



SOLSTICE HEAT

LEILA BROWN

Loose Id

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www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

“You did what?”

Jason pretended not to hear as Donovan’s voice thundered over the sound of the quiet music he’d started playing in the background. He’d been cleaning the house all morning—not to mention trying to move things so it looked inviting. On the former, he thought he’d done an excellent job, but the latter was an entirely different thing. Hell, he probably shouldn’t have made the changes he had. He put it down to nerves. Nerves that he hadn’t felt since he was a young pup.

“Stop cleaning and tell me you did not just invite some stranger up here in the hope of mating with her?” Donovan’s voice echoed around the room with his barely leashed power buffeting the walls.

“She is not a stranger.” He’d been talking to her online for almost three months now. And yes, he’d asked her to visit to see how they’d suit. If things turned out like he planned, he would take her to the solstice ceremony and turn her. If he changed her before she knew what they were, he’d be trapping her in their world, but he couldn’t tell her and give her a choice. Their pack had very serious laws about outsider knowledge. Anyone who knew was either turned or killed. A policy he’d instituted after the locals started telling tourists the tales of the Climax werewolves.

“And if she doesn’t want to be turned?” Donovan moved around and stood in front of Jason’s wheelchair.

“Why do you think she’s coming early?” Jason pushed the wheels forward, bumping into Donovan. “Do you think I’m into torture? She’ll be the first woman—

the first fuckable woman—I've been alone with since the accident. Well, alone and in any condition to do something about it."

"Why couldn't you just pick one of the women from the pack? Any number of them would gladly move in here and take care of you." Donovan stepped back as Jason hit him with the chair again.

"Really?" Jason angled his head up to stare at Donovan. "Name me one woman in the pack who wouldn't either see bedding me as a duty or as a means of gaining status. Name me one woman who wouldn't look at me with pity in her eyes instead of longing. One woman who would look at me and see the man I am and not the man I was."

Donovan opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked up and to the right as if he mentally went through the list of every emotionally free female of the pack. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again and raised a hand, but after he caught Jason's eyes, lowered it.

"Exactly. I'm getting a new start here. I have no intention of letting you or anyone else ruin it for me. So you're either with me or against me. If you're with me, great. If you're against me, get the fuck out." He knew his old beta well. Donovan might question his choices, might even throw up some alternatives, but in the end he always had his back. Just like Jason had his, even when it had cost him his legs.

* * *

"You have arrived at your destination."

The small mechanical voice droned on as Giovanni Odell looked up at the large, ranch-style house in front of her. She gazed down the wooded drive, wondering if she had been too rash in her decision to come up here. The costs of the flight and rental car were nominal—not even worth the thought—but coming here without backup and without telling her sister where she was going? Not one of her brighter ideas.

No. If she'd told Celestine where she was going, then she would have had to admit to monitoring Celestine's online activities. Although her sister was twenty-

one, Gio had kept her sheltered from the type of man who'd invited—no, demanded—she come up here. Even though Gio had busted her butt to send Cel to an all-girls high school and all-girls college, somehow Cel had fallen into e-mailing an online predator.

Her blood boiled at the thought of what could have happened. Gio released a pent-up sigh and got out of the car. Time to pull up her big-girl panties and deliver a smackdown.

Gio's anger built with every step she took. She kept repeating that this could have been Cel. Her baby sister. She replayed images of Cel growing up through her mind until she could barely hold back her anger, until it was a writhing, seething mass just below her skin. She drew in a deep breath, then rang the doorbell.

Soft, calming music wafted through the door. There was no doubt in her mind now. The door opened, and she saw red.

The man in the doorway stared up at her from just below her breasts. Gio took stock of him. He was a large, muscled man with dark hair and a defined five o'clock shadow. She watched him survey her from the bottom of her toes on up. His gaze rested on her hips, then moved to her breasts and finally hit her eyes. The male appreciation she saw there did nothing to calm her temper. Instead it inflamed her, helped her put aside all the sympathy the wheelchair could have invoked. It wasn't like she didn't know that pervs came in all shapes and sizes. Did he use the wheelchair to elicit sympathy before he pounced on young women?

He wheeled back. "Please come in."

