



Alpha Awakening

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ALPHA AWAKENING

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Dedication: Selena, Michelle, Cynnara, Leslie, Tim, Mina and JMo.

Chapter One

Rush stood patiently in line waiting to make his coffee order. The Mocha Hut was nearly empty on a Saturday, mid-afternoon. The scents of coffee and different baked cakes permeated the air. He wasn't on duty, and he wasn't in a hurry to get home, either. His sister was moody because her boyfriend was out of town again. She was too much like their mother, and it drove him up a wall. Taking his time getting home was the least of his sins at this point.

Lost in his musings and lack of plans for the weekend, the dragged scrape of a metal chair behind him caught his attention, snapping him around.

A petite woman had leaped from her seat, glaring at her companion.

"Steven." Rush heard the hiss of the other man's name. "Let it go. Leave me alone."

When she tried to step out of reach, the man lunged for her. She squeaked with a hint of fear wound into her anger, now. Her evasiveness looked like something she'd become accustomed to.

"Kay, please. You're making a scene."

Rush frowned at the hidden threat in the lowered growl of a plea. The blond man made another dash for her that she barely managed to evade.

The woman flinched. "The hell I am."

Rush could swear by the man's posture she was about to be tackled.

He didn't know their story, but the blond trying to bulldoze over her was easily twice her size, probably early thirties. The only other two in the coffee shop had stopped to watch the free drama from the far side of the counter. Of course, neither of them thought to offer a moment's aid to a volatile situation.

Rush stepped into the blond's line of sight. "Is there a problem?"

"Butt out." Rush got a glaring, belligerent snarl for his effort.

Rush slid his hand into his back pocket. "Look, either go home and cool off or be arrested for public disturbance. Your choice." He kept his voice low, yet firm.

Dark brown eyes narrowed at the interruption. Rush didn't blink. He didn't know who this man was, and really didn't care, because Rush was used to being obeyed regardless.

"The lady asked you to leave her alone." He hadn't looked in her direction, but he sensed her move out of the other's line of sight. When the guy before him didn't budge, he withdrew and opened his wallet, showing his badge. "I'm not going to ask you again." The lowered warning was distinct. Leave or suffer the consequences.

Steven, if he'd heard right, shoved a chair out of his way, creating a new wave of racket when it bounced and clattered against the table. "We're not done Kay." He stormed out, slapping the door wide open on his way, making it bang against the outside hinges.

He waited a few minutes for Steven to return. When he didn't, Rush turned to find her. "You all right?"

She nodded, her arms around her slight body. "I wasn't expecting that."

"He's never been violent?"

"No. We weren't even dating that long when he broke it off."

Rush took a step closer to study her. Inky lashes surrounded thunderhead gray eyes. Rich, dark, black-brown hair swayed around her shoulders to not quite halfway down her back. There was no sign of old bruises, no wary glances to search her immediate space as though she were expecting retaliation for her earlier denial. Unfortunately, this woman made a perfect target for someone with a violent edge. She was petite and easy to overpower, beautiful and apparently able to stand up for herself. A heady mix of femininity and backbone. Glancing at the heeled boots she wore, he wondered if she even came to his chin.

"He broke it off?" he asked, remembering to find his voice before his mind *and* body wandered off on their own.

She nodded once. "He was getting persistent about getting together again, and I told him no." Her arms finally dropped and her chin came up, those dark eyes shooting defiant sparks as bright as lightning. "All he did was annoy me with his persistence. He didn't make me mad until he tried to grab me. That's not like him."

"If you hadn't dated that long, it might have been exactly like him, and you're just now seeing it," Rush cautioned. He'd seen enough abuse cases to know physical violence was hardly ever exposed in the early stages of a relationship.

"True. It never occurred to me. We broke up quite a while ago."

Quiet music wafted through hidden speakers, returning a calm to the interior of the shop. The sound of feet on tile and voices told him the rest of the customers and staff had already dismissed the little disturbance. "Would you like to share a coffee?" Rush offered, taking himself by surprise. He wasn't sure why he offered. His duty was done. She was safe, but he found he wasn't ready to say goodbye. *It wouldn't hurt anything to give her a chance to put this behind her*, he told himself. His offer had nothing to do with the color of her eyes, or the sweet slope of her bottom lip.

She reached and picked up the chair she'd knocked over in her own haste to avoid Steven's grasping. "I'd like that." Standing closer to him, she held out her hand. "Kaisha Noelles, but everyone calls me Kay."

He took her hand and felt the warmth of her skin all the way up his arm. Desire, raw and unexpected flashed over his senses, a brilliant burst dying down to a slow burning ember as quickly as it had appeared.

"Rush Donovan." Swallowing, he cleared his throat when he sounded husky. Her entire palm vanished within his own, delicate yet strong, and was he imagining it, or was there a scent of sunshine in her hair?

Rush caught himself before he leaned in to find out for sure. Releasing her, he eased her back down into the chair she'd claimed and strode to the counter to make an order.

Turning away was also the safest, fastest and least telling action to help him calm the raging case of wanting from her touch. He'd never felt anything like her softness

beneath his fingers, or had so quick of a reaction. Taking her entire form in a glance was pure maleness—the appreciation was all his. Snug jeans that coated her legs like soft leather rounded her rear when she'd stooped to grab at the chair, her brown hair swaying with the movements over a simple filmy blouse with a chemise beneath it. Evocative yet sweet.

Giving the drink order, he tried to get a stern grip as his entire body woke up, aware of her like no one in his lifetime. As her remembered scent infiltrated his brain like a stamp of indelible ink on paper, he had a feeling that what had started as a simple need to help a lady in distress was going to turn into something a lot harder to walk away from when they hit the bottom of their drinks.

* * * *

Kay watched him turn and speak to the barrister for their cups. Her mind was still spinning over the near attack from Steven. They'd broken up months ago. Why would he want to come back to her now, when he was the one to end it between them? It had been some story about a personal issue, and he didn't know how long it would take him. Rather than have her wait for him, he had politely ended their occasional dating. She'd moved on. Her heart hadn't been invested, which was probably for the best considering what she'd seen today. The last thing she needed or wanted was to find herself in *that* kind of a relationship.

"Here you go," he said in a warm as honey voice. How did a man with that rugged of a face get that kind of voice? The voice wasn't the only thing to appreciate about her knight in shining armor. He looked young, until she looked into his eyes. There was a calmness in them that spoke of maturity, a soul who had seen a lot and refused to let it weigh him down. The day's growth of dark beard gave him a rakish aura that added to the masculinity of his face. With slightly thick lips and broad cheekbones, she found the deepness of his eyes hard to resist. She also couldn't help but

wonder how it would feel to slide her palm down one cheek, intrigued by the allure of the sensation. She hid the wondering question behind a tentative sip of her drink.

"That's good."

He smiled at her approval of his choice.

Rush sat across from her, palming his own drink between solid hands. Well-muscled arms were molded by a navy blue t-shirt, stretched across a very impressive chest, the strength hinted at beneath the molded cotton. He wasn't overly tall, which truth be told, Kay found intimidating at times. She didn't stand five-feet barefoot. Her size had been perfect for gymnastics, but not real life.

Watching him over her cup, she followed the planes of his face. Not exactly handsome. Maybe striking would be better. Definitely a man used to being in command. A quiet confidence rested all around him. Thick raven black hair looked finger combed into loose swirls over his head. She'd already decided his best asset was definitely his eyes. A deep-sea blue with a smattering of dove gray and brown throughout. How something that artistic could ever be simply labeled as hazel was beyond her. His eyes were as gorgeous as the rest of what she'd seen.

"So, you're really a cop?" she asked after he'd had a chance to sample his own drink.

"A detective, but yeah, for the records," he joked lightly. "You?"

"I work at Savrenson and Son."

"The jeweler downtown?"

She smiled, pleased he knew of the store. "That's the one. I work there part-time as an appraiser. I actually deal in antique jewelry."

"Is that a piece?" he asked, noting a ring on her hand with a glance.

"Yes, it is. This is a family heirloom, though," she explained, letting the light sparkle off the peanut-sized emerald and gold band.

"It's lovely," he said. Glancing up, she noted he was looking at her, not the ring when he said that.

Was he flirting with her? A rare warmth filled her face, and she dropped her gaze. "Thank you."

An hour flew by without notice as they talked. She couldn't remember when she'd sipped her last drop, or when she'd stopped caring if there was anyone but them in the shop. He told her stories about himself and his sister, and she regaled him with tales of growing up with her best friend Stacey. Laughter soon erased the ugly scene she'd been a part of before Rush's intervention.

"Can I ask you something?"

Kay shrugged, completely at ease with Rush. "Sure."

"Do you only do antiques or can you get a feel for something a little more modern?"

Her grin broadened. If there was one thing she knew, it was jewelry. "If it sparkles, I can tell you what it's worth."

"Mom had a few pieces that she wanted to hand down. I'd like to know what they are worth."

"Are you planning on selling them?" she asked, torn at having the chance to see them, but wondering why he'd want to sell something valuable to his family.

"Definitely not to sell. She'd come back and haunt me for even thinking it."

"Your parents are deceased?" she asked sympathetically, curling a hand over his where he rested them together on top of the table.

His gaze fell to where she held him with a wide-eyed stare, his thumb brushing her skin after a hesitant heartbeat then capturing her hand between the both of his. Warmth fluttered from her belly downward at the simple act. "Unfortunately. I became Sheridan's guardian at an early age."

Dark shadows dulled the life in his eyes as thoughts filled them. A few seconds later, he blinked them away, looking up at her again. "I have a few more responsibilities now, but she's still my younger sister, and I'm still her brother."

There was love in the gruff words, a light smile softening the harsher grimace his memories had brought to him.

"I'd be happy to look at them," she told him, bringing her attention back to the question. The heat of his hand over hers was growing. For some reason, the image of trailing her fingertips up his forearm to dance lightly until they reached a bare shoulder appeared before her, and her breath grew ragged.

"Good." Rush seemed genuinely pleased, his eyes catching the light to glint at the same time his lips lifted. "Can you come to the house to see them? They're in the safe there. Or, I can bring them to the store for you."

"You don't have to. I can look at them wherever. I have a kit that I can bring. If you want a certified appraisal, I have permission to use the store for that."

He lifted her hand still captured between his and held it to his lips as an absent gesture. She wasn't even sure if he knew he was doing it.

But she sure did. The instant he brushed her knuckle over his lower lip, her heart tripped over itself like it was falling down stairs. At some point in the last hour, he'd moved closer, almost at her side, and the ease and tender care of his fingers wrapped around her, while holding her hand, stole her breath. The languid strokes were causing sparks the size of lightning bolts to fly through her system.

"I don't think I need a certified declaration right now, but it wouldn't hurt to have it later for insurance."

Kay nodded, her voice lost beneath the tender swipe of his touch. The warmth of his breath as it flowed over her skin sent liquid tingles down her spine, a raw ache building deep inside as an answer to some call she didn't, or couldn't, hear.

Somehow, she managed to trade her information with him, thankful there were such things as muscle memory and autopilot, because her brain had officially checked out.

He walked her to her car and even held the door for her.

"Thanks," he said. "Buckle up."

She guessed it was as ingrained to say as 'hello', and smiled in answer.

Rush didn't move until she couldn't see him in her mirror any longer.

Chapter Two

Rush walked into his house, hearing the television from the living room.

"Hi!" his sister shouted.

"Hey," he called back. He went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, but after several seconds, closed it, not finding what he wanted. He wasn't exactly sure what he wanted, either.

No, that wasn't true. Rush knew exactly *what* he wanted. Kay had officially set his world on fire, and he doubted she even knew it. He blew out a frustrated breath. His entire body had been a living ache since he let her drive away.

"What's that for?" Sheridan asked, slipping up behind him to sit on a bar stool, an eyebrow arched in question. "Have a hard day of nothing?"

Cool tile from the kitchen outward to the rest of the house kept that much from becoming a blistering inferno, but from the inside out, Rush couldn't tell if it was him burning hotter than a volcano or the summer sunshine heating the house through the windows.

He crossed his arms and leaned back on the hip high counter, not exactly ready to share his find with his sister yet. He was even less able to explain Kay to Sheridan. He couldn't explain something he didn't understand himself and do a good job of it, so staying quiet for a few minutes seemed to be the best idea he'd had all week. "Don't you have a boyfriend somewhere? Or two?"

"Ha. Ha. He's in Chicago hosting a client."

Rush knew Brant was in marketing. It was more than he needed to ever know about Sheridan's love life. The only thing he ever wanted to know was if her boytoys were pack and from whose territory, so when he's called out for some indiscretion, he knew how to handle it. Sheridan wasn't a player with young hearts, but an unsettled female could stir up trouble like a hornets' nest in a high wind.

"What happened to you?" She frowned, meeting his glare while resting her chin on a raised fist. "What's got your tail in a twist?"

He guffawed. "You would say that," he accused, foregoing a real answer.

Sheridan shrugged, grinning madly. "Younger sister privileges. Besides, someone has to harass the pack alpha every now and then."

He smirked. Rush knew his sister was good at it too, and not just because she was his second. "Nothing. There was a ruckus at the Hut. Some guy trying to intimidate his ex."

"Jerk," she muttered with a glowering frown.

He felt the same way. "He was."

Kay on the other hand... He crossed his ankles trying to restrain the pounding throb beneath his zipper. It had been a constant battle since the first sound of her velvet voice that afternoon. It wasn't a reaction he was used to. It was one reason he'd sat and talked for so long. He'd had a noticeable problem within two seconds after following her mouth on the edge of her cup. Supple, dusky lips that looked soft and delicious, slick with the whipped cream from the top of her coffee. He'd imagined every second of leaning over and licking her clean himself from that moment on. And he hadn't been limited in his imagination to her lips.

The thought of tasting her lips, the curve of her jaw, the delicate skin beneath her ear and even burying himself in the thick mass of her hair had kept his blood heated and racing through him all afternoon. Smooth skin had teased him, visible beneath the filmy blouse she'd worn. Lithe and delicate, he'd wanted to lick every visible inch, and then find out what wasn't. More than once, he'd had to forcefully bring himself back to what they were discussing because as much as he'd fought it, he couldn't ignore what she did to him. Now, after almost an hour and distance, the burn had mellowed, but it was there, like a hidden spark from a wildfire, waiting for the chance to burst into a rampaging blaze all over again.

At one time, he'd waited, prayed and hoped he'd find his mate, his match, the one woman who would stand by his side as a leader to his pack and a companion for him, but after watching his mother wither away following his father to the grave, falling in love had ceased to be that much of a necessity.

Rush had thrown himself into the pack, into raising Sheridan, and his work. At not quite fifteen, it was that or go into foster care for a year and be separated from Sheridan permanently. He refused to let that happen. He had no choice but to pick up the pieces, and with the help of the pack, tie their broken home back together. So far, he thought he'd done a decent job. He'd earned his detective badge the year before, after being on the street force since he was twenty-one. Sheridan was in college learning all that CGI art stuff that he had no hope of understanding. He couldn't lie, least of all to himself. He wanted Kaisha, but wanting sex and *wanting more* were different animals to him. One he refused to bend to, the other, his only choice, was to ignore because sex with Kay...

He drew a steadying breath, remembering not to groan with his sister so close. The sex would be incredible. It would be what he'd always craved.

It would be the end of everything he'd worked so hard for.

He ran a hand through his hair.

"You okay?" Sheridan asked quietly.

He looked up, becoming aware she'd been watching him like a bug on a windshield the whole time he'd been negotiating his sanity. "Yes. No." He stopped before he dug himself in deeper. "Yeah," he finally conceded.

"Which is it?"

"I'm fine."

"Uh huh. 'Lie To Me' is a TV show, not what you're supposed to do," she told him with a knowing glint in her gaze. It sucked when his sister was also his closest friend.

"Smart ass," he retorted, grinning because he should know better. His sister could ferret out a lie faster than a wolf could terrify a laying hen.

She stood and approached him around the kitchen bar, her eyes piercing his secrets. "Rush, are you okay? There's something different about you."

Ah hell. There was little chance she'd leave now. Could she tell? Should he admit to what he believed happened? Face the truth or hide it? He wasn't at all surprised

when there were no quick answers and nothing was as easy as he'd believed it should be.

Whether he did anything or not about what happened with Kay, today was up to him. His first priority was to the pack, and Sheridan was his chosen second. Honestly, she had a right to know.

Then why did it twist his gut as though he were destroying a beautiful secret, something fragile and breathtaking, to tell her about Kay? He was unprepared for the slicing heat in his stomach, and it killed the tight throb he'd been fighting for more than two hours now, since that first touch, the first sound of her voice. Pack came first.

Resigned, he stood straight, dropping his arms to his sides and Sheridan paused a foot away, her worried eyes never leaving his. "I found her."

Sheridan's face paled. He nodded. That's exactly how he felt too.

* * * *

Kay's feet slowed as she neared her apartment door. Lying before it on the cement was a bundle, a paper-wrapped bunch of flowers, just like the ones in the display when you first walk into the local grocer. Nothing fancy. But the surprise of finding them there still gave her pause.

Looking around her, she was alone. The lot was clean, a few cars gone for the weekend, but otherwise it looked the same as it did every afternoon. The cheery chirp of the birds or the warmth of the sunlight did nothing to stop the chill that strolled too easily down her spine at finding her gift. She'd never had anyone do something like this, and after Steven's show of temper earlier, she wasn't thrilled to find them now. The thought that somehow Rush... She dismissed that almost immediately. He couldn't have beat her here from the coffeehouse.

She rolled the flowers with a toe, waiting, and then gingerly crouched to pick them up. There was a small card inside the colorful ensemble. Her heart tapped a solid rhythm against her ribs, unsure about what she'd find. They looked to be fresh, warmed

from the sunlight, but not dried or wilted. How long had they been there? Obviously not that long. And from who? Looking around her, she couldn't see or hear anyone. Wary just the same, she lifted the card out of the center.

Kay, I'm sorry. Call me. S.

She huffed a disgusted breath. *Not likely*, was her first thought. The tightness across her forehead grew noticeable as she studied the card and the flowers. Was he being persistent for a reason? Why? Had he been there waiting for her after the argument at the Mocha Hut? If he had, for how long? She dragged her teeth over her lower lip. The idea that he had waited for her at all gave her a new chill. What did he want?

Steven had called that morning, wanting to meet to just talk. She hadn't seen anything wrong with a quiet conversation between them. They hadn't been lovers, and Kay hadn't seen Steven in almost three months, when he'd said he needed that time. He was the one who had told her not to wait for him. They hadn't reached that depth in their relationship where she'd pine away for him, heartbroken. She would have left long before then. Kay didn't do 'heartbroken' for anyone. They were no more than good friends who went out together, shared a few kisses. Steven had been a gentleman – until today. Frowning, Rush's warning echoed within her ears again and she had to agree. She hoped whomever Steven went to next didn't have to deal with his temper. Paper crunched beneath her fingers, reminding her of the flowers she held.

"You found them."

She whirled at Steven's low spoken voice, a gasp slipping out before she could stop it. "Steven!"

He lifted a hand, but dropped it quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you." He stuffed his fingers into his jean pockets and stood a few feet away. "Now or at the Hut."

Kay studied him with a new set of eyes. Was he playing her, using her emotions, or was he being honest? This was the Steven she'd known, the one she'd been to movies with, shared jokes and a few kisses. Sweet, thoughtful. *But it had been him earlier too*, she

reminded herself, demanding she get back together with him, and then threatening her when she stayed firm in not wanting to.

She drew a breath. "Thank you, Steven." Holding out the flowers, she told him, "I don't need the flowers, though."

His expression darkened. "It's an honest apology," he snapped.

Kay blinked and drew another slow breath. This, *this*, was the guy she'd seen earlier. "And I accept the apology. I can't accept the flowers." It didn't feel right. She didn't want what the flowers meant. A connection. A reciprocation.

"Why?" he demanded. His hands were loose at his sides now, and he crowded her into the door at her back. "Why don't you want to get back with me?" Something dark and cruel heated his brown eyes. Stark jealousy. "It was that guy, wasn't it? I saw you talking with him before I left." Steven snarled lowly, as though his territory had been threatened.

Kay was no one's property.

Not for the first time, she hated being so short, but she refused to be treated like this.

"Back off," she ground out, shoving against his chest, the flowers crumpling within her fist. He knocked them out of her hold, scattering them like winter leaves across the thatch of grass that lined the front of her building. Her strength was nothing compared to his. He slammed her backward until she was flush with the door.

He curled a heavy hand over her windpipe, locking her immobile against the wooden panel. "Let me in," he ordered on a lowered growl, literally blanketing her form with his, glaring down at her.

She shook her head. She was dead if she did. A scream bubbled up into her throat, but his hold locked it in place. Air wheezed in and out of her lungs, her heart thudding as she fought to not panic.

Palming her keys between her fingers, she made a fist. They say go for the face, but she doubted she'd have more than one chance, and a face shot was too long and too high for her.

Pulling back her arm, she rammed her keys right into his ribs. She flinched when her knuckles dug into cotton, creating a deep score into his flesh. He howled, his hand clutching convulsively around her throat like a vise before falling slack. Slick blood covered her hand. When he jerked away, he ripped the keys out of place. Rivulets quickly created red lines in his shirt.

Blistering pain exploded across her face before the sight of his hand registered. Stars erupted then she hit pavement with a harsh cry.

