exactly?" He studied the box and its contents, not touching anything, just observing.

"I didn't notice it until I tripped over it coming up the steps."

He looked her over from head-to-toe. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"I didn't fall. Just stumbled a bit."

Satisfied, he turned back to the box. "What did you touch?"

“The bow and the box top. I used the knife on the counter to see if there was a note.”

“Are you certain there wasn’t a note attached? Maybe on the box itself?”

“Not that I could see.”

Chad used the knife to move the flowers around. Nothing. He really wanted to get the bastard that did this to his woman. Disgusted, he tossed the knife aside. “Where do you keep your trash bags?”

“In the pantry. Why?”

“I’m taking these with me. I want to see if I can get any prints off of the box.” He located the bags and put the evidence inside, tied the bag shut and set it to the side. Then he did what he’d wanted to do since he got her call.

He reached out, slid his hand behind her neck, and pulled her into his arms. “Are you all right?”

She sighed and leaned into him as he rubbed her back, trying to comfort her as well as himself. “I’m just pissed. I wasn’t expecting that. I thought they were from you.”

Chad could have kicked himself. That’s what he should have done, sent her flowers. “I’ll find out who did this.” He cupped her face.

“Don’t bother. It’s not like you can charge them with anything.”

“Even so...”

“Even so, nothing. Run your little tests if it makes you happy. I doubt you find anything. Even if you do, no crime was committed.”

Chad kissed her to shut her up. He knew all of that, but didn’t want to hear it. This was his woman who’d been threatened. He might not be able to prove it, but his instincts were screaming.

Before the kiss could get out of hand, his radio squawked. “Attention all units. We have a code 11-25x on State Road 30, mile marker 15.”

Chad reached up and pushed the button on his shoulder mike, holding Tameka close when she tried to pull away. “This is Unit 3. I’ll take the call. ETA five minutes.”

“Roger, Chad. I’ll let her know.”

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

"10-4."

He lowered his mouth to Tameka's again. "I've got to go." *Kiss.* "Motorist needs assistance." *Kiss.*

He grabbed the bag with one hand and walked her backwards towards the door, one eye watching where they were going while his mouth tangled with hers. He stopped when he had her backed against the front door, his body plastered to hers. "I don't want to go," he whispered, his forehead against her own. He could smell her arousal.

"You have to go." Her arms held him tight in direct contrast to her words.

"I know." He swooped in for another kiss. This one left them both gasping for air. "Call me if you get any more presents."

"I will." She pushed him away. "Go. Someone's waiting."

"Yeah, you're right," he agreed, resisting the urge to pull her back into his arms.

Tameka followed him out onto the porch and stood at the top of the steps. He threw the bag on the passenger seat and paused before getting into the car. "I'll see you tonight when I get off. I'll bring dinner."

"No, I'll cook. What time?"

"About six?"

"Dinner will be waiting."

With one last look of longing, he got into the car and drove off.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as his car turned onto the road, Tameka smacked herself on the forehead. "No, I'll cook," she mocked herself in a high pitch voice. Was she possessed? What she was thinking was, 'No don't come over,' but that's not what came out of her mouth. It's like the man put some type of voodoo spell on her.

Six o'clock. It was almost five now. Did she even have anything in there to cook? The thought spurred her back inside the house and into the kitchen. She took a quick survey, opening the refrigerator and freezer, then going through all of the cabinets, ending with the pantry. It didn't look good.

Oh, she had food, just not a lot and nothing meant for a man's appetite. For meat, there was a choice of pork chops or steak. Since she'd never mastered the art of cooking a decent steak, pork chops it would be. She wasn't much of a vegetable eater, but she loved salads. A chef salad and barbeque pork chops would have to suffice for dinner. If it wasn't enough, there was still plenty of Chinese left.

Chad called a quarter 'til six. "I'm still at work. My last call took longer than planned. It looks like it will be six-thirty/seven before I can get there. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Just come whenever you're done."

As she hung up, the realization struck that she had a lover. No, not a lover. One night did not a lover make. Besides, love had nothing to do with...whatever this was. She had a man.

"I have a man." That didn't sound right, either. Maybe if she said it slow and enunciated each word. "I...have...a...man."

She weighed the words on her tongue to see if they fit. No dice. She just couldn't make herself believe it. It didn't feel right.

"I have a...a...friend." Hmm, that might actually work. It definitely felt better. She could handle having a friend. After all, everyone needed friends. She was new in the area and hadn't had a chance to get out and meet anyone yet. Now she knew two people she could consider to be her friends—Chad and Lulu. So what if one of her friends was male, good looking, and hot? That didn't make him any less her friend.

The issue settled satisfactorily in her mind, she went into the bedroom that contained all of her moving boxes, pulled out her trade supplies and took them into the living room. She grabbed the ones she knew she'd need and set them to the side. Until she got a feel for the clientele, she'd leave the rest at home.

She heard a car pull up, and she flipped on the porch light and opened the door. Chad got out of his truck still wearing his uniform. "You haven't been home?"

"It would have taken too long." He jogged up the steps and buzzed her on the lips in passing. "What's for dinner?"

"Barbecued pork chops and salad. I hope it's enough." She headed into the kitchen and pulled the marinating meat out of the fridge.

He followed. "Looks good. Any rice left from last night?"

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“Half a container.”

“I’ll just heat some up to go with the rest of what you’re serving. You want any?” He reached into the refrigerator and pulled out the take-out container. He hunted in the cabinets until he found a microwavable bowl while she stuck the meat under the broiler.

“None for me. I had some for lunch.”

“More for me. You mind if I finish this off?” He held up the container, showing her the contents.

“Knock yourself out. You bought it. Two days of Chinese back-to-back is my limit.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He poured the rice into the bowl and stuck it in the microwave while she took the salad from the fridge and placed it on the table.

He called out, “I’ll get the plates. You got any paper plates? No sense dirtying dishes if we don’t have to.”

“In the pantry. I made more tea. You want some?” She grabbed a bottle of water for herself.

“Maybe in a bit. Right now that water looks good. It’s hot out there.”

Tameka pulled another bottle from the fridge and set it on the counter, then checked the meat. It was ready to be turned. While she was doing so, Chad stirred the rice and stuck it back in the microwave to warm a little longer. “Meat will be done soon. You want me to add the sauce now or put the sauce on the table?”

“I like mine baked on.”

She took the barbeque sauce and poured it on three of the chops, leaving the remaining two bare. The marinade she used was barbeque flavored so she could enjoy the taste without the mess.

The microwave dinged. “Let me borrow that potholder.”

Tameka handed it to him and watched as he took the rice out and set it on the table. Meat done, she divided it onto two plates and carried it to the table and sat down. Everything else was already there. She said grace then dove into the salad, more than ready to eat. The Chinese she’d had for lunch had worn off hours ago.

“These are good.” Chad held up his fork, which held a piece

of meat on it. Between bites he said, “You know my name is Chad Wilson and that I’m a Bradford County Sheriff’s deputy. I know you’re Ms. Emma’s granddaughter, that you moved here from Delaware—don’t forget you only have thirty days to get a NC driver’s license and tag—and your driving record is clean. Tell me more about yourself. I want to know everything.”

Tameka arched her eyebrow, a little startled by the request. “Everything?”

Chad looked a little sheepish. “Well, not right away. Start with the basics like, what’s your profession?”

“I’m a hairdresser.” She sat back and waited to see what his reaction would be.

“Really?” His eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“Is there something wrong with being a hairdresser?” Her tone was just a touch defensive.

“Not at all. It’s just that you look so intelligent...so bookish, I expected you to say something more professional, like a lawyer or doctor or something.”

“So hair dressers aren’t intelligent?”

He put his fork down and pierced her with a look. “You know that’s not what I’m saying. You just look like someone who’s spent years in college. Like you have a Master’s or even a Ph.D. hanging on your wall.”

Mollified, she dropped her gaze to the table in shame. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I do have a Doctorate in Psychology. I’m a bit defensive about it. I spent all that time, wasted all that money, only to discover once I got into my field of practice I’d rather be doing hair. My decision to quit my job didn’t go over well with my family.” She could still hear them. *What do you mean you’re quitting? Do you know how much money you make? You think you can pull that kind of money being a simple hairdresser? What’s wrong with you?*

“Why? What does it matter to them? It’s your life. If you didn’t like doing it, you should have quit. Life’s too short to waste time in a career that you hate. At least you tried and now you know.”

“That’s exactly what Momma E. said.” When he looked inquiringly, she explained. “Grandma Emma.”

Chad nodded his understanding, his mouth full of tea.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“What about you? What college did you attend?”

“Actually, I didn't. I joined the military as soon as I was old enough to sign and became Military Police. I re-enlisted twice. When the third time rolled around, one of my comrades, Bull, was from this area. He told me about the spot available in the department here and put in a good word for me with the sheriff. Rome offered me the position and I came here when I got out.”

“What about your family? You didn't want to go home after being away for so long?”

“I don't have any family, not that I know of. My parents died when I was young and I grew up in foster care.”

“Oh, that's sad.” Tameka's heart went out to him. She couldn't imagine life with no kin.

He shrugged. “I wasn't old enough when they died to remember them, so it doesn't hurt. You can't miss what you never had,” he said philosophically.

His tone was blasé, but Tameka knew better. You may not miss what you've never had, but it didn't stop you from longing for it.

“Earlier you mentioned Ms. Lulu. You went by her shop?”

“I'm ready to work. I went to Refuge to check out the shops there first. I'm glad I did. I think I'm going to like working with Lulu.”

“She needs help, that's for sure. Do you barber, too?”

“It's not my specialty, but I'm proficient at it.”

Chad smiled. “Wait until word gets out. You'll be busy for sure. Old Bert retired three months ago and us guys have been forced to go into Colby. That's a long ride for a five-minute cut. When do you start?”

“I'm going in to set up my station tomorrow and meet the other workers. I'll start taking customers Wednesday.”

A lull fell in the conversation as they both directed their attention to eating. After a couple of bites, Tameka asked, “So, you're new here, too?”

“Yep.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“About two years now, give or take. You'll like it here. The people seem to be really nice and friendly. That whole southern hospitality thing I used to hear so much about is apparently true.”

*Seemed? Apparently? Didn't he know?* The temptation to put on her counselor's persona was very strong. "Where are you from originally?"

"Ohio. Reynoldsburg, to be exact."

"You're a long way from home."

"It was never home, just the place I grew up."

With his background, Tameka wondered if Chad even knew what home was. If any place ever felt like home to him. "Do you like being a cop?"

"Yeah. I like the structure of it, the rules, and the orderliness of it. It's like being in the military without all of the bouncing around."

"I wouldn't think an area like this would have a lot of crime. Don't you get bored?"

"The quiet is one of the reasons I like it. I saw enough action in the military, and I don't like big cities. Give me plenty of rural countryside and neighbors that know each other. We have the occasional drug bust and homicide. No place is exempt from crime, but overall, things are pretty peaceful here."

"That's good to know." She stood and began clearing her things off of the table. Chad rose to join her and she waved for him to sit back down. "No, finish eating."

"I'm done." He placed the last forkful of rice in his mouth and picked up his plate.

Once the table was cleared, they settled on the couch. "So you've been here two years and you're not involved with anyone?"

He reached out and played with a strand of her hair. "Until now? No. Never met anyone who stirred my interest." He stared at her intently.

Not willing to travel down that road, she asked, "You want to watch another movie?"

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. It's what I usually do at night instead of watching TV."

He stood and walked over to the bookcase. "I noticed last night you have the latest *Die Hard*, still in the wrapper."

"I belong to one of those movie clubs. I buy movies and shelve them until I'm in the mood to watch it."

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

"You want to watch this or is there something else you prefer?" He already had the movie in his hand, undoing the wrapper.

"That one's fine."

He started the movie and came back to the couch. After making himself comfortable, he tugged Tameka into his arms. By the time the movie finished, they were both stretched out on the couch, Tameka on top with his chest pillowing her head.

As the credits rolled, she commented, "That was okay. Not as good as the second one, but still enjoyable." She braced her forearms on his chest and tried to lift into a sitting position. Chad halted her by placing his hand on her hips.

At the look of stark desire on his face, she rushed into speech. "Would you look at the time? We both have to be to work in the morning. Can't be late. Don't want to be tired. Make sure get plenty of rest tonight and I'll do the same." The whole time she was rambling, she applied subtle but steady pressure to his chest, trying to get up.

He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to the side, studying her expression. "You're right." He released her.

"*I am?* I mean, yes, of course I am." She scrambled to her knees and off of the couch. Beside her, Chad rose slowly to his feet.

"Tomorrow is a work day. Your first and you want to make a good impression. You can't do that if you show up tired from a lack of sleep."

"*I can't?* I mean, you're absolutely right. First impressions count."

Chad headed for the door as Tameka, fighting back a crushing sense of disappointment, trailed behind. He opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. That's it? He's leaving? *Isn't that what you wanted?*

"Thanks for dinner and the movie. I enjoyed the evening."

"Yeah, it was nice," she said awkwardly, still unable to believe he was just going to leave.

"Well..."

"Yes?" she asked hopefully.

"Goodnight. I'll call tomorrow and see how your day went."

"Uh, okay. Goodnight."

He turned and walked away. He was leaving. Just like that. No argument. No persuasion. No nothing. Just gone. He was almost to his truck when something in her snapped.

“Chad! Wait!”

He stopped and turned around.

She raced down the steps, into the driveway and threw herself against him. He rocked back a step from the impact and his arms came up to wrap around her. She pulled his head down and kissed him with all of the desire she had inside of her.

It was like lighting a match and throwing it on kerosene.

Passion exploded. Clothes flew everywhere. Tameka found herself flat on her back, on the ground, with Chad on top, driving into her.

It was fast. It was furious, and over in minutes.

She lay there feeling like a survivor at ground zero, dazedly staring up at the night sky. “I don’t understand this effect you have on me. This isn’t like me. How do you keep doing this to me?” Tameka muttered, not really expecting an answer.

Chad lifted his head from her shoulder where he’d collapsed. “Is this a bad thing?”

“I’m still trying to decide.”

“Well, let me give you a little more to consider.” He stood, bent down and picked her up, then strode with her towards the house.

“What about our clothes? Your keys? Your *wallet*?”

“I’ll get them later.”

He walked into the house and kicked the door shut.

## *Chapter Three*

Tameka groaned and rolled over, burying her head beneath the pillow. She'd done it again. This time, she couldn't blame anyone but herself. He was leaving until she all but tackled the man to the ground.

Chad was insatiable. He'd woken her repeatedly during the night, the final time just a little before he left. If she could keep her thighs closed long enough to walk, it would be a miracle. After last night, she was sure that they were bent into a permanently open position. She'd never been bow-legged, but that may have just changed.

She really wanted to go back to sleep, but she had things to do. Darn it! She gingerly rolled out of bed and hobbled to the bathroom. First order of business was a hot shower. Hopefully it would loosen her muscles. She'd used muscles last night in places she didn't know had muscles.

After she was dressed, she stripped the linens off of the bed and stuffed them into the washer. Then she lit some vanilla scented candles. Her room smelled like Chad and sex. Even after she placed clean sheets on the bed, she could still smell him. She snatched them off, sprayed the mattress and pillows with Lysol, and remade the bed. While she was at it, she walked through the rest of the house, spraying as she went.

She'd figured out part of the problem last night. The man smelled good, too good. His scent was like the deepest, darkest, richest chocolate, the kind you looked at and just knew you were going to gain ten pounds because it was so good, and you wouldn't be able to stop until every morsel was gone. The kind that melted on your tongue while its flavor exploded in your mouth, instantly addictive and "slap-yo-momma" good. He should come with warning labels, and the shame of it was, he didn't even wear cologne. It was all him.

There. No more Chad. Just the clean, linen scent of Lysol.

Last night she'd been weak, but she was determined not to do this again. It would help strengthen her resolve if she didn't smell Chad every time she rolled over. That problem taken care of, she went into the kitchen. After a quick breakfast of yogurt washed down with a glass of juice, she loaded her supplies into the car and headed to town.

Lulu met her at the door when she arrived. "Everyone, this is Tameka, Emma's granddaughter. She's going to be working in the shop."

Everyone waved or nodded their greeting.

"Tameka, that's Mona behind the register. She answers the phones, sets appointments, and handles the cash."

Tameka smiled. "Nice to meet you, Mona." Mona was Hispanic, with long, curly dark brown hair, and big, brown doe eyes. She was also a hot Latina, so sultry and sexy looking that Tameka immediately felt inadequate.

"Over there, that's Betty. She's one of the stylists."

Another smile coupled with a nod. "Betty." Betty was a black female in her early fifties. Her complexion was so light that you could tell that quite a few someones in her family tree were white. Her long black hair was liberally streaked with gray and she was bird thin. A good, brisk wind would probably blow her over.

"Go ahead and set up," Lulu continued. "Either one of these stations are fine."

"Thanks, Lulu." Tameka gave her a peck on the cheek. She chose the first station on the left and commenced to setting up her equipment.

"Hey, Tameka. Glad you're here. We need some fresh, young blood," Betty informed her.

From what Lulu had told her, she and Mona were the youngest ones in the shop, and Mona wasn't a stylist. "I'm glad to find a shop so close to home. I didn't feel like driving into Colbyville each day, not with the way gas prices are going up."

They groaned at the reminder. Someone, she wasn't sure which one, said, "Please, don't remind me."

"Tameka, you do extensions?" The question came from Mona.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“Depends on what you want done. I can glue and sew them in, but I don’t have the patience or experience to do fusions. I also do quick weaves.”

“What about updos? You do those,” the lone customer in the shop asked.

Tameka laughed at the excitement in the woman’s voice. “Yes. Show me a picture of any style you want and I can do a pretty good rendition of it.”

“Oh, man,” Mona said reverently. “Wait until word gets out. This place is going to be packed. I may need to work more hours.”

“As long as you don’t start missing school. That’s more important.”

“I know, Ms. Lulu. I’m not going miss now, not when I’m so close to graduation.” She rolled her eyes at Tameka, who bit back the smile trying to break free at her antics.

“What are you studying?”

“I want to be a Nail Artist. You know, one of those people who do all of those fancy designs on women’s nails?”

“Yes, I know what you’re talking about. If you can stand the fumes, you can make some really good money as a Nail Tech.”

“I plan to be the best. One day, I’ll work for the stars.” Mona’s voice was dreamy and her eyes had a faraway look in them.

“If that’s what you want, go for it,” Tameka encouraged. “Lulu, I brought some hair style magazines, posters, and a few of my personal photo albums that show the work I’ve done. Is it alright if I lay them out in the waiting area?”

“Sure thing, honey. Tape those posters right up in the window. Maybe they’ll attract some customers our way. Do you have any business cards?”

“I made some new ones last night. I brought a few with me.”

“Give them to Mona. You’re going to be a big hit. Folks will be coming over from bigger towns just to have you do their hair.”

Tameka doubted it, but it was a nice thought. It’s not that she wasn’t good. She’d participated in a few shows in D.C., even won some awards for her styles, but she didn’t know how well

the stuff she excelled at would go over here in the South. She kept her doubts to herself.

“Lulu, someone mentioned that the men in here have to go over to Colbyville to get their hair cut. I’m a pretty decent barber.” Actually, there wasn’t much she couldn’t do when it came to hair.

“That’s great. We sure do need one since old Bert retired. I don’t know how you’re going to handle both, though,” Betty said. She’d just returned from the bowl, washing her client’s hair.

“Easy,” Lulu answered. “We pick a day or two, depending on the volume, where Meka does nothing but barber. Or maybe a few hours each morning and the rest of the day is devoted to styling.”

“Works for me, Lulu. Whatever you say,” Tameka agreed.

Tameka climbed on top of a chair and, with Mona’s help, hung four of her posters in the large picture window, being sure to space them out attractively but still allow passersby to see inside. What she had weren’t the typical salon posters advertising products, but blown-up pictures of models sporting hairstyles she’d created.

Lulu came over to watch. “There’s a ‘Barber on Duty’ sign around here somewhere,” she muttered, looking around distractedly.

“I also have a sign announcing the types of styles I do—braids, twists, ‘locs, as well as extensions and updos. It’s in the car.”

“Go get it and put it right here in the window. Anything that attracts more business to the shop is welcome. Make up flyers and we’ll distribute them to the businesses in town.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tameka smiled. Lulu reminded her strongly of Grandma Emma.

She stretched, taping the last poster in place. Then she, Lulu, and Mona walked outside to admire her handiwork.

“Looks good,” Mona commented. “I’m so glad you’re here. It’s time we had some new blood to shake things up in this town.”

Tameka shook her head. “I don’t know about shaking things up, but I’ll do my best to increase the clientele.”

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

Mona laughed. "Oh, once word gets out that you're here, they'll come running. Out of curiosity if nothing else," she assured her. "Even if you aren't as good as I suspect you are, they'll come just to keep from driving so far. If you're even better than I expect, we may even pull in folks from the surrounding areas."

She walked to her car and took out her sign, along with the business cards she printed. The cards she gave to Mona. The sign she put in the bottom right corner of the window, right next to the entrance. "I'll be back tomorrow morning at ten. I probably won't have any customers, but I'll be here anyway. Do you have class tomorrow?"

"No, tomorrow's a free day. Why?"

"Would you let me do your hair? I won't charge you anything. I want to use you for advertising purposes," Tameka said quickly, before she could get the wrong idea.

"A free hairdo? Hell, yes. Just tell me when," Mona exclaimed.

She sighed in relief. "No, you tell me when. You know your schedule and you're doing me the favor. I'll await your convenience."

"I'll be here when you arrive tomorrow. Let's do it then. Ms. Lulu won't mind. What are you going to do to me?"

Tameka studied her face and hair. "Probably an updo this time. Something simple yet trendy. If you're willing to be my model, I'll do different styles at different times, maybe experiment some. Is that okay?"

Mona's eyes had grown big. "Do you know what you're saying? You're offering to be my personal hairdresser. For free! Shoot, yeah. I'm yours."

Tameka laughed at her excitement. It really wasn't that big of a deal. "Alright. I'll see you in the morning. Ms. Betty, Lulu, I'll see you tomorrow. I need to get going."

"Okay, honey. Take care."

"Bye."

\* \* \* \*

Lulu turned to the others as the door closed behind Tameka.

“That girl is going to set this town on its ear and she has no idea.”

“Not a clue,” Betty echoed.

“Wait until the men realize there’s a new, young, *pretty*, unmated female in the area. They’re going to be all over her like fleas on a dog,” Betty’s customer commented.

“This ought to be entertaining,” Lulu commented.

“Let the games begin,” Mona intoned, and the others laughed.

\* \* \* \*

Tameka went over to Colbyville and grocery shopped. Three stores later, she was ready to head home. She drove home feeling good about her future. The people she’d met so far were wonderfully friendly. She loved the house and surrounding acreage she’d inherited. She was happy now that she hadn’t listened to her parents and sold the property, sight unseen.

When they’d heard from the probate lawyer that there was a large offer on the table for Momma E’s place, her father had dollar signs in his eyes. Her mother had joined in on the chorus to sell, sell, sell.

Tameka told them all no. She owed it to Momma E’s memory to at least try to honor her final wishes, and her dearest wish was that Tameka would find the same happiness she had, living in the relative peace and quiet of the mountains.

Momma E had met and married her second husband while on a cruise to Alaska. From all accounts, the two had been ridiculously happy together, despite their age difference. He was twenty years older, but in amazing physical condition. They’d had ten wonderful years together before he was tragically killed in a hunting accident. Though Tameka had spoken with him often, she’d never met him in person, being busy first with school, and later building her practice, which she’d eventually turned her back on. Another decision her parents thought her crazy for making.

Shaking off those depressing memories, she concentrated on putting the groceries away. She had food to last another month, maybe less if Chad was going to be a regular for dinner.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

Not liking the way her heart jumped at the thought of him, she fixed a quick meal of a turkey sandwich with all the trimmings, grabbed a glass of tea, and went into the living room to eat.

Later, she was finishing the last of the flyers she'd created when she heard a vehicle in the driveway. She pulled the last of the still warm papers off of the printer and put them in a folder while waiting for the knock to sound at the door. When none was forthcoming, curiosity got the better of her and she went to the door.

Chad was outside, still sitting in his cruiser. She stood in the doorway a few minutes waiting for him to notice her before realizing something was wrong. As hot as it was, he was sitting in the car with all the windows closed and the engine off. Concerned, she walked to the car and stood by his window. The moment she got a clear look at his face, her heart pounded an irregular beat and a feeling of dread grew in her stomach.

"Chad?"

He sat looking straight ahead, his fingers clenched on the steering wheel, face blank and eyes—what she could see of them—dead.

She opened the car door. "Chad, baby, what's wrong?"

He turned to gaze at her and the bleakness in his expression tore her tender heart in two.

"They're dead. All of them. So young. So goddamn young." He said nothing more, but those few words were enough.

"Come in the house." If he sat out here much longer, he'd have a heatstroke. Sweat was pouring down his body, mixing with some darker stains on his shirt that she tried not to examine closely.

When he just sat there with the same forlorn expression on his face, she tugged on his arm until he passively allowed her to pull him out of the vehicle. She pulled him into the house, through the living room, straight into her bathroom. "You'll feel better once you cool off."

He just stood there, in his own horrible little world, staring into space. Moved by compassion, she undressed him and then herself, turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature, maneuvered them both into the tub and closed the shower curtain.

Tenderly, she washed him from head-to-toe, growing more and more concerned at his zombie-like state. When they were both clean and dry, she pulled him into the bedroom and pushed him down onto the side of the bed. "I'll be right back. Let me put your clothing in the washer."

She filled the washing machine with cold water, poured laundry detergent directly onto his clothes and more in the water, set it for heavy wash, and closed the lid. Those stains looked suspiciously like blood, but she didn't really want to know.

Back in the room, Chad was sitting right where she left him. She tucked the large, blue bath sheet around her body and made sure it was secure before straddling his lap. If ever a man needed a hug, this one did. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight, crooning nonsense in his ear.

He was unresponsive at first. A few minutes passed before his arms slowly crept around her. He exhaled one harsh breath after another, then his arms tightened like a vise, crushing her to him. She could barely breathe, but that didn't matter, not when Chad's shoulders were shaking and his tears were scorching her shoulders.

She rocked him back and forth, cradling his head against her neck while stroking his hair, shoulders and back. Anything that she could reach. So lost was she in his silent misery that she was caught totally unprepared when he flipped her onto her back on the bed.

"I need...I have to..." he stuttered while ripping the towel off of her body. "Got to get closer," he muttered.

He gripped her by the shoulders and lifted her higher onto the bed. Tameka willingly opened her legs when he pressed a determined knee between them.

"Help me forget," he pleaded, his gaze desperate.

Tameka reached between their bodies and grabbed his cock, bringing it to her opening.

Chad whispered a fervent, "Thank you," and then surged forward, joining them together. Once in place, he didn't move.

"Hold me," he requested hoarsely.

He was already in her and around her, his arms once more holding her in a bear hug. She wrapped her arms and legs around his body like a python and held on tight. She lost track of the

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

length of time they lay that way before he began to move. Using nothing more than his hips, he retreated and advanced in long strokes that slowly set fire to her receiving body.

They didn't kiss or touch in any other way. Just arms wrapped securely around each other as his shaft pumped in and out. He moved like a well-oiled machine—no faltering, no fluctuation, just a steady, relentless stroking that turned her mind to mush as her body caught flame and burned.

She forgot that this was about comforting him. She lost sight of everything except the thrust and retreat of his cock in her innermost being. Her hands slid down his back to grip his butt. "Harder, baby, please. I'm so close."

He nuzzled his face against the tender area beneath her ear, then followed it down to the tendon between her neck and shoulder. His teeth locked down, clamping her in place. Like she'd go anywhere, even if she could.

Her sheath contracted around him in response to his primitive action, and her hips surged up from the bed, seeking a deeper connection. Through it all, he maintained the same steady pace.

Tameka dug her nails into his flexing cheeks, and a growl rumbled up from his chest. The vibration traveled through his teeth and into her chest, and her nipples tightened into taut little beads. She was panting now, right on the edge. The smooth glide of his penis was neither fast nor forceful enough to push her over the precipice. Her heart beat fast in its cage, and sweat poured from her body as she strained against him, struggling to take what she needed.

He ignored her efforts as though he was lost in his own little world.

"Chad," she cried out desperately. "*Please,*" she begged.

He switched angles, causing his pubic bone to bear down on her clit with each forward thrust. Her pleasure spiked tenfold. He licked the skin between his teeth, then bit down hard enough to draw blood.

Tameka dove off the cliff into a tsunami of an orgasm. Vaguely she heard a voice screaming in the background, but the rest of her senses were overwhelmed. She collapsed back onto the bed, legs and arms splayed wide. Her heartbeat pounded like

a drum and her lungs contracted furiously, trying to suck in much needed air.

When she came back to herself, she realized Chad was hard as steel inside of her, and he wasn't moving. She cupped his jaw, trying to turn his head where she could see his face. "You didn't..."

The expression in his eyes stole the breath right out of her lungs. She'd thought he was with her. Wherever his mind was, it wasn't in this bed. His eyes were too haunted. She pushed until she got him turned onto his back. He threw his forearm over his eyes and lay there, sprawled carelessly, his shiny cock sticking straight up in the air.

He'd asked her to help him get his mind off of what happened and by God, that's just what she'd do, if it took all night. Tameka grabbed a few pillows and made herself comfortable, her head even with his cock. She wasn't good at giving blowjobs, but tonight she'd give the best one of her life.

She reached out and took hold of the base of his penis with her thumb and forefinger and slanted it toward her mouth. There was no time for subtlety or finesse. He needed a distraction and needed it now.

Drawing her lips back, she slowly engulfed his rod until it hit the back of her throat. It was by no means all of it, but still a good portion was in her mouth. Treating his cock like it was a raspberry-flavored Blow Pop—her favorite—she sucked on it, hard.

She didn't bob her head up and down. She didn't move her tongue all around. She just sucked and released, sucked and released, with the head of his sex pressed firmly against the roof of her mouth, held in position by her tongue. With her free hand she reached down and gathered his scrotum in her palm. Using the same motion as her mouth, she gently squeezed and released his balls with the same rhythm.

Chad muttered something incomprehensible behind her. The muscles in his thighs began to bulge as his hips made mini thrusting motions.

Maintaining such intense suction quickly tired her jaw, but still she pressed on. Little spurts of pre-cum were leaking from him, mixing with the saliva in her mouth. Suctioning became

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

easier as she continuously swallowed, trying to keep up with the fluid collecting in her mouth. Some of it still leaked past her lips to pool at the base of his shaft.

His thrusts were getting harder. After gagging twice, she wrapped her fist around the base of his cock to control the depth, using the same squeeze and release rhythm as her mouth.

Chad's hand came down and tunneled into her hair, pressing against her scalp. "Suck me, baby. That feels good. Don't stop. Take all of me."

She rolled her eyes but deepened her efforts. He wasn't on autopilot now. He was fully engaged.

She watched as his legs stretched out long and lean, his toes pointed forward. His cock seemed to grow thicker, harder, and longer, but that was crazy. She was tired and imagining things. She began to mentally urge him to come, not sure how much longer she could keep this up.

Chad growled, "So good. So fuckin' good." His voice was deep and guttural. That meant he was close, right? Facing away from him as she was, she couldn't tell.

There was a ripping sound, like that of sheets being shredded. Chad's hand clamped down like a vise, and his fingernails dug painfully into her scalp as he pushed steadily on the back of her head, pushing it lower as he pumped harder. She tried to resist but in his passion, he was too strong.

He let out a low animal growl that grew into a roar. With one final lunge, his seed erupted and shoot down her throat, faster than she could swallow. She choked and her throat tightened convulsively. Chad hissed and loosed more semen.

Before she could catch her breath, he dragged her up his body and kissed her senseless. "Thank you," he murmured, while massaging her aching jaw.

"My pleasure." As she searched his face, she realized she wasn't just saying that. It gave her extreme pleasure to have chased the shadows from the depths of his eyes.

She cupped his left cheek. "Are you hungry? I can fix something. I went to the grocery store today."

Chad shook his head.

"Thirsty?"

"No, all I need is right here in my arms."

\* \* \* \*

*Like grandmother, like granddaughter. How can she let one of those things touch her? She doesn't deserve this land. All the more reason for me to take it from her. By the time I'm through with her, she'll beg me to buy it.*

\* \* \* \*

Chad's voice came out of the darkness. "The call came about three-thirty. From the way dispatch sounded, I knew it was going to be bad." He paused.

Tameka laid silently, her head resting on his chest.

"I was first on the scene." He swallowed hard and she stroked his chest, a reminder that he wasn't alone. "It was worse than I imagined, worse than anything I'd seen in the military." Again he fell silent.

She patiently waited. He had to tell this his way. If she pushed, he might clam up.

"The truck driver fell asleep. It's the only thing we can figure. Nothing else makes sense. Otherwise, he would have had to see them."

When he fell quiet again, Tameka wasn't sure she wanted him to continue. The hair on her nape was standing on end.

Chad's voice was so low, she had to strain to hear him. Then she wished she hadn't. "He plowed right into them. They never stood a chance. An eighteen-wheeler, carrying a full load, going full speed...the mini-van was stopped, waiting for the school bus to finish unloading..."

Her heart began to stutter as comprehension dawned. *Oh, my, God! No!*

"It knocked the bus off the road and onto its side. Kids were screaming, crying...pandemonium. The van..." his voice broke.

His fingers dug into her back. She'd have bruises tomorrow, but what were a few marks compared to what he'd witnessed?

"Seven kids...one family...all dead."

Tameka bit down on a knuckle to keep from crying out.

"The oldest was seventeen. The youngest two..." his voice

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

faded.

They were both silent.

“Too damn many body bags.”

Tameka clung to him, sharing his horror, his grief. *Dear God, that poor family. Those children.* She even felt sorry for the truck driver. This was why she gave up her practice, too many broken-hearted people. People she couldn't fix. Too many people looking for answers she didn't have.

“One of them bled to death in my arms before Rescue arrived. I couldn't save him.” He swallowed. “He was such a cute kid.”

By this point, tears were streaming down her face.

“I lost it,” he confessed. “Rome sent me home. Told me to take a couple of days off. Get my head together.”

“And you came to me,” she finished softly.

He stiffened beneath her. “Should I have gone home?”

“No,” she vehemently denied. “I'm glad you came to me.” She didn't examine her reaction; just knew that it was true.

He relaxed and let out the breath he was holding. “My job isn't always easy. Most times it's quiet—routine, but occasionally...it's bad. Most women couldn't deal with it.”

“I'm not most women,” she assured him, not realizing the implications of what she was saying.

“No, you're not,” he agreed quietly.

They lay in companionable silence until a growling stomach disturbed the quiet. Tameka raised her head and looked at him with a grin. “Someone's hungry.”

He brushed her hair back from her face. “I wouldn't turn down another offer of food.”

Her expression blossomed into a full-blown smile of relief. “Luckily for you, I grocery shopped this afternoon. I'm fully stocked.”

The burgeoning smile on his face disappeared. “I should have been here to assist you.”

Flustered, she didn't know what to say. It was just food, after all, not furniture.

Seeing that she was lost for words, he grinned crookedly at her. “Let's go see what you've got.”

Bemused, Tameka rose from the bed and followed him into

the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Chad lay cradling his woman in his arms. She had no idea the priceless gift she'd given him today. No one had ever comforted him before Tameka. He dealt with the hard knocks of life on his own. He'd learned at an early age not to depend on any one but himself.

Instinct...his wolf...something, had driven him to her today. Had he been thinking clearly, he'd have gone home to lick his wounds like he normally did. That she'd accepted him, cared for him when he was at his weakest...he didn't have words to describe how that made him feel.

If there'd ever been any hope of him letting her go, she'd killed it tonight with one simple act of kindness.

*Mate!*

He nuzzled his face in her hair, inhaling her perfect scent. She was his, and he'd kill anyone who tried to take her away from him. His wolf growled in agreement.

## *Chapter Four*

Tameka woke to the news that she had not one, but two flat tires. Yawning widely while wiping the sleep out of her eyes, she stretched. "What are you talking about? I just put four new tires on my car before driving here. They can't be flat."

"They are. Both of the back tires," he said grimly.