This would be quick. She would tell him exactly what she thought of him and his little lure for barely legal girls; then she was going to stop at the nearest police station before going home.

She stepped over the threshold, looked to the left, and saw another man. Every ounce of control she'd been holding on to swept away. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing—inviting young women up here to such a remote cabin. Did you think Cel didn't have a family? That no one would miss her? You jackass!"

She took a step toward him. He wheeled backward for each step she took forward. He would run out of space first.

“Holy shit!” A large African American man who’d been sitting on a black leather couch farther in the room, stood. The muscles in his arms were almost as large as her calves. She needed to keep her eye on him.

“Oh, so you thought you would bring my little sister up here with your sad story about being in a wheelchair and do some type of gang bang?” She advanced on the guy whose picture she’d found in the last e-mail, determined not to give him any sympathy because he was in a wheelchair. He didn’t deserve any.

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but if you...” The guy’s words trailed off as Gio bent and put her face just a few short inches from his.

“Don’t lie to me. I saw the e-mails you sent my sister. You should have made her get her own e-mail account instead of using mine.” She hissed before pushing his chair back with her right foot.

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but if you’d wait a second and talk to us like a rational—” The second guy put his hand on her shoulder. Surprise lit his face as she grasped his hand and yanked hard. He landed on the ground with a hard *thud*.

She wasn’t a lightweight, and she’d taken enough self-defense courses that she could handle herself. Not to mention the small can of mace in her pocket. She was going to say her piece, and they were going to listen. She was still holding the guy’s wrist as he went to sit up. She twisted until he grimaced, and then stared down at him.

“Stay down.”

As those words left her mouth, she watched the guy in the wheelchair move. More like twitch. He growled at her. Actually growled, like an animal. Then suddenly he *was* an animal. She saw the change with her own eyes. His hair spreading like a rippling wave, the bones in his face cracking and moving under his skin. It seemed to happen in slow motion, but some part of her brain knew only seconds had ticked by. She tried to swallow, but her throat wouldn’t cooperate, and

her scream died before it reached her lips. The beast was now at least two times as large as the man.

“What are you?” She dropped the downed man’s hand and backed away.

The animal crawled out of the chair. He watched like he would love to pounce and cut the distance between them, but with his hind legs out of commission, that wasn’t an option. Instead he stalked her. His body appeared normal, or what she thought a regular wolf should look like. His back legs even seemed ordinary, until you noticed that one hung a bit off the ground. Most of his weight had to be on his front legs. *Shit*. None of that mattered; what mattered was that he was blocking the exit.

“Jason, don’t...” the downed man said.

“Hold him!” she screamed, then shrank down as the wolf’s attention snapped to her. She’d stopped moving backward and inched along the wall, toward the door. The black leather couch and a matching chair were the only things in her way.

The wolf growled at her again. He crouched, and instead of springing on her, he raced along the floor and knocked her down. Before she could move an inch, those large jaws were on her shoulder. She watched them clamp around her flesh and closed her eyes, trying to prepare herself for the skin-rending pain. She counted to three, but when the awful pain didn’t tear her apart, she opened her eyes. Tears slipped down her face, but she couldn’t let the fear roaring through her take hold. If she moved, if those sobs eked out, her entire body would shake, and she would impale herself on his teeth.

“I’m sorry. Please let me go. Please let me go. Please let me go.” Fear made her voice tiny, as if anything too loud would cause him to jerk. Just one more way he could turn her shoulder into a chew toy.

“Don’t move,” the other man said, coming up beside the wolf.

“No shit, sherlock. Tell me something I hadn’t already figured out.” She was scared, not stupid.

The wolf at her ear let out a growl that vibrated against her skin as he tightened his teeth around her. The points felt like tiny pinpricks. She didn't think they'd broken flesh yet, but the slightest movement from either of them would do it.

"You need to stop challenging him. Let your body go limp. He won't let go if you don't submit," the other man said.

Submit? Was he crazy? She was supposed to lay here like a rag doll while a wolf ripped her to shreds? She lifted her head slowly, trying to catch the man's gaze, but was rewarded with the sight of the other man's naked body contorting and shrinking until he was a big black wolf with electric blue eyes.

