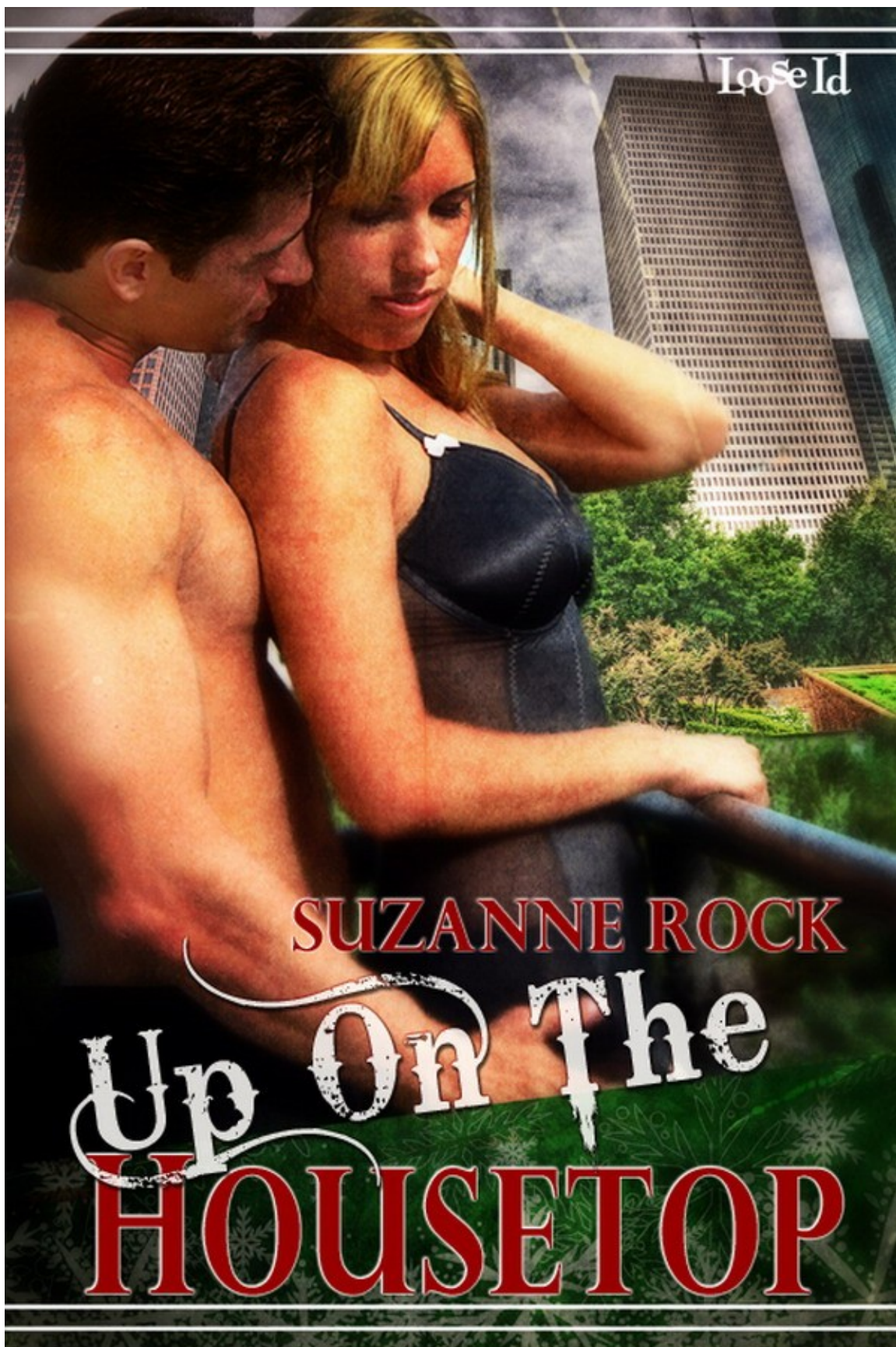




Loose Id

SUZANNE ROCK

Up On The  
HOUSETOP

# *Up On the Housetop*

*Suzanne Rock*



## **Up On the Housetop**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** Shape-shifter Paranormal

Desperate to escape her controlling family, Chloe Bradford scrambles up to the housetop of her Texas home on Christmas Eve. There she discovers a sexy stranger cloaked in shadow. He convinces her to shed her good-girl image and give in to her most secret desires. The man's low, raspy voice tugs at her memory as much as it awakens her passion. Is he a Christmas miracle, or some figment of her imagination? When he tries to leave, she follows him, eager to learn his identity.

Zach can't stop thinking about Chloe, or their reunion on the roof. His wolf-half urges him to reveal his identity and claim her, but he doesn't dare. For both their sakes, he must remain in the shadows until he can control his inner beast's bursts of rage. After a decade of struggle he thought he could handle his curse, but Chloe's presence causes his control to slip. As the moon-rages become more frequent, he knows he's slipping toward the insanity that claims many of his kind. Only Chloe can save him, but will she want to after he reveals his identity and the reason he broke her heart over a decade ago?

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.*

## Dedication

*For Barbara J Hancock, who, like me, belongs to “Team Jacob.”*

*For everyone at Embrace the Shadows. I couldn't ask for a better group to hang out with.*

*For my husband, who takes care of all of the little day-to-day stuff so I have time to write.*

## Chapter One

This time her father had gone too far.

Chloe Bradford threw open the window, grabbed the open bottle of Cristal, and walked out onto her third-floor bedroom balcony. After a few minutes of pitiful acrobatics and a long string of curses, she managed to pull herself up onto the roof. For some reason, the climb had seemed much easier when she was sixteen.

“Damn, my glass.” Chloe carefully placed the bottle down and climbed back into her bedroom.

“Where did it go?” She scanned the pink and white walls in disgust. Chloe had loved the color scheme back when her mother had picked it out. Then again, she'd been only eight at the time. Now, at thirty-two, it made her think of a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. When she'd gone off to college, she thought she'd never see this place again. She'd been wrong. Funny how some things come full circle.

Frowning, she crossed her arms in front of her chest. No glass. Maybe she left it downstairs. *Too bad*. She'd much rather drink from the bottle than go back down there and subject herself to that humiliation again. It was a “drink from the bottle” type of night, anyway.

She shimmied back out to her champagne on the roof. The Spanish-style mansion was like a lot of the other houses in the area. The roof was very flat and a nightmare during times of rain, but it was perfect for a teenager or two to get away from their parents for a few hours.

Or for a middle-aged woman to hide from a marriage proposal.

Chloe took a seat and placed her almost-full bottle next to her. It had been a long time since she'd come out here to wish on the stars and dream of her future.

Now she just wanted to escape it.

She sighed and held up the bottle of Cristal to the full moon hanging low in the sky. She wasn't much of a drinker and wasn't exactly a fan of champagne, but desperate times called for

desperate measures. After the huge fight, she just wanted to get out of there. She had grabbed the closest bottle and left her parents and boyfriend gaping in the dining room below.

She brought the champagne to her lips. The bubbly liquid tickled her throat as she gulped it down. What happened to her life?

When she was a little girl, she had dreamed of becoming a concert pianist. Her senior year in high school, she'd gotten accepted into a program at Juilliard. A few months later, she'd become engaged to her high school sweetheart. For a while it seemed like everything was going great.

Then, a semester before she was due to graduate, her life changed forever.

Chloe blinked back tears and took another sip of champagne.

Marcus, her older brother, and her fiancé, Zach, had gone backpacking in Montana. They never returned. A frenzied search turned up her brother's body but not Zach's. She shivered as she thought back to that day when they had heard the news. The autopsy revealed that Marcus was mauled by some large animal, a bear or a wolf or something. Zach's body was never found.

Marcus had been groomed to take over the family business and control the bulk of their inheritance. Chloe would receive a small stipend from the family coffers to live on, but she could otherwise do as she pleased. After that day, she was the sole heir to the Bradford family fortune. Now it was now up to her, not Marcus, to keep the business going when her father retired.

That meant no more school.

No more friends.

No more life.

She should've told her father to shove the inheritance, but Chloe loved her parents and knew they were grieving. She'd only intended to stay in Texas for a short time, but somehow she had ended up being her father's shadow for the past eleven years.

She took another sip of champagne and leaned back on her elbows. Clouds had moved in, hiding the stars and blanketing the moon. She remembered when she and Zach used to climb up here at night to have sex underneath the night sky. It had been so wonderful back then. Before her new responsibilities. Before Karl.

"Why did Karl have to propose tonight? On Christmas Eve?" she asked the moon.

It didn't answer.

Her father was behind the proposal; she knew it. They were all expecting her to say yes, but the words caught in her throat. She just couldn't.

She refused to spend the rest of her days as boring Mrs. Karl Radcliffe, heiress to the Bradford billions. Karl was nice enough, but there was no chemistry between them, at least not the type of chemistry she had shared with Zach. But Zach was gone, and it was her duty as daddy's girl to carry on the family name. At least with Karl, there was a warm body beside her at night. But she wanted more for her life. She wanted adventure, excitement.

Zach.

*Get over it, Chloe. It's time to move on.*

Accepting Karl's proposal was like giving up on the idea that Zach would return and free her from this miserable life. After a marriage to Karl, there would be no more going back. No more hope. No more dreaming of what could have been. The young, innocent, fun-loving Chloe would finally be dead.

"I wish I could escape this place." She stood and swayed slightly. "Escape my family." Tilting her head back and raising her arms, she shouted at the moon. "I don't want this life anymore, do you hear me? Take it back."

Silence.

"What's wrong with me?" Chloe dropped her arms and pushed her curly mop of hair from her face. "Why can't I just tell them to take the inheritance and shove it?"

She knew why. She was chicken. Her parents were the only family she had left. They'd been through so much with her brother's death, and she didn't want to add to their grief. "For once I wish I didn't have to do what was expected of me," she said to the moon. "I just want to be me."

Who was she, anyway? At one time she thought she knew. She was a dreamer, an artist, a lover. Now...

Now she was just going through the motions. Sighing, she took one last slug from the champagne bottle and tossed it over the side of the house.

As the bottle left her hand, guilt immediately took hold. Good girls didn't throw bottles of Cristal. Nor did they yell at the moon.

A giggle welled up in her throat, and she covered her mouth. She knew she would eventually have to marry boring Karl to appease her parents, but for tonight she'd pretend she was that hopeful teenager, and Zach was once again by her side.

*Wait a minute.*

Chloe frowned. No crash. If you throw a bottle of champagne over the edge of the house, you would expect it to crash when it hit the ground, right? She made her way over to the edge of the roof and peered down. It was so hard to see anything in the dark. Sinking to her hands and knees, she squinted into the darkness below.

There was movement, a shifting of shadow. Then...nothing.

"Who's there?" *And where's my Cristal?* She bent farther over the side of the house.

There it was again. Something was down there.

"Come out into the streetlight where I can see you."

She counted to ten, or maybe it was three. It was hard to tell in her present state. Still nothing happened.

"I know someone is down there. Show yourself."

The wind picked up, rustling the wind chimes on the front of the house. The unseasonably cool Texas night gave her a chill. She shivered and pulled the shawl her mother had made for her over her strapless blouse.

"Shouldn't you be with your family?"

Chloe jumped up and whirled around. A large, muscular figure stood on the rooftop behind her, just a few feet away. His hair hung loose around his shoulders, and the bottom of his open trench coat lifted slightly in the breeze. Shadows fell over his face, masking his identity. He tilted his head to the side, as if to study her.

*How did he get up here?*

Her eyes shifted to the large tree, looming behind him. *Okay, one question answered. Now for another one...*

"Who are you?"

“I think a more relevant question is: why are you out here on Christmas Eve when your family is having dinner inside?” His low voice sounded gravelly, as if he had a cold or sore throat, yet it seemed strangely familiar. The stranger took a step closer to the tree and deeper into the shadows.

“How did you know...?” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “What I do up here is my business. You're intruding.”

“You asked me to come up here.”

Chloe snorted and put her hands on her hips. “I did not.”

“You did. You said 'show yourself.'”

Oh yeah, she did say that, didn't she? “What are you doing out here? A late-night stroll?”

He chuckled. “You could say that.”

Chloe shifted her gaze down to the long, winding driveway below them. It led from the front steps, down around a sculpture her father had commissioned long ago, between two thin rows of trees, and stopped at the gate leading into the property.

Late-night stroll, her ass. Nobody got on or off this property unless it was approved. How did he get past the guards? “You must have gotten lost, then. This is private property, you know.”

He laughed again, a deep, rich laugh that sent tingles over her skin. “I see you haven't changed much.”

So, he knew her. The voice sounded familiar, but with the man's face in shadow, Chloe couldn't tell his identity.

He didn't mean her harm; she knew it instinctively. There was something about the way he spoke, the way he moved, that didn't seem threatening. Then again, maybe it was just the Cristal that made her less wary. She closed her eyes in concentration. *That voice...* It was rough and sensual, like silk sheets against bare skin. *So familiar...*

“Do you know my father?”

“You could say that, yes.” His voice caressed her ears, making her heart flutter. “I knew your whole family, once.”

“Ha! I knew it.” This man worked for her father. He'd probably been over to the house numerous times. It explained why he was in the driveway, how he knew her, and why the voice sounded so familiar. “So does my father know you are up on the roof with me?” She opened her eyes.

*Where did he go?*

A light breeze blew over her, ruffling her blonde curls. She spun around in a circle. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“No, Chloe. No joke.” The stranger's warm breath brushed against the back of her neck. She shivered as the faint mix of sandalwood and spice reached her nose.

She knew that smell. Chloe started to turn, but firm hands grabbed her shoulders and faced her forward again.

“I never thought I'd see you again,” the stranger whispered.

No, he wasn't a stranger. He knew her. *That voice...* If she could just clear the fog of Cristal in her brain, she just knew she'd be able to identify him.

“Who are you?” she asked again.

He tugged the shawl from her hands and let it drop between them. Desire filtered through her as he slid his fingertips down over her bare arms. “You feel even better than I remember.”

Chloe closed her eyes. Heat tickled underneath her skin where he touched. It shot straight to her core and burned between her legs.

“I have a confession to make.” The low, harsh voice rippled over her ears.

“Yes?”

He shifted behind her, pressing his hard chest up against her back. “I was hoping you would come home for Christmas.”

“I live here, so I'm around most of the time. Last week I was in Europe, checking up on my father's hotels, but I'm done with that now.” *Good Lord, stop babbling.* She couldn't help it. For the first time in her life, Chloe was excited, perhaps a little nervous. If that made her babble, so be it.

“I know,” the stranger said.

“You do?” Chloe shivered as he ran his hands over her hips. Need bubbled inside her, like water in a teapot. Hidden, yet turbulent and ready to spill over the edge.

“I’ve been watching you all week, Chloe, waiting for the right moment.”

“You could’ve seen me anytime.” Especially if he was one of her father’s employees. Maybe he was someone else, a guy from town? His name was there on the edges of her mind, just out of reach. There was something oddly familiar about this guy’s rough, sexy voice and wicked fingers.

He removed one hand from her hip and brushed the hair from her neck. “I don’t think visiting would’ve been wise.”

“Why not?” She gasped as his lips pressed against the sensitive skin between her neck and shoulder.

He straightened behind her, letting his fingers drop down to her hip. Silence stretched between them for one intense moment before he responded. “Your father doesn’t like me very much.”

“Yeah, well. He doesn’t like me very much right now either. So I guess we can both be in the doghouse together.”

“I’m sure you can think of a better place than a doghouse.” He reached around her front and laced his fingers with hers.

Heat surged in her core as the stranger guided her hands up to the moonlight.

“Such beautiful fingers,” he whispered. “Do you still play piano?”

This was one hell of a man, whoever he was. Chloe fought down the urge to wrap herself around him and purr like a cat. “No,” she said. Goodness, she hadn’t touched a piano since...forever.

“Pity.” He guided their hands around her middle and tugged her back into his hips. His hard cock pressed through their thin clothing and against her backside. “You played very well.”

His heat penetrated her Cristal-induced haze, muddling her thoughts. Chloe struggled to form a coherent thought. “How do you know me?”

He kissed her neck. The soft press of his lips sent a vibration of desire through her body, as if striking a piano chord. Pulling her hands from his grasp, she gripped his forearms and leaned on him for support.

“Do you really want to know?” Keeping his arms crossed over her middle, he stroked her hips.

Chloe nodded.

Making a *tsking* noise, he curled his fingers into her skirt, inching it up over her thighs. “Come now, Chloe. I know when you're lying.”

“I'm not lying.”

Her skirt bunched around her waist, exposing her thong and thigh-high tights. Her thoughts shattered as he ran his fingers up her thigh. Chloe groaned and closed her eyes as pleasure filtered through her body.

“Admit it. You're lying.” He nibbled her neck, making her gasp with pleasure. “You find this exciting.”