Tameka jolted fully awake. "Let me see." She hopped out of bed, realized she was naked, and glanced around for something to wear.

Chad tossed her his shirt. "Here, put this on."

She hesitated a moment, then checked to make sure all the stains from yesterday washed out. His uniform shirt, Polo in style, came to mid-thigh on her. She slid her feet into a pair of flip-flops and headed for the door, Chad one step behind.

When she saw her car, she muttered words under her breath that would have had her former pastor flinching and giving her a stern look. "Those were brand new tires. Not even a month old. How am I supposed to get to work? I only have one spare." She felt like kicking her car.

"What time do you need to be there? I can drive you into town, pick up another tire, and change them while you're at work. I'm off today, remember?"

She forgot about her anger when she remembered why he was off today. She went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him tight. "How you doing today?"

He lifted her head from his chest and bent down to kiss her. "Better, thanks to you."

Tameka snatched her head away and covered her mouth. "Morning breath," she mumbled through her hand.

His eyes narrowed and his chest swelled. "If you won't let me kiss those lips, I'll just have kiss your other set. Either way, I'm getting my morning kiss."

Her eyes widened over the top of her hand as his meaning sank in. She took a step back. "Let me just brush my...Chad!"

He swept her off of her feet and placed her on the hood of her car. While she tried to find purchase on the slippery surface, he pried open her thighs and dove in for his kiss. The kiss went on, long and deep, until she was screaming his name.

"I've been wanting to do this since I first met you that day by the road," he said as his pants hit the ground. He draped her legs over his shoulders and plunged home.

\* \* \* \*

Tameka sighed as she entered the town's limits, remembering the way Chad took her on the hood of the car an hour earlier. She was getting wet just thinking of it. The things this man did to her, the way he made her respond, was beyond comprehension.

As they neared the shop, she noticed a crowd of men hanging around the entrance. She sat up straight in her seat. *Dear Lord, look at them.* Pure beef cake material. There wasn't an ugly one in the bunch. She unconsciously fanned herself. Man, they grew 'em big in the mountains. If she'd known the men were this attractive, she'd have made it a point to visit Momma E. while she was still alive. "Hubba, hubba. Come to momma," she murmured.

Chad slammed on brakes and shoved the gear into park. "Son of a ..." The expression on his face did not bode well.

Tameka fumbled for the door handle, eyes still trying to take in all of the eye candy in front of her.

He laid his hand on her arm. "Stay put." As he got out of the car and came around the front, they became the center of attention.

"Wonder what they want?" she asked the empty car.

"Is that her?" she heard one of them ask.

"Don't know. Can't see through the glare on the windshield," another responded.

"Can't be. She wouldn't be with him. Least wise, not this quick. She just got here and she's kept mostly to herself. Nobody moves that fast, 'cept maybe Alex and that was different." She

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couldn't see which one offered this opinion.

Tameka forgot about the men when a rumble that sounded suspiciously like a growl rolled out of Chad. He seemed to grow larger before her eyes. Some of the men looked wary. She could have sworn a few growled back. What on earth was going on?

Chad held the door open. As she exited the car, Lulu came out. "Time to go, fellas. Barber's not on duty 'til tomorrow. Be sure to make your appointment with Mona before leaving." Then she opened the shop door. "You, inside. You can leave now. You've already set yours. No need to linger."

*There were more inside?* Tameka stared. All these men wanted haircuts? She tried to pull her arm loose from the grip Chad had on it. Instead of letting go, he pulled her closer to his body. It didn't take a Ph.D. to recognize the "hands off, mine!" vibe he was sending.

She unconsciously looked at Lulu, appealing for help, only to find Lulu gazing at her with speculation and a hint of amusement in her expression. *No help there.*

"Chad," she hissed, "you can let go."

He dropped her arm and placed his arm around her shoulder, tucking her close. This must be what a football feels like. At his action, some of the men wandered off. Others gave her the once over, then met Chad's look, stare for stare. Tired of the foolishness, she elbowed him in the side, jerked loose, and reached inside of the car for her things.

One of the men let loose with a piercing wolf whistle.

"Damn, look at that ass," someone commented.

Tameka snapped upright, almost hitting her head on the roof of the car. She searched the men, eyes narrowed. "Who said that? Who *did* that?" she snapped.

She couldn't tell which of the men made the comment, but the culprit who whistled still had his fingers to his lips. She marched right up to the big, burly fellow with the overgrown, sandy blond hair and got right in his face. "Do I look like a dog to you?"

"No, but you damn sure can be my bitch," someone in the crowd said.

Tameka's gasp was drowned out by the vicious snarling coming from behind her. The man she'd confronted paled.

Distracted and just a bit concerned, Tameka turned to see what he was looking at. She thought she would have noticed a dog in their midst, and from the sound of it, a rather large one.

Mona suddenly appeared on her right and Lulu on her left. "Let's go inside and get out of this heat." They took hold of her arms and all but dragged her to the door.

"Wait! I need my stuff. And what's going on? Why is that man taking off his shirt? Ow, Lulu. Watch the arm. You're stronger than you look."

The last was said as Lulu lifted her off her feet and carried her into the shop, calling out orders as she went. "Betty, call Alex and tell him to get down here, NOW!"

"Kiesha's closer," Mona said.

"But she's pregnant. Call Alex," Betty said.

In the background, Tameka could hear snarling and growling, mixed in with meaty thuds. Sounded like a pack of dogs fighting. She never got the chance to see if her supposition was correct. Lulu dragged her to the storeroom door and opened it.

"Don't you worry about a thing. Here, check and make sure I have all you need for tomorrow. There's a long line of men wanting haircuts and you wouldn't want to run out." She thrust Tameka inside and slammed the door shut.

Once she caught her balance, Tameka spun around and immediately tried to turn the knob. It wouldn't budge. "Lulu, open this door! What's going on out there?" *Bam! Bam! Bam!* She pounded on the door. Finally, she gave it a good, hard kick.

She laid her forehead against the door and gave it a couple of thumps. "Why did I come here? These people are crazy! *Check the supplies.* Hmph! All I need to cut hair is a pair of clippers. She knows that."

Not one to continue to bang her head against a stone wall, she realized she wasn't getting out of this room until Lulu got good and ready. She rubbed her throbbing arm.

Dang, that woman was strong.

\* \* \* \*

Chad was in the midst of a three-on-one fight when a surge

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of metaphysical power forced him to his belly. Two of the shifters he'd been fighting with shifted back to their human form and laid there panting. The third one was paralyzed like him.

"What the hell is going on here? Fighting in the street like animals, in broad daylight where anyone can see. *HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MINDS?*" The last was said in a roar.

Chad had only been a part of the Raven pack for two years, but he'd never seen the Alpha this pissed. Alex Wolfe looked close to changing himself. His short black hair stood up on end and his normally black eyes glowed gold with power.

He looked around. He wasn't the only one watching the Alpha closely. In addition to his own, there were at least three other groups that must have been fighting as well.

"Woman...mate," one of the shifters gasped out.

Chad's wolf growled, hackles raised. If he could have moved, he would have attacked, in spite of Alex.

"Chad." That's all Alex said and Chad shifted back to human.

"Mine," he growled.

"Have you marked her?"

"Yes." It came out guttural. His wolf was still close to the surface.

"She hasn't accepted," a male shifter protested. "He's not marked. That means we still have a chance."

Chad snarled, pushed up on his forearms, and felt his eyes change and jaw elongate.

Alex looked at him sharply. "Stand down."

Chad subsided, but it was extremely difficult. His wolf fought him all the way. It knew what it wanted and wasn't going to let anyone take her away.

Lulu came to the door. "Alpha," she greeted him.

"Ms. Lulu," he said, nodding his head respectfully.

"The woman they're fighting over is human," she continued.

Alex closed his eyes and swore under his breath. Then he pinned Chad with a stare. "You marked her, knowing she was human?"

"Mate," was all Chad could say.

Alex's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "A true mate?"

Chad didn't know what he was talking about, but it didn't matter what he didn't know. He said what he did. "Mine."

Alex studied him for a minute, then sighed and shook his head. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

Chad rose to his knees, but kept his head lowered. "She belongs to me. That's the only thing here that really matters."

Alex pulled out his cell phone. A quick push of the button then, "Kiesha, I need you to come to the salon. We have a situation...human female...newly mated...she doesn't know." He rolled his eyes. "The barbershop. Come now. Fuss later." He flipped the phone closed.

"You and I need to have a talk," he told Chad. "The rest of you," he looked around, "go home. This one's off limits."

The shifters grumbled as they put their clothes back on, some of them casting angry looks at him before leaving. Chad dressed as well, wondering what happened now. The alpha was supporting his claim, which surprised him. But even if he hadn't, Chad wasn't giving Tameka up. They'd have to kill him.

\* \* \* \*

A tentative knock sounded at the door before it slowly opened. "Tameka?"

Having passed ticked minutes ago and now seriously pissed off, Tameka stayed where she was, arms crossed, seated on a box at the back of the storeroom, non-responsive.

A beautiful, plus-sized, bi-racial woman with golden-brown hair and a protruding stomach entered the room, stopping when she got a good look at Tameka's expression. "Damn, I told them you'd be pissed. What the hell were they thinking?"

The unexpected empathy loosened her tongue. "That's what I'd like to know," she growled.

The woman came further into the room. "I know you're angry—with good reason, might I add—but they meant no harm. If you give me a chance, I'd like to explain. My name's Kiesha, by the way."

Tameka's temper began to calm in the face of the understanding Kiesha was displaying. "By all means, explain away," she said with a wave of her hand.

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Kiesha sighed. "There's no way to do this but to just blurt it out. You'll think I'm crazy as hell but believe me, I'm not. The reason they hustled you in here away from everyone and locked you in was to get you away from the fight brewing outside."

She sat up straight. "What fight? The men?"

Kiesha snorted. "Those men, as you called them, are werewolves, and they were preparing to tear each other limb from limb for the right to claim you."

Tameka's eyes narrowed. She was nobody's fool. "Werewolves. Right."

The other woman just smiled. "I know just how you feel. I didn't believe either, at first. Having one change before your very eyes tends to make a believer out of even me. You'll see."

The confidence in Kiesha's voice shook some of Tameka's certainty that she was being toyed with. Werewolves? She'd heard and seen some strange things in her former line of work. Could she be...? She shook her head. No, absolutely not. She squared her shoulders. "That's the best you've got?"

Kiesha laughed. "Oh, I like you. You're strong. You'll need every bit of that strength to deal with these men, especially that one that's claiming you. That one's an alpha, through and through, if I don't miss my guess."

"Who? Chad?"

"I don't know all of their names yet. Tall, blond-haired, green eyes, looks like a serial killer?"

Tameka nodded. "That's Chad."

"Damn, girl. You sure can pick 'em. I wouldn't trade my Alex for anyone in the world, but damn, your man is hot, and deadly. The best kind." She gave a mock shiver of fear that was spoiled by the lascivious grin on her face.

She couldn't help but laugh at her antics. "I know what you mean, but he's not mine. We're just friends."

Kiesha shuffled her feet. "Yeah, about that 'just friends' thing. We need to have a talk. There's something you should know."

Tameka immediately sobered. "I thought we were talking."

"Oh, honey, you have no idea. I need to sit down. This is may take a while."

\* \* \* \*

“We haven’t spent much time together since you joined the pack. I knew you needed space, time to adjust to us all, so I didn’t push. Maybe that was a mistake.” Alex crossed over and leaned his back against the patrol car.

“What I’m about to tell you now is something every shifter knows, or should know.” He stopped again and rubbed his hand over his face, as though trying to decide where to begin.

Chad stood at attention—shoulders squared, back ramrod straight, arms at his side—watching Alex’s every move. He might not be used to pack hierarchy, but he knew how to treat a superior officer.

Alex must have noticed how he was standing. “At ease, soldier. You’re not in the service anymore.” He waited until Chad relaxed his stance before continuing.

“This woman—your mate—when you first met, the sexual attraction was overwhelming? Her scent, everything about her spoke to you and your wolf?”

Chad went from alert to confused, to wary as Alex described their first meeting exactly. “How did you...?”

Alex held out a hand, stopping him. “And when you got your first taste of her, it went straight to your head. You could think of nothing but marking and claiming her, right? Whenever you’re around her for more than two seconds, your only thought is to mount her, and the feelings getting stronger, not weaker.”

Chad nodded slowly. “How...?”

“Do I know?” Alex interrupted. “If you’d been raised among us, you’d know, too. That woman...”

“Tameka,” Lulu supplied.

Chad forgot she was present until she spoke.

“Tameka,” Alex continued, “is your true mate, the one woman in all of creation made to complete you. The humans call them soul mates. Vamps call them Chosen. The things I just described are the signs of a true mate. First comes the mating fever. That’s the part where you two can’t keep your hands off of each other. More than just lust, it serves a deeper purpose. Each time the two of you mate, or exchange body fluids, she becomes more like you.”

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“What does that mean?” Chad couldn't help but to ask.

“She's becoming a shifter like you,” Lulu explained.

The information floored Chad and he staggered over to the car, bracing his palms on it, head hanging down.

“The mating fever does more than change Tameka's DNA, it ensures that the two of you stay together long enough for the mate bond to take effect. That's the part where she accepts you as her mate.”

“I am her mate,” he snarled.

“That's true, but...” Alex was interrupted by a scream of pure rage, followed by the slamming of a door.

Tameka stormed outside, murder in her eyes. Alex quickly got out of her way. “*What the hell have you been telling these people?*” She walked up and jabbed Chad in the shoulder with her index finger.

“I am NOT your woman, or ‘mate,’” she made quotation marks with her fingers, “as she,” Tameka jabbed a thumb over her shoulder in Kiesha's direction, “calls it. I belong to me. That's it. No one else.”

She paced back and forth in front of him, hands gesturing. “Damn it, I moved here for peace and quiet, not to get mixed up with a bunch of crazy mountain folks, and believe me, I know crazy. I have a Ph.D. in it.”

“She doesn't believe me,” Kiesha murmured in an aside to Lulu.

“Her grandmother said she wouldn't,” Lulu commented.

Tameka spun around and pinned them with a glare. “All of you, get this through your head. Keep your little delusions about being werewolves, shifters, *et cetera*. Hell, you can be leprechauns for all I care and have tea daily with imaginary friends while wearing tinfoil helmets that let you communicate with the little green men orbiting the planet. Just leave me out of it.” She surveyed them all with her hands on her hips, then shook her head and threw up her hands in disgust. “I've got work to do.

She stalked toward the shop.

“Uh, Tameka?” Kiesha said as she drew even with her, casting worried glances in his direction. “Challenging werewolves...not smart.”

Tameka rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Whatever.”

He'd heard enough. She was his and it was high time she realized it. With one leap, he was instantly behind her. He had her hands handcuffed behind her back in the blink of an eye.

"What...oomph!"

He flipped her over his shoulder and carried her to the back of his squad car.

"She tried to warn you," Lulu said with a laugh.

Opening the door, he tossed her gently inside and shut the door.

"Alex, can he do that?" Kiesha asked.

"Apparently so," Alex replied with an amused look on his face.

From the back of the car, Tameka hollered, "Let me out of here, Chad. Swear to God, I'm reporting you this time."

"This time?" Lulu asked, eyebrow arched.

"Long story," he muttered as he walked around to the driver's side.

"Bet it's a good one, too." Lulu chuckled. "You tell Tameka not to worry about the shop. Tomorrow's soon enough to start. You go handle business."

Another muffled shriek sounded from the car, then thumps as she kicked the door.

Chad slid his mirrored shades onto his grim looking face, opened the door and got inside.

As he backed out of the parking space, Lulu remarked, "It's a good thing that cage is between them. Meka would tear him apart if she could reach him."

Kiesha crossed her arms over her chest and nibbled her lip. "Are you sure she'll be okay, Alex? Maybe we should stop him. He's such a loner. What do we really know about him?"

"Kiesha, you know we can't interfere with the bonding process. Besides, Chad Wilson is a good man who's been alone for far too long. That woman is the best thing that could have happened to him. She's his One. He'd die before letting anyone, including himself, hurt her."

\* \* \* \*

Tameka couldn't believe she'd been reduced to shrieking

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like a banshee. What was it about this man that he always brought out the worst in her? If her former patients could see her now, they'd think she was the one in need of a shrink.

She took as deep, calming breath. What was it she always told her patients? Don't give away your power. You can't control other people's actions, but you can control how you respond to them. It was time to take her own advice. "Chad, uncuff me and turn me loose. Do you know how many laws you're breaking? Kidnapping is the least of them. Just take me back to the shop and we'll forget this ever happened." She spoke clearly and precisely.

He ignored her.

Tameka immediately lost some of her hard earned composure. Damn, she hated being ignored. Yell at her, cuss at her, hell, even spit at her—she didn't care, as long as she got some type of acknowledgement.

He slowed, turned a corner, and she fell over onto her side. She didn't have the energy to struggle back into a seated position again. "You can't keep me handcuffed forever. Eventually, you'll have to let me go, and when you do..." She left the rest of her threat open as she contemplated all of the things she could do to get even. And to think, she'd been so caring and sympathetic with him last night. This was her reward?

She closed her eyes and silently counted to ten. She wasn't going to beg the man to talk to her. She'd said what she had to say and now she was done with it. Done with him. Yeah, the sex was great and all, but she didn't need the hassle.

Besides, there was something not quite right about Chad. All of her warning signals were going off. She'd counseled numerous women against getting involved with men just like him. Possessive men who latched on to women quickly, who thought they owned them. Men who just moved in and took over.

The women she'd counseled always came to her bewildered, not knowing how or when the men had taken over their lives, but suddenly he was in control and she couldn't breathe unless he gave the say so. *Not me, sister.* You'd better believe she was getting out if this now. The blinders were off. Great sex did not a relationship make. *It had been kind of nice while it lasted, though.*

Tameka had no idea where they were or where they were headed. They hadn't traveled far before Chad turned off onto what must have been a dirt road. She could tell by all the ruts and bumps they went over. Couldn't have been more than an overgrown path from the way bushes scraped the sides of the car. *Where the hell was he taking her?* It was enough to make her struggle to sit up.

They traveled for another ten minutes before coming to a stop in front of one of those little hunting cabins her grandmother had told her about.

\* \* \* \*

Chad ignored his fuming mate while he pondered Alex's words. There was still a lot he didn't understand about this true mate business, but his mind latched onto one thing and one thing only: with each exchange of body fluids, Tameka came closer to accepting him as mate. If that's what it took to keep his woman, he'd flood her system with his DNA and speed up the process. Before today was over, she'd know to whom she belonged.

Body fluid meant semen, but also meant saliva. He could only produce so much sperm at a time, but he had an endless supply of spit. He just needed to get it into her, and he knew just how to do it.

He got out and opened the rear door. Reaching in, he unlocked the handcuffs and rubbed the skin around her wrists, before helping her out of the cruiser.

"Where are we?"

"My place." His wolf was agitated at the underlying coldness in her tone. He could smell her anger. She'd just have to get over it. There was no room for hostility in his plans.

"Why are we here? Take me back to the shop. Better yet, take me home," she demanded.

"I need to talk with you privately. If you still want to go home when we're finished, I'll take you then." He hoped she would consent. Either way, he was keeping her with him until he was ready to let her go, which might be never. He kept his face neutral, as though the decision were up to her.

She debated for a long period of time before sighing.

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“Fine.”

He opened the door. She stalked inside, glanced around—perhaps looking for a place to sit, then went and sat on the shelf in front of the fireplace, arms crossed over her chest.

Looking around, he wondered what she thought. With the exception of the bathroom, his cabin was one big room, dominated by the king sized pedestal bed in the middle of the room. There was a massive fireplace along one wall. The tiny kitchenette in one corner held a small fridge, microwave, and island counter/bar that doubled as his table. It had wood floors, wood paneling, and exposed wood beams in the ceiling. It was just what it looked like, a hunting lodge. Off the back was a mudroom that doubled as his closet.

“You wanted to talk. So talk.”

Her words caused him to focus on the task at hand. Underneath her obvious anger, he could smell uncertainty and wariness. Both man and beast were angered that she could possibly fear him when he'd give his life for hers. He went and knelt before her. She drew back a bit, a movement so slight he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been watching her so intently.

“I'm sorry.” He stated it baldly.

“For what?” she asked guardedly.

His mate was a suspicious creature. He committed that to memory for future dealings. “That my actions upset you.”

Her eyes narrowed and her hands went to her hips. “So, you're not remorseful for what you did. You're just sorry it made me mad.”

Challenged, his wolf demanded he dominate. He caged her in with his hands and leaned forward, smiling inwardly when she refused to move. “I am who I am. I won't apologize for my actions, just how they made you feel. I wouldn't deliberately do anything to hurt or scare you. My actions today did both, and for that I sincerely apologize. I want you to know that you're safe with me.”

She met him stare for stare and he felt his wolf move behind his eyes. She blinked, then lowered her gaze and looked away. His wolf was satisfied by her submission.

“I'm a wolf. There are a lot of things I do you won't understand. Hell, I don't always understand, but I've learned to

accept.”

Tameka rolled her eyes. “Not that werewolf thing again. If that’s what you want to discuss, I’m out of here.”

“Okay. Marry me.”

“What!” She looked shocked, and not in a good way.

“Hear me out. I was raised in foster care, so I’m not really sure how this family stuff works. I have money. I can take care of you. In the service I lived in base housing, and spent all my time working. Same here. This house belongs to the pack. I work a lot of hours and only come here to rest.”

When he paused to gather his words, she jumped in. “You can’t want to marry me. You barely know me.” She no longer smelled angry, just confused.

“I know that I’ve never wanted a woman the way that I want you. I know that my wolf recognizes you as his mate. I know I’ll take care of you and any children we may have, and I’ll be faithful. You may have to school me from time to time because I have no experience with this family thing. Hell, I’ve never had a relationship so I’m bound to screw up occasionally, but I’ll always give you my best,” he finished earnestly.

She held up her hand. “Wait. You’ve never had a girlfriend, lover...*anything*?”

“No.”

“How old are you?” She looked concerned. Maybe he shouldn’t have confessed that last bit.

“Thirty-two.”

She shook her head. “I know you’re no virgin. You’re too good a lover for me to believe that.”

His cock, already standing at attention, leapt in his pants at her praise and he moved closer, crowding her against the wall. “I’ve had women, but those were nothing more than a series of sexual encounters.”

Tameka held out a hand and pressed it against his chest, holding him off, then snatched it back. “Slow your roll. We’re talking. Don’t get sidetracked.”

He sank back onto his heels, still watching her intently.

She shook her head. “Why me?”

“You’re my mate.”

She rubbed her hand over her face, then sighed. “This is

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crazy. We've only known each other four days. There's no way I can make a decision like that."

"Remember I asked." That was all the warning he gave.

He lunged up, snagged her by the nape, and dragged her to his mouth. He devoured her, shoving his tongue deep into her mouth, remembering what Alex said about the exchange of body fluids. Like tinder to a lit match, Tameka went up in flames, just like he anticipated. She reached up and grabbed him by the hair, then tackled him to the floor. The scent of animal lust rose sharply into the air.

Chad waited until she was out of control, clawing at his clothes to get to the skin beneath before he made his move. He flipped her onto her back, the soft faux fur rug cushioning her landing. In an economy of motion, he stripped her out of her t-shirt and bra, then did the same with her shoes, leggings and panties. When she was naked, he dove back in for another kiss.

"Chad, take this off." She tugged at his shirt. "I need to touch you."

"Not yet," he muttered against her mouth. If he stripped, he'd lose focus. Had to stick to his plan.

She opened her mouth to protest and he kissed her again. If she could still think, she wasn't aroused enough. He slid a hand between their bodies and slid his fingers into her sheath and crooked them, looking for her trigger. He knew he'd found it when she jerked like she'd been jolted by a live wire. A few strokes and she came screaming, all over his hand.

While she was deep in the throes of her orgasm, Chad allowed his incisors to elongate and bite her deep on the tendon of her right shoulder, drawing blood. He packed the wound with his saliva, knowing from the previous times he'd bitten her this would heal just as quickly. Keeping her arousal peaked with his stroking fingers, he did the same thing to her left shoulder when she exploded again.

Allowing her a moment to catch her breath, he nibbled and bit a path down to her breasts, breaking the skin but being sure to heal each wound with a moist swipe of the tongue.

"What are you doing to me?" she gasped.

"Loving you."

"By biting me?" she panted.

He thought fast. “Kama Sutra. Biting increases your arousal *and* your pleasure.”

“*Increases...?* Oh God, you’re trying to kill me,” she moaned.

Chad smiled as he licked a path around her left breast, then engulfed the whole thing in his mouth. He alternated between suckling deeply and placing stinging bites around the nipple. To distract Tameka from what he was about to do, he lightly stroked her clit.

She arched wildly beneath him, clutching his head to her breast and pumping her hips. Her breath came in gasps and pants before hitching slightly. “You...I need...” she muttered incoherently.

*...to accept me as mate*, he finished for her in his mind. After he finished today, that would no longer be an issue. He switched to her neglected breast, still flicking her clit, keeping her body on the edge of an orgasm. Each small bite of pain only pushed her arousal higher. He could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

When he thought she’d had enough, he pinched her clit, and at the same time bit down hard on her breast, leaving a perfect ring of bloody teeth marks. He packed the wound with his saliva until it began to heal before his eyes. If filling her with his DNA is what it took for her to accept him, he’d make sure she got a mouth full of the stuff.

While she recovered, he rose and ripped off his uniform. His cock stood out straight and heavy from his body. He massaged his scrotum, ready to empty this load into her waiting channel and prepare her for the next. Dropping to his knees before her, he spread her thighs wide and dragged her up his legs until their pelvises met. With one hand he positioned his pulsing erection at her entrance, then slid home.

He immediately set up a pounding rhythm, racing for the finish line. Today he planned to come as many times in as short a timeframe as his body would allow. His goal was to fill Tameka with his sperm. There would be time for finesse later.

When he’d come hard, he pulled out, ignoring Tameka’s groan of disappointment, and flipped her onto her stomach, ass up in the air. He covered her with his body, fingering her

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

saturated sheath while sinking his teeth all over her back and hips. Realizing he was hard again, he guided himself home. With one hand he turned her head to the side and pinned her to the floor. Then he locked his teeth onto her shoulder and covered her in a dominant position. He didn't release her or let her up until he'd taken her two more times.

By then, he'd lost the feeling in both legs and knew she had to be just as tired. Too exhausted to move, he simply hooked an arm around his mate's waist and fell over onto his side, pulling her with him. He'd come four times, and even now his body was connected with hers, keeping in the sperm.

He wasn't sure how much of his DNA she'd absorb through his semen, if any. So, as an added precaution, there wasn't a soft spot on her body—with the exception of her feet, hands, and face—that he hadn't sunk his teeth into and then licked. He'd lost track of the number of times she'd orgasmed.

Breathing heavy, he held her to him. They'd nap, then talk, and everything would be fine. She'd understand how much he needed her, and she'd accept him for the wolf he was.

Her quiet voice came out of the semi-darkness. "Take me home."

## *Chapter Five*

At her words, Tameka felt him tense against her back. The fingers toying with her nipple stilled.

“In a bit,” he finally replied, and went back to playing with her breast.

She raised her hand and covered his, holding it still. “No, now,” she quietly commanded, a hint of steel in her tone.

His chest vibrated and she could have sworn he growled. She didn’t care if he was angry. It was imperative that she be alone at home where she could think. “You promised,” she reminded him in that same soft voice.

He hesitated, then sighed as he disentangled their bodies and rose from the floor. Tameka moaned as another after-shock rocked her body, then grimaced at the gush of fluid that coated her inner thighs as a result of his withdrawal. She needed to clean up before dressing.

She tried to rise and quickly muffled a whimper as her body refused to cooperate. Chad watched her struggle, probably waiting for her to give up and lay back down. Fat chance! She was getting out of here if she had to crawl.

“Stubborn woman,” he muttered under his breath as he reached down and lifted her to her feet. When she swayed, he held her steady until she was sure her legs would hold her.

“Would you hand me my clothes?” She didn’t trust herself to bend over. She avoided looking directly into his face as he reached down, collected her clothing and shoes, and dropped them into her outstretched hands. “Thank you.” She clutched them to her chest and went into the bathroom.

After washing their combined cum from between her legs, she dressed and braced herself to face Chad again. She knew he wasn’t happy about being forced to take her home. Well, tough. She wasn’t exactly thrilled with him herself for using sex to try

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

and manipulate her.

Tameka exited the bathroom, still moving slowly. With every fiber of her being she wanted to say yes to whatever Chad wanted, lie down across that big, comfortable-looking bed and sleep for hours, but she couldn't, not yet and not here. She couldn't afford to relax her guard, or she'd weaken and her body would make the choice for her. Relationship decisions based on physical lust were never sound. She had a long list of former clients who could attest to that fact.

Chad took her by the elbow and escorted her to the truck. Once there, he lifted her into the cab and made sure she was settled before closing the door. She appreciated his assistance even as she resented the tingle of arousal his touch stirred to life.

Instead of walking around the truck as she expected, she watched in the side view mirror as he walked over to the cruiser and popped the trunk. *What was he...?* Oh, yeah. She'd forgotten about her tires. It felt like weeks ago instead of just this morning that he'd changed one tire and brought the other to town with him to be fixed.

*He really is a good man and a great catch, if I do say so myself. You could do a lot worse, but I doubt you'll find better.*

Tameka shot straight up in her seat and looked around. Great, now she was hearing voices, one that sounded suspiciously like Momma E. If things kept going the way they were, *she'd* be the one needing therapy.

The voice laughed. *You're not crazy, child, just mule-stubborn like your daddy.*

"And you," Tameka muttered, then slapped a hand over her mouth. *I'm having hallucinations brought on by extreme tiredness and stress*, she diagnosed. Obviously this thing with Chad had her more on edge than she'd previously believed.

*You're not hallucinating, Meka. I'm here.*

Tameka closed her eyes and stated calmly and clearly, "There are no such things as ghosts and werewolves. Once you die, that's it. Werewolves and ghosts are simply stories created by imaginative people to entertain the masses. They are *not* real." She nodded her head once emphatically to punctuate her words, then opened her eyes, having reaffirmed her beliefs.

The voice laughed heartily and the sounds of slapping could

be heard, like the way Momma E used to smack her leg when she had a good chuckle. *Oh my precious child, there are more things in heaven and earth than what can be explained by your five senses and intellect. Soon enough you'll believe.*

Chad opened the door and got in. Reaching for the ignition, he suddenly paused and sniffed the air, looking around. "Everything alright?"

Tameka let his odd behavior pass. She just didn't have the energy to deal with anything else. "Fine. I'm just tired."

"We can stay here and rest," he offered.

"No, thank you. I want to go home." At the look on his face, she found herself rushing to explain. "I need space, time to think. I can't do that with you around."

He seemed to consider her words. Finally, he nodded. "You're right. I've been pushing too hard these last few days. I got carried away and neglected to give you space. I'll do better."

Tameka had no doubt that he would. He appeared to be making a mental checklist of the things she needed to make a relationship work. She was sure if she could see into his mind, under her name would be a bullet point that read: needs space.

He started the truck and left her to her thoughts as requested. She huddled in the corner and kept her eyes closed, mind racing while Chad stopped to get her a new tire before taking her home.

She'd always believed psychosis to be a gradual thing. Day by day, incident-by-incident, little warning signs that were missed until one day, sanity was but a fond memory. Who knew it could come in a flash? Maybe all the indications were there and like so many of her previous patients, she'd ignored them. 'Cause really, what sane woman walks away from a lucrative practice to do hair? She'd rationalized by saying that she was simplifying her life, but what if—as her family supposed—it was more?

*Hmmm, so this is what a mental breakdown feels like.*

As soon as the vehicle stopped, she got out and headed for the house. Peace, quiet, and most of all sanity, were just a few steps away. She craved them so desperately she was on the verge of running.

"Meka." Chad's arm came around her waist, halting her as

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

his body molded to hers from behind. He leaned down and murmured into her ear. "Please, don't push me away. Give us a chance." He licked one of the passion marks on her neck and her entire body trembled violently as desire fired to life. With a whimper, she collapsed against him.

Chad must have taken that as a sign of surrender. Who knows? Maybe it was. She didn't complain when he swung her up into his arms, carried her into the house, and deposited her on her feet by the bed. He quickly divested them both of their clothing. Tameka stood as docile as an asylum patient on strong meds while he pulled back the covers.

When he finished, he scooped her up, laid her in the middle of the bed and climbed in beside her. He pulled her into his arms and arranged her body so that her head lay pillowed on his chest, tugging on her leg until it lay tangled with his own. "Sleep, baby. Things will make more sense after you've rested." He stroked her back in soothing motions.

She yawned—a big, jaw cracking one. *Even wolf-man knows I've lost it.* She closed her eyes and let Morpheus take her away.

\* \* \* \*

When she woke later that night, Chad was gone. Tameka immediately missed him and wished he'd stayed, but she'd asked for space and he was giving it to her. She wouldn't complain. She was grateful—darn it!—that he was being so accommodating. Really, she was.

Grumbling at her own lack of conviction, she showered, threw on a multi-colored caftan, and went to the kitchen for something to eat. She was craving red meat all of a sudden. Must be because she'd missed lunch.

She thawed two seven-ounce T-bones in the microwave, seasoned them, and stuck them under the broiler. While they were cooking, she searched the refrigerator for something to eat with them. Maybe a salad...

She cut up various vegetables into a bowl, paused to flip the meat over, and then wrapped the bowl in plastic wrap and put it in the fridge. Once she smelled it cooking, she decided all she

really wanted was meat. Too hungry to wait, she pulled the steaks from the oven much earlier than normal.

After forking them onto her waiting plate, she sat at the table with a tall glass of sweet tea and dug in. When she came up for air, all that remained were the bones sitting in a puddle of pink-tinged juice. Tameka rubbed her stomach contentedly. Why had she always insisted that her steaks be well done? Medium-rare was delicious.

She cleaned her mess and was debating on a movie to watch when she heard a car drive up in front of the house. *Wonder who that is?* Didn't sound like Chad, and no one else came visiting. Occasionally, people used her driveway to turn around, but this car was too close to the house, which sat a good ways back from the road.

She went to the kitchen window and peeked out. A woman living alone out in the boonies couldn't be too careful, especially when the nearest neighbor was a quarter mile away. Tameka relaxed and went to the door when she saw Lulu's familiar form exiting a light blue Lincoln Continental. When she opened the door, Lulu paused on the first step leading to the porch.

"Lulu," she greeted cautiously.

"Well, at least you're still speaking to me. After earlier, I wasn't sure I'd be welcome," Lulu told her with a smile.

Tameka pushed the door open wide in a silent invitation to enter. "You didn't really do anything, other than lock me in the closet." She was still confused about how Lulu managed it. The lock was on her side of the door. She didn't remember seeing an additional one on the outside. She mentally shook her head. That was neither here nor there compared with everything else that happened today.

"Sorry about that. There wasn't time to explain and your presence was only making matters worse." Lulu stopped in the doorway. "I didn't come to visit. Your grandmother gave me a letter to give to you, just in case. I promised her I'd pass it along."

She held out a white, legal sized envelope with Momma E's handwriting on it. Tameka took it before raising puzzled eyes to Lulu. "I don't understand. Why did she leave this with you and not the lawyer, along with everything else?"

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“Emma said you’d only need this if you moved here and became interested in one of the local men. Chad qualifies, so here I am.”

“But why...?”

“Read it, child,” Lulu interrupted. “Then ask your questions. I’ll be more than happy to answer them—after. I have to go. See you at the shop tomorrow.” She turned and walked away, leaving Tameka pondering this strange turn of events.

She closed the door as Lulu drove off and went and sat on the couch, flipping the letter over and over in her hand. A letter from Momma E, reaching out to her from beyond the grave. She suppressed a shiver. Tameka stared at it, wondering what thoughts were going through her mind as she wrote it. Did Momma E. know these would be her final words to her beloved granddaughter?

*Meka! For God’s sake, just read the letter. I declare!*

Tameka jumped, then slid her thumbnail under the seal, opening the envelope. If reading this letter would get rid of the voice in her head, she’d do whatever it said. She determinedly ignored the soft chuckle she heard in response.