Was she going crazy? Please let her be going crazy! The brown wolf growled as the black one bobbed his head and let out a high-pitched whine. There had to be a way out of here. If she pulled away from him... Then what? Even though his back legs hadn't moved, he was still faster than any animal she'd seen before.

Time to face facts. She was in deep shit here. Even if she managed to get away from them, they were going to kill her. They couldn't allow her to go to the authorities. *Officer, those two men can shift into wolves, and they tried to eat me.* That would only earn her a one-way ticket to the loony farm. So as far as options went, she didn't have any, except...

Submit. The rank taste of bile filled her mouth as she thought of submitting to this beast. Hell, she'd always assumed if she was ever put in a life and death situation, she'd want to go out fighting. But faced with a gruesome and painful death, she found she couldn't do it. She took in a deep breath, which just pushed those teeth farther into her shoulder. Pain flashed hot along her skin, but she did her best not to react. She let the tension drain out of her and bowed her head in sickening submission.

Chapter Two

Jason shook his head as he watched the woman scramble into his bedroom and lock the door. He concentrated on slowing the rapid rise and fall of his chest. The urge to run powered through him. It seemed his body didn't understand he couldn't run without those two back legs.

Donovan keened beside him. He needed to shift. Donovan wouldn't shift back until he did. The wolf in him balked at the push to shift. It was going to take him a few minutes to overcome the urges the wolf was feeling. The need to run being foremost. He hadn't run since it happened. Hell, with only two good legs and one slimmed down shadow of a leg, he doubted he could run. He'd most likely fall flat on his face if he tried. The wolf whimpered in his head. Jason concentrated on the door in front of him, staring at the wood until his vision started to blur, until he couldn't hear his inner wolf anymore. Then he took in a slow breath and shifted back.

He was lying on the floor...naked. Damn, he'd burst through his clothes. That was a puppy's mistake. Not something a grown wolf did. He looked over at Donovan, who was shifting.

"You should've grabbed me some clothes before you shifted." His voice was gruff, but Donovan smiled.

"I was actually busy trying to make sure you didn't turn your guest prematurely." Donovan stepped into his jeans and buttoned them, then pulled his shirt on. "Especially since I think she isn't exactly what you expected."

He was halfway right about that. She was exactly what her picture advertised. She had caramel brown skin that gave her a healthy glow and long dark brown hair

that hung below her shoulders. Her mouth was deliciously full and definitely looked in need of some hard kissing.

Jason's cock bobbed against his leg. Shit, he'd forgotten how exposed he was. He pulled himself back over to his chair. "I'll be back."

For a second, he was tempted to tell Donovan not to let the woman get away, but one look told him he didn't need to bother. The woman had seen them shift—Actually, that wasn't the biggest issue. No, not by a long shot.

The biggest issue was that he didn't know if he'd bitten her. One bite from him in wolf form and it was possible she would start the change. He ran his tongue along his teeth and couldn't taste her on his tongue. Maybe he hadn't—

"Did you bite her?" Donovan asked from the doorway.

"I don't know." Jason pulled a shirt over his head. And that was the problem. He didn't know.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Donovan turned toward the guest room. "She can't go now. You know that."

"Yes, damn it. She can't leave until we find out," Jason muttered. His gaze followed Donovan's.

"Not even then," Donovan said slowly.

If she turned, maybe she could stay with the pack. One of the other males would swoop in and take her. His beast growled at the thought. If she didn't turn, she was still a human who knew too much. And he was no longer in a position to offer her sanctuary. Which meant her life was forfeit. That was something he could not live with.

"Man, what the fuck did you do?" Donovan's voice put sound to the words echoing in his head.

* * *

Gio sat on the bed, banging her hands against her head. This couldn't be happening. She'd just had a mental breakdown. Men did not turn into wolves. Werewolves, shape-shifters, whatever they were did not exist except in books.

But they did. She'd had a close encounter with two. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

She wanted to scream, but as she slid a glance at the dark-wooded door, she decided not to chance it. Those two monsters outside the door could come barreling in here and tear her limb from limb. She shuddered as the memory of that beast's teeth clamped over her skin replayed in her mind. The pain of his teeth pushing into her flowed through her body as if she were still sitting on that hard floor, trapped.