“Bitch.” He held a hand to his side, staunching the flow of blood. Shoveling stiff fingers into her hair, he yanked her from the ground. “Wrong thing to do,” he breathed. “You should have just let me in.”

He shook her by her hair, making her keys fall from her fingers. The jangle of her purse thudded to the ground when he shoved her flat against the door again, limp with shock and blistering, driving pain. Half of her face was somewhere between numb with pain and in so much agony, she wanted to scream with it. She couldn’t focus. Her head felt heavy, and the pinching strength of his fingers digging into her scalp was the only thing holding her on her feet. Swallowing, she tasted blood on her tongue.

“Freeze!”

Kay barely heard anything anyone said over the harsh ringing and pounding in her ears. Her eye had shut, making the focusing worse for what she could see. A swelling she didn’t want to think about tightened her jaw. She couldn’t open or move it. Breathing alone was a nightmare of effort and pain. When the hand in her hair loosened, she collapsed to the ground for a second time. She was pretty sure that was where she wanted to stay for a while.

Chapter Three

Rush listened to the scanner in his pickup, carefully taking turns, fighting his instincts to crush everyone in his path to get to Kay's. He'd almost blanked out the call on the scanner at home, used to hearing its constant chatter when he was off, but when he'd heard Kay's address, nothing short of the apocalypse could've held him back.

With an almost sickening feeling, he knew what had happened. "Public disturbance, my ass," he muttered as he milked another yellow light. Ambulances aren't dispatched for public disturbances.

There were two cruisers, a gaggle of witnesses and onlookers, and the ambulance. Strobing lights gave everything an eerie cast of light: blue, red and flickering white. Steven was handcuffed and in the back of one of the patrol cars. Rush snarled, his hands curling into fists reflexively, recognizing the blond. Steven should be thankful Rush was on this side of that bulletproof door.

His next thought was finding Kay. Striding with purpose toward the front of the ambulance, he headed for the open doors at the rear.

"Sorry, sir." A hand lifted and stopped him, barely. He almost plowed right over the duty officer, but managed to control the urge. A rookie to the beat. Rush knew almost everyone on this side of the lake. He had his badge out faster than the cop could cry 'mama'.

"Where is she?" His tone was an 'answer me now' demand.

The rookie studied the badge then nodded. "Inside. She took a hard hit to the face."

Rush didn't let his anger show. Steven had just made a mortal enemy with that news. He didn't wait to be invited, but simply circled the uniform in front of him and climbed up into the cave.

"Hey," he said gently, discovering her propped up on the gurney. He sat down next to her, letting the EMT finish his job with a single nod.

"Rush?" she asked, confused and groggy. She turned, but didn't open her eyes. One was obviously incapable.

"Yeah." He cupped her hand, feeling the limp curl of her fingers around his palm. The simple connection shoved his heart into his throat.

"I gave her something for the pain," the tech across from him said. Rush heard, but didn't answer. Half her face was black and blue, a gnarled mess that had swollen her eye shut. The blood had been wiped away, but the damage was deep. That didn't even touch on the clearly marked ring of bruising around her throat. If he ever found Steven alone...

"Is she going to the hospital?" he asked, unable to tear himself away from watching her float in her drug-induced stupor.

"She said she didn't want to go. Asked for friends to be called. We're waiting for a response."

He hissed a low curse at her stubborn streak ready to override her request, knowing they wouldn't wait either way in her condition, then he took a closer look. She'd taken a beating, but looked to be mostly in one piece. Then the scent of blood filled his nostrils with his next breath. "Whose blood?" It was more of a growl than he'd intended, but the tech didn't seem to notice. There were splatters on her clothes and he found more signs of it on her other hand, like it had been wiped clean.

"That guy's. She tried to rekey his ribs."

Rush smiled, thinking, *That's my girl*, then quickly blinked, wondering where the thought had come from. She was unaware to the tumult of his thoughts, or his desires. The need to wrap himself around her and protect her was impossible to ignore now. His soul was crying because she was lying injured before him. It stole his air at how quickly, at how deeply those needs rifled him. He'd just found her, yet the immensity of how little time had passed since their meeting, of how little he knew about her, seemed to make no difference. She was there now, and that was that. He was going to have to deal with it, somehow. Lifting her limp hand, he brushed her fingers against his lips absently, unaware of the intimate contact.

* * * *

Kay winced when she moved. Everything from her waist up hurt. Her head was killing her, and her mouth felt nailed shut. She tried to lick her lips, but could barely feel them. Her throat was dry and when she swallowed, raw heat burned her from her chin to her chest. Her eyes weren't in any better shape. She'd swear someone had locked them both closed. A low groan filled her ears and it took her a second or two to come to terms that it had been her making the sound.

"Easy," a soothing male voice said. A honey soaked voice that she'd thought she'd dreamed at some point.

"Rush?" she croaked.

"It's me." The sweep of tender fingers brushed over her forehead. "Where does it hurt?"

She thought for a moment, concentrating. "Almost everywhere." Her voice rasped painfully, and she tried again to swallow, wincing harder when it hurt like hell.

"Here, drink this." A firm hand beneath her head supported her and something liquid and cool touched her lips. She felt wetness as it ran everywhere but down her throat where she needed it. After a couple of tries, she managed a swallow or two. The tender swipe of a towel followed the tepid trails, confusing her more.

"Why can't I open my eyes? What's going on?" Her body felt absolutely leaden. At least she wasn't alone.

"Do you remember getting home this afternoon?"

Her brow creased. Flashes filtered through the fog. Steven. The flowers. His anger. The pain. She shrank down into the softness beneath her instinctively. "I remember." Her voice shrank too, sounding small and wounded, something she'd never believed herself to be.

"You're at the hospital for a thorough check." The wave of words was soothing in the lowered timbre.

"Why?" She tipped upward, searching for where she thought he was. The tender brush of his finger against her uninjured cheek proved her right.

"When he hit you, he did some damage to your eye. They applied a numbing agent to ease the worst of pain because the damage was pretty deep. It's covered and will heal, but for the moment, you're bandaged."

Well that explained why half her face felt frozen. "Why are you here?"

"I heard the call on my scanner. I wasn't that far away." The comforting wisp of his lips on her forehead took her by surprise. "Rest for a few minutes. I'll go get the doctor and let her know you're awake."

"Okay," she murmured. The sound of the door swooshing open then closed told her she was alone. She purposely flexed her fingers, legs and arms, cringing when she tried to find out just how extensive the damage was. Then she moved her jaw in a circle. That was a mistake; the agony was brutal. More aware, she could feel the swollen damage to her lip, the taut ache to her jaw. He'd belted her a good one. Half her face felt mauled. She probably looked it too.

Asshole.

"Hello, Miss Noelles." A cheerful, feminine voice filled the room. "How're you doing?"

"Feel like shit." A rough laugh made her tense. "Ah, hell. You're not alone, are you?"

A low, breathy chuckle told her what she couldn't see. Rush had come back with the doctor. "There goes my princess image." It was at worst, a mild complaint.

A chair was dragged to the other side of the bed. Warm fingers curved through hers. She completed the hold automatically, without thought. She knew who it was. The question was why, but she didn't want to ask that with a witness. She was simply grateful to have somebody there, wondering why Stacee hadn't come yet.

She let the doctor do the routine vitals before asking, "When do I get out of here?"

There was a pause and she felt Rush try to stand. "No. He can stay. He's a friend," she quickly assured the doctor. *Don't leave me alone*, she silently whimpered.

"In a couple of hours, at the most," she answered. "We've done an x-ray on your jaw and there's no permanent damage."

"There's a problem though," Rush stated. She focused on his voice, feeling the tender sweep of his thumb running over the back of her hand. It was warm and intense at the same time. "You're blind for the next week, or until you heal."

"What about my other eye?"

"Can't use it for forty-eight hours. It's only a precaution, to keep the injured eye from doing something negative in reaction with your working sight because of the trauma." That was the doctor again, crisp and direct.

"Well, crap," Kay muttered.

"You're doing fine, Miss Noelles." The sharp click of a pen seemed unnaturally loud in the room. "A few prescriptions to help with the swelling and pain and you'll be home by this evening."

"Thank you." She listened for more, then heard the repeat of the door opening and closing.

"There's something else." Rush's steeled tone made her tilt on her pillow toward him. "You said Steven had broken up with you a while back. How long ago?"

"About three months, I guess. He called and ended it over the phone, said he had personal problems."

"Honey," Rush said, making her tummy flutter at the sweet sound of the one word on his lips. "He broke up with you because he was in jail."

"Oh, shit," she breathed, not caring how tarnished her crown became.

Chapter Four

Kay nodded, albeit slowly, and no doubt with pain, physical and emotional. Rush watched her face and body for any sign of strain. The bruising on her jaw was darkening and there was little anyone could do about the finger-sized necklace of blue around her neck. Just looking at it created the need to pound Steven into something concrete, and Rush typically didn't have a violent bone in his body.

"How did you find out?" The lowered note of her voice was considerably clear, considering the shock that her latest boyfriend appeared to be a criminal.

"When they ran his background," Rush explained. "He has a rap sheet that's several years in the making. A long list of petty stuff, but in the last three years, he's gotten into some bigger things."

"How big?" Kay asked. Her fingers tightened on his, and he wondered if it was a conscious reaction. He rubbed her hand between his with a slow back and forth motion, wanting to warm her, to tell her she wasn't alone.

"Drugs."

She shuddered, drawing a slow breath. "That explains the erratic behavior."

"But it doesn't explain his attacks on you," Rush stated. "It doesn't explain much of anything." Rush was positive there was something more going on with Steven and Kay. He just couldn't put his finger on it. Being late in that realization had put Kay in the hospital. If he'd done his job better instead of watching the way her lips moved, or the sway of her hips, he might have been able to stop this from happening.

Her head tilted on the pillow, as though searching. "Where is Stacey? I know I told them to call her."

He cradled her hand closer. "She's at her mother's."

"Crap," Kay muttered, her body going slack with disappointment. "That was this weekend?"

"I talked to her while you rested. She made me swear to have you call as soon as you get settled, so she knows where to come when she gets back to town."

"Where am I going to go?" Her fingers clenched, tension stiffening her frame. "If I can't see..."

"Don't worry. I already have Sheridan cleaning out the cobwebs in our spare, if you don't have any other family you want me to call." He'd asked Stacey, but she'd been evasive about answering.

"You're kidding?"

The huskiness in her voice made her surprise sound throaty, and sexy, which it shouldn't, considering how much her injuries hurt her. It didn't seem to matter to his libido; everything about her made his body hum.

"I can't. You don't even know me."

He could see the thoughts as they flew through her mind. From coffee to sharing a roof, being in his care, was a leap for her. It didn't frighten her, but he could see she was uneasy about it.

"No, you don't know me either, but you need someone to help for a day or two. Is there someone else you can call?" he inquired, silently hoping there wasn't, but knowing if she did then he had to let her go. Sheridan thought he was insane as it was, bringing her home, a total stranger. An outsider who had no knowledge of his life, the one that revolved around his pack. Regardless of what she knew or didn't, he should have been there to help her, to protect her. He kept telling himself it was his job driving him, refusing to acknowledge that the reasoning could be something deeper. He couldn't deal with it yet.

With a slow motion, she rocked on the pillow. "No, no one."

Rush dropped his chin, the weight of the guilt of seeing her in the ambulance crushing him where he sat. Unconsciously, he ran her knuckles against his skin. He knew better than to let her go with a mad ex somewhere out there. Complacency had done this. His.

"Kay, let me do this for you."

"This isn't your fault," she murmured, her fingers firming over his in emphasis.

He didn't argue it with her; he knew they wouldn't agree. He'd been swept up, shocked at finding her, then running scared when he'd watched her drive away, practically leaving skid marks in the parking lot to go in the other direction to get home. If there was one thing Rush wouldn't do it was run from his duty. He could keep this impersonal.

Rush hadn't made up his mind over what the woman before him was supposed to mean to him. He'd been off balance since the first touch, the first sweet sound of her voice. It was telling that he hadn't been able to leave her side since he'd arrived at her apartment discovering her injuries for himself, but he refused to bow to it. Knowing *who* she was to him maybe gave him a foot up on dealing with it all, but it didn't ease his confusion any. If anything, the claw of confusion dug deeper because this woman was exactly the person he'd been avoiding finding most of his life. Watching his mother die after his father's accident had done more than scar him. The tragedy of watching her die before his eyes had molded his adult life.

When he should be running from Kay and everything she meant for him, he couldn't. That single admittance terrified him.

* * * *

"I can walk, you know!"

"But this is fun," he joked. It sounded to Rush like Kay was about to choke on something, or maybe she was just imagining choking him. He didn't try to restrain the grin, knowing she couldn't see it.

"Has anyone ever told you, you're a nut?"

"Probably," he said, laughing at her disgruntled humor. It was late, almost eleven by the time he pulled into his driveway, but he'd never felt more awake. With Kay scooped into his arms, he easily carried her from the truck to the front door where the porch light was on. Sunshine enveloped his senses where he buried his nose in her hair, the first time he'd been able to really find out for sure. He wasn't disappointed in

the least, the scent filling his bloodstream. The front door opened before he hit the steps, killing his rising euphoria. Sheridan was frowning, ignoring the woman in his arms. Rush wasn't surprised.

His sister turned on a stiff heel and left without saying a word, her silence speaking volumes to him. Her bedroom door closed quietly a moment later. He let out a slow breath. Kay wouldn't be staying long, and then everything would be back to normal. He hoped. That's what he continued to tell himself. Now, if he could only believe it.

He set Kay on her feet, closing the door behind them. Now that he had her there, he wasn't sure what to do. It wasn't typical for him to bring home women, for any reason.

"Is there anything I can do for you? Anything you need?" he asked, hesitant to make the next move.

"A change of clothes, if I could borrow something," she said. "I can get something from home tomorrow, if you don't mind taking me."

He mentally smacked his head, noticing what she'd changed into when they'd released her from the hospital. Damn it. She was in the clothes she'd been attacked in. Glancing down the hall, his first thought was asking Sheridan, but like any other intelligent male, he skipped that idea immediately. That was one fight he didn't want to have.

Linking his hand with hers, he pulled gently. "Come with me." He sat her down on his bed and pulled out drawers. "This should work." He turned to face her. And swallowed. Blood pooled below his zipper at the images bombarding him at an alarming rate. Pert breasts, strong, lean legs, gentle curves from her waist to her hips, in his shirt and nothing else. Lifting his gaze, all he could think was small mercies for her being blind. Clearing his throat, he stepped up. "Do you need help?" Part of him desperately wanted her to say yes, but he knew he needed to hear a no.

"What is it?"

"One of my shirts. It's long enough to cover you. I'll dig out my sweats tomorrow. They'll be long on you, but it's better than nothing. And yes, I'll take you home and you can get anything you need."

A small hand lifted, grasping the offering. "I can do that, I think." She tilted her chin as though looking up at him. "Why are you doing this, Rush?"

The rawness of her voice cut at him, but she seemed able to work around it. He kneeled on one leg in front of her, letting her know he'd changed positions by sliding his fingers into her hair. Damn the consequences, he needed to touch her.

"Do you know why I asked you to look at my mom's jewelry?"

"To get its value?" Her cute eyebrows crossed.

"It's a good thing you can't see my face," he told her, knowing he was grinning like an idiot. "I wanted to see you again."

"Really?" she asked with a breathless quality to her voice that hit him like a sledgehammer.

"Guilty." He massaged her scalp gently. "I am sorry though that this was how I got to do it. And whether you see it my way or not, I feel responsible for this happening to you. All I did was chase off the mean dog. I didn't make sure you were safe."

"Rush," she whispered, drawing out his name in slow frustration.

"Shh," he breathed, then leaned in and brushed a gentle kiss to the side of her mouth. Lightning electrified him at the merest touch. He jerked away before the wildness clawing through him demanded he take more. She was in no condition, and she should have been safe from everything in his home, himself included.

Taking a steadying breath, he stood. His intention had been to let her sleep in the spare, but if he waited another minute, or saw her in just that shirt, he was going to lose it. He reached for her hand. "Here, let me give you the lay of the land."

Explaining what she was feeling, he walked her around the room, letting her map the dresser, the bed and the location for the door to the bathroom. "You can tell this is the door out to the house by the wood." He let her hand run down the rough half plank that framed the doorway.

"Is this a cabin?"

"No, but I liked the accents when I had it built."

She smiled. "I do too. I bet they're lovely."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so. Is there anything I can break?"

He glanced around the room. "Hardly." There wasn't much of anything in it at all. The alarm clock was indestructible, and beyond that, there just wasn't much lying around loose. Looking down at her, he realized she only came to his chest, making him feel like a skyscraper next to her. He wasn't sure if he was happy or not about it. Rush had never hit the six-foot mark. It didn't bother him, but she made him feel huge. *Aw hell*. He did like it. He swallowed his groan, something he'd been doing a lot since meeting her. "Go change," he told her in a gentle order, hoping the husky need in his voice wasn't as obvious to her as it was to him. "I'll get you water and your medications."

"Okay." She lifted her palm to cover her mouth, and a yawn cut short when her jaw refused to work. "I hope I don't look as bad as I feel," she muttered.

"Worse," he said, cutting through the ball of need with a teasing rejoinder, chuckling when she stuck her tongue out at him. The last thing he needed was her knowing he'd been standing with her for the last twenty minutes with a hard-on as thick as the trees outside, bruises be damned. He knew what she looked like without them, the sparkle of her gray eyes, the rich thickness of her hair. And her lips.

Shaking his head, he deliberately took a step back. "I'm shutting the door so you can change. Climb into bed and just say yes or no if you're not ready when I get back."

He was almost sweating at the possibility of finding her half-dressed, or worse, naked. Rush swore silently. He had this wanting problem bad.

He watched her turn and find the bed with easy steps. She must have counted or had an impeccable memory.

"I'll be done."

Leaving out the door, he dawdled in the kitchen, reading the prescription instructions no less than three times to ensure he had it right. She had been given the ones that needed to be taken with food at the hospital to monitor her reactions, so all she had to do was come home and go to bed. *In his bed.* Her scent was going to be all over his sheets, his pillow. Unable to hold in the groan of wanting any longer, a gust of breath eased the tension in his shoulders.

Bracing his hands on the counter, he bent at the waist, letting his body unravel for a few unrestrained minutes.

No one had ever told him finding his mate would make him feel like this. Rush wasn't stupid for being on his own with Sheridan for so long. He knew who Kay was to him. There just wasn't a handbook he could grab on the subject, and that sucked. He was a far cry from being a virgin. He knew what sex was and had enjoyed it when he could, though life in general hadn't made him a playboy. He knew the risks and refused to play the odds, but God have mercy, Kay was sinking claws into him that he knew she wasn't even aware of.

Every little thing about her turned him inside out with wanting. He knew she couldn't stay, knew nothing could come from actually meeting her, but he lost all reason around her. The term 'turned to mush' made complete sense now.

So far, he'd done nothing but touch her every chance he could. He'd even dared to steal a kiss. She should kick his ass for that. He'd do it for her, if he could. Everything he'd done had been reactionary, from the second he'd heard her address on the scanner. He needed to take back control of this situation.

Staring down the house and hall, he nodded. That's what he had to do, take back control. He had priorities. Pack came first. *Oh shit.* How long would it be before one of them heard about this? Would they come looking for her, testing his strength? Testing hers? A rock tumbled to his stomach and stayed there.

He dragged a stiff palm down his face. "Shit," he breathed. He was in no way ready for this to happen. There was no one to ask. His dad was gone. There were no real close friends, and he didn't know the other alphas in his region well enough. One

or two, but to ask about finding a mate? He swallowed the sour heat rising into his throat.

He'd surprisingly earned the alpha position when, by some miracle, he'd bested the old alpha at the fun age of twenty-six. Now four years later, he still felt like a pup among the pack. He hadn't been trying to win the leadership, but fighting in form established a lot of things, and alpha was the big one. The pack didn't treat him that way, the insecurity was in his head. They respected him and knew he was young, but gave him credit for keeping himself and Sheridan going after the death of their parents. He'd made sure they both finished school, sold the old home to a pack member in need and when he could afford it, had this one built, better suited to them than the little forty year-old home his father had bought. Everything since that time had all been done with careful planning, each step studied and weighed. He wasn't a half-cocked kid anymore. He had matured out of necessity.

Up until now, it had just been him and Sheridan, and the pack.

Now... He swallowed then cursed again with a harder edge to it. With Kay, he was running on pure instinct and lust. A lot of lust. A mate threw everything he'd been working to keep sane into a whole new spectrum of imbalance.

Steady, deep breaths calmed a heart he didn't notice had been pounding. He'd take her the meds, see her through the next two days and *gladly* deposit her at home or with any friend she wanted.

It was the only, the safest, thing he could do.

Chapter Five

Kay waited for the audible click of the bedroom door closing then stripped as fast as her trembling hands could manage. At least she'd worn easy clothes, jeans and a lightweight blouse. God only knew what the shirt and chemise looked like now, and she didn't care. Kicking off her boots, she ripped off the jeans. She hoped everything landed in a pile where she was because if he came back and she wasn't ready... She whimpered and not out of fear.

She was so turned on, she knew she needed fresh underwear.