*Tameka,*

*If you’re reading this, it means that you did what I’d hoped you’d do—moved to Refuge and met your mate.*

*As you probably guessed, I had more than one reason for wanting you to come here. I knew you’d love the scenery, the quiet, and the people. I was hoping that here you’d find a man to complete you. One who’d love you the way my Ned loved me.*

*The men in Refuge are different. They’re more, as I’m sure you’ve come to realize if you’re reading this. They’re shape-shifters. My Ned was one as well, something you never knew. He said the moment we met on the ship he knew I was the one—his One—his true mate.*

*The idea of love finding me again at my age should have been ridiculous. Your father certainly thought so, but I learned that you’re never too old to love. So there I was, at the ripe age of sixty-two, embarking on the hottest love affair of my entire life.*

*You probably think I'm crazy, think we're all soft in the head, but the truth is shape-shifters do exist. They're real, Meka.*

*I know with your logical, college-educated mind that it's difficult for you to believe, but there's an easy solution. Ask your man to shift for you, and when he does, accept. Don't argue. Don't question. Just accept that God made all types of species—of which humans are just one—and that this man was made for you.*

*Accept the gift of love that you've been given. You'll never find another man who'll love you like he can. He'll be a good husband and father to your children, and he'll always be faithful to you. It's embedded in his DNA. God has allowed you to find your soul mate. Don't blow it. This man might not be what you think you want, but he's what God knows you need.*

*Love Always,  
Momma E*

Tameka read the entire letter three times. *Shape-shifters, please.* There must be something in the water here causing mass hallucinations. She made a mental note to buy bottled water on her next trip to the store. Didn't matter how clean and fresh the water tasted, it must be tainted.

*Meka, her name was sighed. Call him. Ask him to shift. Then you'll believe.*

“Call Chad. Ask him to come over and prove he's a werewolf?”

*Shape-shifter.*

“Whatever. Have him come over and shift. He won't be able to do it.” She knew he wouldn't, and when he couldn't, she'd have her proof that they were all delusional.

*Or, he'll shift and prove that we're not.*

Well, there was that, not that Tameka thought it would happen. She'd call, invite Chad over, and ask him to prove what he was. When he admitted that he couldn't, she'd have her proof and the voice—she stubbornly refused to refer to *it* as Momma E—would have to shut up and leave her alone.

Tameka picked up the handset sitting on the table beside her. Her fingers shook a little as she dialed the number. “I don't

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know why I'm nervous. He's not a werewolf. He won't be able to shift. Case closed. I'm right."

"Meka, what's wrong?" Chad answered.

She cleared her suddenly dry throat. "Can you come over, please? I'd like to ask you something."

"You can't ask me now?" He sounded puzzled.

She winced. "I'm sorry. You're busy. This can wait." God, how stupid could she be? The man *did* have a life. Who knew what she was interrupting?

"Tameka, I asked you to marry me, remember? That gives you certain rights. There's nothing more important in my life than you. If you need me to come over, I'm on the way. See you in a few." He disconnected the call.

She laid down the phone and put her face in her hands. Chad always knew just what to say to turn her to mush. No man had ever said that she was so important to him that he was willing to drop whatever he was doing and come running, just 'cause she'd called. Admittedly, beginning with her father, she'd seen the worst of men in their lives and relationships. As Momma E. was fond of saying, the only good thing her father ever did was produce Tameka. They say that females unconsciously attract men that are the same as their paternal parent. That must be true, because all of the men she'd met to date were ne'er-do-wells like dear old Dad.

Chad was different, but then he had his own issues. The man thought he was a werewolf, for crying out loud. She wasn't sure how to handle it. She began to pace her living room, periodically rubbing moist palms on her caftan. Remembering that she was naked underneath, she headed for the bedroom to change, or at least add a bra and panties.

Too late. Chad's truck pulled to a stop next to hers in the drive. He climbed out, looking yummy in a white t-shirt that molded his chest like every woman's fantasy, and faded blue denim jeans that lovingly displayed every bulge, including the one between his legs. She snapped out of her stupor and raced to the door as he disappeared from view, opening it at the first knock.

"Hi," she greeted him breathlessly, restraining the urge to throw herself into his arms.

Chad had no such hesitation. He snagged her by the nape and pulled her up to meet his descending mouth. As his kiss weakened her knees and flooded her womb with warmth, he kicked the door closed with his foot.

When they came up for air, her right leg was wrapped around his calf and his hands were cupping her hips, grinding her pelvis into his erection.

“Question,” he panted as she placed baby kisses all over his face and licked the strong column of his neck, enjoying its salty flavor.

“Hmmm?” She was more interested in getting him out of his clothes than conversing.

“Meka...” He groaned when she hit a particularly sensitive spot and his hips bucked against her. Drawing strength from somewhere—she didn’t know where—he grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her away from him. “You had a question that was too important to ask over the phone,” he reminded huskily.

Tameka gazed back at him, dazed, her body in full control. Taking a deep shuddering breath, she managed to pull her thoughts together long enough to remember why he was here.

“Oh, yeah.” She took a few steps away from him and wrapped her arms around herself to keep from reaching for him. “I remember now.”

She sighed and paced before turning to face him again. “Lulu dropped by earlier and handed me a letter Momma E wrote, in the event that I moved to Refuge and met someone. In it, she suggested that I ask you to shift, to prove to me that you are what you say you are, since she knew I wouldn’t believe. That’s why I called. I want you to do whatever it is you do. Shift for me. Please,” she added as an afterthought.

Chad hooked his thumbs into the front two loops of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. “Are you sure?”

Tameka nibbled on a fingernail while she considered how to respond. Then she decided she might as well be straight with him. “To be honest, I really don’t think you can. I’m not sure if I want to be proven wrong, or right.” Either way, things between them would change after today. That, she discovered, was the source of her fear. Despite her protests to the contrary, she didn’t

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want to let Chad go and she just may have to if she discovered he was mentally unstable.

"If you're certain this is what you want me to do." The expression on his face said he was giving her one last chance to change her mind.

She seriously thought about just letting it go, but knew this had to be done. "I'm sure." She went and sat on the couch, prepared to wait however long it took for him to admit the truth, that he wasn't what he claimed to be.

Chad reached up and pulled off his t-shirt.

"What are you doing?" Not that she minded, but the sight of all that hard muscle was distracting, to say the least.

"Undressing so I can shift." He toed off his shoes and stripped off his jeans. No briefs. Darn, she wished she'd known when she was rubbing up against him.

"You ready?"

"Sure." She leaned back against the couch. Might as well get comfortable. This could take awhile.

He did something and his image seemed to shimmer. Tameka sat forward. There was a popping sound, and then the biggest white wolf she'd ever seen in her life stood on the other side of her coffee table on all fours, staring at her with Chad's eyes.

She was up and over the back of the couch before she even realized she was moving. The jarring thud when she landed on her head brought her back to her senses. It was only the grace of God that she hadn't broken her neck when she landed. While she lay there dazed, rubbing the back of her head and doing an internal check to make sure she wasn't hurt, the wolf—Chad—stuck his muzzle over the couch, a concerned look in his eyes.

At the sight of him, she scrambled back on her elbows and heels until her head bumped up against the wall. "Di-did I ever me-mention this small problem I have with du-dogs? It's nothing ma-major. I'm just deathly afraid of them," she finished shakily.

The wolf tilted its head to the side, right before it disappeared from view. Her breath caught in her throat when he came walking around the side of the couch, heading straight for her. Dear God, she'd always told her patients that it's best to face your fears head on, but all she wanted to do was get up and

run. It took everything she had within her to sit there and let him approach.

This, unbelievable as it may seem, was Chad. He'd never hurt her. Why she was so certain of that, she didn't stop to question. Nor did it stop her from shaking with fear.

He crouched down onto his belly and approached her slowly, not stopping until he was close enough to nudge her leg with his nose. With a mind of their own, her legs drew up tight against her chest and she closed her eyes. When nothing happened, she peeked out.

He must have been waiting, for he immediately scooted forward and touched his nose to her thigh again. Tameka took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. She could do this. Hesitantly, she reached out and lightly patted his head, ready to draw back in an instant. When she stopped, he gently bumped her hand with his muzzle, twice.

"You like that, huh?" Taking the hint, she rubbed him again until her fear disappeared. "Your fur is so soft."

Tameka stretched her legs out into a more comfortable position and Chad immediately laid his head in her lap. "Don't slob on me."

He gave her a big lupine grin, displaying rows of sharp fangs. She stared at them for a moment, then muttered, "If you did that to scare me, too late. I already know you won't hurt me."

He made some sort of snuffling sound that she supposed was laughter. In his eyes, she could see humor and approval. He was pleased that she'd conquered her fear. Chad rose to his feet and walked forward until he was straddling her body.

Tameka was forced back onto her elbows by his sheer size and proximity. As she leaned back, Chad followed her down, shifting as he did until she was covered by a huge, naked, and aroused male.

He pinned her with a hungry stare and licked his lips, reminding her of the wolf he'd just changed from. "Anything else you'd like me to do?"

The wet tip of his arousal brushed against her inner thigh.

"Uh..."

"Because I really...really...*really* want to do something for you." He lowered his face until he was only a breath away.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

"I...uh..." She couldn't think with him so close. He was short-circuiting her brain synapses. She moved restlessly beneath him, arching and rotating her hips, squirming lower to get his hardness right where she needed it most.

"Yes?" He moved so that he lay between her legs with the satiny, rounded knob of his erection prodding her entrance, and leaned forward to nibble on her bottom lip.

Tameka moaned and lifted her legs to curl around his waist, opening herself for penetration. "Fill me."

"Like this?" He eased the tip of his cock inside and stopped.

"Chad," she whined. His weight had her pinned, preventing her from arching to take him deeper.

"More?" He arched an eyebrow.

Eyeball to eyeball as they were, Tameka was sure he could see the fire shooting out of her eyes as she narrowed them, conveying the frustration she was feeling. She loosened her legs from his waist and planted her feet, flat on the floor. Then she reached down and dug her nails into his butt. "Quit playing with me," she growled.

Chad nipped her lower lip, and then pulled it into his mouth, soothing it. "You'll have to do better than that, baby. We shifters like a little pain with our pleasure." He raised his head and grinned at her.

"You like pain, hmmm?" With no warning whatsoever, she dragged her blunt nails straight up his back, hopefully taking off a thin layer of skin.

Chad flinched and a growl rumbled up from deep within his chest. He grabbed her hands and slammed them down above her head, holding her in position with one large hand capturing both wrists. His eyes began to glow. "My baby wants to play?"

Tameka wasn't sure what got into her, but the glowing of his eyes signaled his imminent loss of control and knowing she was the cause of it turned her on like nothing else. She struggled against him, not to get away but to see what he'd do.

"Maybe," she finally responded, panting with her efforts. "Think the big, bad wolf can handle me?"

There was a tiny voice in her head screaming, *What the hell are you doing?* It was the same voice of caution that had resulted in her playing it safe all of her life, until she walked away from

her job and everything it represented that she'd come to hate. Now she was here in Refuge having conversations with her dead grandmother and taunting her naked, werewolf lover into doing his worst. Yep, sanity had definitely left the building.

Chad tightened his grip and pressed more of his weight down on her. "You know what happened to Little Red, don't you, when she tried to take on the wolf?"

"She kicked wolf butt?" Tameka asked with another useless jerk of her body.

He licked the side of her neck all the way to the underside of her earlobe in one long swipe, then murmured in her ear. "No, he devoured her."

With those words, he gave her a pretty compelling demonstration of what old Red must have enjoyed with her wolf. Tameka gave as good as she got, even as in a small corner of her mind she marveled at how aggressive she was being. This wasn't like her at all.

\* \* \* \*

Later, after they'd finished rolling around on the floor and showered, Chad sat on side of the bed with Tameka kneeling behind him, examining the wound on his shoulder. "I still can't believe I did that. I'm so sorry. Does it hurt?"

Chad couldn't hold in the grin, but he was careful not to let her see it. "Meka, I'm fine. It's just a little bite."

"Little! Chad, I drew blood. Look at it. Well, you can't but I can see each tooth mark. I'm putting antibiotic ointment on it. I don't care what you say. I don't want it to get infected." She moved to get off of the bed.

He caught her by the waist and tumbled her onto his lap. "Leave it. I told you it wouldn't. I heal really fast. Always have, so stop worrying. I like it. Feel free to do it again, anytime."

She shook her head. "You may not have lied about being a werewolf, but you're still insane."

He laughed, but suddenly grew serious. "Are you okay with what I am?" It was his biggest fear, that she wouldn't be able to accept all of him.

She laid her head on his shoulder. He could almost hear her

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

thinking. Finally, she answered. "In a way, yeah, I think I am. It's almost a relief. It means rethinking everything I've been taught to believe. That part sucks, but the rest just might be doable. I can honestly say I'm glad you're not a man."

He stiffened in shock, pushed her off of his lap and onto the bed before standing. "I'm not an animal." Anger filled him as the memory of the one woman he'd dared to reveal himself to calling him a savage beast.

Tameka braced herself with her hands to keep from tumbling off the bed and looked at him with unfeigned dismay. "No! I would never call you an animal. Why would you think...oh. No, Chad. That's not what I meant.

"Right." He looked around on the floor for his clothes before remembering he'd left them in the living room. He turned and headed for the door.

"Chad, wait! Let me explain." She ran around him and leaned her back against the door, blocking the exit.

He gave her his coldest stare, knowing it would terrify her but at that moment, not caring.

Tameka placed her hands on her hips and got right up in his face. "Don't you look at me like that," she snapped. "Damn it, Chad. Sit your ass on that bed and listen to me!" She actually stomped her foot at him.

He felt his eyebrows shoot to his hairline. Even his wolf stuck its ears up, interest piqued. He walked slowly to the bed and sat down as instructed, his face impassive, but inwardly he was stunned. No one ever spoke to him like that. No one.

Tameka paced before him covered only by a purple towel wrapped around her body. Her agitation reached him through their bond, powering through his hurt and anger, demolishing it.

"I told you I used to be a psychologist. My specialty was marriage and family. The courts referred most of my clients to me. Where I lived, anyone seeking divorce—especially if there were children involved—had to go to mediation first, to see if divorce was really necessary. I also had a lot of clients referred to me by the State, counseling parents whose children had been removed from their homes because of abuse."

She turned eyes so full of pain and despair toward him that his wolf howled inside. "The things I saw people—men—do to

each other in the name of love..." She visibly shuddered and hugged herself. "If that's love, I don't ever want to be loved," she finished softly.

Just when he was ready to go to her, she seemed to pull herself together. She sent him a small smile tinged with sadness. "When I say you're not a man, I'm giving you a compliment. I've seen what we humans are capable of. We're the animals, not you."

He did go to her then and wrap his arms around her, hugging her close.

She relaxed against him with a sigh. "The irony is you looking to me to know how a family should operate." She laughed, but didn't sound amused. "I can tell you what not to do, but that's about it," she finished grimly.

He leaned back and gazed down at her, puzzled. "I thought you grew up in a two-parent home."

She laughed again, this time with humor. "My parents are a joke. The only good thing about my family was Momma E. That's why I went into family practice. I knew there had to be a something better than the way I was raised."

And instead she encountered worse. As a cop, first in the military and now as a civilian, Chad had seen enough domestic violence and just plain cruelty to have a very good idea of what his mate had spent years dealing with. He pulled her back to him and rested his chin upon her head. "Maybe between the two of us, we can figure this family thing out—together."

He held his breath, waiting for her to contradict him, and/or express some form of denial. When she just snuggled into him and yawned, he let out the breath he was holding and relaxed.

"Go to bed. I'll lock up the house." He turned her toward the bed and gave her a light slap on her bottom.

"You're staying, right?" She grabbed him by the forearm before he could walk off.

"Yes, I am."

"Good." She dropped her towel and climbed into bed.

Chad quickly locked up and joined her. As he pulled her into his arms, she spoke, her voice little more than a murmur. "Maybe you need to leave some stuff over here. You know, so you don't have to rush off to change every time you stay over."

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

He smiled in the dark, recognizing the invitation for what it was. "I'll do that."

## *Chapter Six*

Tameka couldn't keep the smile off of her face as she dressed for work. Chad had taken it upon himself to demonstrate the benefits of waking up with a horny man—namely him—each morning. An hour later, sated and pleasantly tired, she had to chase him out the door in order to make it to work on time.

Today was Thursday, the beginning of the weekend rush. The shop would be busy today though the rest of the week, and if she intended to build her clientele, she needed to be there to get a good start. She had her things waiting by the door and was headed into the kitchen to grab her lunch when the phone rang. She snatched the receiver off of the cradle and kept moving.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Jones?”

“Yes, it is. Who's calling?” She stuck her head in the open door of the fridge, grabbed the chicken salad she made yesterday and a carton of peach yogurt. As an afterthought, she also snagged a bottle of water.

“Ms. Jones, I represent the Markham Group. You haven't responded to any of our queries through the mail, so I decided to try the direct approach.”

Tameka pushed the door closed with her hip and placed the food in her insulated lunch bag. “Look, if this is about my property, I'm sure my lawyer told you I'm not interested in selling.”

“We're prepared to make you a very attractive offer. How does two hundred and fifty thousand dollars sound?”

*Like a rip off*, she thought, rolling her eyes. “For twelve acres of land and a nice sized house? You've got to be kidding me.”

“All right. Three hundred thousand.”

“No.” She looked around to make sure she wasn't forgetting

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

anything.

“Ms. Jones, you drive a hard bargain. Four hundred thousand. That’s as high as we’re willing to go.”

“Look, I’m neither negotiating with you nor holding out for more money. I told you, this land’s not for sale—for any price. That’s final. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late for work.” Tameka disconnected the call. Now she had to hurry or she’d be late. She wished she had time to take something for her head. Dealing with those people had given her a headache.

She drove into town with the AC on full blast, all the vents pointed at her. As early as it was, it was hot as Hades out there. They were in for a scorcher of a summer if the last few days were an indication. When she arrived at the shop, there were quite a few guys waiting for haircuts. Tameka greeted everyone as she went to her station and got busy.

After about the sixth client, she paused while sweeping her area and told Lulu, “I’m going to have to get me a fan. I don’t know how you stand this heat.”

Betty spoke up. “It’s actually kind of cool in here, even with the dryers going. Lulu’s got the air cranked down really low. Are you feeling all right? You look a little flushed.”

“Are you sure? ‘Cause I’m so hot, I’m sweating and that’s not something I normally do,” Tameka told her while fanning her face.

Lulu gazed at her with a concerned expression on her face. “You don’t think you’re coming down with anything, do you?”

Tameka wiped her forehead with the back of her hand as she cleaned her supplies, preparing for the next customer. “I felt fine when I got up this morning. I had a slight headache when I left the house, but that’s because that annoying developer called, trying to get me to sell Momma E’s property again, despite the fact that I’ve told them I’m not interested.”

Lulu’s gaze sharpened. “Someone made an offer on the property?”

Tameka nodded as she motioned for the next guy to come over. “And being downright aggravating about it, too. Won’t take no for an answer. She actually thought I was trying to drive the price higher. I finally hung up on her.”

She placed the cape around the man, ignoring the way he

stared at her and picked up the spray water bottle, after finding out how he wanted his hair cut.

Lulu waited until she finished cutting to ask, “Do you remember the name of the person who called?”

Tameka paused. “Now that I think about it, she never did give me her name. Just identified herself with the Markham Group.”

“What about the letters?” Lulu questioned.

“I couldn’t tell you. Momma E’s probate attorney handled them after the first one. He just passed the message along.”

“How much they offering?” Rosa asked.

“Four hundred thousand was the last offer.” She turned her attention to her next client, running her fingers through his shoulder length hair, checking the ends. “What can I do for you today?”

“Just a trim.”

Tameka grabbed her spray bottle and got to work once she verified how much he wanted trimmed off the ends.

Betty picked up the conversation. “The land alone is worth that much, and that’s not including the house. That’s a prime piece of real estate you have there, with plenty of trees and if I remember correctly, a small lake as well.”

Tameka frowned. “I didn’t know about the lake, but it doesn’t matter. I couldn’t sell even if I wanted to. Momma E made it a condition in the will.”

“Why not?” Rosa wanted to know. “If they offered me enough, I’d take the money and run.”

“Because the land belongs to the Raven pack. Tameka’s just the trustee.” Lulu supplied the surprising answer.

“If it’s not your land, how did your grandmother leave it to you in her will? Doesn’t that make it yours,” Rosa asked Tameka.

“It’s mine to live on and use, but there are restrictions. I’m on what they call a Conservation Land Trust, basically the land’s caretaker. I make sure the land stays as it is—undeveloped—but the deed lists me as trustee, not owner.” She’d thought the land belong to a non-profit, conservation group. Thanks to Lulu, she now knew better.

She turned her client to the mirror, fanning out his brown

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

hair before letting it drop to its new length, just above his shoulders. "Is that enough, or do you want more?"

"That's fine."

Tameka didn't know how he could tell. He was looking at her reflection instead of his own. "That will be fifteen dollars. Pay at the register."

Tameka placed her hand on her stomach while she waited for him to exit the chair. Her stomach was cramping like she'd eating something rancid, and her headache was getting worse. She swayed and closed her eyes as a wave of heat washed over her, leaving dizziness in its wake.

"Are you all right? You're pale as a ghost."

Lulu's voice came to her, sounding like it was a great distance away. She wanted to answer, but was afraid if she opened her mouth her stomach would erupt.

"Meka!"

She swallowed hard. "I don't feel so good." She swayed again and grabbed a hold of the chair to steady herself.

Lulu left her client, came and placed her hand on Tameka's forehead. "Child, you're burning up. No wonder you're hot. Rosa, go into the office, get the Tylenol and bring a bottle of water."

A wave of pain radiated out from her stomach to encompass her entire body, knocking Tameka to the floor. She felt her eyes roll up in her head as her body began convulsing.

Someone shouted, "She's having a seizure!"

"Call Alex. Tell him to get somebody over here," was the last thing she heard before darkness claimed her.

\* \* \* \*

*How dare that bitch hang up on me! She doesn't deserve that land. It should be mine. It should always have been mine along with everything else denied me. Let's see how she likes my next little surprise. Bet she won't be so cocky then.*

\* \* \* \*

Chad parked the truck haphazardly, shoved the gear into

park, and jumped out of the vehicle while it was still rocking. He left the keys in the ignition and the door open as he ran toward the entrance of the Mountain View Emergency Clinic, the private medical facility owned by the pack and operated by Alex.

Damn it! They'd called hours ago and he was just getting here. If only he hadn't gone for a run. He'd felt so good, he decided today was a good day to let his wolf out to play. Tameka wasn't scheduled to be off until later this evening and he was off from work. Why not? It had been too long since he'd gone wolf and just had fun.

He burst through the doors of the small, state of the art facility, glancing around wildly before rushing to the reception window. "Where is she? Where's Tameka?"

"Chad, over here." Carol Johnson, head nurse and the Raven pack's second-in-command, waved him over to a door that read *Authorized Personnel Only*.

He was on her heels as she strode rapidly down the hall. "What the hell happened? She was fine with I left her this morning. Where is she? I want to see her!"

Carol paused by the nurse's station. "You can see her in a minute. Let me go and get Alex. He wants to talk with you first." She turned and walked off.

Forget that. He wanted his mate. Needed to see her now. He looked around and noticed that most of the examining areas were empty. Of the six, there were only three with the curtains closed. He went to the first one and pushed the curtain open. A man lay on the bed in traction, a cast covering his right leg from foot to mid-thigh. He looked up at the interruption.

"Sorry," he muttered and moved to the second one.

Chad shoved the curtain aside. Another wrong room. The part of him that wasn't focused on finding his mate felt sorry for that patient's family. Whoever was in that bed was at death's door. There were tubes and wires everywhere, hooked to machines that alternately beeped and hissed. No need apologizing. This one wasn't even breathing; the machine was doing it for them.

He turned to continue his search when he got a whiff of Tameka's scent above the strong, antiseptic, hospital smell. It was coming from the room behind him. No, it can't be. He

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

stiffened and turned back. This time he looked past the tubes and wires to the person to whom they were attached.

*Tameka! God, no!*

Chad took a stumbling step forward, and then fell to his knees. A mournful howl rose out of his throat. He lost it. Simply lost it. “Nooooooooo!” He couldn’t lose her. He’d just found her. Damn it! He had to do...something...anything. He couldn’t just...

He lurched forward, intent on doing he didn’t know what. Hands grabbed at him, preventing him from getting to his mate. He fought, trying to break free. They held him fast. A growl rose out of his throat as his wolf rose to the surface. “Mate!”

“Chad! Chad!”

The smell of pack surrounded him. He didn’t want the pack. He wanted his mate. He struggled harder.

A stinging blow rocked him back, and then glowing, gold eyes that swirled with power filled his vision. “Chad! Leash the wolf! She’s not going to die.”

Chad barely heard Alex. He gazed past him at Tameka, muscles tensing to launch himself forward again.

Alex grabbed him by the face and forced him to look at him. “Chad, she’s in a medically induced coma. She’s not dying. I won’t let her. I promise.”

Alex’s voice finally penetrated the fog of grief he was in. Chad latched onto the only two words that made sense. “Not dying?”

“No,” Alex confirmed.

Chad slumped in their arms and did something he hadn’t done in public since early childhood—cried.

Alex caught him in a bear hug. He could hear Carol whispering in his ear as she hugged him from behind, “It’s alright. She’s okay. You’ll both be fine.”

Other voices chimed in. “We got you, Chad.” He was enfolded and surrounded by pack—his pack. For once, the words meant something.

When he finally managed to pull himself together, he pulled back, embarrassed at his emotional display. Carol handed him something to clean his face, and with one last gentle stroke of his head, left. Others did the same until only he and Alex remained,

kneeling on the floor by Tameka's bed.

"You with me now? Ready to listen?" Alex asked him.

He heaved a deep sigh. "Yeah."

Alex stood and held out a hand. Chad took it, allowing him to help him to his feet. He leaned against the side of Tameka's bed, as close to her as possible. She had an IV in one arm. Taped wires stuck to her chest and temples, and tubes down her nose and more that disappeared under the covers. There was even one of those blood pressure monitor things on the finger of her opposite hand.

He reached out to touch her, needing to connect with her in some minor way, but stopped short.

"Touch her. It's okay. You won't hurt her."

He glanced at Alex for reassurance, then reached out and held her hand, the one that didn't have anything attached to it. His beast immediately calmed. "Why is she like this? What happened?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Lulu said she complained of being hot. There was some dizziness, and a complaint about her stomach cramping right before she dropped to the floor in a grand mal seizure. They brought her in when she lost consciousness. Once here, she had three more despite our attempts to stop them. As a final resort, to prevent brain damage we induced a coma. What I need to know is what triggered it. Did Tameka ever mentioned being epileptic? Was she on any medication that you know of?"

Chad shook his head. "No, no medications that I noticed, and she didn't smell sick." Shifters could sense when something wasn't quite right about humans. Tameka never smelt "off" to him at all.

Alex sighed. "That's what Lulu said, but *something* happened. *Something* made her body go haywire. We just need to find out what that something was."

Chad stiffened, feeling dread grow in the pit of his stomach. God, if this was his fault...

"You've thought of something?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I hope not. If I'm responsible..."

"If you think you did something, I need to know what it was. I doubt, whatever it was, that it caused this," Alex assured

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

him.

"I did what you told me to do," Chad haltingly confessed.

Alex arched one brow. "What *I* told you?"

"Well, yeah, not exactly told me to do it, but you said the more of me she had in her, the quicker she'd accept me as mate." Chad never took his eyes off of Tameka's chest; the steady up and down movement was the only thing that assured him she was still breathing.

"What—exactly—did you do?"

He shot a quick glance at Alex. The way Alex was looking at him made him hunch his shoulders. Chad felt his face flush and knew he was turning red.

"I know you didn't hurt her on purpose." Chad's shoulders relaxed. "But if something you did caused her immune system to go crazy, I need to know what it was."

He looked at one of the monitors so he wouldn't have to see Alex's face as he admitted, "I bit her—all over—and packed the bites with saliva."

"You flooded her system with your DNA?" Alex sounded like he was trying not to roar.

Chad finally gave Alex his full attention. "I wanted her to accept me. I didn't know it would cause problems."

"You didn't know..." Alex broke off, rubbed his face with his hands before reaching back and pulling on his hair. Then he pinned Chad with a look that said "You just screwed up big time but don't understand so I can't yell at you like I want to."

"The problem here is that you gave her too much too fast. Her body didn't have time to adjust, so it treated your DNA like a foreign invader and tried to attack it. This explains the high levels of antigen in her system. That's what shocking her system." Alex spoke slowly, like to someone hard of understanding. "You could have killed her trying to force a conversion."

"I wasn't trying to turn her into one of us. I just wanted her to mark me, to recognize me as her mate."

Alex muttered some succinct curse words under his breath. "This is my fault. I didn't get a chance to fully explain what true mates were before we were interrupted. It's not the exchange of fluids that causes the mate bond to kick into place. When she

accepts you for who you are and acknowledges your position in her life—that's when the bond kicks in. It's not a physical thing, but a mental and emotional one on her part."

"So when she marked me last night, it had nothing to do with what I did?" He wasn't a stupid man by any means, but this whole true mate stuff was confusing.

"I'm not saying it didn't help, but unless she was willing, it wouldn't matter what you'd done."

"I see." And he did. A goofy grin rose up on the inside. Tameka really did want him.

"There's really nothing I can do but give her fluids and keep her under until her body finished transitioning," Alex was saying.

"Does that mean she'll be a shifter when she comes out of it?" Chad wasn't sure how he felt about it. He liked Tameka just fine the way she was.

Alex picked up her chart and made a notation on it. "I really don't know. I've never heard of anything like this before. I didn't even know this could happen. We'll have to wait and see."

\* \* \* \*

Three days later, Chad was firmly ensconced in a chair by her side, holding her hand when his phone rang for the fourth time that day. They had moved Tameka to one of the few private rooms that the clinic possessed. Pack members had been dropping by and calling his cell phone, checking on him and his mate. Plants with cards and balloons filled every available corner.

"Yeah, Bull. What's up?" Bull, especially, had been keeping in close contact, running by his place to pick up items and generally keeping an eye on things for him.

"I drove your mate's car home like you requested. There's something here you need to see. I've already called Rome."

Since crime in Refuge was almost non-existent, Chad wasn't overly concerned. "What is it?" Whatever it was, he doubted it was serious enough to require his leaving. He hadn't moved from her side since he'd arrived and didn't plan to now.

"I know you don't want to leave your mate, but this is

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

important; not something to discuss over the phone.” Bull disconnected the call.

Chad cursed. If Bull says it's important, then it was. He wasn't one to exaggerate.

He leaned over and kissed Tameka. “I have to go to your house to check out a few things. I'll be back as soon as possible. You concentrate on getting better.” He didn't know if she could hear him, but talking to her made him feel better. As a result, he'd talked so much his voice was getting hoarse.

Chad stopped by the nurses' station on the way out to let them know he was leaving, but that he'd be back as soon as possible and to call him immediately if there was any change in Tameka's condition.

It was twilight when he pulled into Tameka's yard. He'd made a quick stop at his house to pick up some more clothing and personal items. The clothes Bull brought him needed washing. Bull, Rome, and the Crime Scene Technician van were there, parked off to the side near one of the trees in the yard.

Rome met him as he exited the truck. “How's Tameka?”

“Still heavily sedated. What's going on?” His wolf was crawling under his skin, demanding he get back.

“Someone left a little present for your mate. Bull, bring that letter over here.”

Bull took something from Chuck, the nightshift's Evidence Technician, and came jogging over. He handed a sheet of paper, already encased in a gallon-sized plastic Ziploc bag to Chad. “This was pinned to the tree.”

### BEAST LOVER. GO BACK WHERE YOU BELONG.

It was spelled out in letters cut from a newspaper and glued onto the paper.

Chad handed it back to him. “Any prints, or recognizable scent?”

Bull shook his head.

“Whoever did this knew what they were doing, or what they were dealing with,” Rome informed him.

“I don't like what this note implies, but I don't see why you couldn't just tell me about this over the phone.” He was

impatient to get back to his mate; felt like his presence was somehow needed.

“If it were just this, I wouldn’t have called. I’d have taken care of it and told you about it later. It’s the other that has me concerned,” Bull assured him.

“What other?” He wished they would just get on with it. He wasn’t in the mood for a long, drawn-out game of Find the Clues.

Bull and Rome gave each other a look. “You don’t smell it? It’s over here. We left it up so you could see.”

They led him over to where the others were working.

As they rounded the van, what he saw was shocking enough to bring him to a complete stop. How on earth had he missed this? The smell of death was strong in the air. An Alaskan Husky, amazingly wolf-like in its appearance, hung from a tree in the yard with a noose around its neck where she’d be sure to see it. The thing had been maliciously gutted with a butcher knife, still embedded in its belly. Entrails were hanging from various spots. “Shit, the animal cruelty people would have a field day with this.”

The words “beast lover” suddenly took on a new and ominous significance.

“Has your mate been having any problems that you know of? Any enemies she told you about? This can’t be an isolated incident,” Rome stated.

Chad couldn’t pull his eyes away from the gruesome sight, while deep inside anger burned and began to grow. “Monday someone left a box of dead roses on her porch. No note. It’s in the evidence room at the station. A couple of mornings later, she had two flat tires, both rear. I took her to work and got them fixed. After everything that’s happened, I forgot about it, but Tucker said it looked like someone drove a small nail through the tire so the air would slowly leak out.” He could kick himself for forgetting.

“Sounds like someone’s taken a nasty interest in your mate,” Rome commented.

“When I stopped in to get her keys, Ms. Lulu mentioned that someone was trying to get Tameka to sell this property. Said Tameka was smokin’ hot because they wouldn’t take no for an

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answer. You think this is somehow related?" Bull questioned.

"She tell you about this?" Rome asked Chad.

"She mentioned that she received an offer and her parents were upset that she didn't sell. But that was when Ms. Emma first died, months ago. There's been nothing recent, that I can remember." Of course, they'd had other things on their minds than talking.

"She got a call that morning. Was offered four hundred thousand. Turned them down flat," Bull informed them.

Both he and Rome turned to him with questioning looks.

"Me and Mona hang out some times. She told me about the conversation," Bull said with a shrug.

"You think someone's trying to run her off, thinking if they harass her enough they might be able to get their hands on the property," Chad asked Rome.

"If so, it's not anyone associated with the pack. The shifters around here all know this is Raven pack land," Rome informed him.

"But it's obviously someone that knows about us." Bull pointed toward the tree. "That was targeted directly at you."

"Then it could be anyone. Everyone in the county knows what we are," Chad said in disgust.

"Not everyone," Rome corrected. "Just those who grew up here in Refuge and have reason to know. We don't reveal ourselves to just anyone."

"So we know we're looking for a non-shifter who knows about you, and doesn't like the idea of you and Tameka together," Bull stated.

"That could just be because if Tameka's involved with someone, she's less likely to want to leave. It may not have anything to do with Chad being a shape-shifter," Rome speculated.

Chad could feel his wolf stirring. "Someone's targeting my mate, and the threat is escalating. I'm going to find out who it is and when I do..." He broke off as his cell phone rang.

"Wilson."

"Chad, you need to get back here pronto. It's Tameka."

"I'm on my way." He stuck the phone back in his pocket, pulled out his keys and headed for the truck. "I've got to go."

That was the clinic.”

Rome called to his retreating back, “I’ll investigate and see what I can discover. I’ll also inform Alex about what’s going on. This is a pack matter, especially if someone thinks Tameka’s the only thing standing in the way of their claiming this land. You go take care of your mate.”

“Whoever’s doing this better hope you find them before I do.” Chad tossed out the warning as he started the truck, then slammed the door closed, his mind already on what he’d find waiting for him.

Minutes later he was running through the clinic doors, bag in hand. He hung a left and slowed to a jog as he neared Tameka’s room door.

Alex caught him at the door. “Hold up a minute, Chad.”

Oh, damn. Not again. “She needs me.” His hand braced for entry through the door.

“I want to explain what’s happening before you go rushing in there.”

Chad slowly pulled his hand from the knob and turned to face Alex. “What’s going on?”