Oh shit. He'd bitten her. Somehow, in the last couple of hours, she'd overlooked that small detail. But he hadn't done more than puncture her skin. It wasn't like he took her blood or anything. Wait... That was vampires. She didn't want to even think about getting furry. Hell, she'd just had her legs waxed three weeks ago. *Damn it.*

Her heart raced. It rushed and dashed until she knew she was about to pass out. *Calm down. Calm down.* No matter how many times she tried, she couldn't stop the panic drumming through her.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out. She held it up and stared at the three bars, then at the single sliver of red in the battery section. *Shit,* it was almost dead. Hopefully she had enough juice for one call. If it went through, one call was all she would need.

She punched in the numbers and prayed.

"Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?"

"Hi, my name is Giovanni Odell, and I'm being held prisoner. I think they might kill me." She chose her words carefully, even though the voice in her head was screaming at her to tell it all. Tell the woman about how the men had changed on her. Tell her to call out the police and animal control.

"Can you tell me where you are?" the woman asked slowly.

"I'm in Climax, Minnesota. I don't remember the address. Can't you pull up my location from my phone?" Gio heard a small *beep* and knew her phone was about to go dead.

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry; we haven't upgraded to the new systems. Do you remember anything special about your location?"

Before Gio could answer, the phone clicked, then shut off. She pulled it away from her ear in time to see the cheery good-bye message on the screen before it went black. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

She wanted to throw the damn phone with its short battery life at the wall. Her one chance at escape gone because she hadn't bothered to fully charge her phone on the drive up here. Anger overtook the fear coursing through her. This could not be happening. Her head ached. She was consumed with the need to scream, cry, and run. And just like that, she passed out.

* * *

A loud knock at the door woke her with a start. For a minute she was disoriented. Had it just been a dream? No, no she hadn't been dreaming. She scanned the room quickly, looking for something she could use as a weapon.

"Are you ready to come out?" a male voice yelled through the wood.

"Is that monster still out there?" She groaned as she realized that it didn't matter which one of the men was speaking to her, both had turned into monsters. Almost the same size...

There was a chuckle from the other side. "Come on out and see for yourself."

"Not fucking likely."

"Look, we aren't going to hurt you. We want to sit and discuss this like rational adults. Besides, do you really think that door would keep me out if I wanted to come in?"

He had a point there. She rubbed her hand back and forth along her forehead. Didn't the news always say you should tell your kidnappers your name? Build some

sort of connection with them. Make them see you as a person. Gio licked her lips. She was going to have to go out there.

When she went to take a step toward the door, her legs turned to jelly. With each step, her muscles quaked, and she found her heart racing as though it was about to burst from her chest. *You can do this. You can do this.* She pinched the door lock between her fingers and twisted, then grabbed the door handle and pulled it open.

Jason was there, staring up at her, and he was grinning.

“How long have you been there? Were you going to sit there all night?” Her gaze narrowed, but she knew she didn’t want to hear his answer. “Never mind. I don’t care. I just want to get out of here.”

“You’ve been in there since yesterday,” he said hesitantly.

“No. I couldn’t have.” She started shaking. This was crazy. He moved out of her way, and she walked toward the door. She wanted to think he was lying but there was no denying the light coming in the window.

“We can’t let you leave.” He turned the wheelchair and rolled after her.

“And why not? It’s not like anyone would believe me if I told them what happened here.” She stopped and swung around and noticed two things. First he was right behind her. Hell, he’d almost run into her, he was following so closely. And second, the other man was sitting across the room watching her. “I don’t want to spend my future locked up in some mental facility, sipping Jell-O through a straw.”

“It doesn’t matter. Some people would believe you, and they would come here trying to kill me and others like me. That can’t happen.” Jason sounded like he didn’t expect any argument.

“What? You’re going to kill me now?” she asked in a matter-of-fact tone, even though her heart stuttered as she said the words.

“Not necessarily,” another male voice sounded from close behind her.