Damn it! She wished she could see. She wanted to see the way his eyes followed her like they had that afternoon, if they burned with the want she felt coming off of him with every stroke. There was no denying she wanted to return the caresses he'd been giving her almost non-stop. The husky roll of his voice had made her melt like butter more than once. Her heart had almost burst from her ribs at the touch of his lips on hers. It should have frightened her, but if anything, it had only left her craving more. He hadn't pushed, hadn't taken. If he had, she probably would have freaked like a screaming banshee. He'd given her the sweetest caress she'd ever received, completely cognizant of the pain and her injuries. Like a gift for her, a single touch of caring, it sent a jolt of heat straight through her system.

It was sad that even though she knew nada about him, she liked being with him, and loved being held like she mattered. She wanted him with a heated need that had been steadily growing since she'd met him that afternoon, but she honestly hadn't expected to see anything come of it; she still didn't. Desire wasn't unknown, but it had never been this...overpowering...before, either. She could barely stand with his warm fingers wrapped through hers, his every touch, word and motion attuned to her stuttered insecurity in her blindness. Kay felt absolutely safe with Rush, instinctively knowing he wouldn't lead her astray.

She could picture his face in her mind, the strength of his jaw with just the shadow of beard, like he hadn't shaved that morning. It had made him rakish and sexier than sin on a stick.

All she knew was her own face hurt everywhere, making anything she did painful, from smile to breathe. It was a wonder Rush hadn't run in the other direction. Kay was positive she looked like some horror movie makeup dummy.

"Damn you, Steven," she hissed. She hoped he rotted in jail for what he did to her. She wasn't a vindictive or blood thirsty type, but if he even dared to think she'd forgive him, he was more of an ass than she'd already labeled him.

Reaching behind her, she found the t-shirt on the bed where she'd laid it, and debated leaving her bra on or not. Listening, she heard nothing but her own breathing and no steps approaching, so she quickly stripped it off then yanked the t-shirt on. Running her fingers around the neck, she felt the tag stamp under her fingertips and turned it, slipping her arms into the sleeves.

She let out a grumbled sigh. Okay, at least she was decent. The hem reached her thighs easily, allowing her to relax a little more. She wasn't on display, thankfully. The bed was behind her. She'd been very careful to notice every tactile detail about the room she was in. From the feeling of the wood beneath her feet, to the area rug that was on the side in front of the door to the bathroom. Crouching, she picked up her things and laid them on the bed, ticking them off in her mind. Good, she had everything.

Walking the edge, she found the lip of the covers and slid under them, tugging them over her hips, then sat and waited. Rush was going above and beyond the call of duty. She frowned then winced with abrupt pain. Stacey was at her mother's this weekend. She and Jonas were officially informing her of their engagement, and Kay knew as well as her best friend did just how well that was going to go over.

Jonas was in law enforcement, the same as Stacey's dad had been. Stacey's mom had been devastated when he'd died in the line of duty. Saying she held a grudge was an understatement. Jonas had been winning her over in increments to make the truth a less bitter pill to swallow. The difficulties the girls each shared through their childhoods

and through their parents was one of the reasons she and Stacey had been friends for so long.

Under the circumstances, Kay could forgive Stacey for not being there. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Crap," she muttered. She was supposed to call and tell Stacey where she was!

What time was it? Where was her purse? Where had she last seen it? She mentally rolled her eyes. She hadn't seen anything in over seven hours, at least. She didn't even know what time it was.

A light tap on her door had her letting Rush in with a quick, "Come in."

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked as soon as she heard his feet moving.

"Almost midnight."

"Rats." Her shoulders slumped. Make that ten hours.

"Why?"

God, his voice sent shivers down her arms and spine no matter what. It had to be because she couldn't see. Her senses were zeroing in on his voice. Had to be. Gathering her straying thoughts, she said, "I forgot to call Stacey."

"I told her to try here first in the morning if you hadn't called."

Following the sound of his steps and voice until he stood next to the bed, she crossed her arms and legs to hide the tightening response of her body beneath the shirt. It had little effect to help her reactions. Her belly quivered with him so close, relying on her hearing and surprisingly, the scent of his clothes and body to find him. He had a unique maleness to him. Not over doused with cologne, if he wore anything at all. Just a subtle spice that tingled her senses with awareness. The more time she spent with him, the more she found herself looking for it.

She made herself talk, because drooling was just not the image she wanted to give him. "Confident I'd come here, weren't you?"

"No, she agreed it was better, too. She knows roughly where I live, and I gave her everything from my phone number to how many baby teeth I lost."

Kay chuckled. "Okay. Where is my purse though? My cell phone is in it."

"It's probably still in the truck. I'll get it if you need it."

"No, tomorrow is good enough. Midnight is too late to call her mother's house." Or *mine*, she snorted in silent disgust. She wouldn't have called her mother anyway. There wasn't a point in it.

"Okay, time for your horse pills. I have broccoli green and something that I think is neon blue, but don't hold me to that."

She wished she could smile more. He made her want to laugh. His touch was gentle when he turned her palm to drop the two pills into it. "In the hatch," he ordered, the husky timbre sending shots down to her womb. She did the only thing she could do and ignored it and her body's response.

"God, this hurts," she muttered, trying to open her jaw enough. It was even harder to swallow water. He took the cup from her hand, and then she felt a dampened, warmed towel on the edge of her face. If she thought about it, she could almost feel tears at his thoughtfulness. She couldn't remember once when someone had taken so much time and effort in caring for her. Her mother could have used Rush's lessons. Kay pushed the bitterness away. The only reason she even wanted her mother was because she was familiar and Kay was alone and out of her element. Her mother had never wanted her, so it was an equal negative attraction. She refused to want or need anything from the woman.

"You'll sleep the night with those," he said, reminding her of his close presence. Like she could forget.

"Rush?" She listened for his breathing, turning toward him. "Thank you. I know you didn't have to do this, responsibility or not."

The sweep of fingers through her hair made her salivate. He was touching her again, combing through it with light strokes even though she could feel how the bandage restricted him. He never did anything too forward, always gentle and he seemed to know just what he could do without frightening her. It was hard to not relax into his palm and wallow like a happy pig in his kindness. It had to be the medications making her sappy. She did *not* act like this around guys!

"My pleasure, ma'am," he drawled with a hint of laughter. "Okay, time to rest. Don't worry about anything in the morning. We'll see how you're feeling then. Doctor Aimes said to report in if things changed drastically."

Kay nodded and lay down on her back. The covers were pulled up to her neck and patted down.

"Goodnight," he told her.

"Night." She thought it would take a while for the pills to kick in, but she couldn't remember fighting to find sleep at all the next morning.

* * * *

Rush threw the covers off his body, frustrated with their heat, with anything he could name. He was too sensitive to anything and everything touching his skin.

The spare room had been cleaned up and Sheridan had put fresh sheets on the futon. It was as far as she seemed willing to go, though. The room was black with deep night, the window partially opened to clear the air.

After flipping for the last two hours to get comfortable, he finally tossed in the towel. Sitting up with his hands bracing his face, he rubbed his eyes. It was no surprise he couldn't sleep. He glared downward between his thighs with a distinct disgusted frown. Unable not to, he encircled his engorged length and groaned deeply, stretching his legs to give himself some room. He was so full, it was almost painful. Blood pumped into his cock, making him thicker, throbbing mercilessly. "How is she doing this?" he managed through gritted teeth as pleasure slammed into his body beneath his hand. He moaned when his fingers flexed, the sensations spiraling tighter. She wasn't even in the room with him, and he could smell every inch of her inside of his head.

He remembered walking into the bedroom after she'd changed into his shirt and had almost been knocked flat at the wall of desire in the air. She had been turned on and the headiness of her heat hit his senses with a sweetness that stole his breath, and nearly his capacity for rational thought. Flush with need and hungry for more, her body

had been calling for his. It had taken all his willpower to follow through with his commands and just give her the pills and water. When he'd wanted to dive into bed and satisfy them both in a primal way that he was still feeling, he'd managed to walk out of the room with his sanity intact. He was still paying for that decision.

Sliding up and down his cock with a firm fist, he panted, needing more. Needing her. "Shit." He was teetering on the edge. With closed eyes, he imagined those lush lips of hers encircling the tip of his cock, and he groaned again, his heart pounding. If he could just reach release, he could forget how much he craved her. Could forget that it was her scent, her body, her voice that was making him feral with lust.

He leaned back, his hips thrusting into the ecstasy of his own making as dew drops glistened on the head of his shaft. "Yes," he breathed, his mind creating all the images he could ever imagine. He rubbed the moisture beneath his palm, slick against hot, sensitive skin, making him ache harder. The throbbing was building, heat gnawing right behind his balls. Her sweet body, the feel of her tongue lapping his flesh, teasing him with flicks and swirling to claim the moisture beads, the heat of her skin, the velvet feel of her riding him. *So good.* The strength of his need for her left his blood pounding like explosions against his ears.

A deep breath. *So close.* A low moan filled his chest as pleasure tightened his body.

Almost compelled, he released his flesh, exhaling a bitter growl of needy hunger that filled the room with an echo. No. The next time he reached completion, it would be with her. Period. Rush didn't know why, but he knew it was right. He knew no matter what he did now, he would never be satisfied. It would be like eating a spoonful of ice cream when the smothered in chocolate fudge and whipped cream sundae he was starved for was only two doors away.

His head jerked around. She was only two doors away. His blood raced through his body again, hotter. *Kaisha.* The sound of her name rocketed through his system.

Before he could think about it, much less understand the need, a sturdy wolf stood by the futon where he had just sat. Cautiously moving one foot in front of the

other, he inched out of the spare, his gaze on his sister's door. He knew Kay was asleep. Sheridan catching him would see him getting his hide blistered by her tongue for what he was about to do.

Nosing his occupied bedroom door wider, he spotted her asleep just the way he'd left her, except she'd managed to kick the sheets off a little, exposing one small foot and a sleek, well-muscled calf. She may not be used to sleeping in different beds and had been restless before the pills kicked in.

Rush didn't care the reason. All that mattered was he could see her. He stood in the doorway and drank in his fill of her length. She looked small enough to still shop in the kid's department for heaven's sakes. The bandage across her forehead bothered him, and his lip lifted in objection. The wolf knew she had been harmed and it didn't like that fact one bit.

Carefully moving past the door, he prowled closer to the bed. Raising his nose, he tested the air, drew her into his senses, reveling at her sweetness, the warmth of sunshine and something so heady it made his entire body tremble with a renewed lusting hunger. It was *her*, her scent, her everything. His wolf knew it instantly. Rush wasn't ready, but arguing with the tunnel-visioned want of his wolf was a lost cause. Tentative steps moved him up the side of the bed.

He settled a paw on the edge and froze. She didn't move, her breathing deep and steady. *God, I'm going to Hell for this.* There was little doubt. His wolf couldn't have cared less.

Nudging beneath the edge of the covers, he inched along her thigh, licking with delicate learning sweeps, tasting her on his tongue, absorbing her scent and her taste to be forever twined with his.

What Rush would give to have her lost in the throes of passion, his hands cupping her hips as he licked her like a sweet confection all along the taut shape of her thigh to the very center of her being. He could imagine the tang of her juice, dripping over his tongue like ambrosia. Suckling on the plump edges of her sweet, pink pussy. He growled inside, the fantasy so real he could taste her when he licked his lips.

Lost in the wolf's presence, he let his desires run wild, his arousal hidden behind the animal's curiosity. Then he pressed his nose to the juncture of her legs and inhaled. He let out a sharp yip of satisfaction. She was ready for him. She was his. Before he could control the urge, he licked the crotch of her panties with a determined pass. Rush froze within the animal's conscience.

Stop it! Idiot!

She drew a deep breath in her sleep and twisted. The wolf waited for its mate to acknowledge him.

She's asleep. Leave her alone.

He knew he was literally yelling at himself, but apparently, no part of his rational mind was paying attention. The wolf hefted up on both paws and licked at her thigh and hip, nipping impatiently at the thin lace restricting him, wanting the treasure hidden beneath it, waiting for his female to come to him.

Well hell, Rush wanted her too, but not like this.

The wolf paused, then with a resigned sigh, clumped to the floor. Glad Rush had control, the wolf rubbed along the bed in compromise, leaving his scent, marking the bed and the occupant. It looked like his earlier decision to let her stay with friends, let her go, had been overruled.

He'd never experienced such an animalistic hunger in his wolf, and had never reacted like this to any female, pack or otherwise. He wondered if she would accept his wolf, and then shook himself before letting the idea become a real, aching want. Why would she accept something she'd never even known existed? This was new ground and there was no way he was going to hurry it or her.

He understood hierarchy and survival, but mating was new to Rush. Apparently, the wolf knew without a doubt. It was up to him to catch up.

Chapter Six

Kay lay in bed confused. She couldn't see, and it only took a few minutes of full awareness to remind her why.

Running a hand over her lower face, the pain was a dull throb now, the bandage a rough reminder of how the day before had gone for her. Sitting up at the edge of the bed, she hugged her arms around her. She didn't know what time it was, if the sun was up, anything. It was more than a little frightening to have no concept of her world aside from what she could physically touch at the end of her fingers. She kept telling herself it was temporary, half scared she'd start screaming because of the total and complete darkness swimming before her mind.

Carefully standing, she followed the room to the bathroom, managing to navigate the space without stubbing any toes, only cracking an elbow once on something more solid than herself. Running her hands along the walls, she found towels, then the sink. Good, she was going in the right direction.

Ah ha! She found her goal. A few moments later, she was fussing with the sink, trying to run the water when she jostled something. Running her fingers over it, she realized it was a razor. Moving cautiously, waving her fingers mid-air, she also found a can of shaving cream and a couple other things that wouldn't likely be in the spare room. A toothbrush and toothpaste. And hadn't he pulled a shirt out of a drawer in the bedroom?

Standing straight, she gasped lightly. Did he let her stay in his room? Why? She would have been fine in the spare. This felt so intimate. Without even trying, he'd managed to fluster her again. She could imagine him standing right where she was, a towel around his hips after a shower. Licking her lips, she shook her head, careful to not strain herself. Not good. No lusting after the knight in shining armor.

Too late.

He would stand right behind her, his shower-heated chest flush to her back, the thick, course sensation of his towel sliding along the backs of her thighs. The hard ridge of his cock would imprint her with his own need along her ass. Unhurried, simply enjoying the moment, he would play.

Imagining his hands on her body and the rough pads of his fingers caressing her, sent tingles up and down her spine. Her nipples budded into aching points beneath the t-shirt, rubbing beneath the soft cotton. Her head tipped, feeling the exploratory touch over her breasts to tweak and play with them before he cupped each to tug at the nipple with just a twist of pain. The shock sent a jolt of awareness straight down to land with a pulse between her legs. She moaned breathlessly, gripping the edge of the sink to stay standing. Her legs trembled and liquid heat dampened her pussy.

The warmth of his breath would flow over her neck, his lips and tongue teasing her the same way his fingers would, with flicks and nips of teeth and fingertips. The trail of his hand would linger on her stomach, tracing her bellybutton, making her squirm. Laving against her pulse with a slow, torturous tongue, his fingers would delve between her legs, gliding effortlessly into the moist folds of her sex. A shudder racked her frame as desire spilled into her bloodstream.

"Oh, God," she moaned. Shaking, she drew a breath, collecting herself. She was in his bathroom for heaven's sake, daydreaming. A sexual daydream! And if she'd had even another two minutes, she was sure she could have orgasmed imagining his touch alone. Another slow inhale and she released the sink, her insides still quivering and needy. She felt flushed from her cheeks to her knees, but with each breath, she trembled less with wanting.

Washing her hands as best as she could without seeing what she was doing, she blanked out the detailed pictures her imagination had kindly given her. She was only marginally successful.

Shaking the water off her hands, she carefully turned, reaching for the towel she knew was close by, and instead, bumped into a hard set of abs.

“Oh!” she squealed then stumbled a step, losing her balance at being taken by surprise, right into his arms. Warm and strong, he caught her. She swore she could feel herself melting from the surge of body heat between them. It went miles deeper than even his voice had gone the day before.

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you. I heard you moving around and wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Her heart stuttered, and she fought to reset her equilibrium. Her brain was threatening to short circuit. She was pressed into the wall of his chest and stomach, her nose inhaling his scent of pure male and warmed cotton. A low purr formed in her throat. He felt so good. Without planning to, she rubbed her cheek against his chest, her arms winding around his waist naturally.

She’d never in her life reacted to a guy like she did to Rush. He made her feel absolutely wanton.

Horny, her mind supplied. Yeah, that too.

The weight of his fingers sweeping across her back sizzled against already sparking nerves, recreating the delicious desire she’d imagined only a few short minutes before. Molding herself against him, her blood raged. Good God! Was that his...? She licked her lips unconsciously. It wasn’t small by any means, long and thick and... She knew she was drooling, drowning as her imagination and body left her restraint in the dust.

“Kay?” Her name sounded strained. The racing of his heart thundered beneath her ear.

Solid muscled thighs brushed against hers and her body went liquid. The urge to climb him like a tree and hang on blazed like a living need within her center.

A low groan vibrated his ribs and his arms tightened, encircling her. “Kay, you’re killing me.” She felt him move as he bent practically in half to bury his face against her neck. “Sweet hell. You feel good.”

The ridge beneath his jeans pulsed against her stomach, and she swore her knees turned to water. Hot and panting, she clung tighter, swept up in the desire he created. She was so wet; she ached with the need to be filled.

Firm but gentle, his hands slid down her back and palmed her ass, squeezing lightly. A hummed sound of appreciation rose from him. "Damn, you're perfect. Freaking tiny, but so perfect."

"Gymnastics," she managed, nuzzling against him any way she could without causing herself pain.

A slow hiss was his answer. His next groan turned into a low growl and his hands braced her, lifted her and she naturally hooked her legs around his waist. He took two steps and sat on the bed, holding her over him, the movement pressing her pussy flush to the ridge of his cock. She couldn't hold back the whimpering moan. Sliding against him, she arched. The friction of his jeans to her underwear was sending her right out of her mind.

Stiff fingers slid upward into her hair, his other hand on her waist. "Do you want to come, baby?"

Did she! Her lips quivered and her pussy clenched, the hoarse words bitten off with his hunger right in front of her. She moaned low, wishing she could see, wishing she could kiss him. Instead, she simply nodded her head, rocking her hips over his pelvis in determined, obvious answer.

Rough as sandpaper, his voice filled her ears. "Then do it, Kaisha. Let me feel your pleasure."

Riding her hips against his body, she arched, her spine tightening like a crossbow being pulled to fire. The fingers gently massaging her scalp held her steady, holding her weight as she felt the slide of his other hand, caressing and learning. Fire spread in his wake. She almost screamed out loud when he inched fingers beneath the edge of her damp panties.

"Shit, you're soaked."

She trembled violently, a storm breaking over her when he found her hardened clit. Her world shrank to the ecstasy of his hand teasing her, the burning desire launching through her system as he stroked her.

“Oh, yeah, you like that. Ride it, baby. I want to taste you so bad,” he told her gruffly.

Sensitive nipples stroked against his hard chest through the two shirts, sending a flurry of sparks into her brain. Sweeping across her nub with swift strokes, shocks stole her sanity. She couldn’t help herself. Grinding against his cock, his fingers sliding up and down her slick pussy, the orgasm she craved came barreling down on her. The rise and fall of his hips urged her, pushed her closer and closer.

The pleasure of his fingers filling her channel sent her careening out of control. His groan became buried when he pressed his face into the crook of her neck. She snapped her arms around his shoulders, clutching at him. Sliding and pumping into her pussy, she milked the stiff digits, tightening around him with each stroke. Fireworks erupted behind her closed eyes at the pressure, the rough of his knuckles streaking fire through her veins. He was going to make her fly right out of his arms with the intense pleasure. The heat of his tongue sliding beneath her ear sent her to another level. Teeth, lips and tongue. It was too much.

Without warning, her entire body flared like a roman candle, hot, achy and hungry. The heated essence of her cream coated his hand in ecstasy. The liquid sensation against her own sensitive skin sent her plummeting over the edge again in a blast of euphoric light.

He panted her name, scissoring his fingers, demanding every last ounce of satisfaction from her body until he finally let them slide free of her sheath. He felt so good, his solid body holding her steady. Arms and chest cradling her protectively. She felt utterly relaxed within his embrace. Then he surprised her by pressing tender kisses to the side of her neck, as though relishing her. Kay almost sighed in contentment.

“I want to kiss you so bad right now,” he told her. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Concern stilled his body until she was able to answer him. Gasping for breath, she shook her head. His solid frame supported her noodle-limp length beneath her unmoving hold. A pleased murmur was joined with a tightening of his arms. The warmth of his body aligned with hers felt so good, so right.

“Rush?”

If he was relaxed beneath her, the call of his name from somewhere in the house hardened him into a wall of concrete. A deep breath stretched his chest. Standing carefully, he placed Kay on her feet, readjusted her shirt, making sure her hair was in place.

“Just a minute, Sheridan.”

Shit! His sister! Flames crawled up Kay’s face. She’d completely forgotten they weren’t alone. And she’d practically jumped his bones! Was the door even closed? The heat in her cheeks spread.

A very light finger pressed to her lips. “Don’t. I’m a big boy, and she’s going to have to learn to deal with me being grown up.”

She gulped, mortified. How could she do that? She almost lost total control. *Almost, nothing!* she scolded herself. Once he’d wrapped his arms around her, the entire world had disappeared. The heat of his body had stolen into her, and she’d been swept up into the moment. That wasn’t like her at all. She’d never reacted like that to any other man. She’d had one long term relationship that fell apart and she didn’t care to repeat it. That was before she met Steven, and being cautious hadn’t pushed for more with him. She wasn’t the kind to risk her heart. After yesterday, she was grateful for her own reticence. *Then what the hell just happened?* she inwardly shrieked at herself.