“She’s coming out of it and she shouldn’t be, as heavily as I have her sedated. Not too long after you left, the monitors went crazy. The EKG is showing brain activity, and shouldn’t. I have two options here: increase her medication to put her back under, or start the reversal process to bring her out. Both procedures involve risk. If we bring her out of it too soon, it may trigger another seizure, causing damage to her brain. If we put her back under, there’s the risk she may develop blood clots or pneumonia from lack of movement.”

Chad closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. This day just kept getting worse and worse. “What can I do to help?”

“Your presence seems to calm her. I find it more than a little coincidental that her agitation coincided with your departure. When you go in, talk to her like you’ve been doing. Let her know you’re here. Hold her hand and try to connect. I’ll monitor her vitals. If I’m right and this works, I’ll start the reversal process.”

“All right. Anything else?” His hand was on the doorknob,

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his back already pressing against the door in preparation of entering.

“Just one last thing. I need for you to remain calm. I’m not sure how much she’s sensing. If your wolf’s upset, it may have an adverse effect on her condition,” Alex warned grimly.

Chad pushed open the door, dropped his bag and immediately crossed to Tameka’s side. Her eyelids were flickering wildly and her body seemed to jerk and spasm. “Baby, I’m back. Sorry that took so long. Missed me?” He took her hand and brought it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on the back of it.

She stopped fidgeting and seemed to be listening, though her eyelids kept fluttering like she was trying to open them and couldn’t. Alex motioned for him to keep talking.

He reached back with his foot and hooked the chair, bringing it closer to the bed and sat down. “I asked Bull to go by the shop and take your car to the house. Lulu sent your things home with him and everything is waiting for you, including your purse. You need to hurry and get better, baby. I miss our nice, comfortable bed. This chair is murder on my back.”

Alex made encouraging noises, adjusted a few of the machines, and then picked up Meka’s chart and wrote on it. When he finished, he came and stood by her bedside, leaning over it until he was speaking directly into her ear. “Tameka, my name is Alex. I’m your doctor. I know you’re trying to wake up. I have medicine in your IV. That’s why you’re having such a hard time of it. Just relax. You had a severe allergic reaction that caused a seizure. The medicine is to prevent you from having another one and possibly causing brain damage while we work on finding the source of the problem. I know you want to be with Chad. He knows it, too. The best thing you can do to speed up the healing process is to stop fighting and let the medicine put you to sleep. Chad will be here with you.”

Amazingly enough, something Alex said must have gotten through to her. It wasn’t until he saw her body slump into the bed that he realized how tense she’d been.

“Her vitals are better. They started improving as soon as you spoke to her. She’s definitely aware of her surroundings on some level. I’m lowering her meds. We’ll see what happens.”

Chad brought Tameka’s hand to his mouth, cupping his jaw

with it. "Is it safe?"

"We'll take it slow. She'll be closely monitored at all times. I don't anticipate any problems. Have you eaten?"

He had to think about it. "Breakfast."

Alex nodded. "I'll have the nurse bring you something." He put his pen in his jacket pocket and left the room.

As soon as he was gone, Chad leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I'm so sorry, baby. This is all my fault. You do what Alex tells you so you can get better and kick my butt. I need you."

He could have sworn he felt her weakly squeeze his hand. He closed his eyes and laid his head on the pillow next to hers, inhaling deeply of her scent.

Minutes later, the door quietly opened and the aroma of food filled the air.

"Awww! That's so sweet," she whispered. "You can lie next to her if you like."

Chad raised his head. "How? There are wires and tubes everywhere."

Gloria, the cute, petite blonde nurse's aide who worked the night shift, gave him a smile. "I know, but she's doing so much better than she was before. Let me see what I can do. You eat while I handle things here."

Chad roused himself and went to see what she'd delivered. He needed to eat. Shape-shifters burned a lot of calories due to their increased metabolism. Also, eating helped control the beast. Right now, both he and his wolf were more interested in his mate's welfare than satisfying his non-existing appetite.

The meal consisted of a large steak, bake potato and a side salad. He forced himself to eat while keeping an eagle eye on Gloria. The minute she was done, he pushed the plate aside and went back to the bed.

"There. If you want to lie along her right side, you should be fine. Just be extra careful. Try not to dislodge anything."

He wasted little time before toeing off his shoes and climbing up beside his mate. There wasn't much room, but he didn't care. He snuggled up as close as possible without actually touching her. Being near her was enough.

Gloria left the room after dimming the lights. Chad doubted

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

he'd sleep. There was too much on his mind. Tameka's uncertain diagnosis and the wacko targeting her topped the list. They'd come a long way in a short period of time. Frankly, he was scared that these latest developments would cost him his mate. She was already skittish. He just prayed that the fragile bond they'd form would be strong enough.

## *Chapter Seven*

Two days later, Chad dozed, waking every time the door opened. Several times he had to clamp down on his wolf. It took exception with the clinic staff turning Tameka into a pincushion as they drew blood at various points during the night. Once, they even took a vial from him. For what, he didn't know, but didn't argue. All he was told was that Alex needed it.

The investigation was at a standstill. Rome's research into the Markham Group revealed that they weren't the ones interested in the property. An unknown financial group had approached them about entering a land development deal to build a housing development on Tameka's land. They were unaware that the property wasn't available, as negotiations hadn't progressed that far.

Further investigation showed the financial group to be bogus. The only solid clues they had were that their suspect was a female, and someone who'd either lived in Refuge or nearby, and knew of their existence. Unless or until the perpetrator made another move against Tameka, they were stuck. In the meantime, Rome was checking into Tameka's family background, and anyone else that had expressed an interest in the property on the off chance that this woman wasn't working alone.

It was a little after eight when Lulu came visiting. "How's she doing?"

Chad rolled off the side of the bed and stretched, trying to loosen some of the kinks from lying in one position all night. As he grabbed a shirt and slipped it on, he responded, "I don't really know. Stable, I guess. They've been running in and out of here all night, poking needles in her and monitoring the machines. Have you heard from her family?"

Bull had gone through Tameka's things, looking for an emergency contact, and hadn't found one. Lulu turned out to still

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

have the number for Tameka's father from when Ms. Emma was alive. She'd agreed to get in touch with them and let them know that Tameka was in the hospital.

Lulu snorted. "They're out of the country—vacationing. Said since there was nothing they could do any way, they'd call and check on her condition when they got back. Didn't even leave a number where they could be reached," she finished disdainfully.

He ran his hand through his hair and glanced worriedly at Tameka, and then at the EKG machine. Same steady wave pattern. If she were listening and aware, the news didn't trouble her. "Meka mentioned that her parents were..."

"Lousy." Lulu supplied the word he was looking for.

"Yeah." His mind just couldn't comprehend it. To him, growing up in a two-parent home was the ultimate dream.

"From what Emma told me, Tameka's father spent more time hanging with 'the boys' than being home with his family. That wife of his was no better, only she liked to party. The clubs were her choice of hang out. Tameka virtually raised herself when she wasn't with Emma. She had her hands full, going to school and looking out for the younger ones as well. From what I hear, those two turned out just like their parents. Good for nothing."

Chad didn't have anything to say to that, so he left it alone. He hadn't even realized she had siblings. She hadn't mentioned it when they were talking about families and such. Before he could think of a response, Alex came through the door with Carol and a few others.

"Lulu, Chad, I'm going to have to ask you to step out for a minute," Alex respectfully commanded.

"I was just leaving," Lulu stated. "Gotta open the shop, but wanted to stop by and see how she was doing first."

"How long do you need? I was just heading for the shower," Chad told Alex. "I can wait if needed."

"No, go ahead. We should be done by the time you finish." Alex was already by Tameka's bedside with his team, which buzzed around her like a group of busy bees. They each put on surgical gloves as Carol set up an instrument tray next to Alex.

"Chad, call if you need anything, ya' hear?" Lulu's parting

words distracted him from the commotion around Tameka and reminded him of what he was supposed to be doing.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll make sure Meka knows you stopped by.”

Aware of Alex patiently waiting, Chad gathered his things and locked himself in the bathroom. He wasn’t concerned with someone walking in on him, but the lock would slow his wolf down if it heard something it didn’t like and thought his mate was in danger. The locked door would hopefully buy him enough time to gain control again.

When he came out the bathroom some fifteen minutes later, a lot of the machinery around Tameka had been removed, most notably the one that was doing her breathing for her. He slanted a questioning look at Alex.

“She’s in a twilight sleep right now.”

“Okay.” He waited a moment. “What’s a twilight sleep?”

Alex smiled before clarifying. “She’s unconscious, but breathing on her own. The anesthesia’s the same as if she were undergoing surgery. I doubt she’ll stay under long.”

Chad examined his mate again. The patches attached to her temples and chest were gone. So was the machine. The IV had been removed from her arm, along with the tubes that were inserted in her mouth, stomach, and urethra. The only machine he could see that was still attached was the one monitoring her vitals via the clip on her finger and the blood pressure cuff on her arm—the Pulse Oximeter. They’d even removed the anti-embolism stockings from her legs.

“I’m not sure how long it will take the medicine to work its way out of her system. At the rate she’s going, I’d say no more than an hour or two. If it takes longer, I’ll reverse it medically,” Alex finished grimly.

Chad walked over to the bed and gently traced Tameka’s jaw-line with his forefinger. “So, by that I take it she’s progressing faster than expected?”

Alex sighed. “I’ve been here all night running tests and monitoring her progress. I’ve never seen anything like it. She literally turned into a shifter, right before my eyes. I watched her DNA change until it was almost a perfect match for yours.”

Chad snatched his finger back and gazed at Alex in horror. “Like twins?”

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“What? No! I meant I saw her transform from human to wolf-shifter like us. Whatever it is that makes us who we are, she has it, too. The transformation’s almost one hundred percent complete. That’s why I say she’ll be out of it soon. The medicine in her now can only put a shifter, especially an alpha, under for a very short period of time. Tameka’s already proven she’d be strong earlier when she fought off the heavy dosage she was given.” Despite the confident tone he was projecting, Alex still didn’t look too sure.

“So,” Chad spoke slowly, “she’s alright now?”

Alex looked him straight in the eye. “As I told you before, this is new territory for me. I’ve never had a case like this, and there’s no one I can call to ask, not without revealing who and what we are. Based on what I can see, she’s doing fine. We won’t know for sure until she’s awake.”

He gave his patient one more all over glance, examined her vitals and made a notation on the printout, before turning back to Chad. “I’m beat. I’m going home before my mate comes looking for me. Carol’s here, as well as Tim. They’ll keep an eye on her and call me if needed.”

Chad much preferred Alex being in charge of Tameka’s medical care than Tim, Alex’s new assistant, but if the alpha felt it was safe enough to leave, he’d just have to deal.

When Alex left, Chad turned to Tameka. “Let’s get you bathed, honey, now that all those tubes aren’t in the way. I want you feeling good when you wake.”

Over the course of the week that he’d been there, he’d helped the nurses care for his mate, taking over as many of the duties as they’d allow. The one that he enjoyed most was bathing her. It was more than a sponge bath. Once done, he rubbed scented oil into her skin, massaging her muscles to increase circulation. He did it several times a day and to him, she seemed to rest easier each time.

He locked the door and took the basin into the bathroom to fill with warm water. Using one of her favorite body washes from home, he washed her from head-to-toe. After setting the basin to the side, he spread the pleasantly scented oil over his hands and fingers, and began giving his mate a deep muscle massage that started with the top of her feet and ended with a

scalp massage. He was extra careful to avoid the bandaged areas where tubes were previously inserted into her flesh.

Once he finished with her front, he gently turned her and began again with her back. As he washed her, he checked that there were no sore spots or tender areas that might be an indicator of forming bedsores. Amazingly, to his inexperienced eyes, she looked good.

When she was clean, he lathered his hands with oil again and began her massage. He took his time, giving extra special care and attention to these muscles that she'd lain on for so many days. As he massaged her, he spoke to her.

"I love your feet, how they're so dainty and narrow. And these slender ankles of yours." As he massaged her arch, her foot seemed to jerk in his hands.

"Your legs are long and strong, like a runner. These thighs and hips," he sighed with pleasure. "Don't ever let me hear you say you're trying to lose weight. These babies were made to cradle me, providing just the right cushioning. When you're carrying our child, the wideness of these hips will be a blessing, ensuring a safe pregnancy and delivery for you and our babe."

"This ass is a work of art. Makes me hard just looking at it. High and tight with just the right amount of jiggle. Oh, yeah, baby. This thing speaks to me and it says, *Do me!*" He spent an extra long time working her globes, rubbing them up and down, rotating and separating the cheeks.

"I love this little dip in your back right before the swell of your ass. It's so sexy. Makes me want to run my tongue down the length of your spine and linger here, savoring your flavor." Before he was tempted to do just that, he moved on.

"Your back is strong and lean, shoulders broad. Some men don't think wide shoulders are sexy on a woman. Fools. I appreciate them because I know what they support. Two handfuls of the most luscious breasts it's ever been my fortune to witness. I could spend hours feasting on them. I can't wait until they're flowing with milk." He paused for a moment to adjust the erection pressing against the zipper in his jeans.

His hands cradled her neck as his thumbs massaged the back of her nape. "This right here is long and slender as a swan. It's so graceful and elegant, but has so much attitude. I love how

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expressive you are. Your anger turns me on like you wouldn't believe."

He finished and, unable to resist, ran kisses down the indent of her spinal cord. "Hurry and wake, baby. We got a whole lot of lovin' to make up for. Once I get in here," he stroked his finger down her glistening slit, "I'm not coming out for a week, so you better be ready."

Chad forced himself away from his mate's prone body and put up the supplies he'd used. That task completed, he covered Tameka with the sheet and went and unlocked the door. Karen, one of the nurse's aides, came and dropped off breakfast, and he ate while she changed the linens on the bed.

"I'd say another hour or so at the most and she should be out of it," she told him.

"Good. I can't wait." He finished eating and laid down his fork.

"If you're done, I can take this with me when I go. Save me a trip back to collect it later."

"Sure, and thanks. Do you know if she's scheduled for anymore tests or lab work?" he asked while she placed the dirty linens outside the door and then came back for his food tray.

"No. Now we just wait and see." She gave him a reassuring smile.

"If that's the case, I'm going to lie down and hold my mate. It's been way too long since I've been able to."

Karen's brown eyes gleamed with suppressed amusement. "I'm sure you'll both enjoy it. I'll tell the rest of the staff not to disturb you unless it's completely necessary."

Chad gave a heartfelt sigh of relief. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"No problem." She waved away his gratitude and left.

He slipped his shirt off his shoulders, laid it to the side and unbuttoned his jeans. He wanted to take them off, but he settled for loosing them instead. When he was as comfortable as he was going to get, he climbed onto the bed and gathered Tameka in his arms with her head lying on his chest. He made sure the cuff and monitor had plenty of leeway, and gave a small moan of pleasure as he relaxed against the pillow.

He pulled the covers over the both of them and lay there

stroking her back. Before he knew it, the stress of the last few days caught up with him and he was out like a light.

\* \* \* \*

Chad woke to the sensation that something was off. Warm, moist heat engulfed his naked and throbbing shaft, and his eyes snapped open. For a moment, he was too stunned to move. His need to protect kicked in, jolting him out of his temporary paralysis.

“Tameka, baby, no!” He placed his hands on the sides of her head and tried to pry her off of him.

She growled, low in her throat. Razor sharp teeth pressed against his erection as she raised eyes that glowed pure gold in warning. The message was clear. Back off and let her have her way, or risk losing a much valued part of his anatomy.

Being the smart man that he was, he quickly raised his hands in a sign of surrender.

She played with him, licking, sucking and slurping his cock like it was a big, frozen Popsicle she was trying to consume before it could melt outside in a hundred degree weather. Chad gritted his teeth, leashed his wolf, and held onto his passion with grim determination. He breathed a sigh of relief when she finally rose, licking her lips.

The sigh quickly morphed into a groan of apprehension as she climbed on top and impaled herself on his penis in one smooth motion.

He quickly reached out and clamped hard hands on her hips, ready to lift her off of him, no matter how much his body protested. “Meka, we need to stop. It’s too soon. You just came out of a coma, woman.”

“Mine,” she snarled gutturally. Her eyes flashed and she dug claws into his chest. “Chad, mine. All mine.” She lifted up and dropped back down.

Chad fought and lost a battle with his wolf as it came roaring to the forefront. His body shifted into its half-beast/half-man form as he growled back, “Mate want? Mate take.”

She smiled, displaying a dainty row of lethally sharp teeth, and rode him hard enough to make the bed shake. His human

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part hoped no one stuck their head in the room to see what the commotion was. His wolf didn't care. This was his mate and she was claiming him in the most primal of ways.

He felt her sheath contract violently right before she lowered her head and sank fangs into his chest, marking him. Chad growled long and loud, gripped her hips with claws extended to hold her in place as he jack hammered up into her convulsing vagina. He lunged forward and sank his teeth into her right breast, marking her as she'd marked him, as his body expelled streams of cum into her waiting receptacle.

He licked the wounds so they would quickly heal before collapsing back on the bed. Tameka sprawled on top of him in a boneless heap. His wolf, supremely satisfied, slid back into the place in Chad's soul where he resided. Now that he was himself again, concern for his mate overwhelmed him.

"Meka, baby. How you feeling? Was I too rough?"

A soft snore was his response.

He chuckled ruefully. "Bit off a bit more than you could handle, huh? Rest, baby. I'm not going anywhere."

His jeans were toast. Tameka, the little she-wolf, had shredded the front of his jeans to get to her prize. With a goofy grin on his face, he reached down and tugged the covers over their joined hips. He was still hard and had no intention of leaving the haven she offered anytime soon.

A knock sounded at the door moments before Carol stuck her head inside. "Is it safe? We heard growling." Her face was deadpan, but Chad thought he detected a naughty twinkle in her eyes that said she wasn't the least bit surprised by what she was seeing. Of course, there was no hiding what they'd been doing with the scent of sex permeating the room.

"Tameka woke, or her wolf. I'm still not sure which one it was," he confessed.

A soft snore punctuated his statement.

"Chad, you wore the poor girl out and her, barely out of a coma," she scolded as she came into the room.

He immediately protested. "Uh-huh, not me. I was sleep. She's the one who attacked me. I tried to stop her, but she was having none of it. So, I just laid back and let her have her way." He languidly stroked the path of Tameka's spine while valiantly

trying to suppress the satiated grin that kept rising to the surface.

“Um-hmm. And if I were to look under the covers?” she asked in her sternest voice, the one he only heard used in her role as second-in-command of the Raven pack.

He shifted uncomfortably and tightened his grip on the sheet. “I wouldn’t advise that.”

Carol snorted right before she burst into laughter. “Relax, honey. I remember what it was like to be newly mated. I’ll stop teasing you now. Just let me secure the equipment and I’ll leave you two alone.”

He was a bit bemused by the realization that she was playing with him. In her role as Second, she tended to be direct and to the point. But then, he’d never been around the beautiful beta in a strictly social setting. The only pack gatherings he’d attended to date were the mandatory meetings.

Carol checked the equipment. “She must have snatched this off. >From the way it was thrown, I’d say it was definitely her wolf you dealt with earlier.”

She lifted Tameka’s wrist and took her pulse. “She seems to be fine. Expect her to be groggy and sleep a lot as the medicine finishes working its way out of her system. I’ll let Alex know when he calls that she awakened. He’s going to want to keep her a few more days just to be safe, but we’re not anticipating any problems with her recovery. Actually, waking as she did was a good thing, in my opinion.”

At her words, he felt a part of himself relax that he hadn’t know was tense. Everything was going to be fine. He could finally let himself believe. He was lying there contemplating the glorious future that awaited them when Bull arrived.

“Knock, knock. Comin’ in,” Bull announced as he stuck his head around the corner.

Chad immediately pulled the covers up to Tameka’s shoulders and made sure she was decently covered before raising the back of the bed. “Hey, Bull. What’s up?”

Bull seemed to hesitate. That’s when Chad realized Bull was in uniform and not his usual joking self. He got a nasty feeling in his gut. “Since you’re in uniform, I take it this isn’t a social visit?”

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\* \* \* \*

NeeCee Jones stood outside the partially opened door to the room, her hand poised to knock. Moments earlier, the hunky cop she'd seen earlier disappeared behind this same door. Hearing the question, she paused. There was no way her sister Tameka was in trouble with the law. Maybe she had the wrong room, but the number on the door was right, and there weren't too many doors to choose from.

"Our perp struck again." Hmm, nice voice. Had to be the cop speaking.

"What did she do this time?"

NeeCee couldn't see to whom the other voice belonged. If she moved, there was a good chance she'd be spotted hovering in the doorway. Uncertainty and curiosity held her in its grip, so she waited. If this were the right room, once she found out what she needed to know, she'd reveal her presence.

"Tameka got a package in the mail. I've already taken it in and tagged it for evidence. There's no prints and no return address on the envelope. We know where it originated—a post office in Colby—but it doesn't do us any good."

There was the slight sound of shifting, then the cop spoke, "I should warn you..."

"Son of a bitch!"

"...the photos are pretty explicit," he finished ruefully.

The other guy was still cursing, using some pretty graphic and colorful language combinations of what he was going to do to "her" if he ever caught her.

"We're still no closer to discovering who's behind this, but Rome's got an inside in with the Markham Group. They agreed to work with us to try to lure her out. Deputy Shelley is working with one of their managers, who is pretending to be interested in the project, but only if the perp can procure the land within a limited period of time. They're drawing up bogus contracts as we speak."

The other guy finally quieted. "What's the method of contact?"

"The address Markham was given is one of those mailbox services. We're sending a letter and will have someone watching

to see who comes nibbling at our bait.”

“I want her, Bull. No one threatens my mate and gets away with it.” The voice was deadly.

Who was this guy? NeeCee was damn glad he wasn’t talking about her. The last thing she wanted was this guy as an enemy. She shivered. What the hell had Tameka gotten herself involved in?

“This woman sat outside my mate’s house and took intimate photos of the two of us together, after she’d just got finished puncturing Tameka’s two rear tires. She was waiting and hoping for a reaction. Meka can’t see these. She’d freak.”

What was in those pictures? Surely Tameka wasn’t caught having sex. Naaww. Not Ms. Uptight-Got-To-Fix-The-World and Safety-and-Caution-First having sex with a man she’d just met, in full digital color? Impossible.

“Who else has seen them?”

“Just Rome. I dusted and catalogued them myself and locked them in the vault. I wouldn’t do that to you, man,” the cop assured him.

Whatever was in those photos, it was definitely something the other guy didn’t want to be seen.

“It’s a good thing you stayed human or we’d be in deep shit now,” the cop continued.

“Staying human when I’m that deep in Tameka is impossible.”

*Huh?*

“Well, if you did, you must have kept your head down because she doesn’t have a clear shot of you in half-form. The camera must have been mostly focused on Tameka.”

“Yeah, thank God for small mercies.”

Silence fell in the room, except for the small sound of paper being shuffled. NeeCee wanted to hear more about the guy not being human. Mentally, she urged them to explain. Before their conversation could continue, she heard a cart rattling in the hallway, coming her way. Time to quit lingering here in the doorway.

She rapped on the door, calling out, “Tameka?” as she pushed it open and stepped inside the room. She stopped abruptly, as though confused. “I’m sorry. I’m looking for

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Tameka Jones?"

The cop turned to face her, his stance protective as he blocked her view of the couple on the bed. Damn he was cute, in a tall, lanky, cowboy kind of way. He had rich brown hair with a cowlick that fell over his one of his deep, dark, brown eyes with a hint of gold in the center, and big hands with long, lean fingers. "And you are?"

"NeeCee Jones, Tameka's sister."

The cop turned partially to get the other guy's reaction. If she hadn't just listened in on their conversation, she would have been concerned and angered by the lack of friendliness—downright suspiciousness—they were exhibiting. As it was, she understood their caution and reserve and appreciated it, 'cause it displayed their concern for her sister's well being.

"Can I see some identification, Ms. Jones?" The cop again.

The blond giant on the bed hadn't said a word, though she really couldn't see him that well with the cop still blocking her view. NeeCee reached into her back pocket for her wallet, feeling her shirt stretch tight across her breasts. The cop's eyes focused there and seemed to linger on the nipple hugging jewelry she wore, made more visible with her action.

"Here you go." She handed him her driver's license.

He examined it. "You mind if I take this out to the car and run it through?"

"Knock yourself out." She granted him permission with an airy wave of her hand.

As he moved past her and headed for the door, NeeCee got her first good look at the other man in the room.

Good Lord, the man was handsome in a cold, deadly way—like one of those movie assassins on TV—but the way he held Tameka was telling. She wouldn't have imagined after listening to him and now seeing him, that a man that appeared as ruthless as he could be so gentle.

Look at Tameka, sprawled over the man like he was her personal mattress. NeeCee mentally shook her head. Who would have thunk? Tameka, the prude, lying naked in her equally naked lover's arms, right here in the hospital—clinic—whatever this was. These mountain men sure moved fast.

While she'd been busy checking him out, she took note that

he'd been doing the same. She started to ask if she passed muster, but one look into those jaded eyes and she only had one thought—cop. Figures he'd be a pig.

“So you're Tameka's sister. She doesn't talk about you.”

NeeCee shrugged. “Any reason why she should? You've known her, what? All of five days? I'm sure you know her entire life history by now,” she finished snidely.

He almost smiled, but seemed to catch himself. “Eight days, and you're definitely related. Same smart mouth and lack of fear.”

She allowed herself to smirk. Found out Meka wasn't as soft as she looked, had he? “Now that we know who I am, who, or shall I say what, are you?”

Any hint of warming in his manner towards her disappeared in an instant as his eyes narrowed to slits. “Deputy Sheriff Chad Wilson, and your sister's mate.”

NeeCee planted her hands on her waist, leaned forward aggressively and narrowed her eyes in return. “My sister hasn't been here long enough to have a mate, whatever the hell that is. And she doesn't jump into strange men's beds, especially white men. What did you do to her?”

For a brief second, she thought she saw a look of extreme guilt cross his features before vanishing. He opened his mouth, and from the expression on his face, was ready to blast her good when Tameka stirred. It was like someone threw a switch. All of that hostility, gone in an instant as a look of...she had a hard time deciphering it. It looked like love, lust, and tenderness all rolled into one. Whatever it was, he had it bad. Now she needed to see if Meka felt the same.

Meka rubbed her face against the man's chest and whispered, “Chad.”

“Right here, baby. I told you I wasn't leaving.” His voice was a husky murmur.

“Mmm, you feel good,” she drawled in the sexiest tone NeeCee had ever heard come from her lips. She hadn't even known Meka could sound like that.

She made a movement with her hips and NeeCee suddenly knew, just absolutely knew what she'd see if the covers weren't in the way. Blech! She didn't know whether to be grossed out at

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

the visual she just received or to be ecstatic that her sister was finally getting some.

Chad's massive hands clamped down on Meka's butt, stilling her movements. "Your sister's here," he warned.

"Who...NeeCee? Last I heard she was in Spain or one of those European countries."

"Yeah, about that. I guess I really should do a better job of keeping in touch. I've been back in the States for awhile now."

Meka jerked towards her. Any doubts NeeCee might have had about Meka's lack of clothing vanished as she caught a glimpse of breasts before Chad hastily covered them.

"What are *you* doing here?"

Inwardly, she winced. It wasn't as though she expected to be welcomed with open arms, but still. She bit back a sigh.

"Mom called. Said something about life support, critical conditions and if I wanted to see you before you croaked, now might be a good time to do so. So I came." Dropped everything and come running as fast as she could, but Meka didn't need to know all of that.

"Life support? Critical condition? What?" The confusion on her face would have been comical under other circumstances.

Chad touched her sister's face, capturing her attention. "Babe, what's the last thing you remember?"

Tameka blushed. "Us..."

"Before that." Chad quickly cut her off as he nodded in NeeCee's direction, reminding Meka of her presence.

"Oh, right. Umm," she thought for a while, then continued slowly. "I remember getting really sick at the shop. It gets a little fuzzy after that, but I know you were with me. I remember you talking to me."

So Mom hadn't lied. Meka had gone back to hairdressing. Weird.

In the gentlest motion NeeCee had ever seen, Chad brushed Meka's hair back from her face, and stared deeply into her eyes. "You collapsed into seizures. One right after the other. Alex put you into a coma to keep brain damage from occurring. That was five days ago. You just came out of it a few hours ago. I've never been so scared in my life."

And he'd already nailed her? That must be some serious

juju he was packing. Before she could remind them that she was still in the room, and to not start doing anything she definitely *did not* want to be party to, the cop returned.

As he handed her the license, he told Chad, “She’s clean. No priors. Not anything that I can find.”

Background check. She should have known. Cops everywhere were the same.

“My sister’s no criminal,” Meka said sharply. “I’ll admit she doesn’t have the best judgment in the world, and can be a major pain in the ass, but she’s no felon.”

“Love you, too, sis.”

## *Chapter Eight*

Tameka sighed heavily. "NeeCee, you know what I mean. And why are you guys checking out my sister anyway?"

Chad tensed beneath her. He and the deputy she didn't know exchanged meaningful looks. She could feel the tension in the air. Something was going on besides her getting sick.

"We..." Chad began.

"They're just being extremely cautious," NeeCee interrupted. "You know how cops are. Oooo, new person in town, and look, she's black. Better make sure she's on the up and up."

"NeeCee!" Not that she hadn't thought the same exact thing that day when Chad pulled her over, but some things you don't voice aloud.

"What? It's not like you've never thought it," her baby sister said defensively.

Tameka could feel Chad staring at her and fidgeted, avoiding his gaze.

"So how long are you supposed to be in here anyway, since you're not dying and all?"

She was grateful when both men's eyes swung NeeCee's way. "I don't know. I haven't spoken with a doctor, or seen one for that matter. I have no idea what's going on beyond what Chad just told me." She frowned at the realization.

"The clinic's head nurse, Carol, said you seemed to be recovering nicely but that Alex would probably keep you another day or two to be sure. In the meantime, expect to be groggy and sleep a lot as the medicine works its way out of your system," Chad informed her.

"If you're going to be stuck here for another day or so, can I bunk at your house? From the looks of things, the nearest motel is over an hour away."

Since Tameka never thought she would stay anywhere else, she responded a bit absently. “Yeah, sure.” She turned back to Chad. “Do *you* have my keys? I don’t know where anything is,” she explained to her sister.

“I gave them to Bull. He’s been keeping an eye on the place for me. Bull, will you escort Ms. Jones...”

“You can call me NeeCee. Ms. Jones was my grandmother,” her sister interrupted.

“NeeCee to Tameka’s house and make sure she’s settled?”

“Sure thing. Right this way, miss.” The twinkle in Bull’s eye said he’d like to do more than help her get settle.

NeeCee opened her mouth to comment, but held back at the last minute. Unusual for her. Finally she said, “We’ll talk later, when things aren’t so...” She waved her hand, taking in the contents and the inhabitants in one sweep.

“Yeah, that will be good.” And it would be. She hadn’t seen NeeCee in a long, long time. Frankly she was amazed that her sister had come running when she found out she was sick.

“Here, Bull. Take this with you, and close the door on your way out, if you don’t mind.” Chad handed the deputy a large gold envelope with her name on it.

“Hey, that has my name on it. Hand it over.”

“Come on, Bull. I’m tired. That was a long drive. You people are on the backside of nowhere. I got lost twice. Let’s get out of here while I can still function.” NeeCee grabbed him by the arm and started tugging. “So, they call you Bull. Would that be because you’re hung like one, or because you frequently spout a bunch of bullshit out of your mouth?”

“Would you really like to find out? I’ll be happy to show you.” The expression on his face could only be described as lecherous as he paused at the door, waiting for NeeCee to exit before him.

The door closed on her response. Damn, she hadn’t seen or heard from her sister since NeeCee was a teenager, and it looked like she hadn’t changed a bit.

The hands still cupping her hips began a slow, sensuous massage as Chad flexed his hips. His cock rubbed against tissues still sensitive from their earlier mating, and her breath caught in her throat.

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“Don’t think you can distract me with sex. I want to know what was in the envelope and why my name was on it.” It was hard to sound firm when what he was doing felt so good. She found herself matching him, doing a slow grind on his pelvis in a circular rotation that complemented his in and out micro-thrusts.

“Who says my goal is to distract you? Why can’t I simply be expressing the love I feel for my mate? You want to talk? By all means, let’s discuss whatever’s on your mind. I can multitask.” He punctuated the word *multitask* with a sharp jab of the hips that almost rolled her eyes up into her head.

Tameka planted her hands on his chest, raising her upper body for leverage and began to rock. “So...the packet. What...was in it?” she hissed, eyes closing in bliss.

“I don’t want to speak of that right now. Tell me about your sister. Why haven’t you mentioned her before now?” His head was tilted back into the pillow, eyes closed, cords in his neck beginning to protrude.

Tameka froze. “You don’t want to talk about it,” she echoed. “Why not?”

Chad got a good grip on her thighs, planted his feet on the bed and pistoned inside her. “Because...right now...I want to focus...on pleasant things, like...how much...I missed you,” he panted. “How happy...I am that you’re...okay. How much I love...you and...I’ll never let...you go. You’re mine.” The last came out in a growl as his eyes started to glow.

Tameka wanted to argue. She really did but at that moment, deep inside of her something shifted. Something feral. It rose and took over. “Mate now; explain later.”

\* \* \* \*

“What the hell is going on around here? Who is after my sister and what are you doing to stop them?”

The alluring siren from a moment before was gone and in its place stood an angry, fire-breathing sex goddess. This side of her turned him on more than the other. His dick hardened painfully in his pants.

NeeCee Jones stood before him, model tall and slender, hands on her hips, tiny breasts jutting out and one hip cocked

forward. The skinny jeans she wore lovingly molded to her long, lean legs, and his gaze helplessly traced the seam that ran through their juncture, wishing it were his hand. Or better yet, his tongue.

Her nipples were either pierced or clamped. Either way, he was determined to find out. He wanted to dip his tongue into her exposed naval and play with the diamond stud piercing. Then he'd examine her body, inch by succulent inch, and see what other delights her clothing was hiding.

She cleared her throat—loudly. “Excuse me. I asked you a question. If you're finished ogling me, would it be too much trouble to give me an answer?”

Oh, yeah. He liked this woman, and before she left, he was getting a taste of her. His mind instantly got lost in all the ways he was going to take her.

Muttering something about “inbred hillbilly cops,” she stormed off.

The back view was just as luscious as the front. On her right lower back, just above the waistband of her pants was a tattoo—a red heart with a jagged split down the middle caused by a striking bolt of lightning. He caught her with her hand on the car door handle. After spinning her around, he pinned her against the car with his body.

He was six-two. She stood only an inch or so shorter than he and was able to look him straight in the eye. That meant he could kiss her without getting a crook in his neck. Or, with the slightest bending of the knees, take her standing since their groins lined up perfectly.

The murderous look in her eye made him focus on the conversation. “How much did you hear?” She had to have been standing right outside the door.

“Enough to know that there are pictures in that envelope that Chad doesn't want anyone—including Tameka—to see. And that someone is after her. Something she seems to have no knowledge of, and that the guy she's with may not be human. I miss anything?”

Her expression dared him to lie, so he gave it to her straight. “Someone is pushing your sister hard, trying to scare into leaving town and selling the land she inherited. They sent a box

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of dead roses, flattened two of her tires while the car was parked in her yard, butchered a dog and hung it from a noose in her front yard, and now these pictures.” He set the envelope on the roof of her vehicle and settled his weight more firmly against her.

“You can get Mr. Happy off of me. I don’t do white men,” she snarled while pushing against his chest. “What about Chad? If he’s not human, what is he?”

He refused to budge. “You may not do white men, but you’ll do me.” He got right in her face and said, “Chad is a werewolf, and so am I.” Then he swooped in for a kiss.

She tried to bite his lip off.

He drew back with a silly smile on his face. *Damn, I think I’m in love.*

“Back off.” She tried to meld into the metal framework of the car. “I said I’m not interested. Werewolves? Him, I can believe. You’re definitely a dog. What kind remains to be seen.”

She shoved him again, and this time he gave her just enough space to turn around, then he leaned forward and whispered into her ear, “Your mouth maybe saying no, but I can smell the way your pussy is creaming for me. I can’t wait to lap it up.”