She did. There was something about his voice, his scent, something about *him*, that made her feel safe, loved. “Yeah, I do.”

He ran his hand down her leg. “Then open up for me, Chloe, and let yourself go. Show me the real you.”

## Chapter Two

*Let herself go.* Could Chloe do as he asked? Did she want to?

Yes, she decided. She wanted to. For the past eleven years, good-girl Chloe did everything her father wanted of her. She'd quit school, attended etiquette classes, flew all over the world checking up on different hotels, and sacrificed her personal life. She'd even enrolled in business classes at the local college like her father wanted. Now she'd have to marry Karl, someone she didn't love, because her parents counted on her to carry on their legacy.

For once, just once, she wanted to do something for *her*. Something daring and exciting and...a little bit naughty.

This man, whoever he was, excited her. Being on the housetop excited her. She loved being outdoors, in the open air. The full moon filtered through the trees and cast shadows on the roof. It made her feel mysterious. Out here, she was a part of nature, a little rebellious.

Out here, she was free.

Chloe widened her stance, the *click* of her heels on the housetop echoing in the night.

"That's my girl."

She shivered as his nails gently scraped her inner thigh.

"You're so soft. I wonder..."

He slipped his finger under her thong and pushed it aside. She stiffened as he stroked her opening. His touch felt rough yet gentle.

The stranger stilled. "Do you want to stop?" His voice rumbled with danger, like a growling animal.

"No." Chloe would have screamed the word, but she lacked the strength. His touch was addictive, and she wanted more. A breeze blew around them, rustling the leaves in the nearby tree. She shivered as the backs of his nails traced a lazy line over inner thigh.

"I'm sorry. It's been a long time," she said. *A long time since I felt a desire for anything.*

He rested his forehead against her shoulder and stilled his hands.

He was stopping? Did she do something wrong?

Clearing his throat, he raised his head and pressed his cock harder against her backside. "We'll just have to fix that, then."

Although he had cleared his throat, his voice still sounded rough, strained. The low vibrations sent heat racing up her spine, and Chloe ground her hips against him, causing them both to moan. She groaned as he nibbled the outer rim of her ear.

"Now, where was I? Oh yes." He inched his fingers back down over her body. Chloe tightened her muscles in anticipation.

When he returned to her opening, his touch was softer, featherlight. She gasped but didn't move.

"That's better." He ran his finger over her soft folds. Each stroke added a new note of desire to her body. He played her well, and her body sang, tightening her muscles and making her mouth dry. Chloe bit her lower lip and slipped her hands down behind her until they rested on his hips. She curled her fingers into the fabric of his khakis and dragged him closer.

"That's it, Chloe. Don't hold back."

He found her clit and gently squeezed it. She moaned as desire pulsed between her legs. Whoever this man was, he knew what she craved, and wasn't afraid to give it to her.

"You're already so wet." He kissed her shoulder. "I wonder. Did you mean what you said, darlin'? Are you ready to let go and be yourself?"

Chloe shuddered as his fingertip inched inside her. She knelt down into his hand, but he pulled back out.

"Do you want to be rebellious, Chloe?"

"Yes," she whispered as he slid inside again.

"I wonder..." He pulled out and used his slick finger to rub her clit. "Would you come for a complete stranger on your father's housetop while he eats dinner inside?"

"Yes." She gasped as he plunged his finger in to the hilt. The sweet stretching of muscle made her feel wanton and rebellious.

It made her feel *alive*.

He chuckled. "Hold on, sweetheart."

The mystery man slid one hand up under her shirt and cupped her breast. Chloe raised her hands above her head, arching her back and pressing her chest into his palm.

"Eager, aren't we?" His voice sounded so deep and sexy, almost animalistic. Chloe shivered as he trailed fiery kisses along her neck and shoulder.

She groaned, letting her arms fall back and holding his head to her skin. Never before had she felt this turned on, this needy. She wanted this stranger inside her, desperately. Chloe closed her eyes and dragged his head to her lips.

After a brief kiss, he pulled away. "Not tonight, sweetheart." He pressed his lips against her neck as he freed her breast from her bra. "Tonight all I want you to do is feel."

"Who are you?" she asked again.

The stranger made a *tsking* noise. "Just enjoy the moment, Chloe." He squeezed her nipple, making her gasp as a spark of pain heightened her pleasure. "This is for you."

How long had he been listening to her? Did he hear her rant to the moon? Chloe wasn't sure, but if this stranger wanted to help her, she wasn't going to stop him.

She groaned as his finger pressed a sensitive spot deep inside. Pleasure rose and fell in her body like one of Mozart's concertos.

No, she wasn't going to stop him. Not now.

For once, she was going to do something radical. Something selfish.

Another finger entered her, spreading her wider. She moaned at the intrusion and focused on the sensations he was building inside. Her need burned through her, and soon she was grinding against him. His breathing became ragged, his touch rougher. He thrust his hard cock against her ass. The stranger's low growl burned through her. She couldn't wait anymore.

Chloe dropped her arms from around his neck and reached between them. With trembling fingers, she tugged at his zipper. "I want to touch you."

"No." He removed his hands from her body and stepped back.

*No?* Chloe suddenly felt empty, alone. She tried to turn, but he gripped her arms and kept her facing forward. Maybe he was the kind who didn't like to be touched. Although Chloe couldn't imagine such a man existed. She tried another tactic. "I want to feel you inside of me."

Silence.

"Hello?"

He was behind her once more, kissing a line from her shoulder to her ear. She slid her lower lip between her teeth as desire burned through her body. His teeth raked over her lobe, and a momentary sting shot through her body. She groaned as it subsided, leaving her feeling weak.

"Don't move," he said. Cool air brushed her back as he stepped farther away.

Chloe moistened her lips. What was he doing? She started to turn around.

"Don't move," he repeated.

She froze. A tearing sound echoed behind her. Within seconds his heat enveloped her once more.

"Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Trust me."

The odd thing was that she did trust him. Although deep and harsh, his voice had that calming familiarity. If she could just concentrate...

She closed her eyes and stood still for a moment, letting him slide his fingers down her bare arms to her hands. Chloe bit her lower lip as her mind blanked, and her muscles tightened in anticipation.

He laced his fingers with hers and led her a few steps across the roof. There, he guided her to something hard and unyielding. She recognized it as the decorative balustrade that ran like a short wall the along the western part of the roof.

"Bend over."

She tightened her fingers on the edging as he lifted her skirt around her waist once more. Cool air whispered against her skin.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Shh, don't think, just feel."

“But—”

“Do you want to stop and go inside?”

Go inside and face her father and Karl? After she had just refused the proposal? She shook her head.

He ran his fingers over her backside, underneath her thong. “So perfect.” The stranger slid his hands up and down her inner thighs, spreading her legs apart. “Are you sure you want me inside you? Because once I'm there, I won't stop until you come for me.”

He touched between her legs, sending ripples of pleasure through her body.

“Yes,” she gasped.

He brushed her thong aside. Something hard pressed against her opening, and she curled her fingers into the hard surface in front of her. Desire warmed her skin and wound her muscles tightly in her core.

He curved his body over hers, slipping his hands underneath her shirt and up over her skin. Undoing her bra, he freed her breasts and palmed them. “You've grown into a beautiful woman, darlin'. I'm just sorry I wasn't with you to see it happen.”

Before Chloe could process what he said, he plunged deep inside her. She cried out as her body stretched to receive him, widening her stance so she could take him fully. He stroked her breasts as he let her adjust to him. His touch was rough and exciting. Desire pulsed in her veins. Chloe wanted more, much more. Arching her back, she pressed her chest into his hands and inched her ass toward his hips.

He growled near her ear and started to move inside her. The sound was more animal than man, low and possessive. Chloe shook as her need rose. Her whole body burned with desire. Soon she was bucking against him, opening herself up completely. He pushed harder, faster, dragging her toward the edge. She felt dizzy with need and pleasure and excitement. Each thrust elicited another moan as she inched higher. Closer...

“Chloe?”

Her eyes flew open, and she looked down, in the direction of the voice.

Karl's voice.

He stood on her bedroom balcony directly below, looking down toward the street. If he looked up...

The stranger's thrusts slowed. He buried himself deep inside her, moving inch by delicious inch. Leaning over her body, he wrapped his arms around her middle and rested his chin on her shoulder. He cupped her breasts as he whispered in her ear. "Exciting, isn't it?"

She stifled a moan as he pinched her nipples, his cock retreating. Pleasure and pain mixed in her bloodstream, making her forget what was happening below.

The stranger thrust deep inside her. Chloe bit her lip as pleasure burst through her body.

"You don't want to live the life your father laid out for you." He pulled away, sliding slowly through her wet channel until only the tip remained inside.

*Oh no.* Her father would kill her.

He pushed hard and deep, making her gasp as pleasure shook her. "You want to be rebellious. Admit it." His voice sounded deeper, rougher, as if in pain.

But he was right. She was so tired of being the good girl. Just for once she wished...

"Do something for yourself, Chloe. Something you need." He repeated the motions, this time stroking her nipples as he drove himself deep.

All she could do was groan in reply.

"Tell me you want this," he whispered.

"Yes." Her answer was barely audible over the thumping of her heart.

The stranger rewarded her with another thrust. Chloe bit back a moan.

"Is that Cristal?"

Chloe opened her eyes and followed Karl's line of vision to the bottle in the bushes.

The stranger quickened his movements, and Chloe tightened her grip on the roof as he dragged her closer to oblivion.

They might be caught.

But then again, they might not.

Chloe closed her eyes as she tightened her muscles around his cock. She sighed, enjoying the added friction along her inner walls.

The stranger growled in her ear. "Come for me, Chloe."

She was so close...

Another voice blended with Karl's, but she was beyond caring.

Letting go of her breasts, the stranger grabbed her hips, thrusting again and again with a feverish pace. Nails dug into her skin, mixing pain and pleasure. Her grip tightened on the structure before her. Never before had sex felt this raw, this animalistic. Chloe embraced her wild side as the stranger claimed her. Desire built, and she stretched for her release. Resting her forehead on her hands, she concentrated on the sensations ripping through her body.

When her orgasm came, she bit back her cry as pleasure exploded around her. The stranger stiffened, digging his fingers deep into her skin. Pain shot through her body, heightening her pleasure. Somewhere behind her, a neighbor's dog howled. Again and again he pumped into her, allowing her orgasm to stretch out into oblivion. Only after he emptied himself completely did his movements slow.

Chloe couldn't move if she tried. She felt so sated, so complete.

The stranger muttered a curse and loosened his grip on her hips. "I didn't want..." He pulled out and lowered her skirt. His voice sounded even more pained than before, if that was even possible.

Chloe closed her eyes. He regretted what they'd done together.

Well, she didn't. It was wonderful, exciting. Chloe didn't realize how much she had missed the excitement in her life until just this moment.

She heard him remove the condom behind her. Soon he was back, wrapping his arms around her middle and bringing her upright.

"Did I hurt you, darlin'?" He nuzzled her neck and brought her into a standing position.

Her hip throbbed, and her heart thudded in her chest, yet she had never felt better in her life. "No." She smiled to herself as her breathing slowed. The scents of sandalwood and sex surrounded her. She reached behind and ran her fingers through his thick hair.

Voices continued below them. Karl and her parents had left the balcony and were combing the bushes at the base of the house below them.

"I found the bottle." Karl held up her Cristal like a prize.

"Maybe she just went for a walk." This came from her mother.

"Why would she go for a walk at this time of night? On Christmas Eve?" her father asked.

"She's upset, Jerry," her mother said.

"She has no right to be upset. Doesn't the fool girl know everything I've done for her?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Bradford. I'll find her," Karl said.

Chloe listened to Karl's footsteps fading away.

"Come inside, Jerry. It's cold out here," her mother said.

"Not without Chloe."

"There's nothing you can do right now. She'll come back when she's ready."

"I don't know, Eva. That girl..." Their voices faded as they entered the house.

The stranger kissed her neck. "You should go."

She nodded. Chloe had no idea what she was going to tell her family, but she'd think of something.

He pulled away from her, leaving Chloe feeling empty and alone.

"Wait!" She turned. The stranger had already made it to the other side of the roof. His body was cast in shadow. She could make out his outline against the sky but little else. Another breeze picked up, rustling his hair. His figure seemed larger than before, more ominous.

How did he make it over there so fast?

"Who are you?" she asked. "Will I see you again?"

"Do you want to see me again?"

Heat sprang up in her center as her mind replayed their time together. "Yes," she whispered.

He shifted his stance. "Then you will."

She wished she could see his face. "When?"

"Soon." He stepped off the edge and disappeared over the side of the house.

"Wait!" She didn't care that her father might hear her scream; she needed to know the stranger's identity. When would they meet? How would she know him? Chloe ran over to the opposite edge of the roof and peered over.

Nothing.

Damn, he couldn't have gotten far.

She leaned farther and scanned the ground. "Come back!"

Did something move down there?

"Who are you?" Chloe squinted as she leaned over the side of the roof. Something moved beneath her in the shadows. She tried to find leverage with her feet so she could bend down farther for a closer look. Her foot slipped, causing her to tilt forward. She swore and tightened her hold on the roof. Her grip slipped, and she screamed as she fell over the side of the house.

## Chapter Three

Zach grunted as Chloe fell into his arms. *Foolish woman*. “Are you all right?”

A soft groan was his only reply.

He placed her body gently on the pavement. His inner wolf howled at him to take off her clothes and bury himself deep inside her once more. He gritted his teeth and ran his hands over her soft skin. Besides a few cuts and scrapes, she seemed well enough. Maybe she was in shock.

“Chloe?” His throat felt dry and scratchy, as often happened when he felt the pull of the moon.

Zach squinted toward the house as the front light went back on. Movement increased inside. He couldn't be discovered, not like this. With a soft growl, he moved Chloe and himself close to the bushes surrounding the house, out of the light. A quick glance at the moon confirmed he didn't have much time before his inner wolf would control him completely. Sex with Chloe had held off the moon-curse for perhaps an hour—two at most. Before the night was over, his inner beast would demand to be released, and he would be a danger to himself and everyone around him.

He was so stupid to come here. What was he thinking? That she would just jump into his arms and accept him, curse and all?

The truth was, he hadn't been thinking.

When he and Marcus had set out on that camping trip, neither one of them could have expected how much their lives would change. Or at least, how much his would change, when the creature attacked them, ripping out their throats and dragging them to a nearby cave.

Marcus didn't live to notice.

Zach should have died too, but it wasn't to be. For reasons he couldn't explain, he was spared, while his best friend and future brother-in-law was ripped to shreds. He could still remember the yellow eyes of that monster peering at him in the dark as he feasted.

Eyes like Zach now possessed.

He shuddered.

He had passed out from lack of blood and had awakened surrounded by others like him. They told him he was immortal—half-human, half-beast. He didn't believe them, as the only outward change seemed to be his damaged voice. Soon he learned what his new family meant. When that first full moon rose...

His new family taught him to live with his inner beast and how to control the moon-violence with sex. The problem was, he didn't want meaningless sex. He wanted Chloe, but not like this.

She was better off without him.

Zach meant to only come to Houston for business, but the wolf craved more. It was almost as if it had sensed Chloe was nearby. He'd gone to their old neighborhood on the outskirts of the city to check up on her, one look to make sure she was okay. He knew neither of them would benefit from a face-to-face meeting. He had much more control over his shifting now than when he was eighteen, but there were still risks. He could hurt her or the ones she loved. Lives depended on Zach's keeping his wolf half a secret—his, his pack's, and if she freaked out while he shifted, even hers.

He wasn't going to interfere, but when he saw her out on the roof, wishing for a different life, he'd paused. Her blonde curls and soft curves had called to him. She hadn't changed since he'd last seen her over a decade ago. She even still had that intoxicating citrus scent. Back before the curse, her father had disapproved of their relationship. Zach's family was too poor, too dysfunctional. Thank God Chloe wasn't like that. She had been so much fun, so beautiful.

But now she looked...defeated. Gone was the youthful glow, the twinkle of rebellion, the eagerness to experience life. *What happened to you, Chloe?*

Both Zach's human and monster halves wanted to touch her. God, it had been so long. Too long.

He could find that sparkle in her again; he knew it.

Before he could stop himself, Zach had climbed up onto top of the roof. Now she was unconscious in his arms.

He should have left her alone, for both their sakes.

“Chloe? Is that you?” Chloe's father poked his head out the front door.

Zach stifled a growl and took Chloe back behind one of the bushes, deeper into the shadows. He examined her once more, forcing his desire under control as her smooth, pale skin begged for his touch. He gently patted her cheek and cursed when he saw his hand shake.

“Come on, sweetheart. Wake up. Daddy's calling.”

She didn't move.

He fought back a wave of panic and used his fingers to prop open her eyes. There was a flicker of life there. Maybe...