“Kaisha,” he murmured. The petal soft press of his lips to hers froze her thoughts, reminding her where she stood, and with whom. “I can’t wait to kiss you senseless, woman.” It was a growled promise that totally belied the gentleness of his lips.

Kay knew she'd be anticipating that moment with barely controlled impatience now. She wanted his kiss and so much more, more that she shouldn't be wanting at all. No, it wasn't fair, and she knew it wasn't right.

Drawing a steadying breath, she didn't fight when he twined his fingers through hers. This was temporary. She would be going home soon or Stacey would get her. Kay didn't have a heart to offer him, and somehow letting things go further felt wrong because she couldn't love him.

Being wrong or right had little leeway though. She couldn't remember the last time her body had felt so satisfied, so complete. It was a dangerous lure. What she refused to admit fully was how much she did want Rush. How much she wanted the gentle man who made her feel whole and wanted. It was a temptation she couldn't succumb to, either the man or the feelings he generated.

Chapter Seven

Rush held her hand in his, guiding her to the living room where he knew Sheridan waited. One glance at his sister and her frown deepened, her nostrils flaring at the scent he knew she'd find. He hadn't bothered to try to hide it. Rush didn't want to. For the longest time, Sheridan had acted the older sister to him, but from here on out, it stopped. He had no idea how to deal with Kay, but she was his. The wolf knew and now, without a doubt, he knew it. The remainder of the equation had no room for his sister's condescension. He was going to have a hard enough time from here on forward without his sister pressuring him.

Sheridan was six years younger than him and had taken a lot of the personal responsibility between them as he learned how to be alpha. Some were born, some were made. He was the latter. He was quieter, a thinker, and only aggressive when needed. Alphas he'd known had all been 'king of the mountain' men. The old alpha had been for decades. Rush had never asked for the position and hadn't seen himself as one, but his wolf was one hundred percent alpha and a bad ass in a fight. He was growing into the leadership and honestly hadn't ever planned on mating. It disturbed the balance he'd worked so hard to find and maintain.

He owed his sister a lot for that. It hit him hard suddenly. She didn't like Kay; not because she was another woman in his life, though that was huge, but because she feared Kay would take her place.

Damn. This was why Rush liked things a little more planned out. He could deal with upheavals, if he could prepare.

Unfortunately, nothing on this planet could have prepared him for Kay.

She halted at his side when he stopped walking. No sense in putting off the inevitable. "Sheridan, this is Kay Noelles."

His sister gave Rush a glacial stare, speaking to him. "It's nice to meet you, Kay."

And you lie like a rug, he thought, meeting her gaze without flinching. A shallow heat flickered to life in his gut when she refused to speak directly to Kay. He narrowed his gaze at his sister. If Kay was his mate, his sister would have to learn to respect her. Rush wasn't even aware of the bristling of his spine while he locked gazes with his sister.

"Hi," Kay replied, then a little stronger, added, "Thank you for letting me stay with you." Kay tipped her head as though in contemplation, her body relaxed at his side, but alert. "You don't want me here, do you?"

Sheridan blinked, apparently unprepared for her candor. "It's not my place to disagree with my brother." Sheridan crossed her arms, a cool dismissal on her face, telling him she didn't have to do anything—speak to or respect the woman at his side—if she didn't want to.

"Bullpuckey," Kay muttered. "If it's your house, you have a right, too." She tipped to essentially be looking at him. It was weird with the bandage over her eyes, but he was willing to bet she knew perfectly well where he was. Sadly, she let her hand slip from his. He wanted her warmth back. "I told you if it was a problem, I could go somewhere else, or even stay at home."

Sheridan rolled her eyes. Rush recognized her impatience. "Bullpuckey back at you. You're blinder than a bat."

Kay turned toward Sheridan's voice, a frown daring to twist those lips he'd barely tasted. They'd lost the puffy look and he swore he was counting the minutes to really taste them. Was it fair that after the pleasure he'd shared with her in his room, she made him feel like the horniest of teenagers? He sincerely didn't think so. He wanted her, too much, but keeping his sister from disrespecting her in front of him was keeping his attention divided.

"Worse. They at least can squeak at walls before splatting on them."

This was said with such a disgusted deadpan note that Rush had to hold his breath to not laugh out loud.

"That bad, huh?" Sheridan asked with a silent sneer.

“Until the turban comes off, then I’ll have univision. I’ll have a patch for about a week until the swelling and God only knows what else is healed. The bastard deserves meeting the grill of a Mack for this. Is there anything bigger than a Mack?” she mused, not at all repentant for wishing bodily harm on Steven.

“Wait.” Sheridan’s eyes pinned Rush from the other side of the coffee table where she’d stood from the couch at their entrance. “You’re the girl that was roughed by the ex at the Hut? I didn’t know this was what Rush meant.”

Kay’s hand lifted and gingerly cupped her jaw. “Yeah,” she answered. “And my best friend is out of town on a mission, so Rush took in the stray.”

Sheridan shook her head, her dark curls bouncing with her. When she lifted her eyes again, she looked apologetic, almost stricken with remorse and realization. “I’m sorry,” she mouthed for his benefit, walking around the table. “Here, come sit down. Coffee okay?”

“Su-re,” Kay replied, sounding confused. She wasn’t alone. The abrupt disappearance of animosity from his sister made no sense. Rush had expected it to be a lot worse.

“I’ll get some, too,” he said, bewildered at his sister’s sudden turn around.

Once Rush made sure Kay would be all right resting on the couch, he followed his sister into the kitchen. “Okay, explain what just happened.” He leaned on the counter, watching his sister prep mugs and coffee.

“I owe you an apology. I thought the girl at the Hut and your find were two different people. When you told me about her yesterday, I was under the impression that Girl A had been hurt and you had found Girl B, who was...is...your mate.” She spoke quietly, in a rush of guilty words. “You bring home injured Girl A and practically screw her in your r—”

His growl of warning cut her off and dark blue eyes swept to his, dropping quickly in deference. “Sorry. But now do you see why I was upset? I know you, Rush. You are as organized as the Library of Congress and here you are, playing with someone who you shouldn’t be when—”

He lifted a hand to stop her rambling. "I get it. Sorry I confused you. One and the same." Sheridan had been studying when he'd left in such a hurry, hearing the dispatch call on the scanner the day before. She hadn't known a thing until he'd called and asked her to set up the spare room. "Right now, the bastard who hurt her is in jail, but I don't know for how long. He was arrested on assault charges, but had nothing else outstanding." Scumbag Steven's last stint behind bars had cleaned his latest crime slate.

Reaching for his cup, he said, "But I thought you were upset that I had found her. You weren't dancing in circles yesterday." He sipped, waiting.

It took her a minute to answer him as she stirred her coffee slowly. "You're right. I wasn't. I remember Mom, too," she said distantly. "I know that's why you live the way you do, but there's something about that woman out there." Glancing up, she asked, "Can I speak as pack, and not as your sister?"

"You know you can!" he answered quickly, surprised she'd think she had to ask.

She tipped her chin, a deeper deference than she'd shown all morning. "As your chosen second, you need more than me. You need your mate, and if she's the one, then don't screw it up."

Rush was pretty sure his mouth was swinging wide. He'd had no idea. This was his *sister*? "Do you mean that?"

Her touch on his arm was light. "I always knew you were a strong male, and an alpha, but you've hidden it. I think me being here has done that. You don't do anything without weighing how it will affect the both of us. You think you took Tays's place by default, but you didn't. Maybe a little sooner than anyone may have expected, but you are whole with the wolf. He's an alpha, because you are too, and vice versa. Whether you knew it or not, your wolf did, and that's why you challenged him so young. No one else was ready then, and they wouldn't think of challenging you now. You're not an animal, but you are intelligent, loyal and compassionate to those under you. She's living, breathing proof."

Suddenly she smirked and he wasn't sure he wanted to know why. But without asking, she was going to tell him.

"I've never heard you laugh like you do for her," she said. "I've never seen you *be* alpha like you are for her. You couldn't see your expression when you came into the room. You were prepared to fight for her, even against me," she finished calmly, with a total lack of tonal inflection.

He studied her, trying to wrap his mind around what she was telling him. "I knew you weren't happy."

"It was all over your face, too. And you had already decided who you would stand for," she told him without heat.

His hand paused on the rise with his cup. Had he? Was he already taking Kay over Sheridan? Had his loyalty shifted so quickly? His chest heaved with a drawn breath, eliminating a tightness he hadn't known existed. He couldn't deny the blatant truth behind what she said, not when it stood up and smacked him with a foot thick brick wall.

"You'll always be my sister," he said, his voice trying to crack.

"And you'll always be my brother," she returned, blinking hard. "It's time you became the alpha you were meant to be for this pack. I've always known you could do it and beating Tays was just the beginning."

"You're staying?" He didn't want to chase her out of his life, and he needed her to know that.

"Until you choose otherwise, I'm still your second."

He frowned, not sure if that was the answer he was honestly expecting from her. She rolled a shoulder, pretending unconcern that he knew wasn't entirely real. Then he had to think about it himself. What *was* he asking?

"Damn." He choked on the word.

"Love you, too," she whispered, not looking at him, giving him his pride. "Now go, before she thinks she's been abandoned."

She handed him the third cup in silence.

Chapter Eight

She called Stacey on the ride to her apartment. "Well, crap," Kay muttered, closing her cell phone after only a few minutes.

"What's wrong?" He slipped it from her hand, and she heard him flip the clasp on her purse, putting it away. The man was sweet on sweet.

Kay knew Rush probably had a good idea from her side of the conversation what the problem was. "She's not coming home. Well, she is, but she's going with Jonas somewhere and won't be home until late because of it." Her chin fell forward.

"Hey, I'm not going to dump you off at your door."

"I'm glad," she replied weakly. "I'm sorry I'm being so much trouble."

"Quit it. You are no trouble."

She harrumphed. "Your sister doesn't agree with you."

"Sheridan apologized."

"She left."

She heard Rush's exhale. His hand threaded through hers. "She was giving us privacy. She thought you were someone else and was royally pissed at her brother, not at you."

"Who is older?"

"I am, by six years."

Kay shook her head. "You'd never know it."

His laugh was warm. "I know. She pointed that out this morning too." She felt the truck slow down and then stop. "We're here."

Kay turned to find the door handle, but his hand stopped her. "Come here," he purred, that low, sexy rumble that had her melting from the inside out.

"Hm?" she asked, swiveling on the seat, though she hoped she knew.

She wasn't wrong. The warmth of his kisses started beneath her jaw, dropping heated surprises with every touch. Damn! She wanted to see. Her fingers inched

upwards, memorizing the hardness of his muscles, the slope of his shoulders. A gentle tug brought them thigh to thigh on the seat. Her fingers delved into the loose curls she remembered.

"You taste so good." A shiver shot up her spine then rocketed goose bumps down her arms at the rough heat of his tongue gliding beneath her ear.

"Kiss me," she pleaded.

The swirl of his tongue paused. "I don't want to hurt you, baby."

"Please. Unless..." She ducked down, her forehead landing on his broad shoulder.

"Unless what?"

"The bandages. I know they've got to be the last thing anyone wants to see."

"I've dreamed of ripping them off. I want to see you again." The pulse of his breath against her skin, sliding through the strands of loose hair, warmed her. She felt safe in the circle of his arms.

"I want to see you too," she admitted.

A tender finger lifted her chin, the heat of his breath right in front of her on her lips. "Kiss me. You'll know when to stop, before it hurts."

Her heart pounded. Blood thundered against her ears. Lifting trembling fingers, she found his mouth. Caressing the shape of his lips with the tip of her fingers, she swore she could hear both heartbeats, his and hers, within the truck.

Easing herself forward, she found his lips. Kay had never explored the adventure of sex with a blindfold. The experience of kissing Rush without being able to see him was beyond anything she'd ever felt before, more titillating than any skin to skin caress that she could remember.

That morning had been explosive, both their desires so raw, so ripe she was surprised they didn't tear each other's clothes off and finish what they'd started, what they'd both so badly wanted. She wouldn't have said no. Rush did something to her, made her *want*; want sex, want his body, want him, period. He made her forget when he held her, touched her, kissed her.

Without being able to see him, the sensation of his lips, the male form of his mouth against hers, drove her right to the brink of no return. She craved to feel him naked beneath her hands, the solid shape of his chest beneath her palms as she caressed him, teased him. Yet the gentleness of the kiss was a sweet torture in its own way.

Cautious of her limits she pressed closer, her fingers holding herself steady in the thick curls of his hair. The taste of his kiss erupted on her senses when he let go, letting her take control of the moment. She felt it, the way he let her make every move, every step forward. Wanting spiraled through her, winding tighter like a coiled spring just waiting for the chance to explode into full desire.

Tentative caresses turned into a wanton seduction when she slid her tongue across his lip. Heat blossomed, filling her being with his scent, the feel of his lips against hers. The fingers holding her tight dug into her hip, screaming his own growing hunger held back in restraint. His chest rocked, fleetingly brushing against taut nipples in a give and take dance of breath. He played with her, stroking her tongue as she learned his shape, sucking lightly, giving her every chance to stop him or pull away.

She didn't want to. The twinges of discomfort were low, the pressure miniscule compared to the pleasure. A slow burn had taken root, and her only hope of surcease was the man tenderly worshipping her in a way she'd never once experienced.

Swept up into the rise of desire she went too far, wanted too much and gasped. He stopped instantly. "Kay?"

Breathing through the sharp pain, it began to recede almost as soon as it hit. Her hand caressed him, drifting over his ear to form to his cheek, her heart aching while her jaw reminded her why she needed to be careful. "I did that. Not you. I'm fine." She sensed his doubt and pressed a finger to his lips. "Heaven," she murmured, meaning it.

"Sweeter than candy," he replied. And she smiled halfheartedly, absolutely crushed that she'd had to stop, and worse that she knew he was blaming himself.

* * * *

Rush sat outside, watching the sunset behind his house, something he hadn't done in months. Except he couldn't tell anyone anything about the glory of the colors of the fading sun. His thoughts had kept him mired since they'd arrived back at his home after the stop at her place.

Kay was inside, resting in the spare this time, insisting she couldn't kick him out of his own room twice. The day had been long and tiring on her, and even though he was positive she hated taking the pills because they literally knocked her out, it was for the best. They both needed time. She needed time to heal; he needed time to think. The list on his mind was easily long enough to rival Santa's naughty and nice list.

Sheridan had still been gone when they'd returned and she wasn't back yet. Not a huge problem, but she usually told him where she was going. Taking advantage of her being gone, Rush had been camped out on one of the bleached Adirondack chairs in the quiet, trying to sort through the changes his life had taken on over the last twenty-four hours.

Amazing how much had changed in a day.

Twice today, Kay had literally bowled him over. He dragged a finger in memory over his lip, the essence of her body imbedded into his very pores now. If it weren't for the ramifications of a bonded mating, he'd have stripped her there on the bed and pleased her for hours. That was something he couldn't do without her knowledge. If instinct was going to bend his will to take a mate when he'd had no idea how he could, when he'd avoided it as much as catching the measles, the least he could do was give her the chance to refuse. Once she was his, there would be no others. The thought of loving her, tasting her body, caressing her soft skin for the rest of his life sent a hard shudder down his torso. A low heat boiled in his gut. Nothing he'd thought or done had eased it.

And then she'd kissed him. He shook his head mockingly. He'd told her to do it. What did he expect? Snorting at himself, he slouched a bit on the wooden seat, one leg bent on a slat at the knee. To be honest, he hadn't known what to expect, but any idea he may have held had been obliterated by the sweetest seduction she gave him. Her lips

were more potent than any liquor, sweeter than any candy. If lightning had a source, she was it. He could still taste her, sweet as fall apples, and find her sunshine scent on every breath.

He shifted in the chair, adjusting his cock beneath his jeans, without an ounce of relief. If he didn't know it wasn't possible, he'd swear that his condition hadn't changed one iota since the first sound of her voice, the first glimpse of her thunderhead gray eyes, a sultry gaze that he longed to see again.

A rattle between the trees in front of him below the deck's edge dragged him to his bare feet, annoyingly hunting the growing shadows for the coming visitor. Wanting to relax as much as he could, he only wore his jeans, when he'd normally be in nothing if he'd been alone. Either way, he wasn't in the mood for interruptions, or visitors.

Not surprised to hear them nearing with the loud warning they'd offered, a pair of wolves loped from the trees. With his permission, they lost their skins, standing on two legs. He welcomed them with a nod. "Trevor, Zackary."

They both dropped their gazes in quiet respect. "Alpha," Trevor said.

"What brings you here?" He wasn't concerned with their nudity. Within the pack, it was normal, and he knew if either of these teenagers had shifted before being a hundred percent aware of their surroundings, they would pay their faults to him. They didn't know about Kay, but Rush knew she was out like a light, and thankfully, out of sight. He wasn't quite ready to share her with the pack.

"Zoe is lost. We were running and hoped she'd come this way." Trevor looked ready to puke he was so anxious as the words tumbled from him. His skin was waxen with exhaustion. They'd been running, and looking, for hours by the sight of the pair.

"Your sister?"

Trevor nodded.

"How long?"

"We came out this morning. Dad dropped us off and told us not to leave the Dale's land, but we all did and now we can't find her."

Rush frowned at that news. Mr. Dale was Zackary's uncle. He had a large wooded spread just east of Rush's property. It was prime real estate for the pack to kick up their heels. Their territory was wide spread, but individual wolf families had territory, too. Some were better suited for the wolf and were open to pack use. Rush knew Trevor and Zackary were out there often. This was the first he'd heard of his little sister running.

"Where did you last see her?" He studied both, hoping they had an idea of where to start. The Dale's property was huge and if they didn't stay on it, the odds weren't good they'd find her tonight.

"On the southern ridge. It's my fault," he admitted. "She wasn't up to the distance, and I got impatient with her." Shamefully, his entire body folded in, most likely wanting to crawl into the ground and stay there. "Zoe turned and ran back the way we'd come from, but she's not able to track scent yet. She never made it back to the house. She hasn't eaten since this morning."

Rush's impatience died a little for the youngster, his heart and tears in his eyes.

"I have to find her."

Zack rubbed shoulders in comfort with his best friend.

"We will. I want you and Zack to go back to the Dale's and wait. Do not leave once you are there. I'm not looking for two of you. I'm going to gather the trackers and start at the ridge. It may take time, but we will find her."

"Thank you, Alpha. I'll call Dad when we get there."

Rush didn't say anything to ease the fear he heard in the younger boy's wavering voice. There wasn't much he could do about how Trevor's father would handle his girl missing. "I know it won't be easy, but try to keep your dad at your uncle's. It's already sundown. Hopefully she found a hole to hide in."

Trevor nodded and with a shared look, both boys dropped to the ground, two wolves that spun and tore back into the trees.

"Shit," he breathed. He so didn't need this, but life and responsibility go hand in hand. With the evening's peace shattered, he spun to go inside.

Sitting on the side of the futon, he brushed the hair back from the dulling bandage wrapped around her forehead. He tested the edge and frowned when it moved a considerable amount. She'd been pulling it in her sleep. He'd have to do something about that when he got home. He'd already called Sheridan home and a few others to alert them to the emergency. He couldn't just leave her a note to tell Kay why he wasn't there, and it tore him apart that he had to leave her at all.

"I'm sorry, baby," he breathed, lowering to press a tender kiss to her mouth. "I'll come home as fast as I can." *Come home to you.* For the first time, he felt he was beginning to understand the relationship his parents had shared. The pain of his mother's decision was actually being explained a little at a time. Maybe she couldn't live on without their father. Maybe she hadn't wanted to die, maybe she'd been so lost she couldn't live on and saw no other way. Devastation and depression were powerful against a human body and mind. Rush didn't know. There was only one truth he was certain of at that moment. Leaving Kay, injured and alone, was killing him.

Her hand lifted and caressed his face then sank to her stomach, her breathing still deep. She'd known he was there, even in her sleep, and the belief that somehow she could, created a lump in his throat.

Hearing Sheridan's car outside dragged him back. Standing, he turned and left the smaller room, knowing he was leaving his heart behind this time.

Chapter Nine

Kay tossed in her sleep. She was sick and tired of sleeping, but the drugged abyss wouldn't let her go, not yet. She heard voices close by. Or was she dreaming? Rush's face appeared in her mind. That was his voice, she was sure of it. Centered on his voice for the last day and a half, she knew it was him without a doubt.

Alpha?

Kay frowned, trying to hear more, trying to understand the dream. Her body and mind felt disjointed, like she was drifting through time. She was aware, but it refused to connect to her body. Damn, he sounded sexy when he went serious like that. Husky and gruff. She fought to concentrate. Someone was missing. A child? That's how it sounded to her, his concern thick. But how could a child, any person, follow scent? Her frown deepened, fighting to comprehend what they were saying, to wake up.

"I have to find her."

"We will. I want you and Zack to go back to the Dale's and wait. Do not leave once you are there. I'm not looking for two of you. I'm going to gather the trackers and start at the ridge. It may take time, but we will find her."

"Thank you, Alpha. I'll call Dad when we get there."