She froze, muscles stiffening until she resembled a living, breathing, marble statue.

“Follow me and I’ll show you where your sister lives. By the way, I’ll be staying there as well until she’s able to come home.” He licked the shell of her ear, grinning when she shivered. Before backing away, he made sure she could feel how hard he was for her.

As he walked off, the cop in him came to the forefront and he turned back around. “On second thought, leave your car here. I have an idea.”

\* \* \* \*

Tameka collapsed onto Chad, so exhausted she could do nothing but groan. “I can’t feel my legs.”

A supremely satisfied, belly roll of laughter rumbled out of the chest below her. “You need to eat. Once you get some solid food into your system, you’ll be back to your normal self. Let me

call the nurse.” He reached for the call button.

“Touch it and die. Enough people have seen me naked. I want clothes and then food, in that order. And while I’m dressing, you can explain what was in the package that you didn’t want me to see.”

His heartbeat stuttered, and then began to race. Whatever it was, it must be serious. He really didn’t want her to know.

“Do I have clothes to put on?”

The hand languidly stroking her back paused. “I didn’t think to have Bull bring you some.”

She sighed. “No biggie. I’m not sure I like the idea of someone I don’t know going through my underwear drawer. I’m sure this place has a gown or something I can put on, even if it does leave my butt hanging out.”

The hand resumed motion. “I can do better than that. I have a shirt you can wear that should cover you sufficiently. Later, you can call your sister and have her pack you a bag.”

When minutes passed and he continued to lie there, Tameka prompted him. “Well, are you going to get me the shirt or not?”

He grumbled under his breath. “I don’t want to move. I miss being connected with you like this.”

She patted him soothingly on the shoulder. “I’m alive. We have all the time in the world to be connected like this.” On the word *this*, she contracted her vaginal muscles around his still erect penis.

Chad cursed and his hips flexed. “If you’re trying to convince me to pull out, you’re going about it the wrong way,” he muttered.

“Fine. I’ll just lay here and starve,” she complained despondently. “You can explain my death to the medical staff.” Her stomach chose that moment to rumble, punctuating her statement.

With a harassed expression on his face, Chad lifted her off of him, rose from the bed and brought her one of his shirts to wear. “Anything else I can do for you?” He placed his hands on his hips and arched his left brow.

She answered while donning the shirt. “Yeah, you can help me into the bathroom.”

He frowned ferociously. “I’ll have the nurse bring you a

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bedpan.”

“Only if you want me to bludgeon you with it. Help me out of this bed or I’ll do it myself.” She scowled back at him.

He snatched her up and plopped her down on top of the toilet stool. Leaning against the doorjamb, he crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

“Get out and close the door behind you. I’m not peeing with you watching.”

He opened his mouth, probably to complain, but Tameka didn’t give him a chance. “Now! The longer I take, the more time Mr. Winky has to wait to come back home.”

His mouth snapped shut and he stormed out, muttering about stubborn females lacking the sense God gave a goose right before the door closed.

“And put on some pants!” she hollered through the door.

Once he was gone, Tameka allowed the smile she was suppressing to surface. He was so cute when he couldn’t have his way. Imagine the big, bad werewolf throwing a temper tantrum.

An uncomfortable fifteen minutes later, she was no longer laughing. Sweat poured down her face and she was so weak it was all she could do to sit upright. Pee shouldn’t burn coming out. There was also blood. Not much, but enough to frighten her. Having never been seriously ill, now that she wasn’t being distracted by Chad, she was worried and wanted nothing more than to go home.

Too tired for modesty, she called for Chad and allowed him to assist. At her request, he sponged the sweat off of her body, gave her a fresh shirt, and placed her back on the bed seconds before dinner arrived. She picked at her food, having lost her appetite.

“Chad?”

“Hmm?” He glanced up from the steak he was devouring.

“Are you sure I’m alright? I don’t have some fatal disease and you’re just too afraid to tell me, do I?”

Chad choked, coughing and pounding on his chest to get the food to go down. “What! No, why on earth would you think something like that?”

“I’m never sick. Something must be wrong. People don’t just suddenly up and have seizures, unless... Did I have a

stroke?”

“No.”

“Well, I know it’s not epilepsy and I didn’t hit my head, so there’s no trauma to the brain. Hypoglycemia? I did get dizzy for a while there. That’s one of the signs of low blood sugar.”

“Your insulin levels are fine.”

“Oh, God, is it meningitis?”

He dropped his fork and just stared, a horrible, hunted expression on his face.

Her heart clenched. “That’s it, isn’t it? How bad is it? Tell me. I can handle it.”

“It’s my fault, all right?” He pushed his food away and surged to his feet. “I did it. You almost died because of me.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then she quietly said, “I don’t understand.”

He stalked over to the window and parted the curtains. From the way the light reflected off of the glass, she doubted he could see anything, yet he stared intently.

“That day at my house, when I bit you...”

“You gave me rabies?” She said it half-jokingly, hoping to at least get a smile.

The fingers clutching the curtains turned white. “When I bit you, I licked the wounds to heal them. In the process, I flooded your body with too much of my DNA. That’s why you got sick. Your system couldn’t handle it and reacted.”

“I see.”

He spun around. “Do you?” he asked fiercely. “I don’t think you do. If you did, you’d be yelling right now, kicking me out of the room.”

“Why? It was an accident. You didn’t mean to make me ill. It happened. I survived and we know not to do that again.” Tameka didn’t understand why he was being so hard on himself. He was a different species from her, and he’d already admitted he didn’t know much about his nature. Only what he managed to learn through trial and error growing up. Accidents were bound to happen as they adjusted to each other.

“Was it, Meka? Are you so sure? What if I told you I did it on purpose?” He stalked over until he stood three feet from the bed, almost within touching distance. His hands were fisted at

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his side and his body rigid with tightly leashed anger.

If all of that rage were directed at her, she might have been nervous. But it was clearly self-directed. "I'm certain of it. Whatever your intent, it wasn't to harm. You would die before doing anything to intentionally hurt me."

The quiet confidence in her voice deflated him like a balloon. He sank to his knees beside the bed, an earnest expression on his face. "I swear to God, Meka, I didn't mean to hurt you. Alex was explaining to me about true mates, and he said that the more of my DNA you had in you, the quicker you would accept that I was your mate. Only he didn't get a chance to finish. I took it from there and almost lost you forever."

"You wanted me that bad, that you were willing to change who and what I am just to keep me? Without my permission?"

"Yes." His answer was stark and honest, but the feeling in the depths of his eyes shook her right down to her soul. This green-eyed Viking didn't simply want her. He craved her the way a drug addict lusted after his next fix. He gazed at her as though he would die if he couldn't have her, like she was the very air that he breathed.

She scooted over and lifted the cover. "Come here. You're too far away. And take off those jeans. I want to feel you skin-to-skin."

He hurried to comply. Once he was in the bed, she fell into his arms, immediately tangling their legs together. When they lay face-to-face with the same pillow supporting both of their heads, she asked, "Does this mean I'm like you now?"

"Alex believes so." His gaze searched hers, as though he were trying to decipher how she felt about him and the news he'd just given her.

Logic dictated that she be angry. After all, thanks to him she was no longer human, but strangely, she wasn't. Though she'd been furious at the time and believed it to be one big joke at her expense, she remembered every word of what Kiesha explained about true mates, the mating fever and bond, and its effect on her body. If Kiesha was to be believed, her changing into a werewolf was inevitable as long as she continued her relationship with Chad, and she'd done nothing to end it. In fact, she'd welcomed him with open arms once she realized he was telling the truth

about who and what he was.

On the basis of all she'd been told, she deduced that all Chad had done was speed the process of something that would have happened anyway. She couldn't be angry with him for that, although he clearly thought that she would be. She could see the guilt and self-condemnation written all over his face. He expected her to reject him, maybe the same way everyone else he ever cared about had. Growing up in foster care couldn't have been easy.

She'd deal with that in a moment, but while he was being so open, there were a few more things she needed to know. "What was in the envelope?"

He stiffened and tried to move away, but she held him tight.

"Chad," she growled warningly. She was sick and tired of him trying to evade answering this question. Something was going on. Something that effected her and she was damned if she'd let him continue keeping her in the dark. "Talk!"

\* \* \* \*

At her tone, he looked at her. She was pissed. Her wolf peeked out at him from behind her eyes. He couldn't put this off any longer. He started talking before her wolf could grab control. "Pictures of us."

"Is that all?" She rolled her eyes. "What's so bad about...wait a minute. We haven't posed for any photos. Who took the pictures?" First she looked puzzled, then suspicious. "Pictures of us where...doing what? The camera wasn't on when you stopped me that day, was it?" Her eyes were narrowed and mouth pursed as she glowered at him.

"No," he responded absently as images cascaded through his mind. The first ones weren't so bad. Tameka as she exited the house in his work shirt, flip-flops and nothing else, looking sexily ruffled. Him, right on her heels in his work pants, bare chest, and feet. Them examining the tires. Meka backing away as he tried to kiss her.

Then they changed. Him with his white blond hair covered head buried between her meaty brown thighs. The purplish, swollen head of his cock as it parted the puffy, fuchsia-colored,

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inner lips of her sex. Meka, head thrown back, eyes slitted and mouth parted, a look of ecstasy on her face. Another of Meka with her feet up in the air, one flip-flop dangling from her big toe as he bent her in half and rode her hard.

Thank God he'd been too intent on getting inside of her and bringing them both to completion to bare her breasts. From the angle of the photos, this person must have been in a tree upwind of them, or he'd been so focused on his mate he failed notice anyone else around.

"In your yard, but that's not all." He hurried on before she could probe for further details. "Those flat tires of yours were no accident. Neither were the flowers. You're being stalked."

She reared back in shock. "Chad, that's crazy. I just got here. Barely even know anyone. Stalkers fixate on their victims. I haven't been here long enough to attract anyone's attention, let alone piss them off." She was shaking her head.

"You got mine," he reminded her quietly.

"But," she sputtered. "That's different."

"There's more. While you were unconscious, this same person butchered a dog and hung it from a noose in your front yard," he continued grimly.

Meka froze and her eyes rounded as she searched his face. Whatever she saw must have convinced her he was serious, and the threat was real. "Why? None of this makes sense. Stalkers don't just randomly choose people."

"The land," he told her firmly. "It's the only thing that fits. We believe someone's trying to scare you off, force you to sell. This same person contacted the Markham Group to contract a housing development deal using your property."

"Markham...but those are the people trying to buy my property." Chad could smell her confusion.

"No they're not. Someone's trying to use them to hide their actions. Have you ever called the Markham Group and asked for this person?"

"What person? She never gave me a name. Even the letters never mention a specific contact, just a department. I don't know why I never noticed before," she finished, the disgust she was feeling rich in her tone.

"Why would you? It's not like you were actually interested

in selling. As far as you were concerned, this woman was just a nuisance.” He cupped her chin and gazed steadily into her eyes until she acknowledged the truth of his words.

He could literally see her brain processing the information he’d given her. Her face was that expressive. He wasn’t surprised when she continued questioning him, but the direction she took did.

“If someone’s trying to scare me off, why hang a dog in my yard? Just a plain noose would have been more effective. I would have immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was racial targeting a la the Ku Klux Klan.” Tameka rose up onto one elbow and rested her head in her hand.

“It was, but it was aimed at me, not you,” he confirmed, liking the way her mind worked. Of course, there wasn’t much he didn’t like about her.

“I hate to keep saying this, but I don’t understand. Enlighten me. How was this targeted at you?” She began to absently draw circles on his chest.

He caught her hand and held it, not wanting the distraction. “The dog they chose was an Alaskan Husky, very wolf-like in appearance. And they left a note.”

“What did it say?”

“Beast lover. Go back where you belong.”

“So, whoever this person is, they know what you are. That should help narrow down the suspects,” she concluded confidently.

He felt a spurt of annoyance. “This isn’t an episode of *CSI*. Real crime solving isn’t that easy,” he snapped.

He thought again of how little they knew and got pissed off all over again. This was his mate being threatened. He felt a burning desire to hunt down whoever was responsible and eliminate them, by any means necessary.

Heat rose and his skin felt on fire as his wolf, responding to his anger, tried to rise to the surface. He shoved it back down and clamped a lid on it before his beast could call hers. She was too new and didn’t have the needed control. The less her beast stirred the better. During sex was one thing, but this was totally different.

“I didn’t think it was, but actually, how hard can it be? You

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know it's not one of...one of..." Her face scrunched as she searched her memory. Then she snapped her fingers. "You know it isn't one of the pack. They all know whom the land really belongs to. So you're looking for a human female that knows about you. This area is small. How many woman can there be that fit that description?"

She was so earnest that he forgot his anger. Besides, she was right.

"And another thing, why my land? There's plenty of undeveloped property in this area for sale. I see the signs all the time. Not in Refuge itself, but definitely in the surrounding area. Why is she so focused on mine?"

Chad was stunned. He'd been so intent on discovering the who, he hadn't given much thought to the why, besides the obvious. He reached for his phone on the bedside table.

"What are you doing?" She sat up on the bed.

"Calling Rome."

"Who's Rome?"

"My boss." He held up a finger, telling her to wait as Rome answered.

"Chad. How's your mate?"

"Fine. Look, I was explaining the situation to Tameka and she brought up an interesting point. Why this land in particular? There's plenty around the county for sale."

There was silence on the other end. "That's a good question. Following her line of reasoning, that makes this personal. The note said, 'Go back where *you* belong.' The implication being that Tameka didn't belong here. I took it to mean Refuge, but it may have been more specific to the land itself."

"Was someone else in line to inherit my property? Did Mr. Ned have any children that feel they've been cheated," Tameka asked.

Chad's eyes narrowed at this further proof that his Meka was no longer human. Before the transition, she wouldn't have been able to hear Rome's side of the conversation.

"Not that I know of," Rome answered. "I can ask some of the elders. They'd know more so than I."

"Whoever she is, she's very angry and not just about the land. She doesn't like the idea of humans and shifters sexually

interacting. That's why she butchered the dog and sent the pictures. She's trying to shame me."

Chad was stunned again by the way her mind operated.

"What makes you say that?" There was a wealth of curiosity in Rome's voice.

"The dog that was butchered, was it male or female?" Tameka asked while Chad sat quietly holding the phone, his mind racing as he tried to figure out where she was going with this.

"Hold on." The sounds of paper shuffling came through the line. "Male."

"Was it castrated?"

There was a short pause as he looked for the information, then Rome cursed.

Tameka didn't wait for him to confirm it. "I wonder if she killed the dog before or after she photo'd us having sex," she mused. "Probably after. She took the pictures, then killed the dog and castrated it to show what she thought about werewolves," Tameka concluded.

"Meka, this dog was completely butchered. She stabbed it over and over again. How do you know the castration wasn't part of it?" Chad questioned.

"I'm guessing she started with castration, but it triggered her rage and she ended up mutilating the dog instead."

Rome whistled. "You want a job? The department could use a profiler. Doesn't have to be full-time. You could work as a consultant."

"What she says makes sense," Chad interjected.

"More than that, I think she's dead on target," Rome added.

"But it still doesn't explain the land. Momma E never mentioned Mr. Ned having children. If he did, I'm sure she would have insisted he leave the property to them instead. And did this thing start with me, or was she after Momma E as well?" Tameka asked. Chad could sense her concern. "You don't think this person had something to do with Momma E's death, do you?"

Rome immediately assured her. "No, your grandmother died of natural causes. However, Ned's death might bear further investigation. It might not have been poachers as we originally

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suspected.”

“But if she killed Ned to get to the land, wouldn't she have gone after Tameka's grandmother as well?” Chad wanted to know. If their stalker was a murderer, that made her infinitely more dangerous.

“Not necessarily. If this woman is as familiar with us as she seems to be, she'd know a lot of shifters grieve themselves to death after the loss of a mate. With Emma's age, all she would have had to do was wait for Emma to die and purchase the land for unpaid taxes. Since none of Emma's family ever visited her here, she may not have anticipated Emma willing the land to someone.”

Chad could smell Tameka's confusion and anger combined with a touch of fear, and it pissed him off all over again. Whoever this person was, she had to be stopped.

“Tameka, you think about my offer. Chad, this gives me an idea on some leads. I'll be in touch,” Rome said right before he hung up.

He rested the phone back on the table and turned to his mate, pulling her into his arms.

“Was he serious?”

He couldn't quite place her tone. It sounded like a blend of intrigue, skepticism, and confusion, as if she didn't quite know what to make of the offer. “About the job? Rome never jokes about police work. With your degree and experience, you'd be a tremendous asset to the department. Not just ours, but surrounding counties and municipalities as well.”

She leaned over him until they were face-to-face. “Do you think I should?”

“Honestly? I don't know. As a rule, we don't see a lot of crime, but the types of cases that require a profiler are...harsh,” he inserted, for lack of a better word. “If you're interested, I won't stand in your way. I'll support you fully. Are you?”

She dropped her head to his chest. “I don't know. It's not something I've ever considered.”

“Give it some thought. It won't hurt to try. If you don't like it, or it's too gruesome, just stop. No one will fault you. Police work isn't for everyone.”

Silence fell and Chad found himself stroking the silky skin

of her back. Tameka gave a big yawn and snuggled deeper into his embrace.

“How’d you guess what was in the pictures,” he asked lazily.

“Your reaction. If it was nothing, you would have shown them to me,” she murmured, sounding half asleep. “Tomorrow I want to see them.”

“I’ll tell Bull to bring them.”

## *Chapter Nine*

“What’s this plan of yours?”

NeeCee sat in the passenger seat of his cruiser with her arms crossed and one toe tapping against the floorboard as he drove.

“You’re going to play decoy. You and your sister are about the same height. We’re going to make whoever’s watching think you’re Tameka returning home from the clinic,” Bull stated.

He could feel the weight of her stare. “I’d applaud your brilliance, but there’s just one problem.”

He arched one brow. “What might that be?”

She sighed and shook her head. “Meka and I look nothing alike,” she said in disgust.

He slanted a look at her. She was serious. Was she really that blind or was there something else going on here? “I think the resemblance is remarkable,” he drawled, just to draw her out.

She snorted. “That’s ‘cause you’re white. To you, we all look the same.”

He bit back a curse. “That’s a stereotype and you know it. I’m an officer of the law, trained to be observant. I’m also a shifter with a keen sense of smell. There’s no way I’d ever confuse you with anyone else.”

“And yet you expect this person to?” She turned in her seat to face him, as much as her seatbelt would allow.

“One, people tend to see what they expect to see. She doesn’t know about your arrival and I plan to use that to our advantage. Two, she’ll only be getting a glimpse of you from a distance.” He turned the corner and headed out of town.

“That still doesn’t change the fact that I’m fifty pounds leaner, three shades lighter, and at least three inches taller than Meka. My eyes are gray and my hair is in dreds, not loose like hers. Anyone with half a brain can see this won’t work,” she

huffed.

“Do you want to help your sister or not?”

“Yes,” she snapped.

“Then quit bitching. I know what I’m doing. If I say this will work, believe me. It will,” he finished firmly.

She muttered something under her breath that even his sharp hearing couldn’t decipher.

“Lady, what’s your problem? To us whities, y’all all look alike anyway. This should be a breeze,” he drawled.

The scent of her anger filled the air. Guess she didn’t like having her words thrown back at her, he mused. She turned towards him, finger pointed, eyes narrowed and mouth ready to spew. Then she caught sight of the grin on his face and hesitated.

“Yes? You have something to say,” he taunted silkily.

The hand lowered to her lap and she turned to face the front windshield, her face set like stone. “I wouldn’t give you the pleasure. You’d enjoy it too much,” she muttered.

His grin blossomed into a full-blown smile as he bit back the laughter that wanted to break free. He let silence reign as he completed the drive to his house.

After parking the car, he turned to her. “I don’t know what you see when you look in the mirror, but besides the differences you noted, anyone with two working eyes can see the resemblance between you and your sister. Facial structure, nose, the shape of your eyes and ears—all the same. You’re a few inches taller and leaner, but there’s no denying you two are closely related,” he stated bluntly.

NeeCee looked both hopeful and skeptical. She flipped down the visor and gazed at her reflection in the mirror, turning her head this way and that.

There was a story here. One day he’d know what it was. For now, they had things to do. He got out of the cruiser and walked around to her door. Before his hand touched the handle, the door opened and she jumped out.

“*This* is where Tameka lives?”

“No, this is where I live.” Good thing his hand was already on her back. When she stopped abruptly in the drive, he used it to propel her forward.

“Why are we here? I thought you were taking me to

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

Meka's." She dug in her heels.

*Jeez, you'd think the woman didn't trust him, the way she was acting.* He grinned as he slid his arm around the bare skin of her waist and bodily lifted her off of the ground. She immediately began to struggle. "I am, but first you need a little camouflage."

At his words, she relaxed and settled down. "Put me down. I'll walk."

"I thought women like to be carried. Doesn't it make you feel all light and feminine?" He was certainly enjoying himself, especially the way the underside of her bra-less breast rested against the back of his hand. If he lifted his thumb a little higher, he could touch her nipple and find out for himself what she was wearing under that shirt.

With a growl, she twisted around, teeth bared and mouth open to bite him.

"Do it!" He swung her around in front of him and braced her body against the front door. "Bite me!" He tilted his head to the side, exposing his neck. "I dare you."

She lunged forward and his body tensed in anticipation. A breath away she stopped, hovering over the tendon where his shoulder met his neck.

"Do it," he demanded again, suppressing a needy groan. His cock was as hard as a rock in his pants, filled to bursting. He leaned forward, pressing his skin to her mouth.

"No." She backed away and looked at him through narrowed, stormy gray eyes filled with suspicion. "For all I know, this is some kind of freaky foreplay with you guys."

Bull let out the breath he was holding and hid his disappointment behind a cocky smile. "Now that's real a shame, darling. I was looking forward to biting you back."

NeeCee pressed her shoulders, back, and head into the door behind her in a vain attempt to increase the distance between them. "Shouldn't we be going inside? It's almost dark. I'd like to get to Meka's and hopefully get something to eat before calling it a night."

Bull slowly loosened his grip and she slid down the few inches needed for her feet to touch the ground. Then he stepped back. His body protested the loss of contact, but they had things

to do. Playtime came later.

He opened the door and motioned her inside. His house was a simple log cabin. One big open space in the front with a fireplace taking up one wall, two bedrooms, and a bath in the back. The décor was something he liked to call “early bachelor,” lots of black leather and chrome.

She walked to the center of his living room and stopped, placing her hands on her hips. If she knew how it made her breasts jut out and drew attention to her beaded nipples, he doubted she’d do it. Not that he was going to tell her. He was enjoying the view too much.

“Now what?”

“Now we make you look bigger,” he answered. Bull went into his room and came back with one of his white t-shirts and a pair of navy blue drawstring sweatpants. “Put these on.” He tossed the garments to her.

Some primitive instinct made him choose clothing that had his scent on them rather than ones fresh from the laundry.

NeeCee wrinkled her nose. “Are these clean?”

“Do they stink?” he countered.

She brought them to her nose and sniffed, then seemed to have trouble pulling them away. He almost smiled. Somebody liked his scent. Good, cause soon she’d be wearing him and nothing else.

“You know that’s not really an answer,” she rebutted, finally lowering her hands with the garments in them.

“Just put them on. It’s not as though your clothes won’t be underneath them if you’re worried about germs or something. Which, by the way, as a shifter I’m totally disease free. That info will come in handy later.” He winked. “Put them on so we can go.”

She shook her head. “A total dog. Like I said earlier,” she muttered as she donned the clothing.

“Dogs bark,” he informed her sagely. “Baby, you make me howl,” he told her with a lascivious grin, then demonstrated.

“You are *sick*,” she exclaimed, but he could see her biting back a smile. Oh yeah, she wanted him. She just didn’t know it yet. He was feeling smug until he got a good whiff of her.

Her features changed and she took a step back. “What the

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hell is wrong with your eyes?"

His jaw tightened and began to stretch. He could feel his muscles elongating as his frame changed, height lengthening. The heady scent of her fear spiked the air as she took another step back, and another.

"Don't run," he bit out, reading her intentions on her face. He fought hard against the shift. His wolf wanted out. If she ran, instinct would take over.

NeeCee's body tensed and she glanced over her shoulder at the door.

"Don't," he grunted as claws emerged in place of his fingernails. He could hear his shirt straining, then ripping at the seams. "I can control it as long as you stay put," he panted.

She took another step back and he snarled. She instantly froze.

Smart lady.

Bull closed his eyes as he negotiated with his wolf, promising it could have what it wanted—NeeCee—later, but right now they had more important things to do. He'd always had a strong sex drive and both he and his wolf loved the ladies, but this was ridiculous. When he reopened his eyes, NeeCee was by the door with her hand on the knob.

His other half surged to the forefront and he leapt the twelve feet between them in a single bound, trapping her against the door. He jabbed his claws into the wood above her head and dragged them down even with her ears, shredding the wood. Then he bent down until he was in her face. "Going somewhere?" It was difficult to talk with a mouth full of razor sharp teeth and a tongue gone wolf.

She shut her eyes and hunched against the door, while the smell of her fear intensified. "Don't eat me," she squeaked out.

Bull rubbed his nose against her cheek and followed the jaw line to her ear. Once there he teasingly scraped his teeth along her neck, smiling when she flinched. "But I want to eat you. I want to lay you down, spread your legs, and gobble you up until you come screaming my name," he growled, right before he licked her neck.

NeeCee seemed to stop breathing.

Bull buried his nose in the tender area behind her and

inhaled. She smelled so good. Like caramel and vanilla with an undertone of spice. He was getting drunk off of her scent.

“Sex? This is about sex?” Her voice was low, deadly. The smell of fear vanished and was replaced with something else.

“Mmm, fuck. Yes. Fuck, mate, claim.” His voice was guttural as he studied the exposed tendon between her neck and shoulder. His cock was hard and weeping, ready to plunge inside her waiting sheath.

A few swipes of his claw and she'd be naked. His fingers flexed, preparing to move when excruciating pain blasted up from between his legs and radiated outward. The pain was so intense, it dropped him to his knees and stole the air from his lungs.

“Seven-feet tall with fangs, claws, and a snout and underneath it all, you're still just a *man*,” she spat.

NeeCee took her foot and shoved it against his shoulder, toppling him over. “I told you, I don't do white men.” With that she opened the door and slipped outside muttering, “Am I a dog magnet? Is there a sign on my forehead? One that says, *NeeCee's an easy lay?*” Right before closing the door, she told him, “I'll be in the car waiting.”

Good thing he had supernatural healing abilities, otherwise she'd have neutered him. He rose to his feet on a pained groan and hobbled to his room to change clothes. It was going to be a long night.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning when Alex arrived to examine her, Chad left to give them privacy. “I have some running around to do, and I want to check in at the station. I'll be back as soon as I can,” he told her as he leaned down to kiss her goodbye.

“Take as long as you need. I'll be fine,” she assured him. Chad told her what happened the last time he'd left so she could understand his worry.

“All right.” He glanced at Alex, then back at her, hesitating.

“Go. I'm okay,” she ordered.

He sighed, grabbed his things and left, reluctance in every line of his body.

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“Now that Chad’s gone, let’s get you checked over. Any headaches, pains, anywhere?” Alex inquired.

“No. I feel great. I think I could eat a horse by myself, but other than that...”

He laughed. “That’s your metabolism kicking in. You’ll find yourself eating more to accommodate it.”

“What happens if I don’t?” This high metabolism thing sounded like just the ticket to lose a few pounds.

Alex’s features changed to a serious demeanor, almost stern. “Always feed the beast. Feeding it helps keep it under control.”

“How so?”

He seemed to think for a minute. “You know how irritable you get when you’re hungry?”

“Yeah.” She’d been there and done that more times than she could count.

“The beast—your wolf—operates on a basic level. Eat when hungry. Defend itself. Protect family. Fight when angry. Flee when afraid. Eat, mate, fight, protect, and defend. That’s it. It also has the cunning required to get the things that it needs and a strong survival instinct. When you deny it its basic necessities, you trigger its survival mechanism and it comes to the forefront. Give it what it wants and it stays quiet and happy, as long as you let it out to play every now and then.”

Freud would have a field day with this, she mused. “You make it sound like a child.”

“In a sense it is. An extremely powerful, highly intelligent child. Life is simple for the beast part of our nature. It sees things in either black or white. No gray areas.”

Tameka rubbed her forehead wearily. “I don’t suppose you guys have a book—Werewolf 101—or a class or something for people like me?”

Alex winced. “The first thing you should know is that we refer to ourselves as shape-shifters, not werewolves. If you have to specify, the correct term is wolf-shifter. And no, we do not have a book. There’s too much danger of it falling into the wrong hands. Normally, your mate would be responsible for teaching you all you needed to know over time as you slowly transition from human to shifter. Your case is special in many

ways.”

He sighed. “Since Chad wasn’t raised among us, I’m not sure how much knowledge he has. I’ll have my beta Carol and her mate Mark come by and answer any questions you might have.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know what to ask and probably won’t know for some time. You say I’m a shifter now, but other than an increased appetite, I really don’t feel any different. Shouldn’t I?”

“Give it another day or so for the medicine to totally leave your system, and then tell me how you feel,” he counseled.

“I still think there should be a manual,” she muttered, not liking this whole ‘one step at a time, feel your way through’ method he was prescribing.

“Even if there was, it wouldn’t do you much good. Think about it. What if you had to write a manual on being a human being for visitors from another planet? What would you say? The human existence is varied. Would you include everything? *Could* you include everything? We mostly know about ourselves and those like us, but the differences between us vary as much as the similarities. We could no more write a how-to book on being a shifter than you could on being a human.”

She hated to admit it, but he was right.

“I’ll have Carol come and talk to you. She can go over the basics and Mark can tell you about his experience. He used to be human before he mated with Carol. He’s good at explaining things,” he finished.

She must have been looking as doubtful as she felt, because Alex rushed to reassure her.

“Don’t worry. Mark’s a pharmacist. He’s used to taking the complicated and breaking it down into in simple terms. I’ll tell them to come by this afternoon. Think of them as your very own mentors. Call on them, on any of us, as much as you need. Pack means family. You’re mated to one of my wolves, that means I’m responsible for you.”

As he left, she sat pondering just what that would mean for her and Chad.

\* \* \* \*

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As Chad approached the turn-off to County Rd. 17, his phone rang. He answered one-handed as he turned south onto the road that would take him to Tameka's house.

"Wilson."

"You rollin'?" Bull asked.

"Yeah. Alex is with Meka so I'm headed to her house to check on the sister and pick up something for Meka to wear while I'm there."

"Negative. Don't come here," Bull stated emphatically.

"Did you say 'here'? You're at Meka's?"

"Yeah, I stayed the night."

"I see," Chad stated slowly as a grin crept across his face. "Anything I should know?"

"Hell, no!" Bull's voice abruptly lowered. "Nothing happened," he finished quietly.

Chad could hear the regret in his voice. "She shot you down?"

"Like a torpedo," he answered in that same low voice. NeeCee must be nearby. "Tried to neuter me, man. I'm still trying to coax my balls back down into position. Put the fear of God into them, I tell you."

Chad snorted and almost choked on the gum he was chewing, then burst into laughter as he got a visual. Bull was one of the few people that could make him laugh. Just one of the many reasons he considered Bull his friend. "If she said no, why are you there?"

"Thought since NeeCee was here, we could play decoy and draw the perp out."

"You know, that's not a bad...*SON OF A ...!*" The windshield spidered and splintered, small fragments of glass flying everywhere. Chad dropped the phone, swerved hard to the left and stomped on the brake, bringing the backend of the truck fishtailing around to the side in a screech of rubber.

He flung open the driver's door with his left hand while shoving the gear in park with his right. As he bailed out of the vehicle, his passenger window exploded seconds before he heard the sharp, echoing report of a shotgun. Shit! This truck, a black Ford F150 crew cab fully loaded, wasn't even a year old.

“CHAD, WHAT’S GOING ON?”

He ducked as another blast sounded. Gravel kicked up as some of the pellets ricocheted off the ground underneath the truck. “Enemy fire. Twelve gauge. Took out the windshield and passenger side windows. Probably using buckshot,” he finished calmly, his voice as cold as an arctic breeze.

He snatched off his shades and dropped them on the bench seat, tossing his hat beside them. Hoping not to get his fool head blown off, he raised up to see if he could get a visual on the shooter. Nada. Nothing ahead but empty road and dense woods on either side. Couldn’t even catch their scent. All he could smell was the strong aroma of burnt rubber and the faint tinge of lead. Whoever the shooter was, they were well hidden. He couldn’t even tell if the shoots came from the right or the left.

“Location?”

“CR 17 just past mile marker 53.” The engine sputtered and died. Then it was silent. Too quiet. Nothing stirred. Not even the wind. The shooter was either reloading or retreating. Hopefully it was the former. He wanted this bastard. Just one more shot and he’d have a fix on the location.

He could clearly hear the squawk of Bull’s police radio as he called it in, even though the phone had slid halfway under the passenger side seat in the open position. “*Base, this is Unit Nineteen. Code One, Officer needs assistance. Pinned by gunfire. CR 17, mile marker 53.*” He reached underneath and grabbed it, before hunkering back down in the open doorway.

“*Roger, units responding.*”

Three more shots fired in rapid succession. Chad dove behind the front driver’s side tire, cell phone clutched in his hand.

“Chad! Speak to me!”

“I’m fine. Definitely buckshot. Large pellets. Getting closer.”

“Hang on, buddy. I’m on the way.”

“Don’t bother. I can handle my end. Go after the assailant.”

“I said I’m on the way,” Bull insisted stubbornly.

Chad sighed. “Proceed with caution. The enemy is hidden in the woods between us.”

“Roger.”

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Chad kept a wary eye on his surroundings, listening intently. He didn't hear any movement in the undergrowth, but the hair on the nape of his neck stood on end, warning that he was being watched. He wouldn't put it past the bastard to come around and try to get a hit. The open door of the vehicle provided little protection. He'd probably survive a direct shot from a twelve-gauge, but he wasn't interested in putting it to the test.

Good thing it was as late as it was. Most of the morning commuters were long gone. The road was empty—for now. That could change at any moment. He looked around again. Cautiously, he came around the driver's door and reached into the cab, putting the truck into neutral. He was in the center of the road. If he could just get it to the side, it would serve the dual purpose of getting the truck out of harm's way and putting him within running distance of the safety of the wood. The engine had stalled out minutes ago. He didn't want to attract the perp's attention by cranking it back up.

He got a good grip on the frame and gave the truck a shove to get it rolling. So far, so good.

"You okay, bud?"

"Yeah. Moving the truck out of the road. Trying to get to the side, make it to the woods and shift."

Three more shots rang out. Both passenger side tires went flat and the last shot missed him by a hair. "*Shit!*" He ducked back for the protection of the wheel.

"Status!" Bull demanded.

"Truck stalled in southbound lane. Two flat tires. Shooter switched ammo. Slugs."

Damn, what a time for him to be unarmed.

Chad was tired of sitting here like a duck. He wanted to shift forms and track the shooter, but he couldn't take the chance of an outsider discovering what he was. Of course, if this is who he thought it was, that might just be what they were waiting for.

In the distance, he heard sirens approaching. Bull must have hit some back roads and circled around to be coming from the north instead of south where Tameka's house lay. Being real subtle about it, too. Not. So much for catching the perp unaware.

The cruiser came screeching to a halt less than ten feet

away, lights flashing, dirt and gravel flying. Chad waved a hand to get the dust out of his face. Bull jumped out with his Glock drawn and an M-16 in his left hand, running in a bent over crouch until he was by Chad's side behind the truck. "You get a bead on him?" He handed Chad the rifle.

"Negative. Couldn't lock onto target." Much to his disgust. "What's with the sirens?"

As Chad spoke, he heard an engine turn over, then the motor rev as the driver gunned the engine. "Damn it, she's getting away." He jumped up to dash around the front of the truck to see if he could spot the vehicle.

"Negative. Units five and thirteen took point, covering all the exits. They'll catch her."

Chad paused, then sank onto the ground, sitting with his back against the side of the truck and waited. He wasn't going anywhere without a tow truck. "Bitch probably rode right past them, pretty as you please." Hernandez and Casanova were good cops, but they were probably expecting the perp to be a male.