Zach bent low, his cheek hovering above her mouth. He closed his eyes as the smell of citrus overpowered his senses. *Her* scent. Warm breath brushed past his skin.

She was alive.

He ran his fingers around her head, sifting her long, curly locks through his fingers. His cock hardened painfully inside his khakis as he worked. After a few moments, he felt a small lump on the back of her head. She must have hit something on her way down.

A shaft of moonlight filtered down between the house and tree, landing on his hand. Thick, brown fur sprang up from his skin.

He closed his eyes and attempted to control the beast. He couldn't shift here, out in the open. Not in front of *her*. If he gave in to his beast now, he would be useless. He might even hurt her. Zach ran his fingers over the tear in her skirt. He'd lost control on the roof, and Chloe had paid the price. The deep claw marks she received on her hip tonight would take weeks to heal.

“Who's out there?” Another man joined Chloe's father on the front step.

Zach couldn't let her father find her like this. There would be too many questions, and he wouldn't betray his pack. He couldn't stay with her either. Unfortunately, his control wouldn't hold for long. Already he could feel it slipping. He would need a continuous supply of sex if he had any chance of keeping his wolf—and the beast's rage—under control.

He had dealt with the rage before, but he wouldn't dare attempt such a thing near Chloe. He had to think of somewhere to keep her until the moon went down and she was well enough to go back to her family.

Picking her up, Zach slipped away from the house and raced back to his car. He'd have to bring her back with him, back to his hotel room. There was nowhere else for her to go. Nowhere safe, anyway. He would figure out what to do with her once he got there.

He cut through side streets as his heart raced in his chest. Every once in a while he would hear a soft groan from the woman beside him.

*Please, don't wake up. Not here.*

He could feel the pull of the moon. Zach was running out of time. Normally, by now, he would be chained up or deep in the woods where he couldn't harm anyone. He was so stupid to think he could seek her out tonight.

Hopefully he could see her safe before the madness began. There was no one else he trusted with Chloe's life.

Zach keyed into a side door of the hotel. His hands and arms had almost completely changed. He could only imagine what his face looked like. Luckily, there was no one about. Now if it could only stay that way long enough to get her inside...

He took the steps two at a time.

Somehow he made it safely to the room. Zach used his foot to close the door and made his way to the bed. The beast raged inside him, and he beat it back the best he could. After placing Chloe gently on the comforter, he spun around and looked in the mirror.

*Shit.* He looked like a something from a nightmare. Chloe had been ripped away from him once. If she saw him now, he would lose her all over again. He couldn't let her go. Not after he saw how defeated she looked.

*Her family needs to pay for robbing her of her passion and hope for the future. They should all pay.*

Zach put his hands to his face and shook his head. He had to get a grip; otherwise Chloe wouldn't receive any more help tonight. *Calm, stay calm.* He ground his teeth and pulled the blankets around her. Sighing, she turned into her pillow. Zach closed his eyes as her scent pulled at him. The beast wanted sex and wanted it now.

*No.* He wouldn't take her like this, never like this. She wasn't some object to appease his wolf. She was Chloe.

He would have to give himself up to the wolf for a little while, at least until the moon went down. Hopefully in a couple of hours he'd have enough self-control to think rationally again. Until then...

He rubbed his nose up against her temple. Inhaling, he let her scent penetrate his body and fill his mind. Now that he had tasted her again, Zach wasn't sure he'd be able to let her go. Would she accept him as he was? He didn't think so. Chloe was a gentle woman, used to the finer things. She deserved the finer things. He couldn't ask her to be chained to a half man for the rest of her life. It wouldn't be fair to her. He would only hurt her. When the moon was full, he became an animal. She'd never tolerate the repeated rounds of rough sex he would need to maintain control.

He couldn't ask anyone to become a slave to the beast's desires, especially not Chloe.

Zach ran a finger along her temple as he studied her face. It would be hell to leave her, but he would endure. He always had. Chloe could never know of the monster he had become.

*Just one more taste.*

Zach ran his tongue around the outer rim of her ear. The wolf inside howled with pleasure. *So sweet, so soft.* He eased down the blankets and unbuttoned her shirt. She wiggled, her skirt slipping up her soft thighs. He eased his hand under her clothes and over her breast. She moaned and stretched, her nipple peaking under his touch. He rolled it in his fingers and watched her respond. With his free hand, he inched her skirt higher, revealing more of her creamy skin.

He moistened his lips as he watched her slide closer to him. Even in sleep, she wanted him. He would give everything he had to be able to bury his cock deep inside her, make her scream his name as she came beneath him again and again.

*No.* He ran his fingers over the claw marks on her hip. Dried blood had gathered, forming a hard seal and taunting his inner wolf. Zach closed his eyes and fought for control. He had taken her like an animal. She deserved better.

With a growl he rose up from the bed and stumbled into the bathroom. The dull *thud* of the lock echoed around him, and he shuffled to the window. Pain roared through his body, crippling his fingers.

*Not yet... Need more time.*

Finally the window opened. Fresh, cool air surrounded him, momentarily clearing his head. He threw himself over the windowsill.

A lone wolf landed on the pavement outside in the back lot beside the hotel and raced away into the shadows of the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Zach awoke to a loud *bang* above his head.

“Is someone there?”

He blinked. Once. Twice. Slowly the bathroom floor came into focus. He raised his head and winced as pain exploded across his skull.

*What happened?*

“Hello?”

*Chloe.*

Desire tightened his muscles at the sound of her voice. His eyes focused on the open window a few feet away as memories flashed back.

The roof. The hotel...

He had left her here to satisfy his wolf. Fortunately, he remembered much of these streets from his childhood and navigated through them to the city limits and beyond. Fully changed, he'd let his wolf form lead him. Zach the man had disappeared. Only the monster had remained.

Yet somehow the man must have gotten through to the beast, for after it was satisfied, the wolf brought him back here, to her.

Each month, while his brethren had gone out and sated themselves to keep their wolves at bay, Zach instead chose to lock himself away. Even knowing Chloe moved on with her life, he could never betray her love. But now that he had tasted of her...

He eyed the lock about four feet up from his head.

“Hello? Are you hurt? I heard moaning.”

Slowly, Zach crawled onto his hands and knees. When had he changed back to his human form? He stood and was relieved the pain had eased in his head. Glancing out the window, he saw it was still night. The moon had started to set, then. This was good. Zach studied the round sphere as it headed toward the horizon. The worst had passed. He felt more himself now,

although he knew it would be a long time before the sun rose and the wolf was fully under control. If he didn't calm his emotions soon, the monster would control him again before daybreak.

The lock jiggled. "I know someone's in there."

Zach turned toward the door. Chloe. He wanted to touch her, taste her body. The wolf wanted to sink its teeth into her flesh while he drove himself deep inside her.

*No.* He'd pushed his inner beast down before; he could do it again.

He walked over to the mirror and blew out a sigh of relief. The figure staring back at him was fully human, not some half-breed. Cut, bruised, and battered, yes, but fully human.

*You can do this.* He splashed some water over his face and thick auburn hair.

*Get a grip.*

"Look, if you could just tell me how I got here," Chloe said through the door.

It was no use. Every time she opened her mouth, his desire wound him tighter. Desire and the wolf were inseparable. Unleashing one was to unleash them both. He looked down at the result of his struggle. His cock throbbed, sending a pulsing ache through his body. There was no way he was going to be able to hold the beast at bay. One touch and he was going to explode.

Zach shut off the water and stared at himself in the mirror. Even now he could see the wolf just below the surface, eager to be free. Damn, if just the sound of her voice did this to him, what would her touch do?

He thought about their encounter on the roof. Desire surged through his body, and his fingers curled into the countertop. A low growl escaped his lips.

*Down, boy.*

"Look, I'm just going to go." Zach heard her shuffle around the room.

Maybe it was better like this.

*No.* He needed to see her, just one more time.

But what if she found out about his wolf?

He cleared his throat. "Do you trust me?" His voice sounded rougher than usual. For once he was thankful his throat had never fully healed from the attack. He had learned much later that his immunity against disease and human weapons didn't translate to the supernatural world.

When attacked by others of his kind, his skin would not regenerate, and his wounds would not heal. At least, not in the classical sense. Josh, the alpha of his pack, had done what he could to heal him, but parts of him would never heal.

He ran his fingers down the long, horizontal scar on his neck. If she hadn't recognized his damaged voice on the roof, then she wouldn't recognize it now. Maybe there was a way to be with her after all...

The steps stopped on the other side of the door. "What did you say?" Her soft voice burned through his body. He had ached before, needed before, but it had never been this powerful.

He left the mirror and rested his forehead on the wood. Her voice sounded so sweet, so pure, so human. And her touch... Zach shivered as he remembered her fingers in his hair, her hands on his neck.

God, how he missed her.

Placing his hands flat against the door, he closed his eyes and struggled for control. "Do you trust me?"

A pause. "Yes."

*Foolish woman.* "Turn out the light."

"What?"

With effort, he controlled his temper. It was stupid to think a hunt would tame the wolf. Even now he felt the rage within beginning to grow. The wolf liked Chloe, more than was natural. It wanted to claim her, mark her as its mate...

*No.* He steeled his jaw. He needed sex to tame his beast. Sex or sunrise. Some wolves managed to find their mates and tame the moon-rages, but such a thing would be impossible for him. Mating only happened between wolves—never with a human. The thought of marking someone other than Chloe turned his stomach, yet he could never bring her into his world. Even if she survived the mating, he didn't know how his pack would react to his bringing a human into their midst. Marking her would be a mistake. A horrible, tragic mistake.

Power and need rolled through his body in a giant wave. He dropped his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut.

*Fight it.*

Desire rose inside him, and Zach felt helpless against it.

“Turn out the light,” he ordered.

He opened his eyes and watched the light underneath the door go out. *Thank God.* He needed more protection, though. What if he started to turn, as he had on the roof? She could never know the monster he had become. “Turn away from the door.”

“Why?”

“Do it.” He curled his fingers into the wood and winced as splinters stuck underneath his lengthening nails. “*Please.*”

“Okay,” she whispered.

Silence.

“Are you doing it?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He wished the door had a peephole, but then again, who would need a peephole for their bathroom?

Zach picked up the robe on the floor and covered his naked body. He fingered the long, thick sash around the middle. Whipping it out of the robe's loops, he mentally measured its length. It would do.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

“Who are you?”

He opened the door. The sight made him painfully hard. She stood with her back to him, her long blonde hair cascading in curls down her back. She was curvier than he remembered, more woman than girl. He moistened his lips as his gaze trailed down her back, over her round hips and flowing skirt. He itched to grab hold of those hips and...

With a ragged breath he composed himself and placed the sash-turned-blindfold over her eyes. He ground his teeth as he noticed the familiar wolf hair sprout from the back of his hands.

*Hang on.*

He could do this.

“What are you doing?” She raised her hands toward her face.

“You said you trusted me.”

She lowered his hands. "I do. I just wish I knew who you were."

"You already know me." God, she was so beautiful, even more beautiful than he remembered. He swallowed and forced his fangs to recede.

"I do?"

He brushed his fingers down her neck. Her pulse thudded against his fingers, and Zach felt his teeth elongate once again in response. "Did you like our encounter up on the housetop?"

He watched her nipples tighten underneath her shirt. He could smell her arousal, saw her slide her lower lip between her teeth.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Would you like me to show you more?"

"Yes."

Zach muffled a groan as desire shot straight to his cock. He concentrated on retracting his teeth and glanced in the mirror. Although it was dark, his inner wolf gave him heightened sight.

He had only partially changed. His face had grown hair but still looked human. His arms and hands were the same. If he kept her blindfolded, there was a possibility he could satisfy both man and beast. Once they had sex, he could control the wolf enough to stay with her, if only for a little while.

What was he thinking? He couldn't do this. It was too dangerous. He could hurt her.

She reached out for him, searching for his face. He caught her wrist and placed a kiss on her palm. She shivered.

To hell with the danger. He wanted her, now. "Then I will show you pleasures beyond your wildest dreams." He slipped her finger into his mouth, letting his tongue roll over her tip. She groaned and reached out again to touch him. He grabbed her other wrist before she discovered any tufts of fur, and removed her finger from his mouth.

"One rule, though," he said.

Chloe lifted her chin. "Yes?"

"I will be the only one doing the touching tonight." He picked up his shirt off the floor and used it to secure her hands behind her back.

## Chapter Four

Chloe shivered as the bindings tightened around her wrists. She knew that she should've been afraid, but she wasn't. Instead her heart skittered in her chest, and excitement trickled through her body.

He dropped his hands and leaned into her, his warm breath brushing over her skin. "I have thought of you every night since we've been apart, Chloe. I have thought of you, here like this, with me."

She swallowed as his lips pressed against the curve of her neck. Tingles of awareness sprinkled over her body, running over her sensitive skin and tightening the muscles in her lower abdomen.

She'd recognized the room; she was in one of her father's hotels downtown. She had visited this place many times, even stayed once or twice. There was something about the soft greens and yellows that calmed her nerves when she would have otherwise been afraid. And she knew the staff of this hotel very well. One scream and they would come running.

But she didn't cry out. Nor did she try to escape.

"Have you thought about me?"

"Thought about you?" Her voice hitched as he nibbled the outer lobe of her ear. "I don't even remember you." She closed her eyes and focused on the feel of his tongue as it slid gently over her skin. *But I want to.*

He pulled away from her skin but remained close. Chloe resisted the urge to stand on her tiptoes and reach for the warm, wet heat of his tongue.

"You knew me once, a long time ago." His voice sounded sad, perhaps a little lonely. Chloe's heart reached out to him. She knew what it was like to be all alone. For years she had suffered in silence, never really connecting with anyone. She didn't dare. Not after Zach. It hurt too much.

“You can get to know me again,” the stranger said.

“Yes.” She wanted to know this stranger, the one who made her body hum with excitement. The man who made her feel wanton and free.

For a brief moment she felt his arms loop around her. Chloe gasped as she was tipped back and lifted into the air.

“What are you doing?”

“Trust me.” He lowered her onto something soft—the bed. The pillow pressed against her head as his arms drew away. She should have felt awkward, lying on her back with her hands tied behind her. But the way he bound her hands allowed her to bend her arms into a more comfortable position, and the fluffy comforter beneath her also helped to prevent any discomfort.

Part of her—the rational, logical part—knew that she should leave. This was ridiculous, if not a little dangerous. Sure, she was in a familiar place, but she was with a complete stranger. Good girls didn't do this. It was crazy.

Why would the stranger bring her to her father's hotel? He said he knew her. If that was true, he knew this place was filled with people who knew her and would come running if she called.

She shook her head, trying to dispel such thoughts. It didn't matter. She should just get up, go back home, and try to salvage the mess she made earlier tonight. Maybe, if she were lucky, her father would forgive her.

But then, if she did that, she wouldn't get to have sex again.

She gasped as something cool and soft brushed over her cheek. She strained against the bindings, eager to touch it, but it disappeared as quickly as it came.

“Relax, Chloe.”

She calmed her mind but continued to work at the bindings behind her back. She needed to touch him...

“That's it, just feel.”

*That voice.* If she could just see, she knew she would be able to identify him. “You worked for my father, didn't you?”

“Shh.”

The cool, soft object returned, tracing down her temple and cheek. Chloe arched her back as desire warmed her body and clouded her mind.

“No, I didn't work for your father,” he whispered.

*He didn't?* “Then...”

The object left, and the bed dipped as he leaned over her. “I won't hurt you.” His spicy scent surrounded her, making her limbs weak.

“I know.”

The object returned, circling her wrist, trailing up her arm, and twirling on her shoulder. Her skin tingled in its wake. The knot loosened in her fingers.

“I used to love listening to you play piano. Why did you stop?”

Desire warmed her skin, and she moistened her lips. “I had other obligations.”

He made a low sound with his mouth. “Do you miss it?”

*Every day.* “Sometimes.” She didn't have the heart to tell him that her obligations to her father's company left room for little else.

“You should play again.” His tone had a note of finality to it.

Chloe opened her lips to respond but shut them again as the object lingered over her breast. The second knot came undone. Her hands were free, but she kept them behind her back. Blindfolded, she was able to focus on the sensations and her body's reaction. She shifted on the bed to hide her victory, the cool cotton sheets rubbing against her legs. He moved his free hand under her skirt and blazed a trail of fire up her thigh. She moaned as his hand inched higher, closer.

The object left her breast and brushed against her other arm. When it reached her forearm, her hand sprung from its hiding place. Soft petals slipped through her fingers as the object was pulled away.

“A flower?” she asked.

He didn't reply. He didn't need to. Chloe remembered the vase of flowers by the door in the room. It was a signature of her family's luxury hotels. Fresh flowers added an inviting fragrance to the room, and the bright colors cheered weary travelers.

When she had first proposed the idea to her father, she had never expected anyone—

She gasped and arched her back as the flower traced the edge of her sleeveless blouse, lingering in the tip of the V between her breasts.