This wasn't a dream! Panic was distinct in the lowered youthful tones. She tossed, grasping at consciousness, fighting the cloud over her mind, but being unable to force light into her senses with her eyes covered she couldn't do it. She felt weak, sluggish, lifting her hand to her head. If she could just see! The rough feel of the bandage across her forehead was foreign. Though she knew it was supposed to be there, she tried to remove it.

Then she heard him right there with her, felt his hand caressing her and her world calmed. Everything would be all right. The darkness pulled her down again.

* * * *

Rush, along with Tanner, who was Tays's youngest son and one of the best trackers in the pack, and Nicole, another who could find a flea on a ferret, managed to get within a mile of the ridge where Trevor said he'd lost Zoe's trail. There was no road, but the land was drivable. Now with the truck behind them and the sun long gone, the three wolves spread out. Time wasn't a concept to the three who scoured the ground for any scent, any sign that she'd passed.

Rush's focus was exact, but he couldn't help the stray thoughts, his worry for Kay, from flickering into his conscience. He'd been by her side since the incident with Steven, and now he couldn't imagine being without her. It was happening so fast, all the shocks and decisions. He knew he couldn't let her go.

The wolf snorted, disgusted at the notion. *Okay, I get it*, Rush grouched back. He didn't know if the others talked to their wolf the way he did. It was something he'd done since he was a child, and when his mother died, he relied more and more on the quiet patience of the animal he shared souls with. They were one and the same, but different, symbiotic yet two entities within one shell.

A sharp bark snapped his attention to Nicole. She lifted her head and sniffed then whipped her tail up. She'd found something.

Jogging to her further down the ridge, Tanner joined them. Dropping his nose, Rush studied the ground and his body tightened on alert. She'd found Zoe's scent, but someone else had beaten them to tracking the young girl.

Zoe was being followed.

Shit. With a low growl, they began tracking the tracker and the prey.

* * * *

Kay sat up and stretched. Rubbing her face, she refrained from rubbing her eyes. She'd done that once without thinking and the tenderness of her left eye had shot her with agony. The tips of her fingers ran along the bottom edge of the bandage. If it was

night, then she had less than twelve hours to need the bandage. Her lips twisted as she debated.

It *had been* a precaution, not a necessity. She flexed her facial muscles and didn't feel faint at the pain to her left side. Her throat had lost the tight burn from being almost crushed, and though her mouth was tender, her lips didn't feel like swollen sausages any longer, not to herself and not to her fingers when she pressed against them, testing their healed state.

Standing from the edge of the futon, she placed herself in the map of the room. Turning, she walked the four paces to the bedroom, glad Rush had also walked her around this one, too. She found the bathroom easily enough. Now how did she get rid of the bandage?

Scissors would be best, but she doubted they'd appear because she needed them. Carefully, she slid her finger beneath the loosest edge and inched it upward with steady pressure. The tape gave easier than she'd thought it would. She didn't open either eye as the rough linen swathe slid upward. She peeled the remaining tape strips and the circle of linen cleared her crown.

She released a nervous breath. Her first instinct was to blink, but she remained calm. Turning on the faucets, she ran warm water and carefully patted her eyes, shuddering at the contact and relief of the moisture. She knew Doctor Aimes had prescribed eye drops for dryness. That would be next.

Patiently, though anxious, she wiped her hands and cheeks on the towel hanging behind her, disappointed when she didn't find the feel of muscular abs again. She'd barely breathed before, and Rush had been there, helping her. At least now, provided she wasn't seeing double, she'd be able to go look for him, not have to wait for him to come guide her around like a seeing-eye dog.

She turned on a bare heel, the familiarity of the natural hardwood beneath her feet. Standing straight she found the sink with her palm and cautiously cracked her eyes open. She stifled the cry of alarm, all but slapping her hand over her mouth to keep it from exploding into a wailing scream.

"Damn, you're a mess," she muttered when she could breathe beyond the shock. But she could see.

The undamaged eye was mostly clear, only a little foggy, which drops would likely fix, but the left... She sighed. Her left eye was blood red across the white, and she knew that it would take months for it to clear. At least another two weeks before her face would completely heal. Sonofabitch. *What did he hit me with?* She thought it had been a fist, but a fist wouldn't do this. It was lucky no bones had been broken. No wonder Rush had been all but waiting on her hand and foot. She'd been inches, if that much, from serious damaging harm. It's a wonder she didn't get a concussion.

Lifting her hair, she swept it back, noting the blue around her throat. Shaking her head, she realized that what she'd thought had been overkill on Rush's behalf had been a necessity for her. She couldn't have, shouldn't have, been left alone with this.

Stripping the bandage apart, she eked two strips of tape and a portion to cover her left eye again, knowing it was only temporary for the moment. The more she blinked, the clearer her vision became with her right.

"My, don't you look charming," she mocked her reflection with the make-do patch in place. *Princess image, hell.* She looked like a Tinkerbell pirate.

Leaving the bathroom, she meandered through the house, finally seeing the beauty of the home she'd been exploring with her fingers for the last two days. And he'd had this designed and built? It was gorgeous for a home.

The interior had a cocooning effect, solid with rough redwood accents. The scent permeated the air now that she could see the cause, like she walked through a sun-heated glade. It was cool inside, with large open rooms and several wall sized windows. The house wasn't dark. Although it was nighttime outside, a ceiling fan in the center showered the room in light.

"Gorgeous," she breathed. Glancing around, she wondered where everyone was. She walked toward the kitchen, but couldn't hear or see anything. Then she heard Sheridan's voice. She was outside in the back where a glass sliding door stood open.

"No, I'm sure Rush can find her, Emily. The boys didn't mean to leave her behind. You know how impulsive young pups are."

Kay slowed. She was on the phone, but before she could turn to leave her alone more of the conversation floated to her.

"Yes, he took two of the pack with him. Nicole and Tanner. It'll be okay, Emily. Even if she doesn't shift, she'll try to find a place to stay safe until morning."

Pack? Shift? Rooted to the spot now, she eavesdropped shamelessly.

"The Rysen pack? No, they're friendly on the south side. If they find her, they'll call someone."

Sheridan was trying hard to soothe an obviously distraught mother on the other end of the phone.

"Rush knows Thomas, their Alpha, fairly well. The territory dispute was solved not long after he took over Tays's place."

It was like a mini soap opera, but Kay was only catching half the on-screen dialogue.

"I couldn't go. We have a guest. Rush couldn't leave her alone, so I'm here." A light laugh broke some of the tension. "I'm not telling either. You'll have to meet her. She's pretty awesome. She'll make a good fem-alpha, I think."

Kay sank to a chair. They were talking about her. There were a few more words with a promise to call as soon as she heard anything, then silence.

Fem-alpha? What the hell was that? And why was she calling boys pups? Was it an endearment term between them?

Sheridan stepped up onto the risers that seemed to lead to the deck on the far side, freezing with a lurch in the doorway. "Oh, crap," she muttered.

"I know, I look hideous," she offered, latching on to the logical.

Sheridan shook her head. "Oh, honey," she demurred. Striding into the room, she sank down next to Kay. "You're fine. Colorful," she offered with a light tease.

"That's more complimentary than I could give." She hadn't turned to look at Sheridan yet. No sense in giving her the up close and ugly view. "What's happened?"

"A couple of boys were out in the woods and being impetuous idiots, left their little sister to find her own way home."

Kay gasped. "Are you serious? How old is she?" It was pitch dark outside. It was way too late for anyone to be left out there.

"She's eleven, but still too young to be out as far as they went."

"That's insane! Have search parties gone out?"

Sheridan nodded. "Rush has gone himself to find her."

Kay lifted a hand to rub her temple. "What is a fem-alpha? And who are the Rysen pack? Is it a motorcycle club or something?"

Sheridan's face paled. "Crap. Rush is going to kill me."

"Why?"

Sheridan's mouth popped open then snapped shut. Twisting her fingers together, she leaped from her seat.

"I don't know if I should –"

The phone rang, snapping both women to the sound.

Chapter Ten

Rush groaned, lifting his head to let it thud back to the ground, a dead weight that was just too much effort to lift. Everything ached. He was sure his nails would if they had nerves.

"Come on, buddy. You have to change, or move, or something."

Tanner was kneeling next to Rush. *Kneeling?* Why was he out of his skin?

Quiet whimpers reached him, the reassuring shush of a female comforting her sobs.

"Is he going to die?"

Zoe. Flashes of memory were beginning to register. A fight. A huge one. A shudder ruffled fur. He closed his eyes to breathe, uninterested in doing anything else. At least they'd found her. He could deal with the rest when he was ready.

"Rush? Not anytime soon, honey," Nicole soothed the young girl. "He'll heal. He's just tired."

"That's what happens when you take on five naturals," Tanner muttered.

"She didn't know," Nicole rebuked him. "It's not like we wear signs that we're shifters or naturals. She thought they were friendly." Nicole continued to wrap the terrified girl into her embrace, rocking her. As a female alone, she was prime for the plucking, age didn't matter.

"I'm not blaming her, Nic," Tanner stated evenly. "Although Trevor deserves anything his dad gives him for leaving her alone like this. She just hasn't learned enough to know how to tell the difference between us and them, or how to get home, but he didn't have to take them all on." Unaware of the mistake, Zoe had been happy to follow the pack who had found her, unfortunately being led right to their territory and lair.

Nicole snickered. "They took *him* on, remember? She's part of our pack. No alpha would just let her be stolen without a fight, natural or not." Nicole continued to

brush her hand over Zoe's hair. Exhaustion was growing with the young thing, her body going limp. Rush managed to keep an eye on all of them through lids that just wanted to stay closed.

Somewhere overhead the sky and stars blinked down on him. He wished he were home, in bed, with his arms curled around Kay. The memory of sunshine in her hair soothed him the way Nicole's crooning eased Zoe. So long as he was breathing, he'd heal. He wished the other two would just take Zoe home. He was sure her mother was ready to rip heads off waiting for them.

"Come on, Rush." Arms wrapped around him, lifting him from the cool ground. "Just do me a favor, and don't shift until I tell you to, okay?"

He let out a low growl at being told what to do, but couldn't do much more as his body fell slack, the jarring movement causing blistering pain across his shoulder and back.

* * * *

Sheridan drove in tense silence, her lips pinched tight, exacerbating the paleness of her face. She was stretched with concern and angst. Not that Kay could blame her. After hearing from Emily that Zoe had been found, nothing would have held either woman back, which put Sheridan in a real bind.

Because she'd had no choice but to try to explain to Kay something both were sure should have been left to Rush.

Short of strapping her to something solid, Kay wasn't about to be left behind. Rush had been injured looking for Zoe. They'd found her, but from the sounds of it, he'd been ripped to shreds extricating her from a pack of natural males.

Naturals? Shifters? Alphas? There was that word again. It was enough to make her head run in circles. This wasn't possible, whatever *this* was, but if Rush was hurt, she wasn't going to leave him.

When they arrived at the Dale's home, almost every light was on, even though it was well past two in the morning. Kay sat straighter as they neared and spotted Rush's pickup truck. The tailgate was down and a young girl was sitting in the bed with a large dog.

"There's Zoe," Sheridan said.

"Where's Rush? Inside?"

Sheridan twisted her hands over the wheel, her body taut. "No." Her unblinking eyes were locked on the animal in front of them. "Rush is going to kill me," she whispered again. "You shouldn't be here, not yet."

Slipping from the car, Kay didn't have a chance to ask her anything else. She followed behind the other woman, but instead of going inside, she went right up to Zoe and the dog. Only, the closer they got to the truck, the more Kay was convinced that wasn't a dog beside her leg.

"How are you, Zoe?" Sheridan asked gently.

Thick tears trickled from her eyes. "He's going to be all right? Please? I didn't know the others weren't family. I thought I'd been found." Her voice wobbled with the weight of her tears.

Slow breaths moved the ribs of the animal before them, slow and steady, but apparently unaware, his head lying comfortably on the young girl's thigh. "I know, honey. He's going to be fine. You've had a long day. Let's go inside."

Sheridan held her arms open and Zoe slowly flowed into her embrace. She was long limbed and gangly, but Sheridan didn't seem to have any problems with her in her arms.

"Let me get her inside. Her parents probably think she's curled up somewhere in the house. We'll take him home in a minute."

"Him?" Kay croaked.

Sheridan nodded, her own eyes glittering with unshed tears. "I've never seen him this beat up." She swallowed, then seeming to remember the girl in her arms, tucked her against her shoulder and carried her inside without saying anything else.

"Rush?" Kay murmured, gaping in shock at the dark, coffee-brown pelt of the animal in front of her. Even in the absence of strong light, she could see the bite wounds that tore into its rich coat, blood thickening the fur in spots to matted clumps. Several centered on his back and his front shoulder, like the other animals had tried to take him down by sheer force.

It couldn't be. Whipping to look over her shoulder, she stared hard at the house, praying, waiting for Rush to come limping out, or at worst, out with help, but he never did. Should she follow Sheridan? Where was Rush? Confused, she reached forward to the animal before her. It lay there, doing nothing but breathing. Thick fur slid beneath her fingers. She leaped back when its breathing changed.

No. She was imagining this. He did not just sigh. None of what Sheridan had said on the drive over could be possible. It just couldn't. It wasn't logical. There was no such thing as shifters. But inarguably, a wolf lay before her, had been sleeping on Zoe's leg. And Sheridan had every intention that Kay could tell of taking it home with them.

"Rush?" she asked again, a little stronger, knowing there was not one thing sane in thinking this animal was him. A single eye dragged opened, a blue hazel eye. The world vanished, her entire being focused on the wolf in front of her as reality vacuumed on itself.

Somehow, he lifted his head, fighting to rise to his feet. Kay froze, watching the struggle, every inch of the animal before her trembling with the effort.

"No," she whispered sharply, stopping his progress. He did, looking at her questioningly. "Oh my, God, Rush." Hands that shook wildly lifted and palmed the furred face of the beast in front of her. As if that was all he'd been waiting for, his blue eyes closed and his entire length went slack, collapsing to the bed of the truck. Kay didn't know how she stayed standing until Sheridan came out to find her staring in shock. When Rush collapsed, he'd wound a paw over one of the hands she'd held him with, tying them together even when he couldn't be aware of the touch.

Once home, Sheridan carried him easily from the pickup to his room and laid him on his bed. "It's one of the benefits. We're a bit stronger than most," she explained. Even beneath the bruises, Kay was positive she was pale, watching and living this.

"It's really him, isn't it?" Breathing was a torture.

"It is," Sheridan answered. "He will heal, but it'll take some time."

"How?" She licked her lips, fighting to grasp reality, which was a fleeting memory at the moment.

"It's what I was doing such a bad job of explaining earlier. We're born this way. The gene is male dominant, but any child born of a paternal wolf can shift. Both our parents were shifters." Sheridan stroked the fur on his head in comfort as she spoke. Kay stood next to the bed, still in shock. He had a fair-sized bed, but the breadth and width of his slack body dwarfed it.

Sheridan caught her gaze. "I know this is a shock. I'm positive it's not how he wanted you to find out."

Kay nodded, dazed. "Everyone called him Alpha." *Just like in the dream.* It hadn't been a dream after all, if she was to believe the woman standing on the other side of the bed. Believing that the animal laying on Rush's bed was actually him, Kay was dealing with it a moment at a time.

Sheridan's fingers never stopped furrowing through the thick pelt. "Because he is. In the human world, he is a man like any other, but within the pack, he is our leader, our judge and jury. He has earned the right to be Alpha, though he has his doubts."

"You don't doubt him." Kay was positive of it, watching his sister's adoring expressions.

"Never have." Her smile was indulgent.

Kay watched them both. The wolf lay as still as death on the bed, though the rise and fall of his ribs proved he was only unconscious. They lived with this secret their whole lives. And somehow she'd been tossed in the middle of their world.

"What can I do?" she asked, her voice paper thin.

Sheridan's thoughtful face lifted, piercing the space separating the two women.
"Do you mean it?"

Kay met her intense gaze, the hurt and worry of a sister in the almost identical hazel eyes of the man – wolf – on the bed. "I do."

"You are his, and his healing will be faster if he doesn't have to worry about your safety. Stay with him."

"His...what?"

The indulgent smile was back. "Now that is one I know I can't take from my brother. He'll tell you when he's ready."

Kay straightened her shoulders, becoming aware she'd been staring at the furred lump on the bed. She made up her mind, watching the slow rise and fall of his breathing. "If I give you a list and my keys, can you go to my place?"

"I'd be happy to."

"Then let's make sure he heals."

Sheridan's smile was only outshined by the thankful tears in her eyes.

Chapter Eleven

Rush stretched, his fingers digging into blanket and a warm woman.

Warm woman? His eyes snapped open. There right beneath his chin in the darkened room was a full head of espresso brown hair.

It smelled like summer sunshine.

“Kaisha?” He swallowed when he croaked her name. Her thinly covered breasts pressed into his bare stomach like she’d always been there. Her arms were snug around his torso, his hand resting easily on her hip. Hot breath warmed the base of his throat.

She tilted her chin and he caught his breath at her sweet smile. Threading her fingers through his hair, she whispered sleepily, “Hi there.”

He didn’t know where to start, with the fact that she’d removed most of her bandage, or just how good she looked to him. A lot of the swelling in her face was gone and the bruising had improved dramatically.

A low, needy groan rose from within as he buried his nose into her neck and shoulder, holding her flush against him, so glad to be with her, to be skin to skin. Exactly how he’d wanted to be, how he’d imagined her next to him. Her body warmed him beneath the covers, sending heat to dispel any chill he may have felt.

Slowly, it returned to him. The wolves he’d fought to regain Zoe, the damage and wounds he couldn’t avoid for the effort. Rush couldn’t even remember how he’d made it home. Or have any idea of how long he’d been laying in bed with this sweet woman holding him within her arms.

He jerked up to see for himself what shouldn’t be. *A lot* of the damage had healed.

The pit of his stomach felt frozen solid. “How long?”

“Not quite four days. You were really hurt when Tanner brought you back. You almost lost a leg in the fight.” Her fingers slipped through his hair, drifting over his shoulders to return.

Rush rolled his shoulder, more memories returning in snips and flashes. "Yeah," he mumbled. Then what she said registered. "What did you say?" He was almost scared to breathe, staring at her with unblinking eyes. How could she know what shape he'd been in? How long had she been there? The weekend he'd met her was a vague sleep-ridden blur at the moment, but hadn't that just been yesterday? A day more, maybe? She had to be wrong. He couldn't have been out for that long. Panic was settling in. Because that meant...

She leaned up and pressed a warm kiss to the bottom of his jaw. "It's okay, Rush. I know." Her uncovered eye was sparkling up at him. "Although I've never slept with anything furrier than a bear, it wasn't all that bad. At least you don't dig in your sleep." Her teasing laughter was beautiful.

"You...slept...?" He wasn't sure if he should shout with joy or pray in thankfulness.

"The whole time."

She said that with such sweet, relaxed assurance that he couldn't help the smile from pouring free. With gentle hands, he rolled her onto her back until he stretched over her. Her small frame was almost engulfed beneath his. "How much longer do you have the patch?"

"I was supposed to go earlier today, but I didn't want to leave you."

"So it can come off?"

"Mm hm. Doctor Aimes said with the way things have progressed, it's safe."

"Then why didn't you?" he asked her, mildly confused.

Her chest rose and fell beneath him, her breasts lightly meeting the wall of his body, a hint of uncertainty in her gaze. "Because I wanted you to be the one I see when I remove it."

All he could do was look in humbled awe at her, his eyes touching her where his hands wanted to be next. "You're perfect," he breathed. Emotions belted him one after another, and none were stronger than the love he felt for her. "Can I?" he asked, trembling with everything he was feeling.

When she nodded her agreement, he lifted a hand. She caught him before he could touch her. The determined strength behind her slight hand around his wrist was surprising. "I better warn you. It's not going to be pretty. I've seen it once already. I still look like road kill."

"Oh, honey. Kay," he groaned. "There's no one as beautiful, anywhere." He lowered himself and pressed a tender kiss to her mouth. He didn't demand more, exacting his own type of torture, enraptured with her scent as he drifted down her jaw. The fragrant silk of her skin sent jolts of need through his body.

He almost vibrated with the growing hunger, with the emotional overload. He whispered into her ear. "You really slept in this bed with my wolf?"

The answer he got was a breathy moan. Impatient fingers stroked at his shoulders. "For two days solid. You didn't shift until the second night." And there wasn't a hint of fear anywhere on her, or in her voice.

He couldn't help himself. He had to touch and kiss her, the hunger for her so deep, he felt like he was drowning. Trailing hot kisses down her neck until he reached her shoulder, he clamped down with his teeth. He wasn't sure who needed it more, him or his wolf, to mark her, to claim her. Her whole body arched like a bow, a keening cry slipping from her body. Her arousal was instant as her body flooded in preparation of the ecstasy to be received. Every sense was tuned to her body. Her scent between them, the taste of her on his tongue, the sound of her voice imbedded in his brain. There was nothing but Kay.

"Mine," he growled thickly, licking at the tender spot. "Now and forever."

Her answer was a mumbled purr. The teasing drag of her foot up his thigh made his synapses pop. Her hips rose and rubbed against his shaft to further tempt him. Sweeping a hand up her body, he captured her hands from their seductive meandering to hold them over her head beneath one palm.

"Patience. This first," he told her. Gently, he pried the tape from the side of her face, lifting the large circle of gauze covering her left eye. She lay perfectly still for him, only small quivers exposing her anticipation. "Now, let me see. Slowly."