In a lightning fast move, Bull cuffed him upside the head.

"What was that for?"

"My momma's a bitch. Yours, too, I'd imagine, since you were born a shifter. Show some respect," he commanded sternly, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

Chad narrowed his eyes. "What would you call her?"

The stunned look on Bull's face was comical. "Damn, man. You got me there," he said with a grin, then grew serious. "You think it's the same perp who's after your woman?"

"You suppose it's someone else?" Chad's left eyebrow arched in surprised disbelief.

Bull hooked his thumbs into the belt loops of his pants and rocked back on his heels a few times, appearing to give the matter great consideration. "Naw. This definitely feels like the work of psycho-bitch."

Bull walked around the side of the truck to view the damage. Chad stayed where he was. He had no desire to see it until he absolutely had to.

"Dude, your truck. Your insurance company's gonna shit a cow when they see this," Bull exclaimed.

Chad leaned his head back against the truck and closed his

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eyes. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know." He knew it was bad. He was pissed enough without seeing the damage.

"Looks like she tried to take out the gas tank. Good thing it's on the other side."

Chad bit back a few choice words, but couldn't prevent a growl from escaping.

"Dude, I told you when you bought this to install a gun rack. If you'd have listened to me, you'd have been armed and could have fought back," Bull stated smugly. "But no, you didn't want to look like a country hick."

He shot him a bird, feeling marginally better about the situation when Bull laughed.

He rose to his feet as no less than three deputy sheriff's vehicles came screeching to a halt in front of his truck with Rome in the lead vehicle. He reached inside the truck for his shades and donned them before grabbing his hat. Once he'd shaken all the glass off of it, he slid it on his head. "Time to hunt."

\* \* \* \*

She hurriedly stuffed the coveralls, cap, and wig into a black trash bag, and doused it with disinfectant spray before sealing it and tossing it into the back. Straightening her uniform until it was once more nice and neat, she got back into the driver's seat and reached over, turning off the police scanner and shoving it under her seat. Once everything was situated to her satisfaction, she got back on the road and turned north towards Refuge.

As she neared the roadblock, she rolled down her window. "Excuse me, young man. Can you tell me how to get to the Mountain View Emergency Clinic? I'm new on this route."

She smiled pleasantly and waited patiently as the deputy looked her and the van over suspiciously. Finally he said, "Follow this road until you enter Refuge. About two blocks past Moe's Diner you'll come to Newman Street. Hang a left. The road dead ends at the clinic."

"Thank you so much." She paused and let an expression of concern cross her face. "Is everything alright? You seem to be

looking for someone.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he assured her as his eyes continually scanned the road and surrounding area. “You just go on about your business and don’t pick up any strangers,” he warned.

“Don’t worry, Officer. Nowadays you can’t be too careful. Why, some of the most horrendous criminals look as innocent as a young child.” *Or a gentle old woman*, she thought. “You be careful and stay safe. We need all of our police officers alive and well.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He was getting a bit impatient for her to move on, but was too respectful to show it. She hid a grin behind her serene façade.

“I’ll let you get back to work now. Thanks again for your assistance.” She let up off the brake and glided past him. *Fool. Men are so easy. They never look beneath the surface of anything or anyone.*

She hummed a little ditty under her breath as she drove the rest of the way to the clinic. Parking the van near the entrance at the curb, she jumped out and ambled around to the back. She reached past bouquets, plants, and floral arrangements until she found the one she was looking for. As she backed out of the interior, she grabbed the clipboard hanging on the hook and went inside.

The receptionist at the desk was one she recognized from her visits from before. She pasted a huge, friendly smile on her face as she approached the window. “Hi, I have another delivery for a Tameka Jones. My, she must be a very popular woman. This has to be my fifth time here in as many days.”

The young woman, Alice, smiled back at her. “She’s new in town, and you know how small towns are,” she finished with a gamine grin on her face.

“Oh yes, real friendly. I’m sure she’ll appreciate your kindness...if she ever wakes up.” She shook her head sorrowfully. “Such a shame. She’s so young for this to have happened, and with her family so far away...”

“Oh,” Alice said. “She’s doing much better now. She came out of the coma yesterday and the doctors expect a full recovery.”

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“My...well, that’s good news, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. She woke up just in time to see her sister,” Alice continued blithely.

“Did you say sister? I thought she didn’t have any family nearby.” She fought with all of her might to keep the rage she was feeling contained and off of her expression.

“That’s the great part. I heard that the sister was out of the country and came running when she got the call. Wasn’t that nice?” she gushed.

“Great.” She passed the plant through the window, then made a show of glancing at the clipboard. “Oh, dear.”

“What’s wrong?” Alice appeared to be concerned.

“Oh, nothing.” She pasted a vague smile on her face and sighed. “Just having a senior moment, I guess. I just noticed that there were two deliveries, not one. I need to go back outside and get the other one.”

“Is that all? Go right ahead. I’ll just set this to the side until you return, and then deliver them both to her room at the same time.”

“You’re such a nice girl,” she said in a grandmotherly tone that made her want to puke.

Alice, stupid chick that she was, preened at the compliment. Sap.

She went back out to the van and selected one of the peace lilies she’d prepared for a funeral later today—extremely fitting, under the circumstances. After scribbling a quick note, she hurried back inside. Wouldn’t do to get the twit suspicious. Not now, after all her hard work.

“Here you go, dear. If you’ll just sign here for me, I’ll be on my way.”

“Sure, your flowers are always so beautiful.” Alice signed her name at the appropriate slot and handed the clipboard back, never noticing that the delivery receipt stated one, not two.

“I’ll be sure to tell the owner you said so,” she stated as she ambled back to the van, mind already working overtime as she developed a plan to overcome this latest development.

## *Chapter Ten*

Chad looked at the others gathered around the small conference table with him. They'd spent hours searching the woods for clues before Rome commanded that they return to the station for a briefing. Rome, Bull, Leo the evidence tech, and he were present. Hernandez and Casanova had given their reports to Rome and were back on the streets, including the officers who'd manned the roadblocks.

"What do we have?" Rome questioned.

"Zip. No clue who the perp is or the motive," Chad said in disgust.

"We know she's one sick bitch," Bull added.

"How do we know it's a female," Leo asked.

"According to Tameka and The Markham Group, the person that contacted them both was female," Chad stated. "Speaking of The Markham Group, we get a nibble on the bait?"

"Not yet," Rome answered.

"But whoever was out there shooting today handled themselves like a pro," Leo countered, like a dog with a bone, unwilling to let it go. "Are we sure it's the same person?"

"Maybe she has an accomplice," Bull offered.

"Or today's attack could be totally unrelated," Leo proposed.

"Highly doubtful," Chad stated. "That road gets a lot of traffic. Whoever shot at me was clearly waiting for me."

"I'm not saying it was random. I believe you were the intended target. I'm just saying this may have nothing to do with your mate," Leo continued in his usual role as devil's advocate. "Let's not get so focused on this mystery person that we overlook the obvious."

"Your concern is duly noted. Now give us your report," Rome ordered.

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“We have the flowers that were left at the target’s home. No prints. They were in a Flora’s Flower’s box. We don’t know if the assailant works there or if she picked the box out of the trash,” Leo stated.

“Or she could have simply reused a box from a personal delivery,” Rome added.

“Correct. We have the phone call made to the target...”

“Tameka,” Chad corrected. Hearing Tameka referred to as the target was starting to get to him.

Leo nodded. “Tameka. We have her phone records. All of the calls were made with prepaid cell phones or calling cards. Completely untraceable. We know nails were used to flatten the tires, but those can be purchased from any hardware store.”

“Or Wal-Mart. Is there anything they don’t sell?” Bull asked.

“There were no prints on the knife, nothing special about the paper the note was left on or the newspaper letters used to form the words. As near as we can tell, the dog may have been a stray. We called around to the local shelters and found no animals fitting its description recently adopted. Or it might have been a personal pet,” Leo said with a shrug.

Bull whistled through his teeth. “That’s just creepy. Killing your own pet to make a point.”

“No, it’s dangerous. It means we may be dealing with a sociopath,” Rome stated grimly.

Chad just sat quietly and listened.

“The pictures were most likely taken with a digital camera and printed out on a home computer. No help there. The shells we found today were your garden variety twelve-gauge ammo, available at any store that sells hunting supplies, like Wal-Mart,” Leo acknowledged with a grin.

“Like I said, we got nothing,” Chad stated in disgust.

“Not quite. The markings on the shells match those found at the scene of Ned’s death. We have a killer on our hands,” Rome informed them quietly.

He waited a while for that to sink in and then added, “I think Tameka was right on target with the motive. I spoke with some of the elders. Lulu remembers a human woman that Ned was seriously involved with. He broke things off when she

turned up pregnant. The woman swore the baby was his. Told it to anyone who would listen.”

“He abandoned his child? Wait, I thought you said Ned didn’t have any children?” Chad was confused.

“He didn’t. Shifters and humans can’t procreate, unless the human’s your One. We’re not biologically compatible. That’s what makes human women so much fun,” Bull told him, wagging his eyebrows. “All the fun, with none of the consequences.”

“I take it she didn’t know this?” Chad asked Rome.

“She either didn’t know or didn’t believe it. Lulu thinks it was the latter. The woman was convinced Ned was her mate and was pissed that he wasn’t living up to his responsibilities.”

“So what’s this woman’s name?” Chad asked, impatient to hunt her down.

“That’s the problem. No one remembers. They all remember the incident, but she moved away once it was clear that Ned had no intention of marrying her. That was over forty years ago, maybe longer,” Rome finished on a sigh.

“So based on Tameka’s theory, we have the woman’s daughter who believes that Ned was her father and therefore, the land should rightfully belong to her,” Chad concluded.

“It fits. If the woman was convinced Ned was the dad, and she convinced the daughter, then the kid grew up believing her father rejected her. Revenge is definitely a motive for murder, especially if she grew up in less than ideal surroundings and feels ‘dear old dad’ should have been there making life a little easier. It would also explain why she’s fixated on Tameka’s property,” Bull supposed.

“As well as her dislike of shifter/human relationships, considering what she believes happened between her mother and Ned,” Leo threw in.

“We know she’s a threat to Chad. Today’s incident proves that,” Rome stated.

Chad didn’t think some crazy bitch trying to kill him qualified as only an ‘incident,’ but he let it go.

“The question is, is she a threat to Tameka? So far she’s only tried to buy her off and scare her away.” Rome looked at each of them, waiting for their opinion.

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“Right now she sees Meka as an obstacle to getting what she wants,” Chad said slowly, thinking out loud. “She may even see her as a victim, like her mother. Hence the pictures and the dog. Meka thinks she was trying to warn her off, embarrass her into ending the relationship. She may not even realize Meka knows what I am.”

“What concerns me is that she’s already killed once to get what she wanted,” Leo said.

“What was the trigger?” They all gazed inquiringly at Bull. “I mean, this chick’s how old? Why now? Why wait? Why not approach Ned when she was younger if she knew about him and blamed him for the way she was raised.”

“That’s a very good question,” Rome said, a considering look on his face.

“Maybe she didn’t know,” Leo speculated. “Maybe something happened—mother died, etc.—and she came across the information afterwards.”

“Okay, let’s say that’s it. The mother died. Maybe she kept a diary or something. Daughter finds out about Ned. Hunts him down. Makes contact. Maybe she expected him to welcome her with open arms. Only he denies being her father. She gets pissed when he doesn’t acknowledge her. Ned was fairly well off. Prominent lawyer in the area. She feels he owes her something. Decides to take what should have been hers. Kills Ned. Waits for Ms. Emma to die, only now the land goes to Emma’s relatives. That had to be a surprise. Not many people knew Emma had family since they never visited. Tries to get Meka to sell, only she doesn’t. How am I doing so far?” Bull asked.

“Makes sense,” Chad admitted.

“Too much. The question is, what’s she gonna do now?” Leo asked.

They were all quiet.

“I’ll call Alex and have him send someone to the hospital. From now on, you and Meka will be guarded twenty-four/seven until we can catch this woman,” Rome informed Chad.

“I don’t need a guard. I can protect myself,” Chad protested.

“What about the sister? She should be covered, too. This woman may see her as another contender for the land,” Bull stated at the same time.

“This isn’t about you. Think of your mate,” Rome told Chad. “Bull, since the sister is familiar with you, you’re on guard detail while she’s here. Anything else?” he asked the three of them.

They shook their heads.

“Dismissed.”

As Rome watched them file out, he had the nagging sense that he was missing something. He went back to his office to pore over the reports one more time. Whatever it was, he wouldn’t stop hunting until he’d found it.

\* \* \* \*

Tameka showered and dressed in a set of scrubs Alex had one of the clinic staff provide. NeeCee should be arriving any moment with a change of clothes. While she waited, she decided now was as good a time as any to explore the many floral and plant arrangements delivered during her stay. As she read the cards attached, she noticed most of them seemed to be from the same florist.

Judging solely by the many “wishing you well” and “get well soon” cards attached, the people of Refuge were a very caring group. Several had handwritten notes welcoming her to the area and hopes of meeting her soon under better circumstances. She drifted over to the two that came in this morning.

The first card made her smile. The second one caused her to drop into “Chad’s chair” with a thump.

The old lady. Her husband. Your animal lover. Who else will you lose? Your sister?

Give me what I want!

As Tameka clutched the card and envelope in her hand, she pondered what action to take. To borrow an old saying, she didn’t have a dog in this fight. What this woman wanted wasn’t hers to give. If it was, she’d hand it over. Right or wrong, she wasn’t prepared for people to lose their life over what amounted to a piece of dirt. The problem was that this person...woman...whomever didn’t know that and Tameka couldn’t tell her.

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Her first instinct was to call Chad and make sure he was safe. Instead, she made herself sit there and think. If something happened to Chad, she'd know. The man was so deep in her heart, he was like an extension of her soul. If she concentrated really hard, she could actually feel him. Wherever he was, he was angry, but not hurt and definitely not dead.

Besides, he'd called earlier to check on her and alluded to something happening that would delay his return. While she was concerned, he was alive and that's all that mattered. But he might not be as lucky the next time. Being a werewolf gave him supernatural abilities, but it didn't make him immortal. She wasn't prepared to lose the man she loved over a stupid piece of property.

Her thoughts skidded to a halt and her heart stuttered as she mentally repeated the thought. *The man she loved.* She loved Chad. Her, not whatever it was that was growing inside of her. She, Tameka Renae Jones, loved Chadleigh Wilson in the 'til death do us part kind of way. She began to hyperventilate.

*Breathe, Meka. It's alright. He's a good man. Nothing like your father or the sorry excuse for men you've dealt with in your practice.*

"Momma E?" Tameka clung to the familiar voice, using it to stabilize herself in a world gone topsy-turvy. It didn't even matter that this shouldn't be happening. Momma E, who was dead and buried, shouldn't be able to communicate with her from beyond the grave.

*Meka, have I ever led you wrong?*

"No, ma'am."

*You've always been able to count on me, haven't you?*

"Yes, ma'am. You were my rock, the one person I could always depend on." *And now you're gone,* she thought sadly.

*Then trust me now when I say that Chad is a good man. Don't be afraid to let your guard down with him. I'm not saying he won't ever hurt you. Hurtin' comes with loving. The deeper the love, the greater the capacity for misunderstandings and hurts to arise. I'm saying that this man will always be true to you, will love you the way you're meant to be loved and the joy he'll bring will be worth every second of pain that comes with it.*

Tameka was quiet as she considered her words.

“Intellectually speaking, I know you’re right, but emotionally, frankly, I’ve had enough of pain. I’m not sure if I want to open myself up to more,” she confessed mournfully.

*Meka.* Her name was sighed. *If relationships were all good, they’d never grow. Life is hard. It takes a strong love to survive it intact. Just as nature requires a good ratio of sunshine and rain to grow and flourish, so does love.* Too little of one or the other and plants wither and die. Love is the same way. Trust your heart. Better yet, trust God. He’s the one who brought this man into your life.

“I’ll do that, Ma...” she broke off as the door swung inward.

NeeCee walked in with one of her overnight bags over one shoulder and a bag of aromatic food in her left hand. She looked around the room, a puzzled expression on her face. “Who are you talking to?”

Tameka glanced guiltily at the phone still in its cradle. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” she muttered after the silence had thickened to uncomfortable proportions.

NeeCee placed the bag at the foot of the bed right below her feet and the food on the lap table. “Try me,” she encouraged. “I’ve seen and heard a lot of strange things in the last year.”

She shook her head. “You’ll think I’m crazy.”

Her sister laughed. “You? Crazy? I know better than that.”

“Sometimes I wonder, with all that’s happened recently,” Tameka said on a sigh.

NeeCee paused while removing Styrofoam containers from the bag. “Meka, you’re the sanest person I know, other than Momma E.”

She watched her sister’s expression closely as she admitted, “That’s who I was talking to.”

“Oh? Did she answer back?”

Something about NeeCee’s posture and stillness caused Tameka to cautiously confess, “She initiated it.”

Her shoulders relaxed and she let out a deep breath. “Oh, thank God. I’m not the only one.”

“You hear her, too?”

“Oh yeah,” NeeCee said with feeling.

“What does she say to you?” Tameka asked eagerly before cautiously adding, “That is, if you don’t mind my asking.” When

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she was younger, NeeCee would tell her everything without prompting. The one standing before her might not be as open.

NeeCee shrugged. "Typical Momma E. She shows up for one of her little heart-to-heart chats whenever I'm struggling with something important or to warn me. That's how I knew about you. After she told me you were in the hospital, I immediately called Mom to confirm." She paused, then continued a bit awkwardly, "What about you?"

"A few days ago was the first time I heard her and each time it's been about Chad."

"Warning you off?"

"Just the opposite. Encouraging me to give him a chance."

"Even though he's white *and* a werewolf?"

Tameka's back straightened as she jerked to attention. "You know?"

"Yeah. Heard them talking when I arrived yesterday and confronted Bull. He admitted that he and...and..."

"Chad," Tameka supplied the name she was searching for.

"Yeah, that they were both werewolves."

"And you believed him?" Tameka asked skeptically. NeeCee was a lot more accepting than she.

"Kind of hard not to when he changed in front of me. Scared the crap out of me." NeeCee shuddered.

"I can understand my being afraid, but you love dogs, especially big ones."

"Dogs? What are you talking about?"

"Dogs, wolves, same difference. They both have four legs, are covered in fur, and have fangs," Tameka stated with a shrug of her shoulder.

"I don't know what you've seen, but a wolf is not what I saw. He turned into a monster straight out of a Lon Chaney movie. Over seven feet tall, a muzzle, fangs, and his face was covered in fur. You want some of this food?"

"I've already eaten." She tried to figure out what NeeCee had seen, glad that's not what Chad had showed her. And she'd thought his turning into a wolf was frightening. She'd have wet herself if he'd done what Bull did. This whole thing was so confusing. She'd be glad when Carol and her husband arrived. The questions were just piling up.

“According to my doctor, I’m one of them now,” she said quietly.

NeeCee paused with the fork halfway to her mouth. “How do you feel about that?”

“I haven’t decided. Right now I have more questions than answers. Someone’s stopping by today to provide me with some.”

Silence fell between them while NeeCee devoured her food. She still had a healthy appetite. Good to see that hadn’t changed. She waited until NeeCee was almost finished to ask the question pressing on her mind. “Why are you here, NeeCee? I thought you hated my guts,” she finished softly.

NeeCee looked at her then glanced away, just like she used to when she was little and was caught doing something wrong. After a tense moment, she set her fork down and sighed. “I said a lot of mean, hateful things to you, Meka, and I’m sorry. When you asked me to come live with you, I thought you were trying to take me away from Mom. That’s what she said when I mentioned it to her, and I, fool that I was, believed her. I didn’t know about...” her voice trailed off.

Tameka sat silently, waiting for her to continue, knowing she had to do this her way.

NeeCee took a deep breath, then said in a rush, “I didn’t know about the men...the drugs,” she finished softly. The eyes she raised to Tameka had a tortured expression in them.

Tameka wanted to close her eyes as the pain rushed through her, but didn’t want to send the wrong message to NeeCee. Instead, she pushed it down to be dealt with at a later time and asked, “How did you find out?”

“When you first left, things were great. Mom spent a lot of time with me. We went everywhere together—shopping, the movies, out to eat. And we talked. It was...nice,” she sighed, a rueful smile of remembrance crossing her face. The smile faded to be replaced by a grimace. “Then, after you’d been gone about a year, she started bringing guys home with her. Men, in and out of the house, coming and leaving at all hours of the night. I was so angry. ‘How could you do this to us, to Daddy?’ I screamed. ‘I’m just having a good time,’ she said. Ain’t nothing wrong with havin’ fun.’ NeeCee swallowed hard. “‘I’m telling Daddy,’ I

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warned. She was only too happy to tell me Dad had his own thing going, but sometimes he joined her and they all played together. When I stood there with my mouth hanging open, she said, 'I don't know why you're so concerned about a man that's not even your father.'" NeeCee blinked rapidly, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Oh, Nin-Nee, why didn't you call me? You know I would have dropped everything and come running."

A small smile briefly crossed NeeCee's face at the old nickname. When she was little, Tameka used to call her 'my Nin-Nee Pooh.' "I think I know that now, but back then I was devastated. Both you and Momma E were gone. I didn't know how to handle the pain so I acted out. Took Mom's word for it that what she was doing was 'fun.'" She wiped at the tears that escaped. "I stole some of her happy pills, but didn't like the sick, woozy way it made me feel. The alcohol made me nauseous so I gave sex a try. One of Mom's boyfriends had a taste for tender young things, as he called it. He liked breaking them in. Offered over and over to 'do me just right.' One night when Mom was stoned and Dad was out doing his thing, I let him have me."

Tameka sucked in a sharp breath. Damn it, she'd spent years helping other families but hadn't been there for her own when she was needed.

"He...it...was just as good as he promised. I discovered I loved sex. Everything about it turned me on. Most of all, I loved not having to think. I could just be."

"Escape," she murmured.

"Yes, that's it exactly. I can't tell you how many men I've been with. I lost track a long time ago. It's amazing how many like 'em young, and Momma didn't care what I did or who did me until her boyfriends started buying me things and giving me money instead of her." NeeCee gathered her empty food containers and threw them in the trash. "Anyway, I just came to say I'm sorry for the pain I caused. I can understand you not wanting me around. After all, I'm not really your sister. Well, half-sister, and Momma E's not really my grandmother." She picked up her purse. "I hope you have a good life. You deserve it. Be happy, Meka."

She walked towards the door.

Her hand was on the handle before Meka found the words to say. “Did I ever tell you I was in the birthing room with Momma when you were born? You came out all gray and purplish looking, screaming your head off.” She smiled at the memory. “They cleaned you up and then Momma let me hold you.”

She paused to swallow. She had to get this just right. “You were the tiniest thing, more beautiful than any baby doll I had ever seen. I gave you your first bottle.”

NeeCee’s hand came off of the doorknob and she turned around. Tameka eased off of the bed and stood beside it. “I would sneak into your room at night, take you out of the crib, and put you in my bed with me. Momma fussed and got mad, but I didn’t care. You were my NeeCee. I gave you your two AM feedings. I bathed and dressed you. When you cried, I was the one who came running to see what was wrong.”

Tears were running down NeeCee’s face.

Tameka eased forward. “When you started talking, it was me you called Momma.” She blinked back the tears in her own eyes. When she was close enough, she cupped NeeCee’s jaw. “I have always loved you. I don’t care who your father is or isn’t, what you’ve done in your life, how many men or even women you’ve sleep with. I will always love you and be there for you, if it’s in my power to do so. You’re my baby sister.” Then she wrapped her arms around NeeCee and hugged her tight. They were both crying openly.

As the tears flowed, Tameka felt a broken place in her heart began to heal.

## *Chapter Eleven*

“How long have you known about Momma’s men?”

Tameka had dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. They were seated on the bed facing each other, NeeCee with her legs crossed and Tameka’s tucked underneath.

“I didn’t know until you told me,” she replied. “I knew about Daddy’s women because I came home early one day and caught them. He tried to play it off but I’ve never been stupid. I already suspected. I knew Momma liked to party and drink, but she used to keep it away from the house.”

“I think once Momma E. left and you were gone, there was no one to keep things in check.”

Tameka shook her head. “They’re adults. They shouldn’t have to have someone riding herd on them. You and Craig were home. They should have cared enough about the two of you to keep what they doing away from the house. But then, I’ve never noticed either one of them caring about anyone but themselves,” she finished in disgust. It was still a sore spot with her. As a counselor she knew she should let it go, but had never been able to, and definitely not now.

She shoved away the grim thought and focused on her sister. Reaching out, she took hold of the hand NeeCee had resting on her knee and held it between her own, trying to think of a way to say what needed saying without jeopardizing their fragile new accord. Knowing there was no easy way to do this, she took a deep breath and began. “Honey, I would never judge you or the decisions you’ve made in life. Just promise me one thing. Promise me that you’ll be careful. There are so many diseases out there these days. I’d hate to lose you.”

“Believe me, I know, and I don’t do that anymore. Going to Spain was the best thing that could have happened to me. It let me get out and see how other people lived. For a while there

were still men, but Momma E. had a long talk with me and helped me put everything in proper perspective. I didn't need sex for an escape. I had my art and she taught me other coping methods—like keeping a journal—that actually worked. Don't get me wrong. I still like a good, hard cock, but I'm a lot more selective now about when and where I indulge," she finished with a laugh.

The relief Tameka felt was tremendous but she downplayed it with a simple smile. "I'm glad. How did you end up in Spain?"

"My art teacher saw some of my doodling and took an interest in me. Convinced me to take art as an elective. I did and I can't describe how it made me feel, seeing the blank canvas take life before me with something I created." Her eyes had a faraway look in them, like she was gazing back on the past. "My teacher claimed I was a natural. She pulled some strings and signed me up to go to Madrid as part of the Student Exchange Program. I brushed up on my Spanish and off I went."

Tameka played with NeeCee's fingers as she tried to figure out what bothered her about NeeCee's statement. Finally, she asked, "The ISEP costs a lot of money. More than Mom and Dad could afford. How on earth did you manage?"

"Momma E," came the surprising answer. "I don't know where she got the money, but when I called and told her about it, she said not to worry. She'd handle it. The rest of the money came from financial aid."

NeeCee hesitated before continuing slowly. "I always felt guilty about accepting it. I mean, I'm not even her grandchild. It wasn't right for me to be taking money from her like I was."

She let go of her sister's hand and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her slightly. "Don't you start with that mess. Momma E. wouldn't have given it to you if she didn't want you to have it. Besides, I'm not so sure she didn't know about you not being Dad's. She always said you were too pretty to have come from his loins."

NeeCee impishly grinned, then burst into laughter. "You're right. Used to piss him off big time whenever she said it. I had forgotten."

"Hmm, come to think of it, she also used to say the only worthwhile thing Dad ever did was produce me. Kind of makes

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me wonder if Craig is Dad's. There's a five-year gap between us. Long enough for Mom to have realized what a screw up Dad is and go looking for someone else."

"You really think he's not?" NeeCee looked like the thought never crossed her mind.

She shrugged her shoulders. "With Mom, who knows?" She changed the subject. "So where are you living now? You still painting? How's it going? Did you bring any of your work with you? I'd love to see some."

Before NeeCee could answer, a knock sounded at the partially open door. Tameka looked up as the pregnant woman from the shop, Kiesha, stuck her head around the door. "Is it alright to come in? Oh, I didn't realize you had company. We can come back."

"No, it's okay. This is my sister NeeCee."

Kiesha entered the room followed closely by another male that Tameka had never seen before. "NeeCee, Tameka, this is Carol's mate Mark. He runs the town's pharmacy. Alex said you had some questions, but I wasn't aware that your sister was here visiting. We can discuss things another time."

"If this is about the whole werewolf thing, I already know," NeeCee informed them. "And, I have a few questions of my own."

When both pairs of eyes swung to her questioningly, Tameka shrugged. "She's family. I wasn't going to hide it from her. Did I break some sort of law?"

Kiesha looked at Mark, who held his hands up. "Don't ask me. You're the alpha. It's your call."

"Gee, thanks. I can see you're going to be a lot of help."

"Hey, you're the one that decided you'd do a better job than Carol of explaining things. I'm just following your lead, O Mighty Alpha," he said laughingly.

Kiesha turned and caught the expression on Tameka's face before she could erase it. "Sorry. I just don't understand what this," she motioned between Mark and Kiesha, "has to do with anything."

"I'm the one that should be apologizing. You have some legitimate concerns and here we are joking around. Let me explain. I'm not sure how much of our earlier conversation you

remember, so if I repeat myself, bear with me. Alex and I are newly mated. Since he's the pack's alpha that made me alpha as well. Alex asked Carol to come and speak with you today but when I found out about it, I pulled rank. That's what Mark is teasing me about. My understanding is that you want to know how life will change now that you're a shifter, right?"

Tameka nodded.

"Carol's never been human. I felt the two of us would do a better job of explaining things since we're both the human half of a true mate couple," Kiesha finished with a smile.

"Makes sense to me," NeeCee commented.

"So where do you want to start?" Mark questioned.

"First, I think Kiesha should sit down before she falls down. Is it my imagination or are you bigger now than you were just last week?" The question was too personal to be asking someone she'd just meet but the size of Kiesha's belly startled it out of her. It was easily twice the size.

Kiesha lowered herself into the seat with a sigh of relief. "No, you're not imagining things. This baby is growing by leaps and bounds."

"Is it a baby? I mean, you guys don't have puppies, do you?"

"NeeCee!"

"What? Like you weren't curious?"

The thought hadn't even crossed her mind until NeeCee mentioned it.

Fortunately Kiesha thought the whole thing was hilarious. Mark answered while Kiesha composed herself. "We have babies. When they're first born, they look no different from human."

"I'm sorry," Kiesha snickered. "I asked the very same thing when I discovered I was pregnant. You should have seen the look on Alex's face."

"How long have you been mated?" Tameka thought that was as good a place to start as any. There was so much she needed to know but now that the opportunity presented itself, her mind was curiously blank.

"For me it's only been about four months. Maybe I should tell you a bit about my mating experience and Mark can tell you

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about his. Then you can ask your questions. Will that work?"

"Yes. To be honest, I don't know what to ask," she confessed.

"I do," NeeCee stated.

"But you're not the one who's turned into a werewolf," Meka reminded her sister.

"Shape-shifter," Mark and Kiesha chorused together.

"Whatever." She still didn't know what the big freaking deal was. It was the same thing. "The point is, I'm the one that needs answers."

"Actually, you both do," Mark corrected, "though I'm sure my mate would disagree. Ms. Emma carried the gene that allowed her to mate Mr. Ned and now you, her granddaughter, are mated to Chad. There's a very good chance that NeeCee could be someone's mate as well. This thing seems to be heredity, carried predominately on the father's side. Of course, finding one's true mate occurs so rarely that there's still a lot we don't know or understand about the process."

Meka glanced at NeeCee to find her staring at her in a meaningful way. She knew what her sister was thinking. If this thing was passed down through the father, then NeeCee didn't have anything to worry about.

"What's wrong?"

Tameka turned at Kiesha's question. She was debating how to answer without betraying NeeCee's confidence, when NeeCee revealed in a matter of fact tone of voice, "Meka and I have different fathers."

"Oh." Kiesha looked back and forth between her and NeeCee, studying their features closely. "You both must take after your mother because you look a lot alike."

Meka smiled while NeeCee snorted.

Mark ignored her, saying to Tameka, "I can't say I'm happy to hear that. A lot of our guys are looking for mates and there's just not enough to go around. It would have been nice if your sister was a match for one of them."

"Nice for whom?" NeeCee asked, eyebrow arched.

"Uh..." Mark floundered, appearing to be lost for words.

Kiesha started talking, covering his gaffe. "One Friday night, a little over four months ago, I was home in my bed

asleep. I woke to find myself hanging from a tree, in the woods, in the middle of the night. I was freezing my butt off with only a nightgown to cover me when five of the biggest wolves I'd ever seen in my life came out of the darkness and sniffed me. Then one of them licked me and nodded his head. The others stepped back. The wolf transformed before my eyes into Alex, my mate. I passed out. When I came to, he told me this incredible story about my being his true mate, the woman he'd been waiting for to complete him. Of course I thought he was crazy. The thing is, I couldn't explain how I ended up in those woods, three states away from my home. Nor could I doubt the evidence of my own eyes. I'd seen him shift from wolf to man. The part about being his mate took some convincing—frankly I wasn't looking for a commitment—but I eventually believed him and now I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. We're getting married in four weeks, even though by shifter standards we already are. That's my story." She leaned back in her chair with a sigh and rubbed her swollen belly, a contented expression on her face. "Mark, your turn."

Something Kiesha said tickled at the back of her mind, troubling her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She was still trying to figure it out when Mark began his story, capturing her attention.

"I met Carol while in college, when I was close to completing my degree. I was immediately bowled over. I had to have her. Chased her day and night until she agreed to go out with me. We couldn't keep our hands off of each other. It was a wonder we both didn't fail that semester. Then she told me what she was. I thought she was playing games, you know, trying to break things off but didn't have the guts, so she came up with this bull story...until she shifted. No warning or anything. One minute she was there; the next a wolf. Freaked me out big time, but it proved she was speaking the truth. While I was still coming to terms with what I'd seen, she explained about the mate bond and how it was changing me. All I could think was, I'm changing into that? A monster straight out of a horror movie? That's what I shouted at her, along with a lot of other things that don't bear repeating. I stormed out of her apartment and stayed away for a month. I couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. All I

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could think about was her. How much I wanted, needed, and loved her. It was the last that drove me to her, begging her to forgive me and take me back. The pain I felt when we were apart...I've never felt anything like that in my life, and never want to again. I may not be the human I used to be but I wouldn't revert back even if I could." When he finished, he pushed his glasses back up on his nose and settled against the dresser, ankles crossed in a relaxed posed.

"What's this mate bond you keep talking about? And how can you already be married by shifter standards? I don't understand." NeeCee asked the very question that was nibbling at the back of Tameka's mind.

Kiesha and Mark took turns explaining true mates, the mating fever, and how it all culminates into the mate bond.

Tameka slanted a sideways glance at NeeCee to see how she was taking all of this.

"Don't look at me. I don't have nothing to do with this, but you better ask your questions quick before I forget this is about you. I have tons more."

On that note of warning, Tameka asked the first question that came to mind. "Alex said that normally, the change from human to shifter happens gradually over time. What was the first difference you noticed?"

"Oh, God, I'll never forget. My sense of smell. Alex and I were entering Moe's Diner for lunch when suddenly, all these scents overwhelmed me. I thought I was going to pass out. If there'd been anything in my stomach, I'm sure I would have puked. It was horrible," Kiesha stated, a look of remembered distaste on her face.

Mark crossed his arms over his chest, a faraway look on his. "The thing I remember most is how aggressive I was. I'm normally very laid back. I was challenging everyone about everything. Short-tempered and very territorial. I thought the stress of finals and graduation was getting to me."

"What about you, Meka? Feeling any different?" NeeCee questioned.

She brought her knee up and rested her chin on it as she thought about it. "No, I feel the same. Nothing's changed."

In a tone of pure disbelief, Kiesha asked, "You have not

noticed *any* difference?"

"Nada."

Mark straightened and came over to stand behind Kiesha's chair, placing his hands on the top. "I have an idea. Let's try a little experiment."

"What kind?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothing major. I just want you to focus and tell me what you hear."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

She flicked another glance at NeeCee before saying, "Okay."

"Remember, concentrate and tell us everything that you hear."

At first, all she heard were the normal hospital sounds she'd gotten used to. She called them out as she recognized each sound: the woosh and beeps of machinery, carts being pushed down the hall, phones ringing. But as she concentrated, she could hear more—the soft fall of footsteps in the clinic hallways, conversations of clinic staff a good distance away sounding as clear as if they stood right outside the door, and Chad and Bull talking as they entered the automatic doors of the clinic.

"Oh." The last startled her so bad she returned to herself with a thump, feeling like she'd just had an out-of-body experience. "I don't understand. Why couldn't I hear all of that before?"

Mark smiled, seemingly pleased. "You're automatically tuning it out—turning down the volume, if you prefer. That's good. Most shifters have to be taught. You're probably doing the same thing with your sense of smell."