She reached out. "I want to touch you."

He pulled away.

Desire ran deep, tightening her muscles and eliciting a moan from her body. Never before had she felt so reckless.

"Okay," he said.

Chloe reached for her mystery man and framed his face in her palms. Day-old stubble prickled her fingers, sending another wave of need surging through her body. Sliding her fingers back into his hair, she pulled his lips down to hers.

Something shifted in him. She could feel it in the way he dropped the flower and settled his body over hers. Gone was the gentle, caring touch, in favor of something more rugged and wild. His hands freely roamed over her body, stoking her desire. Chloe felt his need, his urgency, and her body responded. She clung to him and was swept up in his urgency. She couldn't get enough of him. One moment she was running her fingers through his hair; the next she was clawing her nails down his back. The fire between her legs spread through her body, and she tugged him closer.

When they broke apart, she gasped for air. He shifted his weight and kissed a trail down her neck and shoulder. He reached the buttons of her shirt and tugged at them with his teeth. Chloe licked her lips in anticipation as one by one they opened, revealing her to him.

Once he finished with the buttons, he undid the front clasp to her bra. He growled when it gave way, taking her breast into his mouth. Chloe cried out as desire soared through her body. She slipped her hand to the back of his head and held him close, letting her emotions carry her. He nipped her tip, and she gasped as need and pleasure slammed through her. He slipped his hands behind the small of her back, undoing the fastenings holding her skirt in place. He sat back and, with a quick, fluid motion, removed both skirt and thong.

Then nothing.

Chloe tried not to count the seconds as the cool air whispered over her skin. "Is there...?" Her breath hitched, and she silently cursed herself for feeling so vulnerable. "Is there something wrong?" God, she hoped not.

“So beautiful...” His hoarse whisper sent shivers down her spine.

She felt the bed dip as his hands rested beside her. He pulled the sheets taut beneath her body, yet he didn't touch her. There was something wrong. Chloe could feel the tension in the air. She brushed her fingers over the backs of his hands. He was shaking. “What is it?”

He pulled away. “I can't control it.”

“Control what?” She dug her elbows into the bed, lifting her head off the pillow. “What's going on?”

“Chloe...”

She reached for the blindfold but stopped as his hand gripped her wrist. “Don't.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Don't want to...to hurt you.”

“Then let go of my hand.”

He did. The bed shifted as she felt him move away. Again Chloe reached for her blindfold, but her hand stopped in midair when he kissed her lower abdomen.

“You smell so sweet.”

Her desire quickly returned. Chloe let her arms drop and her head fall back onto the pillow. Heat ran through her, turning her body to water. He kissed a line down her belly, cupping his hands behind her ass. She gasped as he lifted her off the bed. Raising her arms above her head, she curled her fingers around the headboard and savored his tongue against her skin. Each lick, each touch, tightened her muscles in anticipation. She was close.

With Karl, she had never felt anything this intense, this pleasurable. It was almost as if this man knew what she craved and was eager to give it to her. Higher and higher she climbed, her body humming with anticipation. He rested her hips back on the bed and used both his tongue and his fingers to explore and tease. She planted her feet on the bed and arched her hips into his hand. He chuckled, the vibrations of his mouth causing her to moan. Chloe's grip tightened on the headboard as he entered her, first with one finger, then with two. The intrusion, the wonderful stretching, sent beautiful heat twisting through her body.

She could feel his eyes on her as he moved his fingers, but she was beyond feeling embarrassed or shy. Pleasure lanced her abdomen, and she clenched her muscles in reply. He

moaned, his strokes becoming swifter, more forceful. He found her clit and took it between his teeth, the gentle nipping dragging her toward the edge. She came in a burst of energy so bright, so forceful, that her whole body shook from its force. Still he stroked her, tended to her, wringing every last ounce of life from her body.

When it was over, Chloe collapsed, fully sated. He shifted, resting his full weight on her. He felt good on top of her, the pressure on her body making her muscles weak with pleasure. Bringing her legs up, she wrapped them around him as he positioned his cock between her thighs.

“Can't hold back...”

She arched her back as he entered her, gasping as his entire length speared her core. He pushed his body up and leveraged it over her using his hands. Before she had a chance to think, to adjust, he was sliding inside her. The quick, savage movements left her breathless. She curled her fingers into his biceps, amazed at the ripple of muscle and strength she found there. Emotion rocked her, and she longed to taste him as he did her. She wanted to touch his body, touch the deep crevices of his muscles, and run her fingers through his hair. She wanted to know if the rest of him was as smooth and toned as his biceps. She suspected it was.

Another wave of desire crashed through her, and for the moment all she could do was feel. Chloe hung on as he moved inside her, each thrust pushing her closer to the edge. His rough, wild movements made her feel alive. The sweet friction of his cock moving inside of her...

It was too much. Chloe cried out as her orgasm roared through her. Pleasure cocooned her body, wrapping around her like a warm blanket. She felt him stiffen and then thrust harder. A low, sexy growl vibrated around her as he too went over the edge.

Before Chloe could recover, he slid his arm around her and twisted, rolling them both to the other side of the bed until she was on top of him. Chloe rested her head on his chest. For a long moment they were silent, their ragged breathing the only sounds in the room.

“That was amazing.” Chloe put her fingers over her lips, embarrassed that her thoughts slipped out her mouth.

He didn't seem to notice. “Yeah.” He rubbed his hand up and down her back in a gentle yet possessive manner. It made Chloe feel safe and loved.

"It's been a long time." Chloe frowned into his chest. Really, she should stop being so open around him. He probably thought she was a freak or something. She had never been so open around Karl, but then again, Karl never made her feel like this. She ran her fingers over his chest.

"I'm sorry about Marcus." His voice hitched with emotion, and for a moment it sounded strangely familiar. It was almost as if...

Chloe's hand froze. It couldn't possibly be...

"Zach?"

His fingers stilled on the small of her back.

*Oh no. No...*

Chloe dragged her tired body up into a sitting position and yanked off her blindfold. The stranger, her mystery man, looked up at her with concern etched in his deep green eyes. His dark auburn hair had gotten longer, his features more rugged, mature man than boy, but there was no denying it. "Zach."

"Chloe."

"Oh my God."

"I know this seems strange."

She scrambled off the bed. "Strange? Strange?"

He held out his arms to her, but she retreated to the foot of the bed. "For years I—" Her throat constricted on the words. "Why didn't you call?"

He sat up and turned away. "I couldn't."

"Like hell you couldn't." She snapped her bra together and covered her breasts. "To think that I... Of all the... You could have called."

He turned back to her. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Where's Marcus?"

"He's dead, Chloe. You saw the body yourself."

The mangled, mutilated body of her brother flashed through her mind. *Poor Marcus*. Tears stung her eyes, and she swatted them away. "Yet you survived."

"Barely."

She frowned at him, her eyes going to the scar at his throat. "What happened to you? Why does your voice sound like that?"

His jaw hardened as he sat up and shifted to the end of the bed. "It's better if you don't know."

"We were so worried. *I* was so worried."

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Where were you?"

"With friends."

She stared at him. "Friends? What friends? We hung out with the same crowd of people."

He rubbed his hands over his face. "I can't tell you, darlin'. You have to trust me on this."

She wasn't going to let his sweet talk get him out of this one. "Were these female friends?"

"Some are female, yes."

Chloe saw red. "Some." She began to pace. "Some. To think that..." She stopped dressing and turned to him. "I was your fiancée, Zach." She pointed to her chest. "Your *fiancée*. I think I deserved at least a phone call."

"What was I going to say?"

"How about the truth?"

He pressed his lips together.

"No matter." She waved her hand in the air. "Tell me the truth now. What happened to you and Marcus in the forest? Who are you staying with?"

"I can't say."

"Can't? Or won't?"

He stood. "Can't."

Tears threatened to spill, but she fought them back. "Why did you do this to me? I wish you had never come back."

"Come now, darlin'. I know you don't mean that." He reached out his hand and stepped toward her.

Chloe stumbled back and put her hand on the doorknob. "Don't you *darlin'* me. Why come here after all these years, huh? One last roll in the hay for old time's sake?"

"I..." He seemed to struggle for words. "Chloe, listen to me." He stepped forward.

Chloe opened the door behind her, keeping her gaze fixed on Zach. "I have a job, a life." She thought of all those years she sat alone in her room, thinking about Zach, wishing he'd come back to her. All the while he had been hanging out at some friend's house. Some *female* friend's house.

"I have a lover," she blurted out. "He proposed to me tonight."

Zach stopped his advance and dropped his arm. "A what?"

She raised her chin. "You heard me."

"Chloe, don't do this. You don't love him."

"What did you think, that I wasted away in my room, pining after you year after year while you ran around town with your friends?" *Damn him. Never again.* She would never cry over him again.

"When I saw you on the roof, you seemed upset."

She gasped. "You've been following me?"

"No, not really."

*Liar.* "Have you been in Houston all this time?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Where were you?"

"Las Vegas."

Sin City. Perfect. He was whoring it up while her life went straight into the toilet. Chloe suddenly realized that the perfect Zach of her dreams no longer existed. Her chest ached, and she swatted a tear from her cheek. She had to get out of here.

"Good-bye, Zach."

"No, Chloe." She felt his hand on her arm. "Let me explain."

*God, let him say the right thing.* She lifted her gaze to meet his.

He looked at her for a moment, as if he was weighing his words. "I'm not the same person you once knew."

She frowned. "Well, news flash, I'm not either."

"No, I...I mean, I can't be the person you want me to be."

"So that's why you never called me? Never said 'Hey, Chloe—just wanted to let you know I survived being attacked by a rabid animal.' Because you didn't think you'd live up to my expectations?"

"It's not like that. I was afraid I was going to hurt you." He let his hand slip down her arm and laced his fingers with hers. "I still might."

She jerked her hand away. "Is that all?"

He looked up at her, his eyes wide.

"Well, I've got another news flash for you, buddy." She jerked her hand away. "You already hurt me. But you won't anymore; I can promise you that." She stormed out of the room and slammed the door before he could reply.

*Out.* She needed to get out of here. Get some air and think things through.

At some point tonight she had broken her heel, damn it all. Her pride took a serious shot as she hobbled toward the elevator. Once she was inside, the door to his hotel room opened, and she saw him rush down the hall after her. "Chloe, wait."

She pushed the button for the ground floor. Repeatedly. The doors closed just before he reached them.

Thank God. Chloe slid down the wall of the elevator and put her head in her hands. He was alive. *Zach was alive.*

And he never contacted her. Not once in eleven years.

The elevator dinged, and she straightened, wiping the tears from her cheeks. Well, she didn't need him. Not now.

Not ever.

The doors opened, and she saw Zach standing there, hand outstretched. His dress shirt and slacks looked expensive and fit perfectly over his sculpted body, almost as if they were tailor-made. "Chloe, listen to me."

She blinked. “How did you get down the stairs so fast?”

The color rose to his cheeks. “I...” He pressed his lips together. “Trust me, Chloe. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“But you did.” She brushed past him.

“Chloe...” He followed her through the big revolving door, out of the hotel.

It was a beautiful night, the full moon hung low in the horizon and reminded her of when she and Zach used to sit on her roof and watch the sky. She was such a fool to think he had ever loved her. Chloe tripped on the sidewalk and cursed her stupid shoes.

Zach reached out to steady her and then let out a hiss. He pulled back into the shadows of the building. “Chloe, wait.”

Chloe flipped off her shoes and ran, her hair whipping behind her as she hauled her aching body across the street.

“Chloe!”

She ran harder, tears streaming down her face. *Such an idiot.* All those years, wasted.

“Chlo-e!”

The roar was deafening, but she didn't dare look back. Zach was a part of her past—just like her parents. Just like Karl. Chloe was tired of living in her past.

It was time she left the past behind for good.

## Chapter Five

Chloe ran her fingers over the rim of the Steinway grand piano and wondered why she was destined to be such a fool.

Eleven years.

Her thoughts drifted back to that day when the police arrived on their doorstep to tell them the news. Marcus was dead. Zach was missing. For weeks Chloe held out hope that Zach was somehow spared her brother's fate, that he would come back to her. That he would save her from her suffocating life.

But he never came, and she was forced to turn away from her old life. In the beginning, playing the piano gave her comfort. After she quit Juilliard, however, her father had kept her too busy to practice much. As she was forced to give up her dreams one by one, she became depressed. Over time, she found she couldn't even touch the keys anymore. The music she had once loved so much had become a painful reminder of everything she had given up, everything she had lost.

She sat on the piano stool and opened the fall to expose the keys. Sighing, she positioned her fingers over the large black-and-white keys.

*Arpeggio. A minor.* She worked from memory, her fingers flying over the keys. Her training slowly came back to her as she made her way up the octaves and back down again. *B minor.* She practiced her scales until a song drifted into her thoughts. Shifting her fingers, she allowed the haunting tune to surround her body and penetrate her mind. Chloe wrapped herself up in the music, eager to forget.

Yet she couldn't forget. Somehow her thoughts kept drifting back to last night...

All this time, while she was pining away for a life lost, Zach had shacked up with some friends and lived the good life. How many women had he fucked? Did he have a girlfriend, or worse, a wife? Damn it, why was he here? It was obvious he wasn't looking for money. His

clothes looked expensive and tailor-made to suit his taut body. Her eyes closed as she remembered the feel of his skin against hers. She could almost smell it, the sandalwood and spice penetrating her senses and sending desire through her body.

She frowned and opened her eyes. He looked fresh, alive, almost feral. He reminded her of a college student out on a late-night prowl from pub to pub. No, Zach wasn't suffering. Chloe wondered if he ever had.

What could he possibly want from her now? Did he think to claim her after all this time?

She sighed, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. Whatever his reasons, Chloe knew she couldn't see him again. Nothing good could come of it. She had responsibilities and obligations, promises and duties. To walk away would be unthinkable.

"You're playing."

Chloe jumped, her hands jerking away from the piano keys as she turned toward the voice. "Dad, you scared me."

Her father stepped from the doorway and made his way over to her. "I haven't heard you play in years."

Chloe looked at her hands in her lap. "I know."

Her father hooked his finger under her chin and raised her head to meet his gaze. "I miss it."

Tears welled up behind her eyes. How she wished she could tell her father about the rooftop and Zach, about how betrayed she felt. She pulled her head away and looked at the piano.

Her father sighed and raised a mug to his lips. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled her nose, causing tears to sting her eyes. Zach had loved coffee in the morning too. The stronger the better.

She had always marveled at how poorly Zach and her father got along. They were so much alike—right down to how they were both trying to manipulate her life.

"It was wrong of me to put so much pressure on you."

Her blood ran cold as she looked up at him. "Dad?"

Emotion etched his features. “When your brother died, we were at such a loss.” He reached out and ran his thumb down the side of her cheek. “We were afraid for you, Chloe. I wanted to do everything I could to make you safe and to secure your future.” He dropped his hand and straightened. “I’m afraid I may have pushed you too hard.”

“No, Dad.” She stood and took his hand.

He stopped and squeezed her fingers. “Chloe, you are such a treasure, you know that? I really don’t know how we would have survived without you.”

“Oh, Dad.” She wrapped her arms around him.

He squeezed her tight. “Just let me provide for your future, pumpkin. I need to know that you will be taken care of. Karl—”

She stepped out of his arms. “I can’t marry Karl.”

Her father’s expression turned sad. “Karl is a good man. He comes from a well-established family. Between his inheritance and yours, you will never want for anything. Please reconsider your answer to his proposal.”

Chloe shook her head. “I don’t love him.”

The corner of her father’s mouth twitched. “That’s good, pumpkin. Love will bring you nothing but heartache.” He took a sip from his mug before continuing. “The best we can hope for in this life is a few fleeting moments of happiness before we die.”

Her thoughts turned to Zach. Her father got that right.

He patted her hand. “Promise me you’ll think about it.”

He was hurting, and Chloe suspected it was from more than her outburst last night. Her parents had been strangers living under the same roof for quite some time now. She didn’t know the details, nor did she want to. Her father was unlucky in love and alone in life—just like her. If she left, it would break his heart.

“Okay, Daddy.”

Relief washed over his features. “Good.” He held out his hand. “Now come. You’ve been moping around all morning. It’s Christmas Day, and your mother is waiting for us in the living room. You know how she gets when she has gifts to open.”

Chloe smiled and hooked her arm around his waist. "I'll be surprised if anything is still wrapped, knowing her."

Her father laughed as he led her away from the piano and her turbulent thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe felt drained. As usual, her parents had bought her too many useless things, and they had spent the better part of the day opening presents. Her mother had gone out, saying that she was meeting up with some friends, and her father retreated to the library. Chloe was going to go to her room to lie down for a while, but as she passed this room, she was once again drawn to the piano.