Like the rise of a curtain, the excruciating wait to see her, for her to see him again, was over.

"I told you. There's still a lot of damage."

His shoulders tightened with surprise as he focused on her expression and not just the woman he couldn't seem to get enough of, then the corner of his mouth lifted. "I didn't even notice it. I was captured by the most gorgeous gray eyes I've ever seen."

A rose blush filled her cheeks, and those inky lashes, just like he remembered, lowered to hide her thunderhead eyes. It was a perfect color for her. She'd stolen into his life like a silent storm, only to blow him away with everything that was Kay.

With her pinned beneath him, everything else vanished. "You smell so good." The raw edge of his voice was only an echo of the raging hunger of his body. He dipped again and nuzzled beneath her ear. She turned easily, allowing him access to anything and everything. "Perfect," he crooned. Then he began to lick and sip at the most delicious treat—her body.

He knew she was two years older than he was because he'd filled out most of her paperwork at the hospital, but her body still carried the supple, limber ability of her years in gymnastics, as he soon found out when she lifted a leg over his hip, wrapping over his waist like a pole and hanging on. Holding fragile wrists in his palm, he slid his hand down her length, caressing every curve, every dip and valley.

"I can't say this enough. You are perfect."

Her moans were breathy, her eyes closed as he swept her down a river of pleasure. He learned her body with a leisurely hand, adoring her, holding her flesh in firm then gentle fingers, each discovery sending his blood pounding harder through his body. His cock strained as it filled, emphasizing his desires with a quickening throb.

It took little effort to pull the shirt she wore over her head. Peaked nipples taunted him with their rouge rose color, and he knew they'd taste as good as they looked. She fit perfectly within his hand when he covered her breast, rolling the hardened tip beneath his palm. Her breath caught with low growled sobs that deepened when he gave each tip a light pinched twist.

"Not too hard?" he asked, when her moan turned guttural.

"No," she gasped, shuddering beneath his weight. Rush wasn't a rough lover, but when he made love to a woman, he pleased her before anything else. He wanted to find out everything about Kay. What she liked, what made her moan, what would make her orgasm in ecstasy. Tonight, he wanted a piece of her soul as well as her pleasure. There was no doubt that Kay would own a little of his by morning as well. He wanted no one else's.

Still holding her, he licked at the peak to soothe the treatment he'd given her and she arched, silently begging for more. With each inhale, he could smell her arousal, making his mouth water. Her body undulated and molded to his, fitting and sliding over his chest and rubbing against him. She fit so well against him, he knew he could eat her in just one bite, like the big bad wolf and Red.

The thought of her lying next to him, holding his wolf, maybe soothing him or caressing him in his sleep, made his dick solid as steel. The veracity that she wasn't screaming in terror, but was still with him, in the same bed knowing the truth about his closest secret was almost more than he could comprehend. Rush had wallowed in his doubts about how to tell her. In order to have her completely, she had to know the truth, and she did.

And she was still in his bed. Somewhere in the back of his brain, he knew there was something else he should tell her, but if there was a coherent thought to be found anywhere, he didn't have it. The sweet essence of her hunger, of her body, embraced him, blocking out all other interruptions. Even those by his conscience.

Lingering over her nipple, he wrapped his tongue around the taut point, his hand drifting in languid patterns up and down her body. She bowed off the bed, seeking, following when he lifted, moaning again when he licked his way to the other delicious playground of her body.

She tasted even better on his tongue, warm flesh and sweet breasts. "I could play with this," he lipped her nipple, surrounding it with light tugs, "all day."

Her head thrashed to the side when he drew her into his mouth with a slow pull. It thrilled him that she was so sensitive.

Dropping kisses upward to her collarbone, his hand slid down to her hip, cradling her, feeling her softer body along his. Without missing a beat, he shifted again, stroking her waist with his thumb, teasing the edge of her panties. "These have got to go," he told her. With a twist and a pop, he ripped the waistband and flung them from her body, nothing but a scrap of worthless lace now.

Her eyes snapped open, startled.

"You should never hide this luscious body from me," he told her, nipping the underside of her breast in punctuation with sharp teeth.

"Clothes are kind of necessary," she replied in a husky whisper.

"Everywhere but here," he told her. If he had his way, she would never wear a strip of anything in his bed again. Why ruin the perfection of her body with something as ordinary as clothing? He would be too inclined to remove it as soon as she was next to him anyway.

Whatever would have been said was forgotten when he flicked at the damp curls between her legs. Her body shivered in reaction. Holding her hands over her head kept her stretched out beneath his weight, his hand and mouth able to reach and caress at will, a veritable physical playground of aroused Kay.

Using a flat palm, he opened her thighs for his exploration. Lying down fully, he stretched out along her side. He suckled at her breast with tender licks and pulls, letting his fingers play and tease with her sweet pussy. Smooth skin pressed against his from his chest to his thigh. Bending a leg at the knee, he arched it over the nearest of hers, locking her down, capturing her under his weight.

Nuzzling her ear, he taunted her with his desires, the entire time slipping his fingers closer and closer through the tight curls that covered her core. "I want to lick every inch of your body, taste the sweet heat of your juice when you come." A harsh gasp slipped from her quaking lips. "Does it turn you on, knowing how much I want you?"

She licked her bottom lip, leaving a glistening shine behind. "Yes," she managed in an aching voice.

He lowered himself to taste her lips. At the instant of contact, he caressed the hard bundle of nerves beneath his fingertips. She cried out, his kiss swallowing her pleasure. Delving between her lips with his tongue, he stroked the folds beneath his fingers, lost in the slick heat of her desire, invading her on two levels. Sliding against her tongue, he mimicked the action with his fingers, gliding over her clit in perfect harmony.

Rush tried to keep the kiss gentle, but her whimpers, the way she lifted seeking him, battered his efforts until he claimed her completely. Thrusting his tongue deep into the heated crevice of her mouth, dueling with her tongue, he found the silken sheath of her body and thrust inside her channel. Her body stiffened with bliss.

"Let me feel it, baby," he murmured above her lips.

She gasped, her body arching, fighting to be free, enraptured with the pleasure. Stroking her with his fingers, he felt her walls tighten, plump and heated with the need to be fulfilled.

Releasing her mouth, he licked her flesh, traveling with teasing twirls down her neck for the tip of her breast. His hand holding her loosened, and she didn't try to move, letting him control the moment, every touch. Holding her prisoner beneath his larger size, he continued to thrust into her pussy with hard even strokes, flicking with teasing nails over her clit and tempting her, bringing her pleasure higher. The trembles started at her shoulders and he bit with commanding pressure at the tempting nub beneath his lips, building her orgasm into an explosive burst.

He wanted to feast on her body, but he couldn't wait any longer to feel her surrounding him. He would please them both endlessly, but the need that fired his veins went deeper, feral and primal, demanding he claim and satisfy his mate. The scent of her in the room wrapped around him, engulfing his senses with the mix that was only her. With the heat of her body calling his, he reached for his nightstand before he lost all ability to think beyond the wonder of her laying there, so tempting and

gorgeous. Quickly searching, he found a condom packet, thankful. Covering himself, shuddering beneath wicked fingers that now trailed down his chest, he fit himself between her thighs.

The pounding of his heart was deep, racing, as he became captured by her eyes again, darkened with her lust and desire. He throbbed painfully, holding on with the last ounce of sanity. Lowering to her lips, their soft shape welcomed him, calmed him within the maelstrom of need circling him. Breathly bursts slipped between them with him seated right at her entrance, so close to what he desperately needed. The strain bunched his muscles to not take her, his natural desires leading him. The very last thread of his control was quickly being stretched to its limits.

"Tell me now. I won't let you go after this," he said, his only warning, because it was the truth. Once he entered her body, there was no going back. A bonded mating was permanent, more binding than any super glue invented. He waited, his pulse ripping through him like a hurricane.

"Please," she mewled, her fingers riding into his hair and gripping like he was a lifeline.

With one thrust, he claimed her body, feeling her claim his soul in the same instant. A fire like nothing in his lifetime flooded him and he held on, muffling his gasp against her body as lightning stole his sanity for a heartbeat, tearing through him. Like a piece of him had been missing his whole life, she filled him more than he filled her. Gradually, the sensation of her fingers reawakened him to her within his embrace, demanding yet gentle.

"Perfect," he managed through a single growl as his body took over, sinking into the pleasure that was Kay, thrusting into her heat like he wanted to crawl into her very soul and stay there, safe and warm and loved.

Slender hips rose, and he sank deeper, lights exploding as air rushed from him. Her pussy clenched down on his shaft and he shuddered. "Oh, shit, Kay." He couldn't help it. He was going to tear right down the middle with each stroke, bringing him closer to the edge.

“Yes,” she cried, pressing her lips to his throat, licking and sucking between bursts of gulped air. He tipped his chin, and she raked his throat with her teeth. His wolf snapped his head up and howled within.

Rush exploded, pounding into her welcoming body like it was his home, taking her with him when the ecstasy overpowered him. The universe as he knew it, vanished.

Chapter Twelve

Kay nuzzled the warm arm beneath her cheek. The sun was beginning to streak the sky outside the window of Rush's room, making her blink as the gray brightened. It would likely take a few more days for her vision to completely square itself. She really needed to call Mr. Savrenson and let him know how she was doing. He'd told her to take all the time she needed, considering the attack she'd suffered. Her work was commission and cost, anyway. If she missed a week, it wouldn't kill her or his store.

Rush's easy breathing rustled the strands of her hair over her ear. He was completely healed now. After watching over him for four days with Sheridan, watching in awe as he healed from the wounds on his body, she knew it was time for her to get back to her life. Their fun was over, if she could call what had happened to her having fun. He didn't need her now, and she needed to go home before she allowed herself to feel anything more for the man.

She liked him, and hadn't been able to stop herself from wanting him last night, a clear sign to evacuate and quickly. Liking him was okay, sleeping with him was even better, but at the same time? She couldn't do it. She didn't use men the way her mother did. She had no idea what her mother was looking for or even needed when it came to men. Kay knew to keep any sex separate from any feelings, friendly or otherwise, that she may feel toward them.

The problem was she was scared. She felt too much for Rush already, a clear sign to end this before it spiraled out of control. She could like him, and did, but she couldn't love him. She refused to let her heart fall into the same patterns as her mother. Falling in and out of love as often as the rise and fall of the sun. With a sneer of distaste, Kay knew her mother went through men and boyfriends faster than Brittany Spears appeared in gossip rags.

With the press of his chest to her back, she indulged in a few more minutes before facing the inevitable. Her one luxury was to not hurry through this last morning.

She sighed softly, snuggled in his embrace. His hand splayed across her stomach in sleep, holding her close, her back flush to his chest. He hadn't let her go all night, keeping her pressed to his body like a warmer.

Carful to not wake him, she lifted a hand and ran it over her face. She'd hardly looked at herself while caring for Rush, but the pain was gone and except for soreness around her eye, she was back to normal. Even the split in her lip had healed. She knew the bruises were still there, but they'd begun to discolor, breaking down to disappear.

Gliding up her side, his hand captured her fluttering one. "Stop," he mumbled. "You're beautiful."

"I look like a science experiment gone wrong," she replied.

"It's already fading, baby." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. He surged forward, pressing his groin into her ass, molding them together like two peas in a pod. The man was *not* lacking, she mused. She still ached with pleasurable memories. And he was definitely a morning person. Kay grinned, tucking into his curved elbow to try to hide her smile.

He sighed, dropping kisses to her shoulder. "I need to call work, find out what Sheridan told them and get my time straightened out."

"I think she told him you had a family emergency."

Rush didn't reply, only nodding. "She hates lying," he said quietly a few minutes later.

"Well, it was an emergency, and you are *her* family," she offered, trying to find a way to validate his emergency.

He chuckled. "You probably signed your own absence slips at school."

"I'll never tell."

His laughter was deeper, richer, rocking her within his embrace.

"I need to get back, too," she told him as the silence filled the room comfortably. She rubbed against him again, loathe to really get up and leave, not after the night they'd shared.

She'd been with Rush for almost a full week now. Not that anyone would miss her if she wasn't at home, but she needed to get back to her life. Stacey was probably tapping her toes right now, impatient to let her know how things were since last Saturday, and with Rush's condition. Kay hadn't told her how he'd been hurt, only that he had been and she was staying with him because he'd done the same for her.

"When are you coming back?"

Light as feathers, Rush's lips danced along her shoulder, his tongue flicking out to hit her pulse every few seconds. She was pretty sure he'd given her a hickey. She tingled every time his lips or touch came close to it. She didn't mind. What was one more bruise among the mess she already wore?

"Coming back?" she asked. Kay really hadn't thought that far ahead. She hadn't considered it an option.

"I'd ask you to just move in, but I know that's pushing it," he said in a cajoling, low rumble.

"What?" she whispered with a shocked gulp. "Move in?" She hadn't been expecting that.

"Mm hm," he purred. His lips were still flitting all along her neck and shoulders and his hand was beginning to get ideas too. "You are perfect for me, my little precious."

"Um..." She corralled his hand, halting his wandering progress. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"We'll take this slow, I promise, but I need you. You are mine to love and cherish."

Shit! Love? Is he out of his mind? This was just what she'd wanted to avoid. Too late. She saw the train barreling right for her. She'd had no idea Rush thought he was falling for her. He'd been unconscious for more than three days! He couldn't love her. He was mistaken.

"Look, Rush..." she said nervous now, ready to flee, the moment spent in his embrace shattered. Licking her lips, Kay tried to reason with him. "It's because we've been together non-stop since Steven's attack on me. You don't mean that."

She tried to sit up, but his arms caged her within their unbreakable strength. "I do mean it. I claimed you last night."

"Claim?" She almost snickered a laugh, but he sounded so serious. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You're my other half. I didn't know it, and when I realized it, I didn't want to admit it." He sipped lightly at the skin beneath her ear. "When you told me you slept with my wolf, held him, cared for him, I knew I couldn't let you go." His voice was low, raking her nerves like hot coals.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, fighting to keep her voice down, because he wasn't making sense. His wolf? What did he have to do with this?

"You're my mate," he stated as a simple fact. She felt the flick of his tongue on her ear, and her mind and body both dared to short circuit, for two different reasons.

"Your what?" She was *not* a wolf's mate!

"My other half, my mate, my soul." He said each with slow purpose, punctuating each with tender kisses.

She rolled her eyes. *Oh, God, he's waxing poetic. He must still be feeling ill, or feverish, or something.* She felt trapped and her heart started to pound. She pulled his hands loose. He didn't fight, but watched her carefully as she sat up.

"Rush, I'm none of that. We connected. I was hurt, and then you were hurt." She stood, going to the dresser where her suitcase full of spare clothes lay open. "It's time I got back to what I do."

She noticed when his eyes narrowed. "You accepted me, all of me, my wolf and me," he stressed, no longer cajoling, but flat, with a hardness she hadn't heard from him before.

"I don't know what..." Her thoughts brought back snatches of the night before. "*I'll never let you go.*" She stood slowly, clothes clutched in her bloodless fist, staring

blankly at the wall in front of her. Her lungs emptied as though she'd been kicked. She whirled to face him. "What did you do?" she bit out. His mouth opened, but she flung up a hand. "Wait!" She drew a breath, feeling dizzy, very dizzy. Blinking to steady the room, she asked, "First, what is a fem-alpha?"

He sat on the edge of the bed watching her, the sheets draped over his thigh like a toga tail. The rest of his chest and torso were bared and so easy to linger on with her gaze. She wrenched herself upward when he started to explain.

"The fem-alpha is the feminine leader of our pack, the other alpha. This pack did not have one because I wasn't mated. Until last night."

Her throat hurt because she was trying to breathe and swallow at the same time. "I can't believe this." The shirt in her hand swayed as she raked her fingers through her clothes, searching for what she didn't know. She couldn't look at him. Her heart and body did things she wasn't familiar with. Okay, lust she knew, and desire, but there was more, and more she just didn't have time for.

"You know I'm a shifter. That doesn't bother you."

"I do know, and no it doesn't," she replied cautiously, not ready to admit to more, least of all that she'd somehow bonded with Rush. She'd had days to deal with and accept that the wolf and the man were one and same. Just because a week ago it was inconceivable didn't mean it wasn't true. She'd never seen a million dollars in cash, but apparently for many, it existed. No, she had accepted his wolf.

The rest was just insane. *That doesn't really happen; it can't, can it? With just sex?* She mentally shook a finger at herself for calling something so wonderful, so all-consuming as what they'd shared as mere sex. What had happened between them the night before had been shattering. But it did not tie them together.

"Kay...Kaisha. We need to talk about this," he told her, standing.

She blinked to not look. The man was a specimen of perfection. Solid shoulders, a lightly hair-dusted chest that veed down to his navel with a hint of temptation further. And that hint didn't lie. Even now, his length drew her, thickening under her gaze. Breaking away was hard to do. Then there were his legs and thighs that were strong

and looked it. He was walking muscle, a wall of iron. He made her heart stutter with renewed hunger. That was why she knew she needed to leave. Rush made her want, more than any other man had in her life, and wanting only led to disappointment and pain. She refused to cause this man, or herself, pain. Kay could not, would not, love. She was *not* her mother!

“When a wolf finds his true mate, the woman he’s meant to share his life with, shifter or otherwise, when they make love it cements their souls. We are more than just two people who slept together, regardless of how we ended up in that bed.” He reached out, his fingers drifting down her arm. “You are more to me than that. You have been since the moment I met you.”

She bit her tongue, not wanting to speak, afraid she’d tell him she understood. Because she did. She just couldn’t believe she’d somehow tied herself to him by sleeping with him. That *couldn’t* happen. Underneath everything, wolf or not, he was still a man. And she was a woman.

Yet, because he was a wolf, she feared something had happened between them. There was a suspicion that he was right. She’d never felt so consumed, so swept away by a lover in her life. And it shocked her that she wanted him, now, again. Wanted him touching her, pleasing her, kissing her.

Gripping the clothes in her fist, she drew air into tight lungs. “Rush,” she managed, her mouth feeling dry, while her body almost hummed with a renewed need. She had to push him away. She couldn’t look into those eyes and be cruel to him. He stopped her before she could speak.

Slowly, so slowly, his hand cupped her fist, covering her. “Kay, give it a chance.” She caught the cock of his grin when he told her, “This is new to me too, you know. This only happens once, if we’re lucky.”

Her eyes widened with disbelief and surprise. “No one divorces? Or dies?”

“Divorces? No.” He drew her hand closer, pinning her to his chest. “If one dies, the other can find a companion if they can, but there’s never a second mate. There’s only one shot at this.” His voice had dropped to a husky whisper, and she felt his

breath as he tipped, caressing her knuckle with his lip, the way he had before, in thought. What was going through his mind then? What was causing the dark clouds and shadows? No! She couldn't do it. She could not let this continue.

The hoarse echo of his voice filled her ears when he told her, "I never thought I wanted this. I wasn't even remotely looking, but now that I have you, I would split the earth to keep you."

She swallowed to hide the burning lump in her throat. Here she was a walking wreck and he was spouting eternal love. He was feeling pity, compassion, trust, and mistaking it all for more than attraction. She knew because she was having the same problem. She didn't ever let anyone this close. It wasn't safe.

Closing her eyes, she did the only thing she could do. She denied everything, and him. "Look, I can't tell you how grateful I am for how much you helped me."

He froze next to her. "Grateful? I don't want your gratitude."

She yanked on her hand, but he held firm. "What happened here is no more than a step out of time." Now in the light of day, there was a very surreal feeling to the days she'd spent on that bed, wrapped around his lupine body, or tucked into his human one. She shook her head to clear the images. How many people slept with wolves? *Kevin Costner, eat your heart out.*

"You're kidding?"

"Do I look like a woman who's kidding?" she shot back, glaring up at him. "You weren't looking, or expecting anything out of this. Neither was I. There is no bond. We had a connection of commonality, nothing more."

A hiss broke through his teeth, like he'd been hit or worse, hurt. She turned a deaf ear to it. She had to get out of that house. She had to get away from him before she succumbed to the pull of his gaze, the sexy taunt of his lips. Something she knew she could never do.

"You are the fem-alpha of this pack," he said, the tone direct and decisive. "You can run all you want, Kaisha, but that will never change or disappear."

She huffed impatiently. "I don't even know what that is! I can't turn wolf!" He needed to just stop! He wasn't doing himself any favors.

"It's not necessary." The words were firm, yet trying to be comforting and supportive.

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes. She was not like them, what "they" were. Kay was willing to bet her grandmother's emerald on how well a non-shifter fem would go over. She saw the way Zoe's family protected her, how they circled Sheridan when she'd told them she was bringing Rush home to heal. No one cared then that Kay was around, and they won't care now that she was gone. They wouldn't miss the dime-sized fem-alpha who never existed for them.

"I can't love you, Rush. It's time I went home." She couldn't make it any clearer than that.

Coldly, he released her hand, and stepped back. "Then go," he snapped, a diamond-hard, forbidding light in his eyes that she'd never seen. It sent a shiver screaming down her spine.

Surprised he didn't fight harder and confused as to why she wanted him to, she whirled for the bathroom to hide the tears she felt building. She knew it was for the best. This couldn't continue. They hardly knew each other. They'd hardly spoken in all the time they'd shared the same bed, the same room. For the duration, at least one had been incapable. Until last night.