Tameka decided to test it out. Closing her eyes, she tried to identify the scents around her. She immediately began to gag. Tameka slapped a hand over her nose as her eyes watered and choked out, "How do I shut it off?"

"First, open your eyes," Kiesha commanded dryly.

Her eyes popped open to see Kiesha and Mark gazing at her with barely suppressed amusement.

"Loss of sight magnifies your other senses," Mark added with a chuckle.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

"I knew that," she muttered around her hand as Chad came through the door.

He made a beeline for Tameka, gazing at her in concern as he stopped by her side. "What's wrong?"

"Meka's testing her Spidey senses," NeeCee stated.

"Her what?" Bull asked as he closed the door.

"Still gagging here?" Meka reminded them. The combined scents of antiseptic, hospital waste, and who knew what else were overwhelming. Even the smell of her favorite body lotion on her hand was making her sick.

"Tameka, focus on Chad until all the other scents fade," Kiesha instructed.

She immediately turned and buried her nose in Chad's chest. He palmed the back of her head and stroked her back. "Someone want to tell me what this is all about?"

"We were doing a little experiment to see..." Mark's voice and the rest of her surroundings faded as Tameka immersed herself in Chad's heavenly scent. Her hands came up to grasp his butt as she rubbed her nose against him, pushing past his shirt to his skin.

*Mmm, good. Mate. Want.*

Her nails dug into him, pulling him closer as she crept forward to the edge of the bed. Her nose drifted lower, headed for his crotch where the scent was strongest.

"Meka." Chad's hand twisted in her hair, pulling her head up and back.

She growled at him. "*Mate. Want. Now.*"

He got in her face, a concerned look in his eyes. "Control your wolf, babe."

She lunged up, aiming for his mouth but he jerked away. At the same time, he tightened his grip, restraining her movements. She snarled and tried to snatch loose. When she came back to herself, Chad had her pinned to the bed, his teeth holding her by the throat and she smelled blood.

"Chad," she tried to call out, but it emerged as little more than a hoarse whisper.

He must have heard because he licked her neck and then rose until they were face-to-face. His eyes were glowing; his shirt ripped to shreds. Blood dripped from where her nails dug

into his shoulders. She lifted her hands and gazed in horror at the red coating her fingertips. “*What did I do?*”

“Welcome back,” he whispered and gently stroked her cheek with his thumb.

“Chad, answer me. What happened?” The borderline hysteria in her voice caused the glow to dim.

“Your beast came out to play.”

She gazed again at his blood splattered and tattered clothing, not understanding how he could be so calm. She’d attacked him.

NeeCee’s face came into her field of vision. “Yo, Meka. You okay? Holy shit, her eyes are glowing.”

“NeeCee, stay back. I don’t want to hurt you, too.” What if she lost control again? NeeCee wasn’t a shifter like Chad.

“Baby, I’m fine.”

“How can you say that? I attacked you.” As she spoke, something stirred, deep in her belly. The skin on her body seemed to ripple and she immediately froze. “Did you feel that? What the hell is it?” she whispered, afraid to speak too loudly as though it might hear her and respond.

Plastered as he was to her from chest to knee, she had no doubt that he’d felt what she did.

“That’s your wolf. It’s responding to your fear. You need to calm down.”

“Calm down? You look like a wild animal clawed you.”

“Here, let me help.” He kissed her, spearing his tongue deep in her mouth.

His taste hit her and she moaned, arching into him as the fear disappeared. Her legs came up to wrap around his waist.

“That’s enough, Chad. If your lust triggers hers, we’ll be right back where we started,” Mark cautioned.

It was then she realized Chad was fiercely aroused. She could smell it rolling off of him, although how she identified the scent was a mystery.

“Chad,” Kiesha growled warningly.

He heeded the alpha’s call, slowly disentangling their mouths. He backed off of the bed and stood, pulling her up with him. Meka’s feet dropped to the floor and she swayed, still unbalanced from the emotional roller coaster she’d ridden. Chad

pushed the pillows to the side and sat at the head of the bed, then settled her into the space between his legs, her back against his chest, hips snug against his erection. His arms wrapped around her as he rested his chin on the top of her head, breathing heavy. Meka felt protected and comforted.

“Wow! That was...um...interesting. What the hell just happened? Why'd she wig out like that?” NeeCee asked.

Meka finally noticed that NeeCee had cleared the bed and was standing at the end behind the dubious protection of the footboard. Bull hovered protectively close behind.

“Let me explain,” Mark began. “Meka's enhanced hearing and sense of smell is powered by her wolf. When we asked her to tap into it, it stirred her beast. Chad's return after so long an absence brought her wolf to the surface along with the need to mate.”

“If she wanted to fuck, why did she try to take his head off?”

Meka flinched inwardly at NeeCee's blunt language, but then the meaning of her words registered. “*I tried to rip his head off?*”

“Just a little love play,” Chad said soothingly.

She didn't believe him and it must have showed.

“What you did was totally normal, Meka. Your she-wolf made Chad establish his dominance. It's something all she-wolves do with their mates,” Mark explained.

Once again NeeCee asked what Meka was thinking. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means her wolf made sure Chad was strong enough to tame it,” Bull entered the conversation.

“By *fighting* him?” She was so confused.

“By testing him. Think of it this way, Meka. In the wild, female wolves force the male to prove how strong he is before selecting him as a mate. She needs a mate that's not only a good provider, but one capable of protecting her and their pups. As women we do the same thing. Think about it. When you were dating, how many times have you tested a man by saying or doing something out of character, just to see how he would respond? Would he let you walk all over him or would he put his foot down? Black women in particular tend to be strong. We

have to be. That strength is bred into us. And, we desire and search for men just as strong—not to dominate us --but because sometimes we're weak and we need to know that when our strength fails, our man's got our back," Kiesha concluded.

That actually made sense. Tameka had dated some weak men in her life and she'd sent all of them packing. In the human world, the battle of wits and wills was more subtle but no less important. It all boiled down to one question, is this male a worthy mate?

"You're right. There's nothing I hate more than a 'yes' man. I get rid of them real quick and in a hurry," NeeCee stated.

Bull leaned forward and whispered something in her ear that caused her back to stiffen and eyes to narrow. He grinned wickedly and retreated to lean against the door, gazed still glued to NeeCee's back.

A yawn escaped before Meka could stop it. "Forgive me. I don't know why I'm suddenly so tired."

"Don't apologize. We're the ones that sorry. You're still recovering from the coma. Both Carol and Alex instructed us not to linger too long. I guess now is a good time to leave. We can continue this discussion later, after you've rested," Kiesha stated.

"Thank you for coming. I appreciate it. Please, both of you, take some of these flowers with you. There's no way I can take them all home."

"Are you sure?"

"Very."

"If you don't mind, I'll take this one. It's so pretty. Here, I'll leave the card with you." Kiesha selected one of the ones that was delivered recently and set the envelope on the bedside table.

"I'll have Carol stop by and pick out the one she likes. She's the green thumb in our family," Mark stated.

Bull left his position by the door and walked around, examining the offerings and reading the goodwill cards attached. "Bull, you can have one, too," she generously offered. "I had no idea the people around here were this friendly. They don't even know me."

"But they know Chad. Most of these are from the pack. You're one of us now," Bull stated as he reinserted on card and pulled out another.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

"I should go, too, and let you get some rest," NeeCee stated after Kiesha and Mark left the room.

Meka was barely listening. Just before the door closed, she'd noticed a man standing in the hallway, right in front of her room. Now that she thought about it, he'd moved out the way, allowing Kiesha and Mark to exist before moving back into position. "Why is there a man standing in front of my door?"

"Rome had Alex put guards on you and NeeCee." Chad spoke into her ear.

"Guards? Why?" Meka tried to twist around to face him, but he held her tight. Instead, she leaned her head back and looked up.

"Because Psycho Bitch tried to riddle his hide with bullets this morning. You should see his truck," Bull stated as he moved to a new group of plants.

"What!" Meka was immediately wide awake, tiredness forgotten.

"Thanks, Bull," was Chad's dry response.

"Are you hurt? Let me see!"

"Meka, it wasn't that serious," he assured her as she struggled, needing to see for herself.

When his arms tightened like bands around her, she ordered, "Release me!"

"I'm okay," he insisted, but he did as she commanded and with a long-suffering look, allowed her to check him for damage.

"I can understand Meka needing a guard, but why'd this Alex dude stick one on me?" NeeCee questioned.

Bull held up a card. "Take a look at this, Chad." He turned to NeeCee, "This card is the reason your lovely person is now being protected twenty-four-seven."

Chad took the note from Bull and read it. "Which plant did this one come out of?"

"The lily by the door," Meka answered.

"You knew about this and didn't say anything," he roared.

"Don't you raise your voice at me," she shouted. "I was busy and forgot." She moved to get off of the bed and he pulled her right back and onto his lap.

"You should have told me. This is important." He glowered at her. She matched him glare for glare.

“Like your being shot at this morning is important?” Then she smiled sweetly, knowing her eyes glinted dangerously. “It’s almost three and I’m just finding out about it,” she reminded him. “From Bull,” she added pointedly.

NeeCee interrupted their staring contest when she took the card and read it aloud. “*The old lady. Her husband. Your animal lover. Who else will you lose? Your sister? Give me what I want!* This woman really has a hard-on for that land. Why don’t you just give it to her—take the money and run?”

“If it were mine, I probably would. No dirt is worth all of this grief.” Then Meka explained about the property belonging to the pack and how she was just the trustee.

“If it’s their land, let them deal with it. You shouldn’t be in the middle of this,” was NeeCee’s response. “It’s not like they’re paying you, are they?”

“No, but they do pay the property taxes and such.”

“Well, duh! It belongs to them. If I were you, I’d pack up and move. Let them handle this mess. Go stay with Chad or something. You two are basically married anyway. Let him provide the roof over your head.”

Meka snapped around to see Chad’s reaction to the news.

“We’re married?” He gazed at her questioningly.

“You didn’t know?”

“Dude, I keep telling you. You gotta hang with the pack more often. What do you think a mate is?” Bull smacked his forehead and hung his head in pretended shame, his cowboy hat held against his chest.

“Married.” If the slowly spreading grin across his face was any indication, Chad was pleased with the news.

“I still want rings and a marriage license,” he told her.

“Whoa, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. One step at a time, remember?” She broke out into a sweat just thinking about marriage vows.

He stared at her until she began to squirm uncomfortably. “One step at a time, *wife*.”

Meka flinched and turned away just in time to catch NeeCee laughing at her. “Oh, this is rich. A marriage and a family counselor that doesn’t want to be married. If only your patients could hear you now.”

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“Shut up, NeeCee,” she grumbled. Meka would be the first to admit she had hang-ups when it came to love and marriage. Becoming a shifter wasn't going to magically change that.

“As your *husband*, I have to agree with my new baby sister-in-law, even if she is a brat...”

“Hey! Watch it, wolf-man. I'm trying to help you,” NeeCee protested.

“...let the pack deal with this. Come live with me until this is over with. Hell, I have money. We can buy our own land and build our own house.”

“I think you staying at your place until this is over is an excellent idea. In fact, NeeCee, you should go home, too. You'll be safer. What?!” Both NeeCee and Chad were shaking their heads.

“I'm not going anywhere,” NeeCee began.

“I'm your last line of defense, babe. My orders are to protect you and I can't do that if you're one place and I'm another,” Chad stated firmly. He had that look in his eyes that said hell would freeze before he changed his mind. That left NeeCee to convince.

“Nin-Nee, please. Go home. As much as I love having you here, I'd rather you be safe.”

“Uh-uh, no doing, so you can quit with the baby names. Besides, who's to say this woman won't just follow me and arrange a little accident once I'm away and supposedly safe? At least here I have protection. If you're guarding Meka, who's my guard?”

“Why, darling, I thought you knew. I've been ordered to watch your luscious body around the clock, and I'm a stickler for following directions,” Bull informed her with a leer.

“If that's the case, why don't you go...?”

“NeeCee!”

“What! He started it,” she grouched.

Meka sighed. “I guess we'll all be staying at my place. Oh, joy,” she muttered sarcastically.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Chad looked at Bull. “I need to call this in. We probably won’t get any usable prints off of it—too many handlers—but it still needs to be entered as evidence.”

“While you’re doing that, I’ll go up front and see if the receptionist remembers who delivered them. Someone had to sign for it. Flora’s Flowers...isn’t that the name that was on the flower box left on Meka’s porch?”

“Yeah, but it may not mean anything. Over half the deliveries in this room came from that particular florist,” Chad said in disgust.

“Maybe, maybe not. At this point, doesn’t hurt to check. Hey, my succulent piece of rich, dark chocolate, you want to come with me? After I handle business, I’m headed over to the diner to pick up dinner. You can help me carry the food.” He waggled his eyebrows at NeeCee.

Chad laughed, knowing that despite his antics, Bull had it bad for NeeCee. He’d never seen him work so hard to get a woman’s attention.

NeeCee rolled her eyes. “He’s full of it. I don’t know how you stand to work with him.”

“Are you coming or not?”

“Yeah, hold your horses. I’m coming. It will do me good to get out of here for a bit, and I’m getting hungry.” She grabbed her purse off the end of the bed.

“So I’m full of it, hmmm? Full of charm, sex appeal, animal magnetism? So good of you to finally notice,” Bull commented as he escorted her out the door.

“Actually, you’re full of sh...” The door closed on her answer.

Tameka groaned. “You know they’re going to drive us crazy, don’t you?”

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

"Nah, they'll have sex and that will be the end of it. NeeCee's only fighting because she wants him as much as he wants her," he pronounced sagely.

"Whatever."

Obviously his mate didn't believe his analysis of the situation. He grinned as he pulled out his phone and called Rome.

"Rome."

"It's me. Meka got a delivery. Send someone to tag it for evidence."

"So this woman knows where your mate is."

Chad's heart thudded. "Shit, I didn't even think about that. It's from Flora's Flowers and has a note attached, threatening to eliminate those closest to Meka until she gives her what she wants."

"'Bout like we'd expected. Flora's Flowers, you said? Hold on." He could hear Rome rustling through papers.

"Bull thinks there may be a connection. I'm not so certain. Half the deliveries in here are from them."

"Bull just may be on to something. A Flora's Flower's delivery van came through the roadblock we set up after your ambush. It was one of the ten vehicles that did, and the driver was an older female in her late forties or early fifties. The age range fits our suspect," Rome mused.

"Yeah, but...you really think this could be the woman we're looking for?"

"It makes sense. A delivery truck driver could get in and out of places unnoticed that the average person can't. I'm headed over to Colbyville to check this out."

That was one thing he liked about Rome. He wasn't a desk jockey. He got right out into the field with his men and did what needed to be done. "Before you go, you find out any more from the elders about the woman we're looking for?"

"Got a name. Someone found an old yearbook and it sparked a memory. Her name was Emily Carstens. I've got Reagan on the computer now searching for her. I'll let you know as soon as she gets a hit."

"Alright." He sighed deeply. It really burned him that he was sitting back taking it easy while everyone else was doing the

work.

“Chad, I know you want to be out here hunting, but protecting your mate is the most important thing you can do. We don’t know what this woman’s capable of,” Rome reminded him.

“Roger.” He flipped the phone closed, knowing Rome was finished.

“Sounds like you’re getting close,” Tameka murmured.

“They’re the ones close to finding the truth,” he grumbled.

“Awww, poor baby. Stuck babysitting when he wants to be out playing with the big boys.”

“I’ll show you a big boy.” He wrestled her down to the bed and covered her. Once he had her pinned, he asked, “You were saying?”

“I missed you while you were gone,” she confessed. She went all soft and womanly beneath him. He was instantly hard, but then, with Meka it didn’t take much.

“Not as much as I missed you.” He settled in closer, nestling his hardness against the warm heat of her crotch.

She arched into him, rubbing his erection in a manner that made him hiss in pleasure, especially since he was still at a low burn from earlier. “Lock the door and show me how much.”

“Gladly.” He rose and secured the door, stripping his clothes off as he returned to the bed where an already naked Meka was waiting.

She opened her arms and spread her legs, revealing her glistening slit. “Forget foreplay. I need you in me now.”

“Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say.” He dove onto the bed and into his mate in one fell swoop, taking her with the ferocious need that had been building all day.

By the time NeeCee and Bull returned with the food, they’d showered and dressed, and were once more relaxing on the bed, watching television. Chad was glad he had the foresight to hand the plant and card to the guard at the door, just before locking it. It was amazing since all the blood in his body had been centered below his waist. That was one less interruption to deal with when every moment alone with his mate was precious.

While they ate, Chad told Bull about his conversation with Rome and Bull relayed the results of his talk with the receptionist. “I spoke with Alice. Caught her right before her

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

shift ended. She doesn't know the florist's name but said it's the same woman who made all of the deliveries. Get this. She said that originally, the driver said there was only one flower arrangement to be dropped off. But, before Alice could sign for it, she remembered that there was another one on the back of the truck and went to retrieve it. Alice thought it was odd because when she signed the form, there was still only one delivery listed."

"Does she remember which one was added?"

"Sure thing. Ten guesses which one?"

"The peace lily."

He pointed his fork at Chad. "Ding, ding, ding, ding. Give the man a cigar. Got it on the first try."

"We need to tell Rome."

"Already ahead of you. Called him soon as we left."

"So what happens now?" Meka asked.

"Now we wait. She's beginning to make mistakes. One of them will lead us to her," Chad told her with more confidence than he was feeling.

\* \* \* \*

The next day was quiet. Chad was underfoot all day, refusing to leave the room, which seemed to shrink by the hour. Alex still wouldn't let her check out of or even leave the clinic, stating he wanted her under constant observation, just in case. If she didn't get out of the room soon, she was going to lose it.

Alex must have realized it. "Look, I can't let you leave, but the clinic is built in the shape of a square around a center courtyard. You can go out there and sit, feel the breeze on your skin and the sun in your face and still be protected."

"At this point, I'll take whatever I can get, as long as it gets me out of this room."

It helped tremendously, but it still wasn't home.

"I want to go home," she whined for the fourth time in an hour. "I want my house, my space, my *things*. I'm sick of being stuck in this place."

"Well, you can't. Not until Alex says it's safe."

"I don't see why I have to stay. I'm perfectly healthy. Alex

said so himself. Why won't he let me leave? What can they do for me that you aren't already doing? If something happens—which I seriously doubt—you can pick up the phone and give him a call," she complained as she paced back and forth, kicking at the occasional obstacle in her path.

"You're just bored."

She threw up her hands. "And you're not?"

He sighed. "Meka."

She knew she was being a bitch, but she felt like a prisoner. Her skin was crawling with the need to do something—anything.

"You want something to do? Fine. Let's see if you can shift into your wolf form."

"What?"

"You heard me. You have to do it some time. Might as well be now. Take off your clothes."

She looked around nervously, feeling like there was thousands of eyes watching her. "Here? Now? What if someone sees me?"

"There's no one around and even if there were, nudity doesn't bother shifters. We spend half our time in the buff."

"Well, it bothers me."

"Meka." The way he growled her name cautioned that she was trying his patience. She reluctantly began to strip.

*See what happens when you complain, Meka.*

*Not now, Momma E.*

Momma E.'s chuckle slowly faded away.

"You smell that?" The expression on his face was the same one in the truck that day when Momma E made her first appearance.

Playing dumb, she sniffed the air and gave Chad an innocent look. "Smell what?"

When Chad narrowed his eyes at her, she remembered that shifters can smell lies. Oops!

"Never mind," he told her. "It's gone now."

She slowly let out the breath she'd been holding. Explaining about her dead grandmother was not on today's 'to do' list. "Take off your clothes," she suddenly commanded.

"Why?"

"Cause you're not going to have me out here naked by

myself. Now strip.”

He took off his t-shirt and jeans and tossed them to the side. As per usual, he went commando. When she saw his erection, she reached out a hand to stroke it and suggested, “You know, we could just go back to the room and make love again.”

“No.” He knocked her hand away before it could connect. “Stop trying to sidetrack me.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “Now what?”

“Think about your wolf. Remember that sensation when we were on the bed and you felt it move? Concentrate on that.”

“Is this going to hurt? ‘Cause I really don’t like pain,” she warned him.

“It only hurts if you fight the change, so don’t fight it.”

“Easy for you to say,” she muttered.

“Meka, concentrate.”

“I’m concentrating, or I will as soon as you quit talking to me.”

He huffed at her and placed his hands on his hips. “You’re stalling. We’ll stay out here all day if we have to.”

“All right already. I’ll do it, just don’t look at me. I can’t think with you—and that—staring at me.” She waved a hand at his straining penis.

He rolled his eyes, then turned his back. “Is this better?”

“Not really,” she muttered. The man’s rear was just as luscious at the front. Knowing she had no choice, Meka stopped playing around and got serious. She closed her eyes, trying to recapture the feeling she’d had yesterday.

Here, wolfie. Don’t you want to come out and play, wolfie?

Nothing.

She shook her shoulders to loosen the knots and tried again. After a few minutes passed, she gave up. “Chad, it’s not working.”

He turned to face her. “Are you really trying, Meka?”

“I *said* I would, didn’t I? Yes, I tried and nothing happened.”

“Hmmm, maybe you’re too self-conscious about being naked. Those times when you felt it stirring, what were you thinking about?”

“You.”

“Come here.”

She walked over to him.

“Come closer.”

She stopped when their toes touched.

“Now, open up your senses like you did yesterday and smell me.”

She leaned in so that her nose brushed his chest.

“Don’t think about anything but my scent,” he said in a soft voice.

Her hands came up to hold him by the waist and she rubbed her nose against him, wanting to wallow in his essence.

“That’s right, baby. Rub yourself against me. I’m your mate. You want my scent covering you, don’t you?”

She did. He smelled so good, but lower smelled even better.

He dropped to his knees and she followed, bending on hands and knees until her nose was buried in his pubic hair, sniffing all around his root and balls.

“Meka, look at me, baby.”

She rolled her eyes up until she could see him.

“Your eyes are glowing. Follow me, babe. Just let it happen.” He rolled over onto his side and shifted.

Meka felt a searing heat, saw a flash of light, and then a tingling sensation engulfed her from head-to-toe. When her eyes opened, the world looked funny, all variant shades of gray.

*You did it, baby. You’re a wolf.*

Yeah, yeah, that was nice, but back to that luscious scent. She went back to rubbing her muzzle in his groin.

*Muzzle?*

She plopped onto her behind and looked down. She had fur...and paws. She brought her right paw up felt her nose. She was a wolf. She did it.

*Now how do I change back?*

Chad laughed. *One thing at a time. First I want you to get comfortable in your wolf body. Take a few steps. Run and play. Don’t be in such a rush to change forms.*

*You can hear me?*

*Yes, this is how we communicate. Normally, I have to project my thoughts. With you, it’s like you’re right in my mind.*

Meka stood and took a few wobbly steps. It was easier once

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

she stopped thinking about it and let instinct—or her wolf—take over. She walked all around the courtyard, sniffing the plants and getting used to being on four legs instead of two. Then she and Chad played a game of chase. She was IT. He chased her until she dropped to the grass covered ground, panting.

He settled down beside her and licked her muzzle. It was nice, but she much preferred kissing as a human. As quick as the thought, she was back in her human body. Chad changed a second later.

Meka laughed, pleased with her accomplishment. “That was pleasant, but I’d rather do this...” She leaned over and kissed him, sticking her tongue in his mouth.

He turned until he was lying on his side facing her, and dragged her against his hard body. Meka wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled, rolling back until Chad settled on top of her. She moaned in approval when he nudged her legs apart with his knee and settled between them, sheathing his erection in one plunge. “You’re right. This is much better.”

She grabbed him by the ears and pulled his face back down. Against his lips she muttered, “Talk later. Fuck now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Alex came to her room. “Now that you’ve had your first change, you can go home.”

“You mean that’s it? That’s all you were waiting on?” she exclaimed in shocked disbelief.

Alex slanted a quizzical glance at Chad. “Well, that was my primary concern. As your alpha, it’s my duty to make sure your transition from human to shifter runs smoothly. Overseeing your first change is a large part of it. You shifted, things seemingly went well, and now you can go home.” He said it like he didn’t see what the big deal was.

“And you couldn’t have told me this before?”

“No.”

Meka wanted to push the issue, but Chad was giving her a look that said, “Shut up, woman,” as clearly if he’d shouted it. She closed her mouth, inwardly fuming. If she’d have known

that's all it took be cleared to leave, she'd have shifted days ago, or least tried. She still wasn't exactly sure how she'd transformed into her wolf, or if she could do it again.

She gathered her belongings, still seething at the injustice of it all. In the background, Alex asked Chad about her change. Did she do it on her own or did he have to guide her through it? Did she retain consciousness of who and what she was while in wolf form? Was it painful for her? Was Chad able to communicate with her in wolf form? What about the shift back to human, did it leave her weak and drained? By the time Alex finished his inquisition, she was packed and raring to go.

"Meka, I want you to come back in four weeks for a checkup. I'll have my nurse schedule you an appointment."

She gave a brief nod of acknowledgment, still frowning ferociously.

Chad whispered, "What is wrong with you? Show some respect. He's the alpha."

She twirled her finger in a whoop-dee-do motion and rolled her eyes.

Alex caught their little byplay. "I'll speak to Carol and make sure she schedules your next lesson—the one that deals with pack hierarchy—soon," he informed her with narrowed eyes.

Meka growled in response and Chad snatched her back against his chest, wrapping both arms around her. "We'd appreciate that."

Meka bit her lip and looked away.

"While she's at it, she can teach Meka how to handle the aggressiveness she's feeling."

With a start, Meka realized she wasn't being her normal, peaceful self. She wanted to attack, wanted to challenge Alex's supposed authority over her. Suddenly, she was confused. She raised a shaky hand and pushed her bang out of her eye. "Alex, what's wrong with me? I'm not naturally combative, but I wanted to fight you and I'm not sure why." Actually, she wanted to rip his throat out, but didn't think confessing that would go over too well.

Alex placed his chart on the table and leaned back against the bed, arms crossed over his chest. "What you're feeling is

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

natural. You're a strong wolf. It's the nature of the beast to pit itself against others to establish pecking order. From what Kiesha told me, Chad already established his dominance over you, so that's why you're not feeling the need to confront him. You still need to find your way with the rest of us. Carol will teach you how to control the urge."

Knowing why she was behaving the way that she was didn't make her feel better about.

"Don't worry. You're still new at this and have lots to learn. You'll adjust. You've already made a great start," Alex assured her.

"Ummm, what happens if I don't?"

Chad stiffened behind her. The room was so quiet she could have heard a pin drop on carpet.

"I'm going to go sign off on your discharge paperwork. The nurse will bring it in here shortly along with the date of your next appointment." He collected his clipboard and left the room.

Well, shit. Talk about pressure. She wrapped her arms around Chad's, gripping him tight as she leaned her head back against his chest and relaxed into the safety his arms represented.

Chad rubbed his chin on the top of her head. "I won't let anything happen to you, babe."

"This is going to take some getting used to." She just prayed she was given enough time to adjust.

"Getting out of here will be a big help. The beast doesn't like to be caged."

"I think I figured that one out already."

\* \* \* \*

On the way home, Rome called and instructed Chad to stop by the station. "And bring Meka. I want to know what she thinks of this."

As they went inside, Meka looked around with interest. It looked a lot like the various police stations she'd seen in some of her favorite movies, just on a smaller scale. She guessed they really all were the same. Chad walked straight back past a room full of cubicles to a small, glass enclosed conference room near the back. Despite the multitude of keyboards clacking and

phones ringing, she could feel the curious stares of the other deputies as they walked through.

Chad escorted her to the table and pulled out a chair. Once she was seated, he settled beside her. "Rome will be here in a minute."

She hoped he hurried. The place smelled like stale coffee, cigarettes, musk, cologne, and office equipment. Funny how she never knew office machinery had a scent.

A very attractive Latino male with shoulder length, curly black hair and smoldering black eyes came strolling in and closed the door. He smelled...off. "What the hell are you?" she blurted, then slapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, God. I am so sorry. That was rude."

"Meka, this is Sheriff Rome Barrio, my boss. Rome, this is my mate, Tameka Jones."

Rome held out his hand. She sheepishly reached out and shook it.

His eyes twinkled at her. "No apologies necessary. Good nose. I'm a feline shifter. Up until now, you've primarily been surrounded by wolves. I can understand your surprise."

"Feline as in cats?"

"Feline as in lions, tigers, panthers, etc. Not furry little house cats."

"Big, man-eating kitty cats. Got it." She winked to show she was just teasing and he laughed.

"What's up, Rome? Meka just got released from the clinic. I'm sure she's ready to go home," Chad asked shortly as he blatantly placed an arm around the back of her chair and leaned in real close.

She kicked him under the table. "Don't mind him. I'm in no particular rush to trade one prison for another," she assured Rome.

He smiled and set the bulging folder in his hands on the table before being seated. *Oh my, he has a dimple.* She let out a dreamy little sigh.

"Watch it. You're a happily mated woman, remember?" Chad muttered in her ear.

She patted his knee. "Of course, baby. Doesn't mean I can't look."

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

He captured her hand and held it tight. "That's exactly what it means."

Rome ended their little byplay by getting down to business. "I want to discuss two things. We found Emily Carstens, but she's not going to be much help. She was shot, execution style, almost a year ago. Reagan was able to find the birth records. Emily had a boy named Franklin. He's wanted for questioning as a person of interest in the death of his mother."

"A boy? You're sure?" Chad asked.

"We got a copy of the birth certificate from the Vital Records Unit," Rome assured him. "The son was in therapy before he went missing. We're trying to contact his therapist now to see what he can tell us."

"Not much. It would be a violation of doctor/patient confidentiality," Tameka informed them.

"That's where you come in. He might be willing to speak off the record with another professional," Rome stated.

"I'll see what I can do," she hesitantly promised. She'd took a solemn vow when she got her license and wasn't comfortable with the idea of helping someone else circumvent theirs. "What has this to do with my case? I thought we were looking for a woman?"

"We are. I'm not sure yet how the two are related. I just feel in my gut that they are," Rome answered.

Never argue with a cop's intuition, she reminded herself. If he really felt that the situation warranted it, she'd do what she could to assist, despite her personal feelings on the subject.

"What about Flora's Flowers?" Chad asked.

"That's the second thing. The driver's name is Francis Carter. She's been working for Flora's Flowers a little over two years as a delivery driver. Deb Turner, the owner, said she's very quiet, keeps to herself. She's a dedicated employee, always shows up to work on time and stays 'til her shift is finished. Francis never mentioned having a boyfriend and the owner didn't think she was involved with anyone. She did mention one thing that I found very interesting. Ms. Carter is a member of the National Skeet Shooting Association. She routinely takes off to attend tournaments."

"Damn," Chad muttered.

“My sentiments exactly.”

“What does this mean?” Tameka asked, not sure why the men were looking so grim.

“If she’s got any experience with the sport, she would by necessity be an expert shooter. The person that ambushed me the other day knew how to handle a rifle,” Chad explained.

“She had time and opportunity. Now we need to see if she had motive,” Rome added. He continued with, “When I asked to speak with her, I was told she’d returned from her route early that day citing a medical emergency. Seems her mother is deathly ill and Ms. Carter will be off indefinitely.”

“Well isn’t that convenient?” Chad stated with disgust showing in his expression.

“Sounds suspicious if you ask me,” Tameka stated.

“I got her home address from the owner. Told her Ms. Carter may have witnessed a crime and we’d like to question her. I drove by her place. No answer at the door and the landlord wouldn’t let me in without a warrant.” Rome closed the folder. “At this point, we know Carter is involved, but not in what capacity.”

“She may be Carstens’ lover,” Chad suggested.

“I’m sure Raleigh police would love to know where he is,” Rome said.

“Is that where Emily relocated to?” Tameka asked.

“Yeah. She and Franklin. Emily bounced around a lot after leaving Refuge, but spent the last fifteen years in Raleigh,” Rome stated.

“So basically, we’re back to square one,” Chad said.

“Not really. We have a definite suspect in your shooting. We just need to find the connection. We’re close. I can feel it. In the meantime, you stick close to Tameka. I don’t like it that this woman has disappeared. She’s already proven to be dangerous. Watch yourself.”

Chad nodded his agreement and motioned for Meka to stand.

Rome slid a piece of paper across the table to her. “This is the therapist’s name and number. Wait a day and then give him a call.”

She took the paper, folded it and put it in her pocket. “I’ll

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

call him tomorrow.”

Rome stood, grabbed his folder, and waited for them by the open door. “We’re going to tap your house phone. At this point, we need any help that we can get.”

“All right.” She mostly used her cell phone anyway, so it was no big deal.

“Hang tight. We’ll catch her,” Rome promised. The grin he gave her showed a bit of fang. She shivered. Between him and Chad, she was sure they would.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

When Tameka got home, before she could kick back and relax, the little matter of sleeping arrangements had to be dealt with.

“I’ll sleep with NeeCee.”

“The hell you will,” NeeCee told Bull.

“It’s only fair. Chad is Meka’s protector and he’s sleeping with her. I’m yours so I sleep with you,” Bull said with a wicked grin on his face.

“Step foot in my room and I’ll have a wolf pelt lining the doorway of my apartment,” NeeCee threatened.

“Ew, animal cruelty. I’m calling the people on you. They’ll come, too. I give big money every year to PETA,” Bull said confidently.

Meka’s eyebrows shot up. “People for Ethical Treatment of Animals? Are you serious?”

“Why does that surprise you? It’s my hide they’re protecting.”

It did make a strange sort of sense, she mused.

“Call PETA, NAVS, HSUS, hell, call the KKK. I don’t give a shit. You’re still not sleeping in my bed.”

Meka didn’t know who half of those groups were, but she definitely recognized that last one.

Bull tsk’d at her. “NeeCee, NeeCee, NeeCee. Why does it always come back to race with you? I’m a man. You’re a woman. Let’s do what men and women were created to do.”

Meka thought NeeCee was going to choke. Her complexion turned an interesting shade of purple. She stepped in before things got violent. “NeeCee, you take the guestroom. Chad sleeps with me. Bull, you can either sleep on the foldout in the study or on the couch in the living room.”

He was shaking his head before she finished speaking. “No

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

can do. I'm her bodyguard. Twenty-four hour a day defense. Where she goes, I go. To the kitchen, the bedroom, bathroom—just consider me your very protective shadow,” Bull said and wagged his eyebrows at her.

“Now wait just a cotton picking minute...” NeeCee exploded.

“It's true. I got orders,” Bull interrupted with a grin.

“Chad...” Meka pleaded. “Do something with your friend.”

“You're not following me into the bathroom!”

“He does have orders,” was Chad's oh so helpful comment.

“This is what I think of your orders...” NeeCee spewed forth with a string of cursing that burnt Meka's ears.

“Oh my. Such language, and from a lady.” Bull delicately placed his hand over his mouth, his eyes rounded in pretend shock.

“Chad!”

“Yes, dear?”

“Handle this or you'll be sleeping on the couch with him,” Meka ordered, starting to get pissed. She was so not in the mood for this.

He straightened and the amused grin at their antics disappeared completely off of his face. “Bull.”

“I'll take the couch. Someone has to keep an ear out. Chad can cover the back,” Bull immediately stated in all seriousness.

“That's what I thought,” NeeCee said with a smug grin.

“NeeCee, you're being a brat. Stop it,” Meka stated firmly.

“Me?! What about him?”

Tameka threw up her hands. “I'm going into the kitchen to fix me a sandwich.”

A few seconds later, she bellowed, “WHO ATE ALL OF MY FOOD?”

\* \* \* \*

The next day, the guys focused on beefing up security in the house. Alex sent men to patrol the grounds, both in wolf and human form. NeeCee sat on the back porch with charcoals and a pad, concentrating on her art. Meka did as she promised Rome and called Franklin Carstens' therapist.

“Dr. Richard Higginbotham’s office.”

“I’d like to speak to Dr. Higginbotham concerning one of his patients.”

“Your name.”

“Dr. Tameka Jones, a former family and marriage counselor.”

“The doctor is with a client right now. May I take a message?”

Tameka left her name, number, and the reason for her call.

“I’ll have him call at his earliest convenience.”

Chad appeared in the room’s doorway. “You find out anything?”