Zach was right. It was a pity she had stopped playing. How could she let go of something she loved so much?

She ran her fingers over the shiny black exterior and sighed with longing. What was Zach doing now? Was he back in his hotel room, or had he already left for Vegas? She sat down and flipped up the fall.

A small blue box tied to a note stared back at her.

She whipped around in her seat, but the room was empty. Chloe eyed the window suspiciously and picked up the box.

It was for her.

She pulled on the white ribbon and let the note fall in her lap. Should she open the present or note first? After a moment's deliberation, she opted for the note. She placed the box next to her and carefully opened the envelope.

It was from Zach. It was an apology. He said he wanted to start over and offered a little Christmas present as a peace offering.

She shook her head. Starting over was impossible. Family came first; her father came first. Her head told her to crumple the note and throw it and the box out the window, but she couldn't.

The note continued to say that over the years when his boss, Josh, sent him to different parts of the world, he had collected things that reminded him of her. He was offering one of the items to her now as a peace offering, with a promise of more to come.

He hoped she would wear them and think of him.

*Them?*

If she were a good girl, she would throw away the note and the box before her father found them. Chloe picked them up and walked to the door, intending to do just that.

Standing in the empty hallway, she debated what to do. She listened, but she heard no sounds of life. If she opened it now, took just one quick peek, she could close up the box and throw it away.

She hurried up to her room and closed the door. Sitting down on the pink comforter, she set down the note and took a deep breath.

What did Zach find that made him think of her? What had he been collecting?

She opened the box. It was a full minute before she could comprehend exactly what was in the middle of the soft, black velvet cushion.

*Nipple rings.* For eleven years the man had been collecting nipple rings for her?

Chloe didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Pulling one out, she wrinkled her nose and held it up to the light. It was a simple silver ring with a small chain hanging from one end. At the end of the chain was a tiny music note with a diamond in the center.

He wanted her to *wear* this? The whole concept of nipple rings was crazy. They were crass and dirty and...

She turned toward the mirror at the foot of the bed and held the ring up to her nipple.

Kind of sexy.

She slid her lower lip between her teeth as she thought of Zach finding the rings in the store and thinking of her. How he would massage her breasts, bringing them to sharp peaks so she could take the rings.

How he would help her take them off...

What was she doing? She threw the box and the note into the bottom of her drawer in disgust. She couldn't let Zach back into her life. Not now, not ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe leaned over the balcony of the second floor and watched the guests mingle at the party below. The crowd was the usual suspects. Two hundred of her parents' closest friends and

colleagues drank and laughed beneath the fluorescent lighting, milling around until the clock struck twelve and they could all ring in the New Year together. Her parents had been putting on this party as long as she could remember. She had always loved it. It signified new beginnings.

Then why was she so miserable?

She knew why. It had been almost a week since she had seen Zach, and she was no freer of his spell than she was that night in the hotel room. After the Christmas present, he had tried to call her on her cell phone. She didn't want to think about how he managed to get her number. When she let it go to voice mail, he sent more notes, more gifts, and then flowers. Her father had raised an eyebrow, but she could only shrug. She ordered the servants to throw everything in the trash, unopened.

She used her piano as a distraction. She knew she would never be able to pursue the career as a pianist she had once dreamed of, but she found playing to be soothing. At first she was rusty, but it didn't take long for her to perfect a few of her favorite songs. With every phone call or doorbell ring, she would retreat to her piano and lose herself in another piece.

Then, two days ago, everything stopped. No more phone calls or notes or gifts. She should have been thankful. But instead she felt ill.

This was for the best. *It was*. Despite everything, she found herself back in her room, rummaging through her drawers and once again holding the nipple rings up to her breasts. In a moment of weakness, she had massaged herself, pinching and twisting her mounds while she watched herself in the mirror. She imagined Zach there, watching her pleasure herself. Soon her thong was damp, and her nipples stood at attention. She slipped on the rings and examined herself in the mirror.

She hated to admit it, but they felt good. Really good. By wearing them she felt closer to Zach. So, against her better judgment, Chloe threw on her shirt, then her favorite cardigan, and headed to the party.

For the past hour every time she moved, she had felt the rings rub against her breasts and had thought of Zach. She became hot and needy, even breaking out in a light sweat. It was enough for her mother to notice and send her upstairs to rest for a while.

As if she could think of resting while wearing these rings.

She stood on the balcony above the great hall and watched Karl as he made his way through the crowd. He was obviously looking for her. Chloe ducked into the shadows. After the talk with her father, she agreed to see Karl, at least temporarily. She couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right with him, though. After being with Zach, Karl's politeness seemed cool, his affections forced. He was nice enough, but there just wasn't anything there. She doubted there ever would be.

Maybe her father was right. Would she really need love in a marriage? Would she need passion and heart? Karl was a nice man, a good man. Maybe it was enough.

Chloe swallowed the lump in her throat and moved away from the balcony. Time to take her place by Karl's side and play her part as perfect hostess.

"You didn't answer my calls."

Chloe froze as the deep voice rumbled through her. "Zach," she whispered. Heat crept up into her cheeks, and she had to remind herself that he didn't know she wore his rings—or her wicked thoughts.

"Why, Chloe?"

She moistened her lips and ignored the tingle of excitement running through her body. "Because I can't see you." She tried to move away but stopped when she felt his hand on her arm.

"Why?"

He sounded hurt, defeated. She turned and gasped at his ragged appearance.

"Just hear me out. I can explain everything."

Zach appeared larger, more dangerous. Maybe it was just the lighting, although he looked like he had slept as poorly as she did this past week. She pushed back the urge to go to him and held up her hand. "It doesn't matter. You're forgiven."

He dropped his arm. "I'm...what?"

It didn't matter what he did in his past. It didn't. A relationship with Zach wouldn't work regardless. They were too different. She had made a promise...

“*Love will bring you nothing but heartache.*” Her father's words rang in her ears. He'd loved her mother, and look what it did to him. Her life would be the same; she knew it. Just these past few days knowing Zach was alive had been unbearable.

“You're forgiven, Zach. Now if you'll excuse me...”

“Wait a minute.” He snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her back into his rock-hard chest. She yelped as he turned her to face him. “If I'm forgiven, why didn't you answer my calls?”

“Because there's nothing more to say.”

He shook his head. “But on the roof—you were hurting.”

She stiffened. “Yeah, well, not anymore. Things have changed. *I've* changed.”

“People can't change that quickly.”

*No, they can't, but they can mask their feelings to deaden the pain.* “It was a moment of weakness caused by too much champagne, that's all. Now if you'll excuse me...”

He hooked his finger under her chin, holding her with his gaze. “I don't believe that,” he growled.

She jerked her head away. “Well, you don't have to. It's the truth.”

He leaned in, and her breath caught. Would he kiss her? At the last minute he tilted his head, bringing his nose within inches of her neck. His grip tightened as he took in a deep breath. “You're turned on.”

“What? No.” *Damn him.* How did he know? She had to get out of here.

He lifted his head, his eyes shining bright as a slow smile slid across his lips. “Are you wearing my present?”

“Don't flatter yourself.” Chloe placed her hands on his chest to push him away, but his gaze gave her pause. Something dark and feral flashed across his features; then it was gone.

“Kiss me, Chloe.”

“What?”

He smiled a cocky half smile that brought out his dimple and made her heart flutter. “Just one kiss. If after that you can walk away, I won't bother you anymore.”

*He won't bother...* Chloe took a deep breath. "Okay, just one kiss, though." She moistened her lips as anticipation rippled over her skin. "Then you leave."

"Only if you want me too."

So egotistical. Of course she wanted him to leave.

Sort of.

Maybe.

*Shit.*

Chloe curled her fingers into his silk shirt and held her breath. He leaned in, and she closed her eyes. His warm breath brushed against her cheek; his heady scent hovered in the air. She felt light-headed, needy. Parting her lips, Chloe felt the tendrils of desire and anticipation swirl up over her skin.

The kiss wasn't gentle, nor was it pleading. This was a hard, demanding, possessive kiss that left her senses reeling and her thong damp. His hands were everywhere as his tongue invaded her mouth. Chloe braced herself against the onslaught of emotions crashing through her body. She clung to his shoulders, aware of her own need rising up and mingling with his own.

He dragged his hands over her ass. With a low growl, he squeezed her and lifted her into the air. Chloe wrapped her legs around his waist as his tongue invaded her mouth. Turning away from the balcony, he moved to the alcove on the other side of the hallway and pushed her back up against the far wall.

*Oh God, he isn't going to...*

"Shh." Zach pulled back just long enough to issue his warning. Using the wall for leverage, he pulled her shirt from her skirt.

"Zach, we can't—"

He kissed her hard, scattering her thoughts. Need burst inside her, winding her muscles tight. She clung to him as he slipped his hands underneath her shirt and ran his rough fingers along her skin.

"Let me see. I know you wore them," he whispered against her mouth.

Chloe gasped as his fingers brushed over the lace of her bra. A low growl surrounded her, and she closed her eyes.

*Yes.*

He nipped her lip as he freed her breasts, then leaned back to inspect them. "They're beautiful. Such a perfect fit." He caressed them, then tugged lightly on one of the chains. She gasped as pain and pleasure raced into her system. Leaving the rings, Zach smothered her moan with his mouth as she wiggled, eager for more.

He broke away and trailed hot kisses down her neck. "I need to be inside you, Chloe."

She opened her eyes. "No."

He lifted his head to stare at her. Chloe thought she saw a flash of golden fire before they settled into their deep green color.

"We're out in the open," she explained.

He pushed her skirt up until it encircled her waist. "They're all at the party downstairs."

"But someone will see us."

He ran his fingers over her outer thigh, making her shiver. "But they won't."

She heard him pull his zipper down and free his cock.

"Someone could come up the stairs."

"Why? There's nothing here." He kissed her, this time his lips felt soft and gentle against her own. "Besides, we are hidden in this alcove. Someone would have to really look to see us."

Chloe peered over his shoulder. "I can see the party below."

He chuckled. "So much the better."

She gasped as he pulled aside her thong and positioned himself at her opening. Desire rose inside, mixing with her fear of being caught.

"No more acts, Chloe. Let yourself go. Show me the real you."

She shivered. Those were the same words he used on the roof. Before she could think, he kissed her. Emotion rocked her body, leaving her weak. Holding her ass, Zach eased himself inside her.

*Oh God.* Chloe moaned as her body stretched to accommodate him. Every nerve ending felt as if it were on fire.

"I...I can't be gentle, Chloe. I'm sorry. The curse..." He began to move, long, hard thrusts that stoked the fire inside and pulled her up and out of her body. Emotion wrapped around her,

tightening her abdomen and causing her soul to stretch higher. Chloe heard voices, and the fear of being caught excited her. She needed this, needed him. God, how could she ever think that she could live without him?

It had always been Zach. It always would be.

She was doomed, just like her father.

Her nipple rings tightened as her breasts became fuller. The small chains moved between them as Zach pounded his cock into her center. Chloe leaned her head back against the wall and bit her lip to keep from yelling her pleasure. She tightened her legs around him as she rode each wave of pleasure.

Her orgasm crashed through her body with incredible force. Zach covered her mouth, stifling her scream as pleasure burst around her, and her body released. She shuddered, curling her nails into his shirt and biting on his lip. He continued to thrust into her, stretching the pleasure until she was completely spent.

He quickened his movements, grunting his desperation. Locking his jaw, he buried his head in her neck. Teeth scraped against her skin as he spilled his seed inside her. Chloe clung onto him, feeling his body shake as he gave her everything he had.

When it was over, he brushed his lips against hers and then rested his forehead against the wall. Against her better judgment, Chloe found herself once again believing in fairy tales. Everyone got their happy ending. She and Zach could be together. There would be no lies, no obligations to family, no women in Vegas. Just Zach and her.

Minutes passed as their heartbeats slowed, and their ragged breathing returned to normal.

Then the voices around them solidified. Words were spoken, although Chloe didn't care what was said.

Zach pulled out and eased her down the wall. They straightened their clothes. Chloe slipped the nipple rings into her pocket as he held out his hand. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Chloe paused. It was so tempting.

But she couldn't abandon her father. Not after everything he'd done for her.

*It is better not to love.*

She knew her relationship with Zach was doomed. He wasn't being honest with her about his past. Just how many women were waiting for him back in Vegas?

Finally she shook her head. "I can't go away with you, Zach."

"But we just—"

Resolved, she lifted her chin. "Had sex, I know. But it changes nothing. You're a different person now, Zach, and so am I. This"—she waved her hands between them—"could never work."

"Why?"

*Because I love you too much.* "Because I made a promise."

His jaw hardened. "What kind of promise?"

*Never to love, never to let myself become a shell of my former self again.* "A promise to help my parents."

"I can help you. I have money and powerful friends."

She ground her teeth and placed her hands on the banister. "Friends so powerful that they wouldn't let you make one simple phone call to a fiancée who mourned you for dead? Who was desperate for you?" God, she was acting pathetic. Furious, Chloe swatted at the tears stinging her eyes.

His heat surrounded her as he approached from behind. His spicy scent hung in the air as he snaked his arms around her waist. "Something...happened to me out in the woods that night with Marcus. I was changed."

She swallowed. "If you mean the scar on your neck, you must know that wouldn't have mattered."

He rested his chin on her shoulder and followed her gaze to the party below. "Worse than the scar."

She turned her head to look up at him. "Where? I don't see anything."

"Some scars you can't see, at least not clearly." He kissed her forehead. "I thought you would be better off without me."

She turned to face him. "And now?"

His grip tightened around her waist. She looked down at his hands and straightened.

"I was wrong." The dark blue box appeared small in his hands.

Her heart stopped. "What's this?"

He shrugged. "A late Christmas present." Zach opened the box and pushed it into her hands.

"Zach..."

"Marry me, Chloe."

*Oh no. No no no.*

"I'm sorry I left you and didn't call. You deserve better than that. Hell, you deserve better than me. But I'm too selfish to let you go again. I know you want me. And I love you. Stay with me."

"I can't."

"I swear I will make it up to you." He closed her hands around the box. "Take it."

She stared at the ring. It was the same marquise-cut diamond they'd picked out all those years ago. She still remembered when she and Zach went to shop for it. It was so beautiful—and so expensive. They couldn't afford it, but Zach, in all his bravado, promised that it would be on her finger one day.

And here it was. And here *he* was. Everything she had ever wanted in life.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she turned away. Looking over the banister, she saw her father talking with her mother. They were arguing about something in low, sharp voices. Her mother stiffened, curled her fingers into a fist, and stormed away. Chloe's heart sank as she watched her father's shoulders slump in defeat. He made his way over to the bar and poured himself a drink.

*"Love will give you nothing but heartache."*

She owed so much to her family. She had loved Zach once, yes, but things were different now. She knew nothing about him. There was still something very wild and feral about him, something that both attracted and frightened her. While it was great pretending to be wild and free, Chloe knew deep down she was too responsible to be that way forever.

She turned away from the balcony. "I'm sorry, Zach. I can't marry you; I can't even see you."

He lowered his arm. “Why?”

Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked them back. The only way to be rid of him was to make a clean break, hurt him before he could hurt her. She focused her gaze at the grandfather clock in the corner of the hall. The hands move painfully slowly, the steady movement of the pendulum reminding her of the metronome on her piano. There was only one lie that would hurt him enough to make him leave her. Chloe's throat went dry. “Because you're beneath me, Zach.” They were the same words her father had used to kick him out of the house all those years ago. She suppressed a flinch as she saw Zach's jaw harden. “I'm an heiress to Bradford Enterprises. My marriage must be chosen with care to protect the family assets.”

God, she hated herself sometimes. This was necessary, though. She would never let Zach hurt her like that again. Chloe swallowed and faced him. Zach's features contorted in anger.

She had to get out of here, clear her head. “Good-bye, Zach.”

“Oh no you don't.” Zach spun her around until she crashed into his chest. “You're lying. I can see it in your eyes.” He leaned over, running his cheek over hers and placing his lips within inches from her ear. “I can smell your desire.” He nipped her lobe, sending shivers through her body.

He leaned back and looked her directly in the eyes. “Look at me, Chloe, and tell me the real reason you're running away.”

## Chapter Six

“I'm not running away.”

She was lying. Zach could sense her fear and uncertainty. But why?

Anger surged within him. The full moon was long past. Normally the wolf was dormant during this time, but there was something about this place—no, it was Chloe—that kept his wolf half dangerously close to the edge. He had heard of such things happening when wolves found their mates. The intense emotions touched them on a primal level, bringing out their animal instincts. Only branding the mate—leaving their mark—would calm the beast inside. A mated wolf was different. They didn't feel the moon's pull as strongly and could resist the change. Over time, they became immune to the insanity that tempted them. Or maybe it was something about the sex that kept them sane. Wolves only mated with other wolves, however. Human mates were...dangerous. Their entire society could be exposed. They could be captured, tortured in the name of science. And yet...