Bracing herself on the sink, she sagged, sucking air in taut gasps, fighting the pain. It would end. *This is not real.* People don't meet and fall in love like this. *People nothing!* He wasn't even human in the real world.

Just one more reason she couldn't stay. She didn't belong with him. It would never work. She knew that from experience.

Swiping her eyes with a palm, she cleared the blur of her tears and landed on her reflection. *How could he fall in love with this?* The grimace of pain was more than her face fighting back, but she refused to say it was her heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Sheridan frowned at Rush. "How long are you going to stew over this?"

Couldn't she just quit asking? He ignored her looks, eating his dinner with quiet patience. It had been three weeks since he'd let Kay walk away from him. Three long, painful weeks of calling himself everything in the book.

"It's not me," he told her coolly. Spearing another piece of meat, he slowly chewed, refusing to let her see the deep agony he'd been living with since the slam of the front door the day Kay had turned her back on him. He wondered if she was fairing any better.

Snarling inwardly, he knew he shouldn't be thinking of her at all. Late at night though, when he was alone and felt the hunger of his soul, he did think of her. Couldn't avoid it. She'd grown into a specter that he couldn't shake.

"And you're going to let it stay like this?" she asked bluntly.

He tossed his fork down, leaning away from the table, and not bothering to hide his glare of annoyance at her prodding. "What am I supposed to do?"

Sheridan's eyes shone with sisterly love. "Rush, she wanted to help you. No one forced her to stay. She's the one who needs to learn how to be an alpha, not you. You're doing just fine on your own."

He swallowed the snort out of habit. He wasn't so sure. He'd let his woman walk out of his life with hardly a growl or argument. "She doesn't want to have anything to do with being alpha." *Or with me*, but he left that unsaid.

"Are you feeling it?" she asked gently.

God damn it, he hated when she sounded like their mother, sympathetic and understanding, because that wasn't sympathy in her eyes. He didn't have to ask what she meant. Long term separation wasn't easy to handle, typically for either, but Rush guessed if Kay hadn't complained, who was he to start?

He stabbed at his eyes with stiff fingers and rubbed. It didn't help.

"Go see her. Convince her. Court her. That's what you would have done if she'd stayed. Ease her into being the fem-alpha, let her find her way with you at her side and protecting her back. Nothing says you can't win her because she didn't stay. Usually that's the way it's done anyway, the courting *and then* the pissing off." She smirked at him knowingly.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I know I sprung it on her, but I didn't see the problem with it."

"Of course you didn't. You weren't the one having to completely uproot your life and create a new one with a shifter that she'd never known existed until you." That was a definite rebuke in her gaze now. He didn't wince, but he wanted to. How did his sister, his *younger* sister, manage to make him feel like he was the baby? Rush wasn't the one living in the land of denial, not now. Maybe in the beginning, but after what they'd shared? No, he knew what she was and knew he needed her. The problem was, she didn't need him.

Sheridan cleared her throat. "I've been putting this off because I was hoping..." She picked at the table with a fingernail. "Anyway, I'm moving out."

"What?" He shot straight in his chair. "Why?"

"Well, because you don't need me here anymore. I'm not leaving the pack, but you need your own place. Especially when Kay comes back."

He snarled under his breath. "She's not coming back."

"Uh huh," she murmured, her lips twitching with suppressed laughter. Rush refused to answer her. She left him at the table, glowering after her. Thinking. And wanting.

"Damn you, Sheridan," he whispered, dropping his head into his braced palms. Rubbing his eyes with the heels of stiff hands, the slowly building groans turned into impatient growls. By the time he rose from the table, there was only one choice to be made. If she wouldn't come to the mountain, the mountain would go to her. Even if he had to do it with her kicking and screaming, she was coming back with him. Where she belonged.

If Kaisha thought she was going to brush him off like a layer of dust, then she had another thing coming.

* * * *

Kay stood in the kitchen with Stacee, rinsing off the dinner dishes. Jonas had wandered into the living room to give the girls a couple minutes of privacy, which wasn't easy considering the living room, dining and kitchen were essentially one room.

"How are you holding up?" Stacee asked, toweling off an item or two.

Kay ran water methodically over a bowl in her hand then slid it into the dishwasher. "Fine," she answered. "Why?"

Stacee cut her a glance. "Because you've changed since your incident."

Kay's hands paused, her gaze glued to the water sluicing over her fingers. "What do you mean, changed?"

"You hardly smile. You don't laugh. It's like you're depressed, when usually nothing ever gets you down." Stacee rested a hip against the counter, her longer legs giving her quite the height advantage over Kay. "So, what is it? Are you worried about Steven?"

Kay shook her head. "No, since he was arrested again, his probation was broken." He was completely out of the picture. "I just never found out what the big deal was about me."

"Was he ever here with you?" she asked Kay, coming closer to keep her answer in confidence.

"Once or twice, picking me up for a date, but not overnight." Kay slid the upper shelf into the dishwasher and closed the door. She'd run it before bed.

"What about Rush? Have you heard from him?"

Kay blinked at Stacee's hopeful note. "No." Kay had made sure of that.

She ignored the apologetic sigh from her best friend. Stacee hadn't stopped beating herself up over having to leave her in the hands of a stranger. "He sounded

more trustworthy on the phone. I'm sorry I left you there to stay with him. If I'd known—"

"No," Kay cut her off. "It wasn't like that. He was a perfect gentleman." The most patient, understanding, compassionate man she'd ever known.

He just also happened to be a wolf shifter.

Kay bit her cheek to not say those words. She wasn't entirely sure she could, to be honest.

Gathering her courage, she whispered, "What if I told you he was an important person? Like a leader?"

"Really? Like politically?" Kay saw the way Stacee's eyes focused inward. "I could have sworn he told me he worked at the South Lake precinct as a detective."

Kay nodded, stilted. "He does, but that's not what I mean."

Stacee set the towel down, and Kay purposely shut off the water.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—" A knock interrupted her before she could let her mouth cause her trouble, which was probably a good thing. It would sound insane anyway. Sucking in a breath, she asked, "Jonas, could you get that? It's probably a newspaper salesman." They'd been canvassing again, pitching sales almost every weekend that month.

"Sure."

"Look," Kay said, focusing on Stacee again. "It just didn't work out, not that surprising. I was a victim that he took pity on."

"Honey, that wasn't pity in his voice when he all but begged me to take care of you himself. He had a reason."

Kay's chin dropped. Yeah, he had a reason all right.

The front door opened, and the one voice she hadn't heard, yet had craved for weeks, sharp and snarled, carried all through the apartment.

"You have exactly ten seconds to tell me what the fuck you're doing in my woman's den!"

Kay whirled and gasped. "Rush!"

Oh, God, he looked good. Good and pissed. And good enough to eat.

Stacee hopped out of the kitchen to stand with Jonas. That was when Kay noticed how tense both men were. Rush had a fist already curling, and Jonas looked ready to receive and return the volley. Angry heat glittered in Rush's eyes. She had to do something to diffuse this. She'd never seen Rush or Jonas behave like this.

She took a step on the linoleum. "Rush? What are you doing here?"

His gaze flashed, flickering over to her. "Who is he?" he coldly demanded with a stony glare.

"Jonas," Stacee said, with a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, honey." Kay watched as Stacee not only laid claim to the man at her side, but he seemed to relax and calm under her gentle touch.

He turned and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Sorry. It's reaction."

"I know," she purred with a smile that could melt even the most hardened heart. She turned and smiled at Rush. "Hi. You must be Rush. I'd offer to shake your hand, but until you're both calm, let's just not go there."

Kay was following this and trying like hell to not get lost between the three in her own apartment. Why was she talking like that? What did she mean?

"You're...?" Rush's gaze flicked over them. "Stacee?"

"Yes, and this is Jonas."

Dawning reality had him looking around at everything else for several seconds, until he scrubbed a hand down his face.

"Damn it," he muttered. "It was just a shock."

"Come in," Stacee said, not even bothering to ask if Kay was okay with it. Rush stepped in and Stacee closed the door. Jonas took a step back as well.

Kay's chin came up, stung by his curtness. "What? I'm not allowed to have friends over?"

"It's not that." He hadn't come near her yet, and her whole body ached. After so long without him, he was too far away. "Having the door opened... Finding him..."

His voice trailed off, and he looked uncomfortable, like he knew he was digging himself deeper.

Kay swallowed. "Look, Rush, whatever you have to say –"

His blue hazel eyes glistened, making her heart pound. "Stop. You got to do all the talking last time. My turn." He cleared the distance between them, a long jean-covered stride that ate up the steps in nothing flat. "You could have told me your best friend is mated to a shifter, baby."

"What?" Kay's eyes popped wide. Whipping around to look at them, there was no difference that she could see. They looked the same, for as long as she'd known them.

"She didn't know, Rush," Stacee informed him. Both looked toward the other couple and saw that Jonas had wrapped a hand around Stacee's waist, her head on his shoulder. A complete couple.

Kay rubbed her eyes. "Wait. A. Damn. Minute." She blew out a breath. "Jonas?"

"Yeah?"

"Whose pack?" she asked, determined to get to the bottom of this.

"Cougar Nall's."

Rush nodded his head. "He was a friend of my dad's when he was alive."

"Are you Rush Donovan? Alpha Donovan?" Jonas asked with a new respect.

"Yes." Rush's voice had calmed, smoothed, but still held a rough edge, like something darker, stronger lay just underneath the cool exterior. His chin was up, his back straight even though he was relaxed; he was prepared for anything. Kay was seeing his alpha side in person. Her next indrawn breath was staggered with a mix of emotions.

He stood like a man in charge, like the man she'd seen at the coffee shop who had faced down Steven with nothing more than a few words and a stare. Like a man who would spend an entire night tracking a missing girl and risk his life for any of his pack, for any of his family.

There was strength, patience and so much loving tenderness. She wanted to sink into the floor as she acknowledged she'd been a royal bitch. And not the regal kind, either. Running scared, overwhelmed and insecure with so much to try to understand. She still didn't, but she knew he deserved an apology. Being scared didn't give her the right to be cruel.

"God, Rush, I'm so sorry."

"No, shh. Let me." He pressed a tender finger to her lips, his gaze once more on her. "I didn't do one thing right. You make me feel out of control, wild in ways that scared the shit out of me."

Kay saw the other couple move, but stopped them. "Don't go," she asked quietly.

"If you're sure?" Jonas asked, looking at her and Rush both.

"Stay," he added. "I don't want to take her away from her friends because of this."

Jonas nodded, and he and Stacey stood to the side in silent support of her. The breadth of Rush's shoulders rose and rolled as he faced her again.

Rush lifted her chin with a finger. "Kay, I love you. I don't want to lose you. You won't be alone as the fem-alpha."

"But I'm not like you," she whispered, feeling whipped and shredded, her emotions scattered and difficult to define. With him there, standing in front of her again... Her heart raced like a horse on the run. All the wanting she'd denied reared up and stared her in the eye.

"You don't have to be." Glancing up, he turned toward Jonas. "Stacey, you're human."

"Completely."

"Was finding out the truth a shock?"

Jonas smirked, and the glance he shared with Stacey filled with a memory they'll never forget. "She fainted."

Kay gasped, stunned. "She doesn't faint."

"I did," she confirmed, giggling behind her hand.

"Kay." Rush's voice caressed her ears. "I should have let you decide. I took that away from you, and I didn't mean to. Every time I came to grips with something, I just moved on, never thinking about how it would affect you or if it would even matter." Leaning down, he touched his forehead to hers. "It was a lot to take in. I'm sorry. I was the inconsiderate jerk in this."

"You were only helping me. I was a wreck the whole week. How?"

He lifted a hand and wound her hair over her ear, leaving a tingling trail beneath his fingertips. "Because to me you're simply perfect. There's no explanation that could really describe it," he replied softly.

Subconsciously, she lifted a hand to her face. "But..."

He fisted over her hand, stopping her, twining his fingers through hers. "I knew you before that happened, and you were beautiful to me. You are beautiful." He brought her hand to his mouth, brushing a tender kiss to her skin. "And I think you're wrong. You are the perfect mate for an alpha. What you did and faced, with nothing but near-strangers with you at the time, took courage. Kaisha Noelles is an alpha, a strong one that I would be proud to know stood at my side."

Hanging on his every word, his declaration brought a burst of heat to her cheeks.

"Give us, this, a chance," he whispered, nuzzling with his lip against the hand he held. "I'll be more patient. I promise. I need you Kay."

Kay barely blinked, completely captured by his gaze and his words. The soft tap of the front door closing dragged her focus to the living room. They were alone.

"They left." The sound of her voice sounded loud in the quiet of the apartment. Even the beating of her heart seemed to echo with a heavy, nervous tattoo.

"Do you want me to?" he asked her, his gaze and voice utterly serious.

She drew a breath, trying to still her trembling legs. "No." His touch was sending shooting heat up her arms.

Studying his face, she wondered if they were putting it all on the table. Was this the deciding moment to their future? She lowered her eyes, watching the tender slide of

his lip over her hand, his breath warming her and making her heart race and leap inside her chest. At the least, she owed him a full apology and explanation to her behavior.

It was just going to be one of the hardest apologies of her life.

Chapter Fourteen

“Rush?” She whispered his name, mesmerized by the back and forth of his mouth hovering over her hand. “It wasn’t just you. I’m sorry.”

“I tried to push you into something, rush you into it, even.”

Steeling herself, preparing to expose her darkest secret, she told him, “Do you know why I wasn’t hurt when Steven broke up with me?”

He froze, but he was listening. “Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t let myself care for him. I haven’t been in a long-term relationship since I was twenty-three. At most, I dated for six months then moved on. The guys I met weren’t looking for anything deeper, either. We all knew it. Someone to go to movies, to hit a club or two. I rarely saw any guy more than three times,” she admitted. Not sleeping with them usually precluded a lot of interest on their part. She couldn’t look up, didn’t want to see the disappointment in his eyes as she bared her soul to him.

“Since I was nine, maybe younger to be honest, my mother would leave me in the care of her friends and sisters while she went out, and I don’t mean it was just for a few hours or even overnight. Sometimes it was for days.” Kay was surprised she was able to tell him about her childhood without breaking down, without letting the years of pain leak through. “I didn’t suffer through a lifetime of ‘uncles’, but I did have to accept my mother’s selfish nature and her incapability of loving long term. Me included.”

“Kay,” he whispered.

She fought the tender understanding in his gaze, in his touch. She needed to say this, just once. “No, this is important.” He threaded his free hand through her hair comforting her, massaging her, but didn’t say another word.

“In many ways, I’m like her except I don’t have a child, and I never lead my flavor of the month falsely, dropping them unexpectedly when I felt I wasn’t receiving

something I felt I needed or thought I could do better with the next man to cross my path. I don't go out of my way looking for affection or love. I go out of my way to avoid it. When you said we'd bonded, I felt trapped. Utterly and irrevocably. I don't understand it," she said, her voice thickening as she got to the really hard truths. "But I've been miserable without you. I think if you hadn't shown up tonight, Stacee would have either suggested I find you or she was going to do it for us."

Rush's jaw flexed just above her line of sight, and she was sure that sexy quirk of his lips had appeared. She couldn't raise her vision any higher than the joined hands in front of her, her shame keeping her from looking into the eyes that she knew saw right through her. Swallowing, she finished. "I don't understand any of this."

"That is my fault. I haven't been fair to you. Every time I came to terms with something, I became distracted and by the time I had the chance to think clearly enough to talk to you about it, the moment was gone and something else had moved into its place."

The scent of his skin filled her senses when he leaned down to rest against her forehead again. Husky and deep, his voice reached out to her. "I've been miserable, too. It's been hell without you."

Her gaze flew to his eyes, drawn like a moth to a flame, wanting the truth and it was there, bared for her. She saw the tiredness in the dull gleam of his blue eyes, the lines in the corners that hadn't been there before. His skin was warm when she lifted her fingers to caress those tell-tale signs. "You haven't been sleeping."

"Have you?" he asked right back.

"Not well." A giddy sensation blossomed in her chest, warm and small, just a nugget, but it was there.

"I won't lie to you, Kay. The bond is there. It's unbreakable in our world." Leaning closer until his cheek fit next to hers and she could feel each breath on her skin, he said, "I can't, I wouldn't, take it back. You may not believe it yet, but I love you. I have since I woke up with you in my arms and knew you had been there all along with me. You accepted me when I've never wanted anyone else to even try. No, it's not how

I would have had it happen between us, but it did." He brushed a feathery finger across her lips, ramming at her barriers with gentle persuasion. "And I'm not going to let someone else watch over the greatest treasure I've ever received. Don't live with that fear between us. I need you too much."

Glancing away, she blinked to hide the fresh dampness in her eyes. "You've got a way with words," she teased, trying to hide the depth of her reaction from him. It all sounded so wonderful; it was just taking time for her heart and mind to both agree to believe in them.

"Let go," he breathed. "Let go and love me." Then his lips touched her temple and her eyes fluttered shut.

A light tug brought her flush to his body, and she couldn't stop herself from melting straight through. The lean length of him pressed to hers, his thighs solid against hers. With her free hand, she braced herself on his chest, surprised to feel the ripple of skin and muscle beneath her fingertips. He sighed.

"Yes, princess. Touch me. God, I missed you."

The nickname sent a shot of hunger clear down to her toes. The princess she'd envisioned had been a protection, an untouchable wall to separate herself from the world and the hurt surrounding her life. A barrier that kept the world at bay because princesses weren't approachable, were detached from reality. The way he said it though, the husky rumble, made the nickname sound precious, treasured. Protected.

The gentle pressure of his hand on her back guided her closer, and her hand slid upward, caressing his shoulder. The cotton of his shirt smelled like him and she couldn't resist rubbing her cheek over him to absorb all of him at once. She'd missed him so much. The scent of his skin, the heat of his body, the tenderness in his touch. She sighed quietly, too content to move for several minutes.

With the hand in her hair, he tipped her up to him. The depth of longing and wanting in his gaze stole her breath. He hid nothing from her. Not how much he desired her or needed her, or how much he craved her physically. The steel hardness of his length jutted into her through his jeans in an adamant statement of longing.

"I want you, Kay, but I won't ask for more unless you can honestly tell me you can give me a chance. I can give you the time you need to understand this, but it won't stop me from wanting you."

Gazing up at him into the flecked blue of his eyes, she felt a chink against her heart. A large crack was the result. "You mean it?"

A gentle kiss to her mouth had her sighing. "Completely. I want to court you the way I should have from the beginning. Circumstances being what they were, I never got to really show you much. We kind of jumped right to the middle and the end." He teased her with that smile of his, warm and heady. He slipped from her mouth to lick at the corner of her lips. "You taste so good. I've dreamed of kissing you."

Aches were spiraling, slowly coiling her body tighter with need and desire.

Tucked against her neck, he drew a slow breath, his tongue flicking against her pulse, and she shivered. "Did I ever tell you a wolf has a heightened sense of smell?"

"N-No." She gasped as he continued to tease the one spot that had remained sensitive even when everything else had healed.

"I can smell how much you want me, princess," he told her, his rich voice slipping into her blood stream. "I can find your arousal on your skin, taste it, and it's driving me insane with wanting you."

The thickened roll of his voice sent shivers down her body in a constant shower, increasing her own desire with every kiss, touch, breath. A dampness she couldn't control built and her pussy clenched. Her body thrummed like a taut wire being plucked as his fingers caressed and danced up and down her spine.

Something between a growl and a groan grew between them as he shuddered against her body. Slowly, as though she was fragile and he feared breaking her, he straightened.

"Kay."

She followed the slow movement of his throat as he swallowed. The dull tiredness she'd seen in his eyes was gone. Now they almost burned with his desire. Tension radiated outward. Control hardened his entire length. "I need to leave. I won't

force you back into my bed, and right now the only thing keeping me from ravishing that body for hours is a very thin thread of control."

Her fingers dug into his waist, her legs having turned to water ages ago. "Rush," she whimpered, "I've never felt this before." She closed her eyes as another wave made her body hum harder.

"Does it scare you?" Something softened in his expression, his tone washing over her with a blanket of understanding.

"A little, but I want it. I want you." Her eyes widened at the open admittance of her own needs. A heat that had nothing to do with wanting flooded her cheeks.

"Baby," he breathed, dipping to capture another kiss. "This is normal." He moved to whisper into her ear. "This *hunger*," he growled. Reaching for a hand, he cupped her and slid her palm over his pulsating cock. She licked her lips, unable to deny what he was doing to her. "This is only for you. No one else, ever again."

Her eyes sank shut and dots rose up in a swarm in front of her vision. Heat and scents flooded her, sweat coated her body and somewhere inside, a part of her cried out for him. Stubbornly refusing to put a voice to it out of fear made the dots glow and spin. She swayed, and he caught her.

With a single movement, he scooped her up and cradled her. He buried his nose against her throat as though unable to get enough of any part of her. Gently, he stretched her on her bed then stood. "Better?" he asked. She hardly recognized his voice. She couldn't find hers to answer him.

She didn't know how long she lay there, her world completely distorted as her body and her mind collided. One was filled with a gnawing need that cried for fulfillment, the other screaming with dire terror at what was happening and fearing every step of it.

At some point, she felt his hand holding hers, his thumb brushing over her as he'd done so many times in the past. Time flickered through her mind, knowing it was passing, but no concept of how long.

Eventually she whispered his name without opening her eyes, frightened that she would be alone now. She never wanted to be alone again.