“He’s with a client. I left my information for a callback.”

He nodded and went back to whatever mysterious thing he and Bull were doing at the back of the house. She heard Chad mutter something about an early warning system. Whatever that meant. Frankly, she didn’t want to know.

An hour later, the phone rang.

“Dr. Jones, this is Richard Higginbotham. I understand you have questions about one of my patients?”

“Yes. A Franklin Carstens.” She explained the purpose of her call.

“I Googled you, so I know you’re familiar with patient confidentiality. Though I can’t betray any confidences, I will tell you this. Mr. Carstens is no longer a client. He ended his therapy, too soon in my opinion. To find the answers that you seek, research his family history. That’s all I can offer you.”

“I understand completely and thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome.”

She hung up and called the number Rome had given her.

“Rome.”

“This is Tameka. I just got off of the phone with Franklin’s therapist.”

“What did he say?”

“As I expected, not much, but he did say that if you wanted answers, you need to research Franklin’s family history. Dr. Higginbotham also stated that Franklin ended his therapy too soon.”

“Thanks, Meka. I appreciate your help. Put Chad on the

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

phone, will you?"

"Chad, phone." He was there before the last syllable left her mouth. She handed him her cell. "Rome."

"Yeah, boss?"

"You have access to the internet?"

He looked at Meka questioning. "We do," she answered Rome for him. This supersensitive hearing had its benefits. She didn't have to wonder what Rome wanted with Chad. She could hear both sides of the conversation clearly.

"I want you to research Emily and her son. Find out where they lived, where she worked, where he went to school...I want to know everything. His therapist said the answers we need are in his past. I'll have someone here working on it as well."

"Will do."

She heard the connection end.

"Do you have a password on your computer?"

"No." She followed him into the study. He cut on the computer and logged onto the Internet.

"It's a bit slow, but it will do what I need. Thanks, babe. If you need me, I'll be in here working. Don't leave the house without Bull or me with you."

"I know the drill." He'd been spouting variations of the same thing since yesterday.

He gave her another steady look before he finally seemed satisfied of her complicity.

\* \* \* \*

One week passed, and then another. NeeCee left and went home. She got a call about a show one of her art dealer friends wanted to set up and went to make sure she had enough paintings. With NeeCee gone, Bull went back on patrol and it was once again just her and Chad, and the pack members patrolling the grounds.

Both Franklin and Frances had gone to ground. Their bank accounts hadn't been touched, nor credit cards used. It was like they disappeared. Rome had been in contact with the Raleigh police, gathering more information on Emily Carstens' death.

Tameka blocked it all out. She was a virtual prisoner in her

own home. By the third week, she was tired and listless, appetite gone. When she couldn't even drum up interest for sex, Chad got concerned and called Alex, who made her come in early for a check-up.

"What seems to be the problem?" Alex sat behind his desk in his office while she and Chad were seated on the other side.

She shrugged and looked away.

Chad jumped in. "She's barely eating, and then only when I make her. She sleeps all the time and when she's not sleeping, she's staring out the window, lost in her own little world. I don't know what to do anymore. Nothing I've tried has worked."

"Is this true, Meka?"

She lifted one shoulder and stared at her nails. *Hmm, my polish is peeling. Maybe I'll redo them...later.*

"What about exercise, fresh air? Has she shifted into her wolf form since she's been home?"

"No, she hasn't. She mostly just sits around the house."

Meka felt her first flicker of emotion—anger. "I can't go anywhere without you or Bull with me, and you spend all of your time on the computer. Bull went back to work so I can't call him." That little bit of dialogue tired her and she slumped back in her seat, drained.

"What about work?" Alex asked.

"I haven't been back since I got out the clinic. He won't let me," she said tiredly.

"Go back to work, Meka," Alex ordered.

"She can't. She has to be protected at all times and the best way to do that is to keep her under lock and key," Chad vehemently protested.

"Can't you see this enforced confinement is killing her? She's a wolf. She needs the social interaction of others of her kind," Alex explained.

"She has me," Chad insisted stubbornly.

Alex took a deep breath. "Chad, she's a new shifter. She's not a loner like you. She needs to be around the pack. Not only that, her wolf needs to come out and play before it sickens. If safety is your concern, I'll arrange for someone to watch her while she's working. They can even transport her back and forth to work."

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“No,” he gave in with a sigh. “I can take her and pick her up. Rome’s not going to be happy about this.”

“I’ll clear it with him. None of us expected this to drag out like it has. For Meka’s sake, life has to return to normal, or as much as possible under the circumstances. Meka, next week to celebrate my wedding, the pack has a series of events planned. One of them is a run. Kiesha won’t be able to participate, but the rest of the pack is getting together in our wolf form and spending the night running as a pack. I think you would enjoy it. I expect to see both of you there. No excuses,” the last was directed at Chad.

*The alpha has spoken*, she thought with an internal grin. Just the thought of returning to work—and getting free of the house—had her feeling better.

The next day, Chad began escorting her to and from work. Various members of the pack kept watch while she was at the shop. Now that he had a couple of hours of freedom a day, Chad was able to go into the station a few hours each day. Rome wouldn’t let him back on patrol. Chad told her he’d simply traded one computer for another, still piecing together the life of one Emily Carstens and child.

That Wednesday night, when Chad picked her up from work, she could tell he was troubled. “It’s the damndest thing, Meka. I’ve tracked this woman all over North Carolina. She moved constantly. Worked any and everywhere that she could. In some places, she’s listed as having a son. In others, it’s a daughter. Even the school records aren’t consistent, when there were any. Many times she home schooled, citing medical reasons why her child couldn’t attend. Reasons that aren’t listed in the files.”

“You think she had more than one child?”

“Not according to the VRU.”

“Maybe their records are wrong. We’re talking, what? About forty to fifty years ago? Did they even have computers back then?”

“No, everything was manual, but it should be archived into a computer database somewhere by now for easy access if she’d had one.”

“That’s if she had her baby in a hospital. She could have

used a midwife and home delivered, especially if she didn't have much money. Keep searching, babe. Something will come up."

He sighed heavily. "It would help if I knew what I was looking for. You sure that doctor didn't say anything else?"

"Positive."

\* \* \* \*

Tameka was antsy. Chad thought it was the full moon getting to her, but he was wrong. The air had a weighty feel to it, like the calm before a storm. Something was going to happen, and soon. She could feel it in her bones. Unfortunately, she was the only who seemed to sense it.

The wedding was this week and most of the guards Alex assigned to the house had gone back to their regular lives. They couldn't stay indefinitely. There'd been no threats, no hint of a threat. Until something happened, they had other things to do, like celebrate the alpha's mating.

Chad was no closer to finding what he was searching for. Instead, what he discovered raised more questions than it answered. Both suspects were still at large. The taps on the phone proved unnecessary, since no one called. Even the watcher they'd placed on the mailbox had been reassigned. Life was slowly returning to normal.

"What time is the run tonight?"

"We'll meet at Alex's house in time for moonrise. As soon as it appears, we'll all shift and run."

It was almost sunset now. "What if I have problems changing?"

"You won't. We've been practicing. Just remember what I taught you and you'll do fine. I'll be there to walk you through it."

She went to shower and dress for the run, settling on a pair of old faded denims and a t-shirt with her prettiest panty set.

"No one's going to be looking at your underwear, Meka," Chad commented dryly.

"I will." She was nervous enough about getting naked in front of people without the added worry of if her underwear had holes.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

He just shook his head.

They drove Chad's truck, which he'd just gotten out the shop that day. She fretted the whole trip, but her heart really went into overdrive when they arrived and she saw all the people gathered. "I'm not stripping in front of all of them. You run. I'll sit with Kiesha and keep her company."

He got out, came around and opened her door. "They're not going to be looking at you."

"They're looking now," she pointed out.

"That's because we're one of the last to arrive. You're new in town and I rarely come. When it's time to run, we'll be forgotten about in the excitement. One of the guys mentioned hunting deer."

Her eyes got big. "I'm not eating Bambi."

He grinned, showing a lot of teeth. "You'll feel differently in your wolf form. Come on, it's almost time." He gently pulled her out of the truck and toward the waiting crowd.

Meka was doing a good job of pretending to be invisible when Alex called her name. "Meka, come forward." Instantly, all eyes were on her.

Remembering the lessons Carol had been teaching on pack hierarchy and shifter etiquette, she mumbled under her breath, "You can't kill your alpha, Meka. It's just not done, no matter how much he pisses you off."

The crowd parted like the Red Sea before her. She walked between them, not making eye contact with any of them until she reached the porch where Alex was standing, a smiling Kiesha to his right, Carol and Mark to his left. "You summoned, oh Great One," she muttered.

Kiesha snorted and buried her face in Alex's shoulder, muffling her laughter. Chad groaned behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, fingers lightly circling her neck.

"I can see those lessons are coming along swimmingly," Alex told Carol, who like Mark, was trying not to laugh.

Meka prayed her face wasn't turning red. She hadn't meant for anyone to hear her, but since they had, there was nothing for her to do but brazen it out. Thankfully, Alex seemed more bemused than angry.

Then Alex straightened from his relaxed stance and gave

her his full attention, all hints of humor wiped from his expression. Chad's grip on her neck briefly tightened. In warning or as a nervous reaction, she wasn't sure.

"Tameka Jones, mate to Chadleigh Wilson and newly formed shifter, you have been nominated for membership into the Raven pack. How do you respond?"

"Ah...yes?" She threw a quick glance at Carol and Mark, who nodded encouragingly. Neither one of them had mentioned this. From the way they talked, she'd thought she was already a part of the pack because of Chad. Although, now that she thought of it, Alex never did say what would happen if she didn't adjust to being a shifter.

"Pack means family. Within a family, there are rights as well as responsibilities, privileges as well as duties. One of the rights of family is to call on others in the time of need for assistance. As a member of the Raven pack, do you agree to request help when you need it and receive help when it's offered?"

"I do."

"One of the primary responsibilities of a pack is to take care of the young, the weak, and old. As a member, do you agree to put their safety and welfare before your own?"

"I do."

Alex paused a second, then continued solemnly. "Our race is dying. There are fewer females being born every year. Your mating to Chad gives our unmated brethren hope that they, too, will find someone. It gives our sons hope that when the time comes, there may be daughters born that they may bond with. As a young, mated she-wolf, do you accept your duty to this pack—and shifters as a whole—to try to prevent the extinction of our species by bearing young?"

Chad stiffened and pushed her behind him in a move so quick it made her dizzy. She clutched at the back of his shirt to keep from falling. "The decision to have pups is a private matter between me and my mate and has nothing to do with this pack," he growled.

Meka, after a brief struggle with Chad—who was apparently determined to keep her where she was—managed to stand by his side.

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

“On the contrary, it impacts us greatly. Tameka’s daughter, if she has one, may end up being mate to my son or Mark’s.”

The crowd began to murmur. Kiesha elbowed Alex in his side. “Way to go, mate. We weren’t going to announce the sex of the baby just yet, remember? Chad’s right. Whether they have children or not is none of our business. That’s a matter best decided between husband and wife.”

“But...” Alex began.

“But nothing,” Kiesha cut him off, glaring at him.

After a brief battle of wills, Alex continued. “Fine. I withdraw the last statement. Anyone having any objections to Tameka Jones, mate to Chad Wilson, becoming a member of the Raven pack, say so now.”

It was quiet.

“All in favor, say aye.”

The roar was deafening.

“Tameka, step forward.”

Alex walked down the steps until he reached the bottom one, with Meka standing on the ground before him. “Look into my eyes.”

His eyes flashed gold and began glow. Meka was sucked into his gaze, then into his very being. She could see herself through his eyes, and through him she felt his intense love for his mate, the pack, and his connection to them all. She became a part of that link. The feeling was indescribable. When she came back to awareness of her surroundings, she was kneeling on the ground with Chad behind her, supporting her.

“Welcome to the Raven pack,” Alex said.

Kiesha, Carol, and Mark seconded it. As Chad helped her to her feet, the sentiment was echoed all around.

Kiesha kissed Alex on the cheek, smiled at the group and went into the house, closing the door firmly behind her. Anticipation began to build. Some sort of weird energy began to rise. Meka could feel the hair standing on her arms.

Chad started tugging on her clothes. “What are you doing?” she hissed.

“You need to strip. And hurry.” That’s when she noticed he was already naked. So were many of the others she saw when she glanced around to see if anyone was watching, before quickly

averting her eyes.

Alex stood back on the porch where the crowd could see him. "Tonight, we've gathered to run."

The crowd went wild, cheering and yelling at the top of their lungs. She even heard a few howls.

"Alphas first, then women, children and elders, followed by the omegas with betas bringing up the rear," Alex commanded when the noise died down. "Let's run!" Alex let out a howl and all around her people began to change.

A surge of power went through Tameka and she fell to her knees. Her wolf literally leapt out of her, no coaxing necessary. It just took over. She looked up to see Chad hovering over her protectively.

*What happened?*

*The combined energy of so many people shifting at one time brought on your change. That's why Kiesha went inside.*

He nudged her with his snout. *Come on. Everyone's leaving.*

She rolled to her feet and took off running with Chad at her side. She'd never seen this many four-legged creatures in one place in her life. There were wolves of all sizes and colors, encompassing all ages from preteens to the elderly. She'd discovered that wolf shifters don't experience their first change until puberty. For some of the pups, this was their first run. She could sense them all, felt connected to them in a way she never believed possible.

It was...exhilarating. Exciting. The world looked different at night with the moon shining down upon them. They ran and played. Occasionally, a scent would catch her nose and she'd run off to investigate. When she dangered of straying too far from the group, Chad would nip at her heels until she was back in position. She chased rabbits, not to eat, but for the thrill of it.

Feeling playful, she pounced on Chad, then took off running. He was hot on her tail, letting her stay one step ahead. Then he tackled her and they went tumbling through the underbrush. She wrestled with him, laughing when some of the pups joined in on the fun. Chad was being such a good sport about all of it that she was startled when he shook everyone off

## TAMEKA'S SMILE

of him, his fur bristling, a growl of pure fury emanating from his chest.

*Meka, take the pups and go back to the house. Lulu will show you the way.*

*What's happening? What's wrong?*

*Fire. I smell smoke.*

He took off, leaving them behind. Several of the males ran with him.

*Come along, child. Let's get these pups back to safety.*

Meka wanted to follow Chad, but remembering her oath to put their welfare above her own, she joined the others herding the youth back to the alpha's house. Kiesha gathered all the children inside.

Meka dressed and was on her way to join them when Lulu came to her. "Your house is on fire."

She felt the blood drain from her face. "My house?" she echoed hoarsely. "I've got to..." she looked around, "I've got to go. Where are my keys?"

"Here." Lulu handed her Chad's keys which she'd withdrawn from the pants still in her hand. "I'm coming with you. You shouldn't be alone and that mate of yours is going to need his clothes."

In the end, Lulu drove. Meka hadn't been in Refuge long enough to be familiar with the roads, especially at night when time was of the essence.

"My things: my furniture, clothes, *pictures*. Oh God, everything I own is in that house," she moaned. "Momma E's things." How do you replace memories? she wondered in despair.

"Quit your fretting, child. Maybe it's not as bad as you think. Even so, it's just stuff. Things can be replaced. Life is what's important."

It was worse. The place was an inferno. The volunteer fire department had arrived. There were people everywhere, shouting orders, running around. It was a madhouse. Lulu pulled to the side of the driveway near the road, out of the way of traffic. "You stay here. I'll go see what's happening. No sense both of us adding to the confusion."

It was a picture of hell, the black sky lit up by towering

flames and plumes of water shooting into the air. The fire crackled and the water hissed. The smoke was thick; the scent strong enough make her gag. The heat must be blistering. She sent up a brief prayer for the safety of the workers.

Tameka got out of the truck and leaned against its side, arms crossed over her chest as she watched her life go up in smoke. She should be happy that they weren't in the house when it happened, but all she could think of was she'd now joined the ranks of the homeless. The clothes she was wearing was all she had left. She was just grateful she had a little cushion in her savings. It should be enough to replace the essentials and tide her over until she could find another place to live.

The unmistakable sound of a rifle being cocked brought her out of her maudlin musings.

"Step away from the truck and keep your hands where I can see them."

Meka froze as a thousand thoughts ran through her mind. The strongest and loudest of them all was what she'd taught the women in her self-defense class. *Don't lose your head and you just might keep it.*

"I'm good where I'm at, thanks." She settled more firmly against the truck, eyes trained on the burning building, where help was just a yell away.

"Move or I'll shoot."

"No you won't. I have something you want. You need me alive," Meka spoke with a calm confidence she wasn't quite feeling.

"I can shoot you without killing you."

Her heart jumped, then reason kicked in. "True, but the minute you fire that gun, you'll have all of them," she pointed to the men fighting the fire, "after you."

Silence was her response. *Score one for me.*

Lulu should be heading back this way soon. She just had to keep stalling until help arrived. "I take it this is your handiwork?" She nodded to the burning building. She debated calling the woman out by her name, then decided that might not be too wise.

"Yes. It's amazing what a few cocktail bombs can do. Too bad that beast of yours wasn't inside when the fire ignited."

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Her wolf bristled at the scorn in the woman's voice. *Not yet, wolfie. Calm down. You'll get your chance. Let's find out where she is first.* She'd managed to pinpoint the direction the voice was coming from, but still couldn't see her adversary. "You know, you've tried to buy me, scare me, and now you're trying to intimidate me. Instead of all this..." she waved her hand, searching for the right word, "this...foolishness, why don't you try talking. Simply explain to me why you want my land so bad? I mean, it's not like it's the only land around. There's plenty of property for sale around here. There's a huge lot with more acreage and in a better location down the road a bit."

"Just tell you why I want the land and you'll give it to me?"

There, in between those two trees about twenty feet away, was a dark shadow. When she moved, the firelight glinted off the barrel of the rifle. Her wolf bared its teeth.

"You think I'm stupid?" Meka could hear the anger in Frances's voice.

"Since I don't know you, I really couldn't say what your level of intelligence is. I'm just saying, you've tried everything else. What could it hurt?"

"I know what you're trying to do. Don't try that psychoanalytical bullshit with me. It won't work. I've been around shrinks all of my life."

*It obviously didn't help.* Meka bit back the retort, choosing instead to say nothing. Sometimes the best way to get a person to talk was simply to remain silent.

"This should have been mine, you know? He owes me. They both do."

Meka caught a flicker of movement out the corner of her eye, but kept her attention centered on the shadow. "Who are 'they'?"

"Animals aren't meant to mate with humans, Ms. Jones. When they breed, the results are...unnatural, freaks of nature. Like me."

"You don't sound like a freak. I'm sure you're exaggerating."

"Am I, Ms. Jones? Am I really? Do you know what a hermaphrodite is?"

Tameka searched her memory. "A hermaphrodite is an

animal that's neither male nor female, but both. They have characteristics and features of both sexes, including both sex organs," she said slowly as her studies in biology came back to her.

"That's right. Give the counselor a star." She stepped forward into the muted, flickering light. "An animal, something not quite human. That's what I am. That's what they made me."

No wonder she'd had a hard time seeing her. The woman was dressed in all black, with a black skullcap on her head and black stuff on her face, the kind men used to keep their skin from reflecting light at night. She was tall for a female, but then so was Meka. She had narrow shoulders and broad hips. Her face, what could be seen of it, appeared masculine, but the body was female. Suddenly it clicked. This was Emily Carstens' child, Franklin. "You're a true hermaphrodite?"

Her tone was doubtful, but it couldn't be help. Hermaphrodites were very rare. It was a genetic disorder in which a child was born with both male and female sex organs. Gender reassignment, a surgery performed to classify the child as one sex or the other, was usually performed within the first fifteen months of life. Intersexuality, as it was called now, was gaining more media attention, especially after Oprah did a show on it. They even had their own organization: Intersex Society of America. There were thousands of people coming forward now, angry with the choices doctors and parents had made for them when they were too young to decide for themselves.

"Shall I drop my pants and prove it to you?" came the angry reply. The woman's grip on the gun tightened.

"No, I'm sorry. It's just that the condition is so rare." Tameka thought for a moment. "So you believe that your condition is the result of Mr. Ned being..."

"An animal, like I said. Take a good look at me and do yourself a favor, get rid of the beast before he impregnates you."

Meka's wolf flexed again, reminding her of its presence, but she ignored it, too caught up in trying to imagine what life must have been like for this person, born during a generation when people were less understanding and tolerant of sexual differences. There wasn't even a word in the American language to describe a gender that was neither male nor female, but a

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strange combination of the two, and no one wanted to go through life being an "IT." Sounds like her mother wasn't much help either. From what Chad discovered, Emily never settled on a gender for her child, but switched back and forth between the two. Her innate sympathy kicked in and she tried reasoning with her. "Shifters and humans can't procreate. They're two different species."

"I see they brain-washed you with the same bullshit he tried to sell me. 'I can't be your father. Your mother was human. It's just not possible that her child was mine,'" she spat at Tameka. "Like my mother wouldn't know who got her pregnant."

"Actually, she wouldn't. Bluntly speaking, your mother was a whore. Spread her legs for any male who came sniffing around. Ned was just one of many. He was too polite to tell you the truth."

They both swung 'round in surprise as Lulu's voice came out of the darkness.

"Umm, Lulu? You think that was wise?" Meka asked, her gaze focused on the rifle, which was now trained on Lulu.

"You take that back," Frances screeched, finger poised on the trigger.

"It's time you heard the truth. Ned really loved that woman, would have married her if she hadn't lied and tried to pin a child on him that obviously wasn't his. All he asked for was the truth. Me personally, I wouldn't have been shocked to hear that she was doing her own cousin. They were always unnaturally close. You can't keep secrets in a small town," she added softly.

"You're lying, just trying to distract me." She swung the rifle wildly, back and forth between the two.

Meka tensed, ready to take action.

"Shifters don't lie. We can smell them. This has gone on long enough. A good man's dead because your mother still can't speak the truth. This child lost her home, all because of a woman's delusions. Ned owes you nothing. Blame your mother if you need someone to blame for the way you turned out. He told me himself he would have raised you as his own, if she'd just been honest. He loved her that much," she finished sadly with a shake of her head. "Broke his heart when she left town rather than deal with the truth. That's why I was so happy when

he found Emma.” Lulu said to Tameka.

“It’s a lie,” she screamed. “No, I don’t want to hear anymore. You’re wrong.” Her hands came up to cover her ears.

Lulu dove for Meka, knocking her to the ground as the sounds of scuffling filled the air. When she could breathe again, Meka rose up on one elbow and looked. Rome had the woman on her back and was cuffing her. Bull had the rifle in his hand. There were other deputies in uniform gathered around.

“How did you know she was here?” Tameka asked Rome as she rose to her feet. She turned to help Lulu but she was already standing.

“I still had one officer shadowing you. And, Lulu told us what was going on.”

The woman was on the ground, screeching and hollering. “You can’t do this to me. This land is mine. He owes it to me. You all owe it to me.”

Rome spoke over her. “Take her to lock-up and call Raleigh police. Tell them we have Franklin Carstens aka Frances Carter in custody.”

Tameka looked at the screaming woman being dragged to the patrol car and couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. “What will happen to her?”

“She’ll be charged with arson, extortion, and attempted murder. Then the Raleigh police can have a shot at her for the death of Emily Carstens.”

As she leaned against the truck watching the proceedings, she asked Lulu, “You think she killed her mother?”

“I don’t know. Can’t say I’d blame her if she did. It’s a damn shame what that woman did to her,” Lulu commented. “Emily should have stayed here in Refuge. We’ve got enough stuff going that even if she’d have been born with three eyes and two noses, she’d have been accepted.”

“Did the real father ever come forward?” Meka asked.

“I honestly doubt if Emily knew who he was. By all accounts, she got pregnant sometime during a blue moon.”

Tameka shot Lulu a puzzled glance, wondering what the moon had to do with anything.

“Sorry, I forgot you’re not from around here. Things get a little hairy then. I won’t tell you what the younguns call it, but

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there's a lot of sexual activity during its peak. From what Ned said, Emily was supposed to spend that time with him. Instead, she ditched him and went to a party thrown by some of the fellows. It turned into an orgy and she was right in the thick of it. Tried to lie about it later. Said she wasn't there. For Ned, it was the last straw."

"Sounds like you two were really close," Tameka commented.

"We were." Lulu fell quiet.

Now that the excitement was dying down, she realized someone was missing. "Where's Chad?" She couldn't believe he'd missed all the action.

"He went into the house," Rome stated.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

“What house? That one?” She pointed to her home that appeared to be no closer to having the flames doused than when she arrived. “And no one stopped him?” she yelled at Rome and then took off running.

Face a madwoman with a loaded rifle and she’s as calm as the sea. Find out her mate’s in a burning building and she loses it. Part of her marveled at the irony of it. *He’d better come out there alive in one piece, ‘cause when I get my hands on him, I’m going to kill him.*

She skidded to a halt when she reached the barrier tape set up around the perimeter, designed to keep onlookers a safe distance away. “Have you seen Chad?” she asked hopefully.

The blare of a nearby radio distracted her. “CLEAR THE BUILDING. The roof is about to go. I repeat, CLEAR THE BUILDING.”

People dove for cover as with a tremendous crack and a shower of sparks, the roof caved in. Tameka stared in horror. Please God let him be alive.

“Hey, you lookin’ for Chad? He’s over there getting oxygen.”

She jerked her gaze away from the destruction that was her house and looked in the direction the stranger was pointing. “Thanks,” she muttered and maneuvered her way past hoses and other paraphernalia over to Chad’s side, nearly overwhelmed by the relief rushing through her.

He’d just pushed the mask off of his face. His hair was stringy and wet, and the upper part of his body was covered in soot and ash, mixed with the occasional streak of red that smelled like blood. She stood back for a moment and feasted at the sight of him, happy that he was alive and relatively unhurt. He still hadn’t spotted her when he stood, tossed the blanket

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away from his hips and slipped on a pair of jeans, sliding something in his front pocket.

He was safe. That was all that mattered. She held on to that thought as she approached him. As soon as he saw her, he pulled her into his arms. "I'm so sorry about the house, babe. I promise you, I'll catch the person who did this."

"Rome already did, just a few minutes ago. Right before he told me that you ran into a burning building. *WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?*"

"I'm okay. See, no harm done and look..." He reached into his front pocket and pulled out a small, soggy box. "I saved it." He opened it and dropped down on one knee. "Meka, will you marry me?"

The ring was absolutely beautiful. A marquis cut diamond solitaire engagement ring with a gold band sparkled in the semi-darkness. "You ran inside the house for this?" she asked hoarsely, raising stunned eyes to his pleased ones.

"Yeah," he beamed proudly.

She reared back and punched him so hard, his head snapped back on his neck. "You fool!" She wrapped her arms around herself and turned away to keep from choking him. He could have been killed and for what, a *ring*? Idiot.

He walked around to stand in front of her, still rubbing his jaw. "Is that a yes?" he asked hesitantly.

She groaned and put her hands over her face. "Yes, you crazy man. I'll marry you. Someone has to keep you in check."

Chad whooped for joy and picked her up, spinning her around in his arms. "She said YES!"

Meka hid her face against his neck as people turned to look at them. "Put me down," she hissed. "You're making a scene."

He set her gently on her feet. "We'll go to the courthouse tomorrow. I'm not giving you a chance to change your mind."

"We can't get married before Alex and Kiesha. Their wedding's in two days. We can wait, and I want my sister here," she stated firmly.

"And I want Bull to stand with me, but I'm not waiting longer than a week." Both his tone and expression said he wasn't willing to compromise any further than what he had.

"A week it is," she agreed.

“We can pull a wedding together in a week, can’t we boys?” Lulu asked.

The men around them roared their agreement. Congratulations were called as word spread. A bit of brightness to combat the destruction wrought today.

Rome came up to them. “Take your mate home, son. It’s been a hard night. She needs to rest.”

“Meka said you caught the person that did this?” Chad asked.

“We did. I’ll tell you all about it...tomorrow. Go home,” he ordered.

He wrapped an arm around her and led her to the truck. Before getting into the cab, she allowed herself one more look at all she’d lost. She didn’t realize she was crying until Chad wiped the tears from her face. “I’ll build you a new home, baby. A nice one, for you and our kids. You’ll see.”

She nodded and climbed inside. Chad got in and cranked the engine. With one final look at her past, they rode off into what Tameka determined then and there was going to be a glorious future, together.

\* \* \* \*

That Saturday, precisely a week after Kiesha and Alex exchanged vows, they were married by the Justice of the Peace. Bull stood up for Chad as his best man. NeeCee was her maid of honor. Lulu and Rome witnessed it. After the ceremony, they headed over to Moe’s Diner for a wedding brunch.

“So where you two headed for your honeymoon?” Lulu asked, as they finished the last of their meal.

“Chad managed to get us last minute reservations on a cruise out of Charleston, South Carolina to the Bahamas.” Meka leaned her head against her husband’s shoulder, totally content.

Lulu smiled. “I think your grandmother would have approved.”

“I know she would,” she said with a secret smile and winked at NeeCee, who grinned in return.

“Well, before you two take off, follow me. I want to show you something,” Rome stated.

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She exchanged a puzzled look with Chad. "Sure."

Chad went to reach for his wallet. Bull put out a hand and stopped him. "I told you, man. I got this. My gift to you and Meka." He placed enough money on the table to cover everyone's lunch, and a hefty tip besides.

"What do you think this is about?" Meka whispered to Chad as they exited the building.

"No clue."

"Did I tell you, Mr. Wilson, how nice you look in your dress uniform?"

"No, you didn't. Did I tell you, Mrs. Wilson, how sexy you look in that outfit?" Her suit was champagne colored, two-piece with a demi-jacket and mini-skirt that came to mid-thigh with a back slit for walking.

"Why, no, Mr. Wilson. I don't believe you did," she murmured with a smile.

"NeeCee, you can ride with me," she heard Bull offer.

"That's okay. I brought my ride," she told him and waved him away. She came to where Meka and Chad were standing by the truck and gave Meka a hug. "I'm happy for you, sis. You take good care of her. She deserves the best," she admonished Chad.

"Will do," he responded.

"You're leaving?" Meka asked.

"Yeah, I want to get on the road before it gets too late. My show's next week."

"I'm sorry we won't make it," Meka said.

"That's okay. There will be others," she acknowledged. "You enjoy your cruise and don't worry about me."

"Once we get things situated, we'll come visit," Meka promised.

"I'll hold you to that." They hugged again, and then NeeCee embraced Chad.

"Drive safe," he told her. "No speeding."

"Yes, sir," she saluted him before walking to her car.

Chad lifted Meka into the cab. "At least those two managed to behave themselves today," she stated as she tugged down her skirt.

"I told you all they need..." Chad began.

Meka placed her finger over his lips, hushing him. "Please, I don't need that kind of visual ruining my day."

He grinned and gently bit her finger. "Visualize this." He whispered in her ear what he was going to do to her once he got her home and out of that suit.

She tugged on his tie and reeled him in for a kiss. They jumped when a horn sounded.

"Come along, you two. You have the rest of your lives to play kissey face," Lulu shouted out the window of her car.

Chad gave her a quick peck before closing the door and going around to the driver's side. They followed Lulu and Rome out of town. After awhile, Meka asked, "Is he headed where I think he is?"

"Looks that way. Guess we'll find out soon enough."

Sure enough, Rome turned into the driveway of Tameka's former residence. Bull and Lulu turned off behind him and moved immediately to the side, leaving the way clear for them. When they passed the trees lining both sides of the drive and got an unobstructed view of the grounds, all they could do was stop and stare.

In a week's time, someone had cleared the rubble, laid the foundation and put up framework for a new house. There were men working everywhere. Looked like the whole pack was present, women and men. When they stepped out of the truck, a cheer went up from the crowd and they all came over to congratulate them on their new marriage.

Meka glanced around in stunned amazement. In little over a week, they'd made tremendous progress. "I can't believe you guys did all of this," she told Carol.

"We told you, pack means family. You had a need and we're providing. That's what families do," Carol told them, smiling broadly.

"I don't know what to say." She looked at Chad to see his response. His eyes glistened as he clutched her to him, blinking rapidly.

"Thank you," he said hoarsely, holding his hand out to Mark.

"You're welcome," Mark said as he shook the extended hand.

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“Oh, but this isn't all. Kiesha said when you get back from your honeymoon, stop by the store and pick out furniture for the house. If you don't see anything you like, the pack has taken a collection and put it in an account in your name as a combination wedding and house warming present,” Carol added.

“This is too much,” Tameka protested.

“No. What you went through for the pack was too much. This is just our way of making up for some of it,” Mark said seriously.

“Meka, we know we can't replace everything you lost, but some of us got together and put this together for you.” Lulu handed her a photo album. “It's pictures of your grandmother and Ned at various events during her time here in Refuge. I also have some knickknacks that she bequeathed me when she died. I want you to have them.”

“I can't take those. Momma E. wanted you to have them. These pictures are more than enough. That was the thing that hurt the most about the fire.”

“We're not done,” said another lady whose name Meka didn't know. “Bull mentioned that you were a big movie buff. At his suggestion, we got together and made this for you.” This was a case of DVDs. “It's not everything you had, but it's a good start.” The case held one hundred and fifty and was full.

Tameka was crying openly now, unable to believe the incredible outpouring of love these people were showering upon them. “Bull, come here you big lug and give me a hug,” she commanded.

After hugging him, she wandered off with the women to see the plans for the house and give her input, leaving Chad and Bull standing together. “This is something, isn't it?” Bull asked.

“Yeah, man. Incredible.”

“I guess you'll be coming around more now, huh? Not being such a loner?”

“Yeah.”

Bull was relieved. He'd been trying for years to get Chad to open up to everyone, give the pack a chance. Now it was finally happening. He glanced around. “Where's NeeCee?”

“She left. Had to get back.”

“She's *gone*?”

“Is there a problem? She had stuff to do.”

“Uh, no problem. It’s all cool.” He started backing away. “You better go check on Meka. That dude she’s talking to is the one responsible for the layout of the house.”

“You’re right,” Chad muttered. “No telling what kind of changes she’s making.”

As soon as Chad walked off, Bull went to his car. “You got away from me once. It’s not going to be so easy this time,” he growled.

He casually got inside and started the engine, maneuvering between the parked cars until he was on the road. Once he was out of sight, he hit his lights and took off. Thank God traffic was light. A little over a half an hour later, he caught sight of her car before she hit the interstate highway.

Bull got behind her and flashed his lights, signaling for her to pull over. Once she was safely to the side of the road, he pulled in behind her and killed the engine. He exited the cruiser, walked over the driver’s door, and leaned on the open window. “Get out of the car.”

“Bull? What the hell are you doing? I wasn’t even speeding,” she complained.

“NeeCee, get out of the car.”

“Is this some type of joke?”

He reached inside, unlocked and opened the door almost in a single motion. She slapped at his hands when he reached for her seatbelt. “Stop that. Go away. Don’t you have work to do? Go bother someone else.”

“We have unfinished business.” He snatched off his glasses and placed them on the roof of the car, then dragged her out of her seat and into his arms. He swooped in and kissed her the way he’d wanted to since their first meeting.

Delicious.

He pinned her against the side of the car, thrust his tongue in her mouth and devoured her until they both couldn’t breathe. Breaking away long enough to gulp a few deep breaths, he kissed her again until she melted like butter against him. Oh yeah, he wanted this woman.

He heard the radio in the squad car. The call was for all cars and he was in the vicinity. He reluctantly let her go. “I have to

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go. We'll finish this later.”

“I don't think so, cowboy.”

He grinned. He might have taken her words to heart if it wasn't for the dazed expression on her face, and the way she had to pant to get the words out. He reached on top of the car and grabbed his glasses, before helping her inside. “Go before I change my mind and finish it right here.” He shut the door, tapped the roof of the car in farewell, and backed up as another call came over the radio.

She started the engine and rolled down the window. “Be careful,” she told him. “Don't get killed. Chad would miss you,” she added right before put the car in gear and merged back onto the road.

Bull slid his glasses back on as a wicked grin crossed his face. “I knew she liked me.”

The End

## About the Author

Zena Wynn is a multi-published author of erotic romance, including the books of the best-selling True Mates series. Please visit her online at [ZenaWynn.com](http://ZenaWynn.com).