The fierce possessiveness that consumed him whenever she was around was unmistakable.

Zach whirled her away from him until she gripped the edge of the balcony with her hands. He leaned closer, her scent surrounding him and penetrating his rage. Desire flowed freely through his body.

He leaned over her back. He heard her heart flutter with excitement, smelled the depth of her arousal. What he wouldn't give to plunge himself deep into her center once more.

What if it were possible? What if his kind could mate with humans? Would she really want that kind of life?

He tightened his grip on her arms as he leaned in close to her ear. “Do you really want to join them, Chloe? Is that where you belong?” He felt her stiffen under his touch. Encouraged, he continued. “You never used to want to be a part of this world. Remember how we would escape to the roof and talk about the future? Do you remember what you told me?”

His gaze moved to her father, who was talking to a man at the bar. Zach thought he had seen the man before, the night on the roof. What had her father called him? Kevin, Clark...?

Chloe shook her head and returned her gaze to him. "Don't do this, Zach."

He raised his brow at the tears on her cheeks. She was crying. What was going on? Cradling her face, he wiped them away with his thumbs. "You told me that you didn't like this lifestyle. That you got a scholarship to Juilliard. We were going to move out of here, start a family..."

She grasped his wrists as the tears continued to pour down her face. "Don't, Zach. Please." Her voice shook, betraying her emotions. She still cared about him. He could feel it.

He let her lower his hands and laced his fingers with hers. "What happened, Chloe?"

"The same could be asked of you."

Zach sighed and brought her hands to his lips. Turning them palm up, he traced the lines in her palm. "I wanted to contact you. You have to believe that."

"Why didn't you?"

"I'm..." The words caught in his throat. "I'm not who you think I am. You deserve better."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"I'm cursed, Chloe."

She frowned. "You can't be serious."

"That was no ordinary wolf that attacked us in the woods. It killed Marcus and left me...changed. At the time I couldn't handle it. I had to get the curse under control first." He dropped her hand and lifted his gaze to hers. "But I never, not once, stopped thinking about you. Deep down, you were the one who gave me the strength to fight. Knowing you were safe and happy gave me peace." He lifted her hand and kissed her palm. She gasped, her fingers trembling beneath his lips. Zach closed his eyes and let the scent of her arousal surround him. He flicked his tongue along the inside of her wrist, making her gasp. Her wall was shattering. He pulled her to him and rested her arm around his shoulder. Sweeping her up into his arms, he kissed her firmly on the mouth.

She was his. The wolf wanted to claim her, but Zach refrained. He wouldn't claim her until she willingly accepted his mark and knew all the risks. It would mean telling her about his past, but it was a risk he was willing to take. Chloe was worth the risk.

Zach nibbled on her lip, relishing her soft moans of approval. Right then and there, he decided that she was coming back with him to Vegas. He had to go back. Josh would want his report, and he couldn't let his friend down. Josh and his clan had done so much for him, even adopting him as part of the pack. He couldn't turn his back on them.

If Chloe had his mark, the pack would accept her as his mate. She would have a home. Somewhere she could play piano day and night and pursue her dreams. Zach would make it happen for her. He had saved up enough money from Josh's casino business for both of them to live comfortably.

Chloe whimpered, drawing him back to the present. The urge to mark her overwhelmed him, but she had to be willing. Marking her without consent could kill her.

He stared down at the beautiful yet dazed woman before him. "Tell me why you don't want to see me."

Chloe opened her mouth and closed it again. Zach suppressed another round of rage. Her father was behind this; he knew it. The man was always driving them apart. Somehow, the man must have found out what was going on.

Thanks to the attack in the woods, he almost succeeded. But not anymore. Zach was back, and he wouldn't leave until he had Chloe with him.

"Zach, I—"

His cell phone rang from his jacket pocket.

"Maybe you should—"

"Leave it." Zach took her hand. "Talk to me, Chloe."

She opened her mouth but was interrupted by the phone again.

Swearing, he put Chloe down and pulled the phone from his pocket. "Yeah."

"I need you back here. Now."

Zach straightened. "Josh."

"Your trip is done. I expect you on the next plane."

“What's going on?”

“I'll fill you in when you get here.”

Zach frowned at Chloe and turned to the side. Josh was alpha, and Zach had no choice but to obey. “What happened?”

“Lydia.” The name sent a chill down Zach's spine. Lydia was the sister to Eric, the leader of the rival pack that had moved into town just before Zach left. Josh had suspected that there was going to be a territorial dispute, and he sent Zach out to evaluate Houston as a possible rallying point if they needed a hasty retreat.

“Have things accelerated, then? Where is she?”

Zach saw Chloe frown out of the corner of his eye.

“Last night she and a couple of her minions broke into my office and stole my laptop.”

“Are you sure it was her?”

A low growl came over the phone.

Zach frowned. “Josh? What the hell is going on over there?”

Silence. Zach was about to hang up when Josh finally spoke. “It was Lydia, all right. Her scent is all over everything.”

Zach shifted farther away from Chloe. “I can get you another laptop.”

“This isn't about the damn laptop. It's about the list I keep on there—but I'll handle it. We've got bigger problems right now. She's contacted her brother in Atlantic City. My sources seem to think they're going to make their move soon.”

“Shit. I didn't think Lydia had it in her.”

“This isn't some game, Zach. They found out I sent you to Houston. You need to get back here before they find you. You're fucking exposed out there by yourself.”

Zach looked at Chloe, who looked about ready to explode. “I have a situation here.”

“Whatever it is, it can wait. This is important.”

“This is important too.” God, Josh was going to kill him for this.

Silence stretched. “It's her, isn't it? Chloe.”

“Some stuff happened. I didn't mean to talk to her.”

Josh swore. "I told you to stay away from her."

"I know, but you see—"

"Later. Right now I need to focus on getting that list back, and you need to focus on getting your ass out of Houston."

That list... It had the names of their high rollers. Big-name wolves who wished to keep their wolf halves private and out of the public eye. They paid handsomely for seclusion each and every full moon so that they had somewhere safe to go. Josh's club had been a sanctuary for the wolves, a place where they could be free to gamble and play without fear of being discovered or ridiculed. A place where they could bring out their inner wolves without fear of hurting anyone. A place where they could find soft bodies to quiet the rage.

If those names got out to the other packs, there would be a lot of very angry wolves at their door.

Damn it. For once in his life, he didn't know what to do. Lydia would use those names as leverage to discredit Josh's casinos and have her brother's pack take over. At best, all their casinos would fold. At worst, Lydia and the wolves on the list would expose their pack, and the government would investigate them.

If anyone started digging around their books, then many more packs would be in danger as well.

"Just give me a little more time," he said.

A muttered curse filtered through the line. "You have twenty-four hours to get the situation under control, Zach. I want you on a plane and heading back to Vegas by tomorrow night."

"But—"

"Bring her if you must; I don't care. Just make sure she's marked before you do."

"She'll survive the mating?"

"I've never seen wolves take on human mates, but I've heard of it happening before. You don't have a choice if you want to bring her here. She won't be safe otherwise."

"Thank you."

Josh swore again. "Just get back here before those wolves find you."

The line went dead.

*Shit.*

He put the phone back into his pocket and returned to her. "I have to go, Chloe."

Chloe pursed her lips together and shifted her stance. "Of course you do. Did Lydia finally get tired of waiting?"

Zach touched her shoulder. "It's not like that."

She stepped away from him and toward the stairs. Despair filled him as her anger stabbed his gut like a knife. "It's exactly like that. How dumb do you think I am?"

"Don't use Lydia as an excuse for us not to be together. She's nothing to me."

"Nothing? Is that why you are going back to Vegas? For nothing?"

He sighed. "I want you to come with me."

She shook her head. "No, Zach. You don't. You are so used to getting your own way. Well, this time, you can't have it all."

"Chloe..."

"You stayed with her and didn't bother to call me. We're through, Zach." Her voice hitched, and she spun away from him.

"It's not what you think. She's destroying everything my friends and I have done in Vegas. We're trying to stop her before..."

But Chloe wasn't listening. He watched her retreating form as she ran down the stairs. She deserved to know the truth, but he couldn't follow her into the party. The risk of being discovered was too great.

Maybe he should just leave. If Josh was right, then within days, he would have a pack of angry wolves after him. The hotel staff had seen him with Chloe. They could be bribed. Would Eric and his pack come after her? He couldn't leave her behind to face those monsters alone.

Zach formed fists at his sides. Josh had given him twenty-four hours. By tomorrow night he would be going back to Vegas with Chloe by his side. He would prefer it if she went willingly, but he would bind and gag her if he needed to. He wouldn't lose her again.

Not now. Not after everything that had happened.

It would kill him.

## Chapter Seven

Zach barely suppressed a growl as he watched Chloe speak to the man beside her. *Karl*. There was a relationship there, but not one of mutual affection. He didn't sense the arousal or possessiveness that would be accustomed with mates. For this, he was grateful. When he first saw them together, his instincts howled in frustration. Even now the man's casual arm around her waist was enough to send him into one of his rages. The only thing that kept him in check was the cool demeanor Chloe held with him. Karl seemed distracted, and Zach's acute hearing picked up enough to know that the man was more interested in the Bradford family business than Chloe Bradford.

Well, Karl could ask as many questions as he wanted. Zach wouldn't let him weasel his way into the family—or into Chloe's life.

The feelings were odd. Never before had the rage been this powerful outside the full moon. It must be Chloe. She was sending his wolf half into a frenzy. With each passing moment, he grew more and more confident that Chloe would need to become part of his life. There were risks with bringing a human into his world, but as long as he marked her before he presented her to the pack, the others would respect her as Zach's mate. If Lydia had Josh's laptop, she might have learned that Zach was sent to Houston to map out a potential escape route. He was out of options. If she saw Zach with Chloe, then Chloe's life could be in danger. The sooner he collected her and kept her by his side, the better.

Zach's eyes swept around the room, assessing each individual for a potential threat. The wolf in him wanted to jump down into the crowd and drag Chloe to safety. Unfortunately he couldn't do that now. There were too many people, and he knew that even though Chloe was attracted to him, she wouldn't go with him without a fight.

One thing was for certain; he wouldn't leave her here. She was miserable, and he was concerned about what this Karl character would do in his absence.

Chloe and Karl moved across the room, talking to each guest in their path. They were making their way to her parents, who stood off to one side. Zach followed, keeping to the shadows. His physical appearance had changed somewhat since the night of the wolf attack, but not enough to make him unrecognizable to Chloe's parents. He would have to remain out of sight until he could get her back by his side.

His jaw hardened as he watched the couple move to the side of the room. They were leaning into each other, speaking in urgent, hushed tones. Zach attempted to focus his hearing, blocking out the background chatter and focusing on the conversation.

It was difficult. There was too much noise around him. He would have to move closer. Carefully, Zach inched his way around the room until the voices were clearer.

“Would you like a drink, sir?”

A growl slipped out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“Oh.” The waitress took a step back. “There's going to be a toast.”

Zach checked his growl. He had to blend in long enough to get close to Chloe. He took a champagne glass. “Thanks.” Steeling his emotions, he returned his gaze to the couple in the corner. He was close enough now to hear a part of the conversation.

“Your father thought it would be better if we went together,” Karl said.

Zach straightened as Chloe's hands formed fists at her sides. “I don't need anyone to help me. I've been doing these trips for years.”

Zach's eyes narrowed on Karl. Just what, exactly, did he think he was doing?

“I only thought it would be nice if we could take the trip together. I hear Paris is very nice this time of year. I could go to all those boring meetings for you while you explore the city. Then we could meet for dinner.”

Zach took a step forward as Karl ran his finger over Chloe's shoulder. The wolf inside him sprang to life, ready to tear apart the intruder who dared to touch its mate.

Chloe pulled away. “I'm going to have a talk with my father about this. He shouldn't interfere...”

Zach continued to advance. He could feel Chloe's tension—and her anger. It was obvious he was going to try to take over the family business. The question was, did her father approve?

The wolf in him wanted a fight. It wanted to dominate. This time he wouldn't hold it back.

A waitress reached the couple before Zach could get close enough. "It's time."

Karl held out his arm. Chloe sighed as she followed him to the front of the room where her parents were waiting.

Zach wanted to follow but held himself in check. Something wasn't right. Karl appeared too confident for someone who was just refused. There was a certain swagger, the way he held his head high, that suggested he had something up his sleeve.

Zach pulled back on the wolf and slipped up to the rear balcony so he could keep his eye on Karl and Chloe's father. From this vantage point he could keep the entire room under his vision. A cold chill rippled up his spine. They were up to something. Zach knew, now more than ever, that he had to get Chloe out of there tonight. The sooner they left this mess behind, the better.

Glasses clinked, and the conversation in the hall hushed as guests turned to the Bradfords assembled at the front of the room.

"Good evening, and welcome to our annual New Year's Eve party. This has become sort of a tradition..."

Zach focused on Karl as Chloe's father dragged on. The man stood straighter, his head higher. What was he up to?

"And tonight's extra special, since we have an announcement." Chloe's father continued.

Murmurs spread throughout the crowd as Chloe turned to her father in confusion.

"Tonight, I'd like to announce a new addition to Bradford Enterprises and to our family." Chloe's father looked fondly at Karl and his daughter before continuing. "My daughter, Chloe, has become engaged to Karl Radcliffe. A spring wedding is planned."

"What?" Chloe stumbled back a step and pulled her hand from Karl's grasp. She never agreed to this. What was going on? She distinctly remembered saying no on Christmas Eve. Chloe stared at her father in shock.

He moved over to stand between her and Karl. Wrapping his arm around her waist, her father brought her up next to Karl. "I'll explain later," he whispered.

A glass was shoved into her hand. She looked to her mother, who seemed more enamored with her latest lover than anything that was going on in her family. Never in her entire life had Chloe felt so defeated, so utterly used.

So hopeless.

“To Chloe and Karl.” Her father raised his glass. “May they have a long and beautiful life together.” He took a long sip, and Chloe looked around the room in shock as everyone did the same.

*No. No no no.*

Some glass shattered in the back of the room. The loud noise echoed in the great hall, causing everyone to turn. Chloe blinked back the stunned tears and dragged her gaze to the back of the room.

A loud, inhuman cry rang out around her. The catering table knocked over, spilling food everywhere. Next a sculpture toppled, cracking into pieces and scattering over the floor.

The room was in chaos. People were screaming and running all over the place. Chloe flicked her gaze across the room.

Zach.

But it wasn't Zach, not really. He looked larger than before, more feral. His intense yellow eyes stared at her. He was pushing aside the sea of people, knocking structures over in his wake. A delicate sculpture here, a food tray there.

“What the...?” Her father motioned to security. “Stop him.”

“No.” Chloe tugged on his arm, but it was no use. Uniformed men melted from the shadows and surrounded Zach.

That was when things really got bad.

Chloe cringed as the group attacked Zach. “Daddy, please, stop.”

Zach didn't look right. He flexed his fingers at his sides and then ran his long nails across a security guard's chest.

He cried out as another guard attacked him from behind. The sound was more dog than man, and it sounded furious.

Her father put her hand in Karl's arm. “Get her out of here. I'll deal with this.”

She felt Karl's gentle tug. Every instinct inside her told Chloe to turn away, yet she couldn't. All she could do was to sit and watch in stunned horror.

Zach's teeth were longer, and soft hairs broke out on his skin. *What the hell...?*

"Come on." Karl pulled her toward the exit. "I promised your father I'd get you to safety."

Zach was trying to get to her. Flashing his sharp teeth, he made a trail of terror through the sea of people. Only she could stop this madness. Chloe broke from Karl's grasp and took a step forward.

"Are you mad, woman?" Karl reached for her, but she avoided his hands.

She moistened her lips as she watched Zach. She wasn't sure why, but there was something about him, something about the way he fought, that touched something deep inside her.

He was trying to save her from her family.

And if there was any time Chloe wanted someone to save her from her family, it was now.

"Come on." Karl's touch was no longer gentle, and Chloe had no choice but to move away.

"No!"

Chloe jerked around. Zach had cut down the last of the guards. Leaping onto one of the tables, he locked his eyes on her.

A shiver ran down her spine. Chloe knew she should be afraid of this man, very afraid. Yet, he was still Zach. Her eyes raced over his body, taking in the blood and cuts. He was hurting.

He needed her.

With a primal yell, Zach leaped off the table and landed next to her.

No one should have been able to jump that high. Or that far.

"You're coming with me."

"Zach..." Chloe put her hand on his chest. She could feel the ferocity churning inside him. His skin felt warm, his features hard.

"Oh no you don't, you freak." Karl pulled him away. "I know your kind." He turned to Chloe. "He's nothing but a thug, sweetheart. He'll never be anything. Forget you ever saw this creep." His eyes met Zach's. "Let the authorities handle him."