"I'm here, princess." His weight moved on the bed and she turned toward that voice. Opening her eyes to the shadowy quiet of her bedroom, she found him laying along her length beside her, not touching, merely holding himself up with a palm to watch over her. Protecting her. Loving her.

Finding him there, that crack in her heart shattered completely apart.

The wrenched cry she made was soul shattering. Without an ounce of restraint, she threw herself into his hard body. He caught her, rolling beneath her. "Don't ever leave me. Don't ever let me be stupid like this again."

"Never baby," he agreed, nuzzling her, his arms wrapped around her body, cradling her into his chest. "You can do anything, think anything, but this will never end. I love you."

He dropped butterfly kisses over her face and down her neck, his breath sweeping through her hair in hot bursts with every caress.

Lying across his broad chest, one leg draped between his thighs, the hard press of his erection thickened beneath her weight. The solid pound of his heart thudded against her breast where she pressed into him.

"Rush?"

"Hm?" he answered, apparently very engrossed in his current mission of kissing every exposed inch within reach.

"I can. I want this. I want us," she whispered, tilting to feel the spark of his lips strike against her skin.

The kisses stopped, and he dropped back down to the pillow. "Do you love me?" he asked.

She blinked into the shadowy stillness of her bedroom, taking her time to really think about his question, to not lie, which was her first reflex, and not push him away. He deserved the truth, and an honest answer was the only way. The clock on her

bedside table said it was just after midnight. Lowering her eyes, she picked at the hem of his sleeve between her fingers.

Did she love him? She thought she could, felt herself longing for something that she'd never come close to experiencing or wanting. Rolling to look into his eyes, her worries seemed lighter, maybe even easier to handle because she wouldn't be doing any of this alone. Lifting a hand, she traced his mouth with a finger. He gently kissed the tip, not demanding more, though she could see the lingering desire in his eyes, just waiting for the moment to flare to life again.

"I think I do," she whispered. "It still scares me."

Another kiss to her fingers. "I know it does, princess. I'll do whatever it takes to be here for you."

She let her lashes drop, lost in the sea of tossed emotions crashing over her. "Rush?"

"Yes?"

"Love me." Two words, so achingly quiet, and her own heartbeat drowned them out of her ears.

Chapter Fifteen

“Kaisha,” he whispered, a groan that flitted like a sparrow between them. The lightest pressure of his fingers lifted her when he twisted his fingers into her hair to play with the length. “Never hide from me. If you want something, tell me. If you’re mad at me, scream then tell me why, but please, never hide from me.” He caressed her lips with his own with aching slowness, seducing her with his tongue.

“I don’t know how to do this, Rush,” she admitted. He kept her from turning away again.

“We’ll both find our way.”

His body heat enveloped her, and she felt truly, entirely safe.

Kay rose over him on her palms to see him better. The banked desire in his eyes was only a hint of what she knew he felt, and he was studying her as closely as she was him. The shadows that played around the room liked his features, the broader cheekbones and thick hair, giving him a mysterious aura. It was a stark reminder that there was more to him, to any person, than she’d given him credit for. Replaying the week they’d spent together in forced seclusion and mutual care, she knew she’d done more than shortchanged him. She’d been so intent on running first, far and fast that she’d blinded herself to what was really between them.

God help her, she was falling for him. Stroking his cheek with her palm, the rough bite of his beard shocked her nerves, making her tremble. Holding herself above him, she found his lips, kissing him the way she’d craved since he walked in the door. The sizzle of his fingers in her hair made her nerves stand on end. The masculine strength of his kiss was gentle, accepting, letting her find her way.

Allowing her go at her own pace, she traced his lip, sipping lightly on the full bottom one, loving their heat. A hot burst bathed her lips when she found his flesh between small teeth and nipped down on him.

An appreciative sound filled his throat, urging her for more. Holding his head between her hands, chest to chest, she covered his mouth, claiming him with her kiss, thrusting and dueling with lustful energy against his tongue. The entire length of his body beneath her grew taut, his cock pulsing through two layers of denim to burn her flesh. Instinctively, she rubbed up and down his body, purring with pleasure as her body heated and longing filled her.

The fingers in her hair massaged her while his other slid south to cup her ass. A firm squeeze made her groan. She loved the feeling of his hand cupping her body. Lava began to fill her veins.

Breaking away from her, he dropped kisses along her jaw, licking with abandon. "Sexy," he breathed.

With the strength of his hand on her ass, he guided her to straddle his hips, seating her directly over his cock.

"Oh." He groaned, his eyes closing in bliss. "Shit, Kay."

Harsh breaths made his chest rise and fall in quick patterns.

Trailing her hands down his chest, she purposely dragged her nails over his nipples, feeling the way they formed into hard little bullets. The hand in her hair slipped loose. He was at her mercy.

"I want you to strip for me," she told him.

Like he was drugged his eyes opened slowly. "And then what?"

"Guess you'll just have to find out," she said with a coquettish tilt of her chin and a smile. To tease him, she rocked back and forth over the bulge between her thighs and his head snapped back again. He was completely turned on and letting her run the show. It was a heady feeling. This was more than sex. More than anything she'd ever experienced.

Leaning forward, she flicked his ear. "Or you can just stay like this and I can leave you hurting."

"N-No," he gasped, shuddering beneath her weight because she'd captured one of his earlobes and given it a solid tug.

Sliding off his body, he rolled to the side of the bed. She removed her sandals, jeans and blouse, leaving on her underwear and bra, watching him strip with teasing slowness in front of her.

Skin peeked at her, first his abdomen, solid and lightly tan, with the hinted trail of hair diving for his bellybutton and further. Not a lot, just enough hair to lure her body, fingers and tongue. She licked her lips, wanting to taste him.

The t-shirt fell to the floor then he undid his jeans, a button at a time. Her pulse ticked harder. The slow pace was killing her, but she was loving it too much to make him hurry.

Denim dropped with a quiet whoosh and he kicked them off with his sneakers, his socks disappearing at the same time. Unbidden, or maybe uncontrollably, her gaze rose and stuck on the cock before her. She hadn't really taken the time to appreciate him fully before. The smooth head topped a thick, reddened shaft, a drop of moisture sitting on the tip. Deep black curls covered his balls, and as she watched him, they twitched and tightened, the length of his arousal bobbing as though trying to get her attention. She licked her lips again. He had her attention. All of it.

That is mine, she thought with a giddiness that took her by surprise. She'd never once thought of any guy she'd slept with as hers, had never wanted one like this. She wanted all of Rush. Glancing up, she found his eyes darkened by lowered lids and knew he was thinking the same thing. It was written like large print all over his face. He wanted her and only her.

"Lay down on your back, like you were."

Leaning over, he dropped a single kiss on her mouth then complied, no argument, no demanding to know why.

His absolute trust in her actions stole into her heart, mending another wound that had been long buried.

Lying like a sacrifice on top of her bed, he was gorgeous. "I'm all yours, baby."

Kay glided to the end of the bed, one hand curving over his leg. Rough hair slid under her palm as she worked her way upward. Kneeling between his legs, she

alternated licking, kissing and caressing up his body. His body hardened and shuddered in intervals, especially as she got closer and closer to the shaft standing proud and hungry for her.

"Remember what you said about taste?" she asked him on a throaty sigh. A single-syllable groan was his answer. "You taste like the outdoors on the wind." Heated leaves and sweet earth. A musk that was all his. Licking his inner thigh, she decided she couldn't get enough of it.

Fists bunched the blankets at his waist. "Kay," he moaned. Leg muscles clenched and loosened with each lap of her tongue.

"What?" she asked him innocently, not lifting from her purpose.

"Want you," he gasped. She blew her breath across his groin, and he pulsed in answer. He was beautiful, thick and slick as satin with a steel center that created a heated vortex of need, making her pussy flutter with want.

She nipped at his thigh, her teeth grasping but not bruising. "What do I have to do to mark you?" she asked him. It was a leap to assume it went both ways, or that as a non-shifter, she would have the ability. It was also a leap into the unknown, a step of permanency that she hadn't thought she would want, but when speaking the words, she realized she wanted it all.

When he didn't answer for a long stretched minute, she wasn't so confident when she said, "Do I get to?"

He sat up, his expression unreadable. "Kaisha? That's a big step. I shouldn't have mark —"

"Never mind," she mumbled, sorry she'd brought it up. Spontaneity sucked.

"Baby, no. Don't do that." He lifted her by the chin to peer into her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that. I rushed you. I want your mark." He slashed stiff fingers through his hair. "Fuck, you don't know how much I want it."

"Is it something I can do?" She couldn't meet his gaze, fighting to hide the trembling she felt building. *Bad idea; it was just a bad idea.*

"Yes," he said, holding her face in his palm. Leaning forward, he captured her mouth. "Yes, Kay, I want your mark. Find a pressure point and bite down. You don't have to break the skin, just teeth marks. The rest happens between us naturally." Cautiously, she met his gaze. "But remember, once you do, you've given yourself to me. Right now it's only half done, giving us both time."

"What happens if I complete it?" She swallowed, listening.

"We are permanent. You remember how miserable you were without me?" She nodded into his palm. "Multiply it by about twenty. Long separations are next to impossible. I would need at least your voice."

"So, if I complete it, now, tonight, I have to move in with you?" Her heart stuttered then jolted back to life. The idea terrified her stiff, but the promise of what could come between them gave her just a smidge of strength to not turn away from the idea completely.

He nodded. "Think long and hard on it, baby. I can wait." Then with the sweetest kiss, he covered her lips, seducing her down to a molten molecule. "Now, please, finish what you started. I'm dying."

She giggled, the tension of her outburst suggestion dissipating with his wicked grin, showing her how much he desired her.

* * * *

Rush blinked to stop the swirling stars over his eyes. His body was on fire. His heart was racing, pounding to escape his ribs.

Kay wanted to finish the bonding, wanted to mark him. It was killing him to be rational about it. He wanted to scream to the rooftops, *Yes!* He was in shock that she'd come to the conclusion herself that it was a shared intimacy. The urge to push her into it, to have what was his, was blinding. Fighting it was killing him, but he wouldn't force her. He'd made a promise to her. He was thankful that she'd come this far. The fear that he'd lost her forever had been stone cold real until he'd come here tonight.

The finger-light stroke of her against his thigh snapped his head back and slammed his thoughts to a dead stop. Every inch of his body ached for her, burned for her touch. Warm breath surrounded his cock, and his spine shot straight. Her tongue twirled over the head like an ice cream cone, and he knew his eyes crossed.

Taking a deep breath, he cracked open his eyes and lifted his head to see her, to watch that succulent mouth devour him. "Oh, God, Kay." He moaned and hefted himself up on his elbows, clutching at the blanket to restrain his hands. Slim fingers wrapped around him, and his neck went slack with blissful pleasure. Low grunts were all he was capable of as she squeezed and sucked on him in rhythm.

Just as good as he imagined and so much more. Her tongue was a wicked tool, sliding around and over his flesh. He pulsed and thrust with little bumps of his hips, unable not to try to reach for more. When she pulled her hair out of her way, he almost lost it. The way her mouth captured him was erotic as hell.

There was a tentative stroke then her fingers fondled his sac, and he collapsed to the bed, boneless but harder than he'd ever been in his life. "Kay! I'm going to come!"

That seemed to only excite her more, and she doubled the pace of her driving mouth, sliding up and down his shaft like an overheated piston. He couldn't stop her, and he was helpless, so deliciously helpless.

The burn built, starting at the base of his skull. His body found her rhythm, meeting her with solid thrusts into the cavern of her mouth. Pleasure grew like a fireball, spinning wildly, rolling down his spine for her mouth. Ecstasy he'd never experienced set his nerves ablaze. All he could do was take her sweet punishment.

With a roar, the fireball hit his groin, exploding with bursts of pleasure that stole his breath as he pulsed his seed into her mouth. She took every thrust, every throbbing spurt until she'd licked him clean.

Gasping, he lay like a depleted balloon, empty and limp. Harsh breathing was the only sound in the room as tingles surged then faded down his limbs. With lithe movements, she shimmied up his body, dropping a light kiss on his chest then his cheek.

Turning, he found her mouth and kissed her hard. Thrusting his tongue into her sweetness, finding a hint of salt from his own orgasm, he didn't care. The only thing he wanted was her. "Amazing," he told her, his hand finding the will to wrap over her side as she snuggled into him. He nuzzled against her, completely content.

"Don't worry, baby," he told her a few moments later when he could formulate complete sentences again. "That is only the beginning. You're not even naked yet."

"Oh?" she asked sweetly, turning that coy grin up to him. "You gonna do something about that?"

"Sooner than you think," he warned. Before she saw it coming, he tossed her off his shoulder and pinned her to the bed. Showing his teeth in a feral grin, he told her, "My turn."

"Oh, no! The big bad wolf is going to eat me," she cried in woeful theatrics.

"I think eating you is only going to be the first course," he replied, heat surging through his frame like an electrical current gone crazy. "Sexy as sin in lace." He knew he was going to enjoy unwrapping her over and over.

Lowering for a kiss, he said, "I love you, Kay."

She cupped his face holding him above her. He could see it in her eyes. It was there, but instead of pushing for it, he simply kissed her and loved her. All night long.

Epilogue

Rush walked from the bathroom with a towel slung over his hips, finding the petite beauty waiting for him on the bed. Three months. He didn't know how he lasted through the waiting without exploding with impatience, but he had and now Kay sat on his bed, completely moved in and taking her place as the fem-alpha. Knowing she had expected contention from the pack because she wasn't a shifter, her ease of stepping into the roll was amplified when several of the couples welcomed her with open arms.

Sheridan had been her staunchest supporter, paving the way to introduce Kay. She had won over Rush's sister hands down when she'd stayed by his side while he healed. He had no idea what the two women talked about during those four days, and didn't want to know how many childhood secrets were divulged. Sheridan had found a new home of her own closer to the college last month, but was still close enough to harass her brother. Having her remain as his second, close, meant the world to him. The tight community of the pack was doing good things for Kay, too. He'd always known their support and always had family on some level. Kay's experiences had made her wary, but that was slowly changing, for the better, for the both of them.

She hadn't mentioned the marking again, and he wasn't going to push her. It wasn't a small gift or a returnable piece of clothing. The mark was forever. Leaning on his shoulder on the door, he believed he understood his mother better now, too. He'd never connected the strain of loss to the reasoning behind her death. More than likely, her passing hadn't even been a real choice. He promised to do better with Kay, and with Sheridan in the future, now that he had a better understanding after living through some of this himself. He wouldn't trade a minute of it, either.

"What are you smiling at?" she asked him, those gray eyes of hers teasing him from beneath a wealth of lashes.

"Just the most beautiful woman in the world," he replied, meaning it.

“Really?” She whirled on the bed. “Where is she? Maybe I can get some fashion tips.”

He launched from the door and pinned her to the bed amid a cacophony of giggles.

Burying his nose into the creamy softness of her shoulder, he wrapped his arms around her and hung on tight. Rolling, they stopped on their sides facing each other.

“Rush,” she said, with the sound of his name tugging his engrossed gaze up rather than following his meandering fingers on the tips of her breasts. Her nipples poked like pebbles beneath her nightshirt. Tight little pebbles that he wanted to suck and nibble like hard candy.

“Hm?”

“I want to complete it.”

His hand froze as he locked on her gaze. He didn’t pretend that he misunderstood. This was too important for those kinds of games.

“Now?”

Ducking her chin, she answered, “Well, tonight.”

“You’re positive?” His heart had lodged itself in his throat.

Nodding, she said, “I love you, Rush. It’s time I stepped up, too.” She smiled, her heartbreaking smile that made him feel like he was ten feet tall and bulletproof.

He blinked. “Wait. Did you say —”

Pressing light fingers to his lips and with laughter in her voice, she said, “Yes, I love you. I’ve known for a while, I think, but until I made up my mind about the mark, the significance wasn’t concrete. It wasn’t easy for me.”

With a hand tucked through her hair, he drew her forward until her forehead touched his. “I know, baby. I believed in us, and I’m glad to know you do, too. If you’re ready then, God, yes. Please.”

A flicker of unease dampened her gaze. “I guess this means we’re essentially married, then?” Her tongue sneaked out, trailing her lips. It was impossible to miss the hesitation and worry. It was written all over her face. Deep inside, he wanted to take

her back to her childhood and remove all the scars she carried. Unable to do that for her, he promised from that day forward to love her in ways she'd always been denied. To love her the way she was meant to be, adored and cherished for the wonderful, beautiful soul that was Kaisha.

"It will be all right. You don't have to do it yet. I want you to be perfectly okay, perfectly comfortable with what it means, sweetheart." He stroked her with his thumb, waiting. When she didn't retreat, he explained with a soothing burred rumble, "If we do complete it then yes, all we need is the legal paper for everyone else, but for you and me and any of our kind, you are taken."

She nodded, a comfortable silence filling the room. A dark eyebrow arched a moment later. "How do they know the difference? Stacee isn't a shifter, but she knew immediately."

Rush chuckled, having wondered when she'd remember that. "It's because she's bonded with Jonas. As easily as they can tell she's taken, she can recognize any of us."

"Wow," she murmured in quiet awe.

"Do you want a big wedding?" Knowing how she felt about the idea of matrimony, he didn't want anything left unspoken between them. He caressed her jaw with a thumb. He'd give her anything she wanted to keep her happy.

"No. Just Stacee and Jonas and your sister are fine."

"Not your mom?" He wasn't going to push. It was her choice. Kay hadn't gone out of her way to introduce them yet, but she had told her mother she was in a serious relationship. The reaction had been less than ecstatic. A little part of him wanted to cry for the neglect she'd lived through and still had to deal with. Though his parents were gone, he'd never been without the knowledge that they'd loved him and Sheridan endlessly.

She let out a sigh. "Honestly, I don't know. I'll think about it."

"Okay." He sipped at her lips. With a hand on her hip, he tugged her flush to his frame. "You know, it would be a shame to waste that."

"That what?" she asked, confused.

"This," he growled, palming her ass to let his erection nestle between her thighs. He thrust in even motions, sliding up and down the barrier of her panties.

"Ooh, that," she crooned, her come-and-get-me grin returning. "I had no intention of wasting that." She winked. Then Rush's head snapped back on his neck because she had wrapped her fingers around the base of his shaft beneath the towel. "Ditch the towel, if you dare."

He dared. The towel was gone in nothing flat, leaving his body exposed for her pleasure, and his.

Seconds later she was as naked as he was, her pert breasts peaked with beautifully rosy nipples. He loved her body, loved everything about her. Trailing her trim length with his fingers, he stopped when he reached the heated essence of her pussy.

"Did you do something different?" The full nest of hair that he enjoyed playing with felt...shorter.

"I trimmed. Do you like it?" She bit her bottom lip, waiting for his answer.

Inching down her body, she spread her thighs, his fingers drifting over the edges of her labia so he could explore. "I love it."

"I almost decided on a full wax, but wanted to do a test first."

His breath hitched hard. He'd die if she did a wax. There was little left to say about how much he liked the new style when licking her juice off her skin seemed to say so much more.

She groaned, her hips rising to find more of him as he dipped and suckled at sensitive skin. Playing and stabbing at her clit made her writhe and moan wildly, her scent soaking into his senses with each inhale. He couldn't picture anything better than her lost in the pleasure he gave her. Thrusting deep with his tongue, Rush stroked her into her orgasm, continually amazed at how sensitive her body was to his touch. Licking her with slow swipes to feel her quiver beneath him, he then covered her smaller frame, resting for her to catch her breath.

“Rush,” she moaned, pulling him closer. Gently, he speared her body, filling her inch by delicious inch. In moments, they’d found that perfect rhythm, her heat enveloping his cock as he drove her closer and closer to the edge.

Following the urging of her fingers, he wrapped his hands beneath her body and drove into her harder, deeper.

Her whimpers turned into full-throttle cries of ecstasy in seconds. His own orgasm was quickly barreling down on him. Heat and electricity swarmed through his blood like a lightning storm, striking with random explosions of ecstasy. Then, without warning, pain and pleasure ignited on his shoulder and he arched, stiffening as Kay completed the bonding. For a split second, his world went red then black as their souls merged completely. Nothing prepared him for the euphoria of knowing she was his, of her claiming him as her own. Driving into her softness, into her embrace, the nova that swept over him melted him from the inside out with love for her. Together, they shared his orgasmic high, carrying her with him as they both tumbled over the edge.

His heart screamed, ready to burst from his chest, and he finally remembered to breathe, shudders rocking his body as she clenched around him, around his shoulders, trying to absorb him in every way imaginable.

“I love you,” she whispered, her lips caressing the shell of his ear, sending another shocked shudder down his body. He’d never tire of hearing those words in her voice.

“I love you too, princess.” A contented sigh flowed over his flushed skin, and she snuggled in tighter beneath his shoulder. Wrapped in her arms, he drew her sweetness into his body, looking forward to doing the exact same thing for the rest of his life.

The End

About the Author

Diana DeRicci is the sexy, flirty pen name of Diana Castilleja. A romance author at heart, DeRicci's writing takes you into a saucier spectrum of sensuality and sexual adventure, where a happily-ever-after is still the key to any story. Diana lives in Central Texas with her husband, one son and a feisty little Chihuahua named Rascal. You can catch the latest news on all of Diana DeRicci's writing and books on her website Listed above. Feel free to drop Diana an email. She'd love to hear from you.

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