"Fuck off, Radcliffe."

Chloe gasped and turned to face Zach. Oh God, this was bad.

Karl's whole body shook, but to his credit, the man stood his ground. "She's mine now, freak. There's nothing you can do about it."

Chaos broke out around them as people scrambled out of the way. Zach's jaw flexed, and for a moment, Chloe thought he would attack. Then he disappeared.

*What the...?*

A loud *crack* sounded behind her, and she whirled around. Karl was sprawled out on the floor, his lip bleeding. Zach flexed his fingers and gave her a hard stare. "Don't worry; your fiancé is just unconscious."

Before she could speak, he lifted her in the air and threw her over his shoulder.

"Zach, wait."

He wasn't listening.

"Zach! Put me down."

He leaped up to the balcony. Chloe swallowed the lump in her throat as they went flying through the air. Once on the upper level, she beat his back. "Let me down this instant!"

"Look! It's got Chloe!"

Zach didn't stop. She felt dizzy as he started to run through the halls. They climbed another stairwell, her head bobbing and hitting his back with every step. She felt sick, although she couldn't tell if it was from the jarring motion or the thought of explaining all this to her father.

Down they went again, first through one stairwell, then another. She could hear shouting in the distance. "Zach, please, listen to me. They're going to catch you."

He didn't answer. Instead he paused on the landing before the back door.

"What's going on?" She twisted her body to see in front of them. It was hard to tell, but it looked like people were rushing the stairs.

*Good God.*

Zach turned, giving her a better view of the armed men.

"Oh my God. Don't shoot!"

It was too late. Guns fired, shots echoing around her. Chloe closed her eyes and prayed for her life as Zach took cover behind the large banister. Blood pumped into her head, clouding her thoughts. If Zach would just put her down, she could think of a way to get them out of this.

“Hang on, darlin’.”

“What?” Chloe opened her eyes as Zach flipped her over his shoulder and cradled her in his arms. Instinctively she clutched his neck. He kissed her quick and hard, sending heat and desire bursting through her body. Then he took off at a run away from the stairs.

He wasn't serious...

Chloe screamed and hid her head in his chest as he propelled them both through the second-story window.

## Chapter Eight

“Zach, stop.” Chloe dug her nails into his sides. “Stop!”

Oh God, this wasn't good. How long had they been running? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that she had to stop this madness.

“Please, my head hurts.”

Zach's gait hitched and began to slow.

“I need to rest.”

They had run through the streets until Chloe could no longer tell where they were going. Cuts stung her arms, and she felt dizzy. She needed air, and maybe some water. They had made it to the outskirts of town, she thought. Either that or they were in some kind of park.

“Zach...”

Finally, he lowered her on the ground and turned away. Chloe waited until her head stopped spinning. “You didn't have to do that.”

Zach placed his palms against the nearest tree trunk and rested his forehead on the bark.

“You okay?” she asked.

“You have to go back.”

She frowned and stood. “After you just put on that show back there? I don't think so. You wanted me with you, and for better or worse, here I am.”

His fingers curled into the tree. Small pieces of bark broke off and fell to the ground. “Run, Chloe,” he whispered.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Not until you tell me what's going on. What the hell happened back there?”

He turned around, slowly. Chloe gasped. Zach looked like he was struggling with something. His yellow eyes looked pained. At some point tonight, his features had become more angular. “Are those fangs?”

He closed his eyes and formed fists at his sides. “I’m not well, Chloe. Leave, before I hurt you.”

Chloe took one cautious step forward, then another.

His eyes flew open. “I’m warning you.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Zach.” She wasn’t afraid, just curious. His eyes were hypnotic, and they drew her closer. She touched him. He flinched but didn’t attack her. She ran her fingers down his cheek. There was no denying it—Zach was there, just different. It seemed like he had grown a few days’ worth of beard in a matter of hours. His muscles had grown bigger, his nails longer.

But that couldn’t be possible...

She traced a line down his neck and shoulders in wonder. The steady rise and fall of his chest under her fingers was comforting, if not a little confusing. Surely after the fight and all the running he should be at least a little bit tired.

Zach didn’t seem tired at all. In fact he seemed...energized. Powerful. Raw emotion burned in the air around him, and she found her body responding to it. Her breathing quickened. Her thong became damp. Her skin tingled in anticipation.

Zach swallowed and flexed his fingers. “If you don’t leave now, I...I can’t be responsible for what happens.”

She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I won’t leave you. I want to help.” She pressed her lips against his.

He stiffened, then snaked his arms around her back. The kiss deepened, and Chloe’s senses spiraled out of control. She rubbed herself against him as her need rose within her. Zach’s grip tightened, his fingers digging into her skin. With a growl he pushed her away.

“Zach...”

He turned her around and slammed her back into his chest. “Is this what you want?” He wrapped his arms around her middle and inched his hands over the curve of her stomach. She

gasped, pressing her belly into his hands as he slid his fingers down to the ache between her thighs. He pulled up her skirt, bunching the thin cloth around her hips. “Stupid girl, don't you have any idea how dangerous this is?”

She moaned and raised her arms above her head. He kissed her neck as she drove her fingers into his thick hair.

She was a little frightened. Not of Zach, but of being caught. She didn't delude herself that they were completely alone. The trees provided a buffer, but they were still out in the open. Anyone could walk by. It was...exciting.

He pushed her thong aside and ran the tip of his finger around her opening. “You're so wet. Tell me, are you wet for me or the beast?”

His words were filled with such pain, such longing, that she couldn't help but respond. “You. It's always been you.”

His teeth scraped against her neck as his finger plunged deep inside. Chloe gasped as pleasure swirled through her body. He stroked her, each thrust of his fingers sending a new ripple of pleasure into her bloodstream. Soon she was moving her hips, urging him deeper.

He pulled out and pushed her toward a nearby rock.

“Zach?”

She heard him undo the zipper of his pants. Before she could think, her skirt was around her waist, and his knee was nudging her legs apart. His cock pressed up against her opening. “I need you, Chloe.”

She turned her head and looked back at him. He appeared to be fighting something, and she felt touched. Need and desire burned through her. In this position she felt so primal and wanton. It felt freeing and right. She was meant to be here, meant to soothe his pain. He needed her.

And she needed him. “Then take me.” She pushed her hips back into his waiting cock.

He growled and then, with one hard thrust, buried himself to the hilt.

She groaned as her body adjusted. He leaned over her, covering her hands with his. “You're mine, Chloe. Don't ever forget that.” He pulled out and thrust with such force that she fell forward into the rock. “Mine.”

His quick, desperate movements caught Chloe up in the moment. Her spirit soared. Again and again he thrust into her, sending a myriad of sensations through her body. She curled her fingers into the rock and hung on. Her moans mingled with his growls as their bodies became one. She reached and stretched, her desire burning every inch of her skin. She felt alive and wild, just like the first time on the rooftop. The muscles in his forearms tightened, and his fingers curled around her own. He scraped his teeth over her neck. The act was so fierce, so possessive, that it triggered something deep inside her. She cried out as her orgasm crashed through her body. Pleasure rolled through her again and again, bringing tears of joy to her eyes. Zach's voice mingled with her own as he spilled his seed deep inside her.

When it was over, he collapsed on top of her, pressing her body against the cool rock beneath. For a moment, they both just lay there, catching her breath.

“Fuck, Chloe. I'm sorry.”

“Don't be.”

He pushed himself off her. Chloe let her skirt fall while he adjusted himself.

“You look better,” she said.

He stiffened, his hands on his zipper. Muttering a curse, he ran his fingers through his hair and then lifted her into his arms. Before she could ask what he was doing, he sat underneath a nearby tree and settled her in his lap.

“Zach?”

He nudged her head onto his shoulder. “You can rest here for a few minutes, but then we have to go.”

“Why?”

“We're both in danger.”

“I don't understand.” She sat up and studied the lines of his face. Was his beard disappearing? “What happened?”

He reached out and brushed a stray hair from her temple. “The man who called earlier. That was Josh. My boss. He's worried because there are some people after us in Vegas. They found out that I'm here and are coming after me. Since we have been seen together, they may come after you as well. It's no longer safe.”

She grasped his hand and pulled it away from her face. "I can't go with you, Zach."

His jaw hardened. "You have to come. I can't stay here."

She shook her head. He wasn't going to listen to her, and she was too tired to fight right now. "Please. Tell me what happened back there."

He removed his hand from her grasp and ran his fingers over her arm. "Are you hurt?"

He scraped over one of her cuts, making her whine.

"You *are* hurt." His nostrils flared, and his eyes glowed. "You're right; I never should have taken you. It's too dangerous."

"It's nothing, Zach. I'll live."

He shook his head. "I've gone too far now to go back. You have to come with me, where it's safe."

Chloe blinked as the yellow color in his eyes deepened.

"What's happening to you?"

"I told you that I'm not normal, Chloe. When that wolf attacked me in the forest, I was left for dead. Why he didn't kill me, I don't know. All I know is that I was found by others like me and saved. The wolf's blood mixed with my own, making me this"—he waved his hand over his body—"monster. It wars with me every day. With the beast comes the rage. Most of the time I can control it, but there are only two times when the wolf can gain the upper hand. The first is the full moon. For three nights my body rages uncontrollably, unless I subdue it with sex."

"Did you...?" Chloe swallowed unable to think about Zach with another woman.

He looked away, hiding his changing eyes. "I couldn't do it. Not knowing you were still out here. Every month I had Josh chain me up until the raging passed. That way I wouldn't hurt anyone—or break anything."

"Can I see it? Your wolf, I mean."

Zach shook his head and returned to her gaze. His eyes had changed from yellow to a light green. "No. I can't risk it. When I'm in full wolf form I can't control my emotions—or my actions. I don't remember half of what I do. I won't put you in needless danger. Besides, every time I change, it becomes harder to change back."

“I'm so sorry.” Chloe reached out and ran her fingers along the angular jaw. With most of the rage from the party gone, his features were more human now. More Zach.

Zach caught her hand and kissed the inside of her palm. “It was worth it, Chloe. I couldn't have sex with another woman—not even to tame my inner wolf. Even though the beast had my body, my heart still belonged to you.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and Chloe blinked them back. “What's the other time?”

Zach stopped rubbing his cheek in her palm. “Other time?”

She nodded. “You said there are two times when the beast has become uncontrollable. The first was the full moon, and the second...”

He sighed and let her hand fall to her lap. “The second began as a rumor in one of the casinos.”

“Casinos?”

“Pack casinos. Josh Kyron owns them.”

“Kyron Casinos?” They were some of the most popular—and most infamous—casinos in Vegas.

Zach nodded. “They're sanctuaries of sorts for my kind. There's a casino in front and a haven in back where we can...let our wolf sides run free. Josh has his pack run the casinos. I do most of the computer work.”

Chloe smiled. “I never would have picked you as a computer geek.”

He shrugged. “It's something to focus on. Each month the rages will get worse until we can no longer break free from their grip. We become rabid and volatile. Death becomes welcome.”

“No, there must be some way to resist the change when the moon is full.”

“There is. If a wolf finds their life-mate, it can give strength to the beast. The rages become harder to control, and our emotions more intense. If the wolf then chooses to leave the mate, his inner beast will be harder to control, and he will slip more quickly into insanity. If the mate allows the wolf to mark them, however, then the beast is subdued. The pull of the moon becomes weaker each cycle, and over time, the anger goes away.”

A warm heat washed over her body. “How do you leave your...mark?”

“You've seen me change. You know how long my teeth get. Mating requires our kind to bite our partner during sex. Something about the sharing of blood subdues the beast. There is a price, though. Life-mates are forever joined. Where one goes, the other must go too. If one dies, then the other will follow them to the grave.”

“I had no idea.”

He shifted his gaze away from her. “I believe you're my mate.”

Chloe opened her mouth, but no sound came out. *His mate?* But that was impossible.

“The full moon has passed, yet the wolf remains uncontrolled. It's the only explanation. I need you, Chloe. Come back to Vegas.”

Her heart thudded in her chest. “I have obligations here, Zach; I can't just walk away from them.” Her protests sounded halfhearted even to her ears. After what her father pulled tonight, Chloe didn't feel any obligation to her family whatsoever.

But things were happening so fast... Could she really trust Zach? Was he telling her the truth?

Zach laced his fingers with hers. “You have to. I'm...I'm afraid I won't be able to control the beast otherwise.”

It sure was tempting, but she couldn't just up and leave, could she? Everything she had ever known was here. She shook her head. “I have too many people depending on me.”

Yellow fire burned in his eyes. “Like who? Karl? Your father? They don't care about you, Chloe. They don't need you. Not like I do.” He brushed a stray hair from her face. “You have to come with me.” His gaze flicked to her mouth, sending a shiver up and down her spine. She moistened her lips in anticipation.

“I need you, Chloe.”

Pleasure exploded around her as his mouth brushed against hers. After everything that had happened, Chloe knew she should pull away. She should go home and never look back. Zach was dangerous, and she had a responsibility to her family...

Yet she couldn't do it. For the past eleven years she had hoped he would come back to her. Now Zach was here, and she didn't want to let him go. Ever.

And if he was right, and she could help him...

With a sigh, Chloe relaxed and opened herself up to the kiss. Zach growled and deepened the kiss, but this time his touch was gentler, more in control.

Excitement rippled through her. Karl was never this exciting—or this passionate. She could feel the feral animal in Zach letting go. His hands roamed over her body, sliding over her clothes and tugging at her shirt. Once it was free, he slid his hands underneath and ran them over her skin. Chloe arched her back, eager for his touch.

“Stay with me, Chloe. I need you. It's like a drug...”

Chloe moaned and drove her fingers into his thick locks. She didn't want to hear him talk; her body pulsed with need and desire. Raising her legs, she wrapped them around his hips and pulled him closer.

A dam had been broken, and Zach opened her shirt. She moaned as he ran his long fingers over her bra. She grabbed his hand, pushing it into her breast.

“I need you too, Zach.”

He kissed her again, and Chloe's spirit soared. Freeing her breast, Zach stroked and teased it until her nipple formed a sharp peak in his hands. Chloe's thoughts scattered. She kissed a trail down his neck and shoulder while her fingers worked with the buttons of his shirt. She wanted to touch him, feel his skin under her palms. When the material finally gave way, she sighed and ran her fingers over the muscles of his chest, tangling them in his fine hairs. But it wasn't enough.

As their tongues danced, she trailed her fingers down the ripples of his abdomen and let them hover where the fine hairs thickened just above the top of his pants. He hissed as she tugged at his jeans. He nipped her lip, sending tingles over her skin. Chloe ran her tongue over his sharp teeth, reveling in their feral power. She briefly wondered what it would be like to be bitten by him, to be connected so intimately. She wanted that from him; more than anything else, she wanted to share that intimate bond with Zach.

She could help him.

But her parents...

He pulled away from her mouth and moved to her chest. As he took her nipple in his lips, she lost herself in the sensation. Her thoughts dissolved, and her will weakened. She left his pants and dug her fingers into his hair, enjoying the feel of his mouth on her breast. Her back arched as she moaned her pleasure as he lowered her to the ground. He kissed the underside of

her breast, and Chloe shivered as she felt his teeth scrape against her skin. Down and down he moved, kissing a trail over her abdomen.

Within moments he removed her skirt and his jeans and tossed them aside. Then he was on top of her again. Chloe enjoyed the feel of his weight on top of her. His lips brushed against hers, and Chloe clung to him desperately. Raising her legs, she locked them behind his back. He moved his hips, positioning himself against her opening.

“I won't hurt you, Chloe. I promise.”

He had changed. His eyes had turned a deep yellow, and his muscles bulged from strain. The wolf was just below the surface. It was dangerous to be around him like this, but it only made Chloe more excited. “I know.”

He pushed inside her, and Chloe muffled a cry as her body stretched to accommodate him. Inch by torturous inch, he filled her until he was sheathed completely. Then he buried his forehead against her shoulder. Chloe moaned as heat roared through her body. She ran her fingers up and down his back, enjoying the feel of his enlarged muscles under her fingers.

He groaned and lifted his head. “I'll try to be gentle, Chloe. I promise I won't bite you.”

He started moving before Chloe could refute him. She wanted him to bite her; she needed the connection as much as he did. But when the sweet friction started, she felt the heat burn between her thighs and failed to form the words. Her mind blanked as pleasure coursed through her body. His thrusts quickened, and she whispered his name. Despite the cool air, she felt warm and energized.

Zach balanced his weight on his hands, positioning himself at a better angle. Chloe cried out as he thrust, bringing them both closer and closer to the edge. Her heartbeat quickened, her soul stretched. Every nerve inside her body felt like it was on fire.

Then it happened. Her orgasm roared through her, causing her to arch her back and cry out his name. She shuddered, the force of it rolling over her body and leaving her boneless. She felt him stiffen, his thrusts deepen. Soon his cry echoed around her as he followed her over the edge.

When it was finished, he scooped her up and rolled over onto his back. They lay there for a moment and waited for their breathing to return to normal.

Everything seemed peaceful, quiet. Chloe wished she could stay like this forever.

Then a weird noise sounded from the bushes.

## Chapter Nine

Zach groaned at the familiar cell phone ring. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Leave it," Chloe said.

"I can't. It's Josh." He had selected a special ring for his boss so he would know to answer the call. The tune of "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns N' Roses seemed somehow very appropriate for the older pack leader who found Zach and introduced him to his new family.

Zach reached over Chloe and retrieved the phone from his pants. Chloe made a face as he flipped it open.

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

Zach stared at the sky and tried to suppress his anger. "I told you, I was busy."

Josh was silent for a moment before he responded. "You showed your wolf in public, didn't you?"

It wasn't a question, and Zach knew it was useless to deny it. "Yeah, but it was rather chaotic. I don't think anyone got a good look at me."

Josh whispered a curse. "Okay. I'm sending a team over for damage control. You need to get your ass back here. My sources told me Lydia put out a call to rally somewhere just outside of Vegas. We aren't sure where yet. To make matters worse, Eric's private plane was discovered leaving Atlantic City en route to Vegas."

Zach swore under his breath. If Lydia and her brother got together, then there would be enough muscle to run Josh and the rest of their pack out of town. Chloe raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He turned away and lowered his voice. "There are packs all over the country. Why us? Why now?"

"He's always hated me. As to why now... He knows something we don't, that's for sure. I don't know how they found out you were in Houston. It feels like they're constantly one step ahead of us."

"How could that be possible?"

Josh ignored his question. "Things have gotten out of control here. I'm pulling everyone back."

Zach frowned. "I'll check the flights and call you once I'm in the air." Zach sighed and closed his cell.

Chloe rested her chin on his chest. "What's going on?"

Sweet, innocent Chloe. Zach knew the risks of pursuing her but did it anyway. He didn't want to bring her into his dangerous world, but now it was too late. His wolf side had tasted her and recognized her as its mate. His scent was all over her. Even if they parted, the rival pack might sense the connection and use her against him. It was too risky.

"Remember I told you about the woman who wants to destroy what we are doing in Vegas?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Well, she discovered the file, and now she is threatening to go public with the information."

"What does she want?"

"Money. Power... What they all want."

Chloe thought for a moment. "Josh can't handle it himself?"

"I have to go. I owe Josh so much. Since you now carry my scent, it's not safe for you here either."

"But I'm human. I can't live with your pack."

He shrugged. "Human mates have stayed with us before. As long as you wear my mark, no one will touch you. They know I'd kill them."

Chloe pushed her lips together in thought.

"You'd be completely safe." He kissed the top of her head. "Besides, you'd be with me."

It did all sound good. Chloe knew in her heart that she'd already made up her mind. She was so tired of this life and eager to leave it. There was just one thing holding her back. "I have to say good-bye to my parents."

He tightened his grip for a moment, then let her go. "I understand. We'll go back to the house so you can pack a few things. We have to leave tonight, though. This can't wait."

She nodded.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I think this is something I have to do myself." She looked at her watch. "The party probably broke up by now."

Zach sighed and picked up her clothes. "Here you go." He handed them to her. "I don't feel right leaving you alone with them."

She pulled on her skirt. "But they're my parents."

"I know. I just don't like how your father's using you."

She smiled and kissed him on the forehead. "I'll be fine. Give me twenty minutes to throw some things in a bag."

"You could get some new clothes in Vegas."

She frowned. "Zach..."

"I know I know," he said, waving his hands in the air. "Come on."

They returned to the house and decided to enter through her bedroom window so she could pack before confronting her family. Chloe got to see Zach's superior strength as he took her up the tree to the roof.

"Is that how you got up there that first night?"

"Of course."

"What made you come up here?"

He paused from his examination of her bedroom window and raised his brow.

Chloe played with her hands as she spoke. "You could have contacted me years ago. Why now?"

He shrugged. "Something drew me here."

As if that explained everything.

Zach opened the window and motioned her inside. “Hurry, I’ll be right out here if you need me.”

She shimmied into her bedroom. Zach grabbed her elbow as she began to walk away. “Don’t tell your parents anything about why we are going to Vegas—or about Josh and my pack.”

“Why not?”

“Please, Chloe,” he whispered. “Lives depend on your secrecy.”

She pulled her arm from his grasp. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.” This would make things difficult to explain, but she would respect his wishes.

It took only moments for Chloe to pack a bag. She was never really a vain woman, and she knew Zach was right—she’d be able to buy some more clothes in Vegas. That wasn’t the real reason why she was here.

Once packed, she peeked out her bedroom door. The clinking of glass could be heard from downstairs. The staff must be picking up from the party. If memory served, her mother used to like to retire to her room, claiming such events wore her out. Chloe would try there.

She sneaked down the hallway to her parents’ bedchamber. Although she wanted to say good-bye to her mother, she had no desire to see her father—at least, not until he had time to calm down from tonight’s events.

She put her ear to the door. Hearing nothing, she opened it a crack and peeked in.

“Come in, Chloe.”

Chloe froze.

Her father stood from the chair and faced her. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Where’s Mom?”

He shrugged. “Out with her lover.”

“Oh, Dad, I’m so sorry.” Chloe stepped forward and then stopped. “I have to leave.”

He frowned. “Was that who I think it was with you tonight?”

“Zach, yes. He’s alive.”

He crossed his arms. “The boy has some explaining to do.”

*Damn.* “It's not like that, Daddy.”

“Really? From where I'm standing, he left your brother for dead. For eleven years he has lived his life without so much as a phone call to tell you that he was alive. Now all of a sudden he wants to be in your life?”

Chloe straightened her spine. “I'm not marrying Karl.”

“What? Don't be ridiculous.”

She took a deep breath. “I'm going to Vegas to marry Zach. He has family out there, and a job. He works for Kyron Casinos.”

“Chloe, you are so much better than this.”

“No, Dad, I'm not.” She hurried on when she saw him frown. “I'm sorry, but I'm not the person you want me to be.”

“Chloe...”

She wrung her hands. “I have to go now. We leave tonight.” She stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek. “Good-bye, Daddy.”

He scowled and pointed a finger at her. “If you get on that plane, you can kiss your inheritance good-bye.”

Chloe stiffened and turned around. “That's okay. You can keep your money. We won't need it. Tell Mom I love her and will send her an e-mail explaining everything.” She opened the door.

“You're going to regret it.”

No, he was wrong. For the first time in her life, she wasn't going to regret her actions. Chloe hurried from the room and back to Zach. There was nothing left for her here.

## Chapter Ten

“It’ll be all right.”

Chloe turned from the airplane window and smiled. “I know.” She had told Zach everything her father said. He had been angry for her, but Chloe knew her father was set in his ways. He might change his mind about Zach one day, but if not, then that was okay too. At least now Chloe was the one making decisions about her life. It felt nice.

She leaned against Zach as the plane leveled off in the air and the Fasten Seat Belt light flicked off.

“Did you get in touch with Josh?” she asked.

“I did. He would have sent his plane to fetch us, but the pilot couldn’t be found.”

Chloe straightened. “Was there something wrong?”

“Who knows? I didn’t ask. Josh seemed to lighten up when he learned we were on our way.” He broke out a blanket and covered them both. “You might as well relax. We have a little while before we land.”

Chloe looked around and realized that not many people were on the red-eye flight. “Don’t we have a layover or something?”

He smiled and stretched out next to her. “In addition to business class, my dear, I’ve managed a nonstop flight.”

“Oh.” She felt his hand move up her thigh. “Oh.”

“I’ve always wanted you, Chloe. You have to believe that. I just couldn’t come to you until I had my rage under control.”

Her skirt rose up her leg. She looked around. The seat in front of them was empty, and the couple across the aisle were settling in for the flight. “But...”

He nuzzled her neck. "There's something about you that teases the wolf in me. I don't think it'll be satisfied until it can leave its mark." He nibbled at her neck again, causing a wave of desire to wash through her. "I know I won't be."

"There are people here," she whispered.

"Shh..." His warm breath caressed her neck. "Trust me."

He slipped his hand underneath her skirt and brushed her inner thigh. "Let yourself go."

He nibbled on her ear, and a wave of pleasure washed over her. She slid her lower lip between her teeth and closed her eyes.

"Let me mark you. It'll be safer for both of us." He nibbled a trail down her neck, and Chloe stifled a moan. "You would be safer if you had my mark."

Ah, that was it, a safety issue. Despite everything, Chloe felt a little saddened by his request. She hoped he would want to mark her to make her his, not to make her safe. Still, the thought of sharing a special bond with Zach was arousing.

He had moved his fingers up her thigh, closer to her center. Chloe gripped his shirt as his fingers played with the edge of her panties.

"Well?"

When she didn't answer, he took her hand. "It has only ever been you, Chloe. If you don't want to do this, then just say the word."

"But you said you'd die. The rages would consume you."

"I would never mark you against your will. You have to want this, really want it."

"And your pack? What would they think about a human living with them?"

"They may not like it—in fact, I know they won't—but they'll accept it because you have my mark."

"What if they don't accept it?"

He shrugged. "I'll leave."

It was then that she realized this meant more to him than just keeping her safe. Zach loved her and wanted to be with her. More than that, he was willing to sacrifice his standing in the pack—and his life—to make her happy. She nodded, unable to speak.

"I'm wearing them, you know."

“Wearing what?”

She glanced at her breasts.

He raised his brow. “Really?”

She nodded. “Did you really collect nipple rings for me all these years?”

His devilish grin sent tingles of awareness over her skin. “I’ll show you my collection when we get to Vegas.”

He brushed his thumb over her skin. She gasped as her sensitive nipple responded to his touch. A low growl vibrated in his throat.

“I love it when you do that.”

He smiled and nuzzled her neck. “Is that all you love?”

“Yes.”

He raised his head and frowned.

She smiled. “Maybe.”

He pressed his lips together in thought. “I think there might be something else you like about me.” With a swift motion, he brushed aside the flimsy cotton with his other hand. She cast a quick glance to the couple across the aisle, but they had already gone to sleep.

“Ah, you are so wet for me, darlin’.” He rested his head against her shoulder. “I swear, you make it hard for me to maintain control.”

Chloe loosened her grip on his shirt and slid her hand underneath the blanket.

Zach paused as her hand made its way down to his jeans and tugged at the zipper. He shifted in his seat, giving her better access. She freed him and curled her hand around his thickening cock.

He groaned against her ear as he plunged a finger deep inside. Chloe shivered as pleasure rippled over her. She stroked him, feeling the bead of moisture forming at his tip. He pushed another finger deep inside. Chloe felt hot, breathless. Pleasure built as he stretched her, twisting her muscles.

“So tight,” Zach whispered in her ear.

She gripped tighter.

“God, Chloe. You feel so good.”

He quickened his movements. They continued to tend to each other as the passengers around them slept in their chairs. She felt hot but didn't dare move the blanket. Widening her legs, she wiggled down, burying herself farther under the blankets and pressing against his hand.

He kissed her neck. Chloe closed her eyes as pleasure swirled around her. Higher and higher she was lifted. Zach covered her mouth in a searing kiss as her body exploded in his hand. Stars floated across her vision as her orgasm crashed through her body like an orchestra's finale.

When it was over, he removed his hand. That was when she realized he didn't find his release.

He gently pushed her away from his cock.

“What about...?”

He put a finger to her lips and leaned over her shoulder. His warm breath brushed over her skin as he spoke. “What I want to do, I can't do out in the open.” He leaned back and winked at her. “Follow me.”

It was too dark to see much of anything, but she managed to follow Zach to the back of the plane. “Go on ahead into the bathroom. I'll be along in a minute.”

*Did he mean to...?* Before Chloe could speak, he disappeared.

She turned back to the lavatory and quickly entered it, leaving it ajar. Within minutes he followed and closed the door behind him.

It was cramped, really cramped. Chloe's amazement was short-lived, however, as Zach bent his head, and his lips covered hers. Desire rose, and Chloe shifted so her back faced the door. With a gentle push, she edged Zach onto the only seat available and straddled his lap. He lifted her shirt and slipped his hands underneath. Heat surrounded her as he trailed his fingers up her spine. She wove her hands in his hair, desperate for more. Tilting her head, she deepened the kiss, reveling in the surge of desire that ran through her. He unclasped her bra, freeing her breasts. The chains from the nipple rings swung in the air, tapping the undersides of her breasts. With a swift tug, he lifted her clothes, exposing her skin to him. Cool air brushed against her sensitive nipples, sending sparks of pleasure through her body. She gasped as he massaged and pinched her. Pain and need, heat and pleasure, swirled around in her body, making her light-headed. She broke the kiss, desperate to have him inside her. Chloe ran her hands down his chest and fumbled around with the zipper to his pants.

He chuckled. “Here, let me.” His hands left her breasts and covered hers. Chloe stilled and watched him free himself. She shook with excitement. There was something about the possibility of being caught that heightened her senses and strengthened her desire. She wanted him, desperately.

He freed himself, and Chloe took over, impaling herself on his hard cock. She threw her head back and moaned as the delightful stretching sent heat and need through her body. He wrapped his hands around the small of her back, gently guiding her as she moved on top of him. Fully sheathed, she kissed him, allowing her desire to take control. She brushed his tongue, his teeth, wanting more. A small growl escaped her lips—or maybe Zach's. Chloe could no longer tell where she ended and Zach began.

She framed his face with her hands and slid her body over his cock. He groaned, pushing himself deep inside. Her skin burned, and her senses reeled as sensations rocked her body. She broke the kiss and worked the buttons of his shirt. “Mark me. I want to be a part of you.”

She could see his teeth lengthening, his eyes changing. He looked dangerous and powerful—and he was hers.

She loved the effect she had on him.

“Chloe...”

They moved together as desperation took hold. The room became hot, and the mirror fogged over. Breathing became labored as they both stretched toward their release. She cried out with each thrust, no longer caring if they got caught. Tension and pleasure built, and her emotions spiraled out of control. Curling her fingers into his chest, she felt his muscles changing. They became larger, harder, yet he didn't shift fully. He became something of an in-between, not fully human, yet not wolf either. The same being he was in the park. He squeezed her breasts, the pinching and tugging sending surges of pleasure through her body. Closing her eyes, she let the sensations run through her.

Her orgasm consumed her body, setting her nerves on fire. Each wave rolled through her like notes to her favorite concerto and made her body sing. She felt him stiffen and then draw her close. He buried his head in her neck and licked her skin. Tingles of pleasure rolled through her, heightening her pleasure. He wrapped his arms around her waist. Holding her steady, he pulled her down hard on top of him. She felt a pinch on her neck, and then a new, more intense pleasure

crashed over her. She cried out as Zach filled her body, barely hanging on to her sanity as all the new sensations crashed through her body.

When it was over, Zach let go and licked the spot he had marked. Drawing her close, he buried his nose in her hair. They remained like that for some time, reveling in the closeness they shared.

It wasn't until Chloe heard the knock on the door that she was brought back to reality. Zach put his finger to her lips and bent close to her ear.

“I'll leave; then you follow shortly after.”

She nodded and stood, letting him readjust himself. They shifted again, and he slipped outside. Chloe put her ear to the door and heard him tell someone that she was sick. She glanced at the mirror. Moving her shirt collar, she stared at the mark Zach had left behind.

They were bonded now.

A warm tingle raced over her skin as she looked at the marquise diamond on the hand in the mirror. They'd be married in Vegas, surrounded by people who wouldn't try to change them but would accept them for who they were.

It was a wonderful feeling.

If what Zach said was true, then they would be together for life. Never again would she have to live up to someone else's expectations. She could just be Chloe.

Neither one of them knew what trouble they would find in Las Vegas with Lydia and her brother in town, but Chloe knew that whatever happened, they would overcome the challenge together.

They were bonded for life. And in Zach's world, that meant they would be together forever. She really couldn't ask for a better Christmas present.

Chloe slipped out of the bathroom, flashed a sweet smile at the flight attendant, and went back to her seat.

 THE END 

## Loose Id(R) Titles by Suzanne Rock

*Spyder's Web*

## Suzanne Rock

After over a decade in the scientific world, Suzanne Rock needed a creative outlet. She tried scrapbooking, cooking, crocheting, painting, and piano, none of which held her interest for very long. Then one of her friends suggested writing. Thrilled with the idea of creating her own worlds, she opened up her laptop and never looked back.

Suzanne writes paranormal and erotic romance. When she's not writing, she can be found playing with her two daughters, testing her husband's latest kitchen creations, or curled up with her favorite romance novel in her central Massachusetts home.

Suzanne loves to hear from her readers. When not running the famous 'Cover Clash' at the Embrace the Shadows blog, she can be found feeding her Internet addiction on Twitter and Facebook.