Shit. She hadn't seen him. *Great. Just freaking great.* He'd slipped between her and the doorway while she wasn't paying attention. *Damn it.* It took her mind a minute to replay those last words. He hadn't said they weren't going to kill her. Which meant there was a very real chance she was going to die.

"Okay, talk." She was in a bad position here, but it could be worse. At least she could still see her way to escape.

"Are you hungry?" Jason asked as he moved away from her toward the open kitchen.

Now she had a clear path back to the bedroom. But that wasn't going to get her out of here and wasn't going to help her stay safe. She needed to make them see her as human. Even though it was a long shot, her chances of survival were better if she at least made an effort to be civil. But if the chance came to run, she was damn sure taking it.

"Some food would be okay." Yeah, and they were going to taste it first. She was not about to be drugged.

"Bacon omelet, or are you more of a sausage girl?" Jason asked.

She really didn't care. Hell, she doubted she would even be able to swallow anything they put in front of her. "Doesn't matter."

It looked like the other man wasn't going to move until she did. *Great.* Frustrated, Gio pulled in a breath, crossed the living room, and stepped into the kitchen.

"I wish I could offer you more than an omelet, but I need to go into town to pick up some groceries sometime soon. So eggs it will have to be." Jason's pale skin turned red.

"Don't worry about it. Make a list, and I'll get it," Jason's friend said, plopping down on bar stool closest to the door.

That left two other stools. One close to the other man and one close to Jason. As she sat in the one next to Jason's wheelchair, her mind screamed at her. Wasn't

he the thing that had tried to take a chunk out of her less than twenty-four hours ago? Why was she literally itching to get closer to him? She had no fucking clue. Gio scratched the inside of her right palm then rubbed it along her jean-clad thigh.

She looked up to see Jason staring at her. His eyes were questioning. "What?"

He turned back toward her omelet. "Nothing."

She watched him open and close his mouth several times; then he cleared his throat. "Did I bite you yesterday?"

Gio had to do a double take. She blinked several times. Why was he asking her? Surely he knew. "Why? Am I going to turn all furry now?" She said it in a half-mocking tone. They were too calm for that to be the case.

"Not right away." Donovan's happy voice grated on her nerves.

"Answer the question. Did. I. Bite. You?" He followed every word with a quick flip and turn of her omelet.

This was getting serious. Did a bite mean she was one of them and they would let her live? Or did it mean they were for sure going to kill her? Either way, she knew she couldn't risk telling them the truth.

"I don't know. Are we talking like teeth gouging the skin or a tiny little scratch?" She lifted her plate. "I think it's done."

He placed the food on her plate and then turned to her. "You didn't answer the question."

"I didn't understand it." She held her fork up and pointed it at him. "You need to be more specific."

He growled at her. Actually bared his teeth and growled. The fork stopped midway to her mouth, and she scooted her stool back a few inches. This couldn't be happening. Not again.

"Don't run. I'm not about to pounce on you," he told her, moving back about a foot.

“Yeah, like I believe that. It’s not like it didn’t happen before.” She rolled her eyes but got off the stool. Maybe she should lean against it or stand behind it. Looking like a coward wasn’t her, but what had happened yesterday... Well, she was smart enough to know when to fight and when to run away.

“Give Donovan the keys to your car,” Jason told her.

Was he crazy? If she did happen to make it out of the house, she would need the car to get away. “Doesn’t he have his own car?”

He let out a deep breath. She could see his exasperation but didn’t feel sorry for causing it. “Yes, but he hiked over here. If you want something to eat tonight besides eggs, you’ll give him your keys.” By the time the last word left his mouth, his eyes had changed. It took her a second to figure out what was different; it was very subtle. The blue-gray had changed to a deep blue. It made his face look more alive. Then she noticed the other changes. He was breathing faster. He clenched and unclenched his hands as if he was fighting the urge to grab her.

She took a step away and bumped into Donovan.

“Don’t run. Running only excites the beast. Stand still and stop antagonizing him,” Donovan whispered.

Before she could turn around and tell him exactly what she thought of his suggestion, she heard a rip. She looked down. The bastard had ripped her jeans and was holding her keys. How the hell had he ripped through the denim? Surely she would have felt the poke of scissors... One finger was sporting a wickedly sharp-looking claw.

“You’re going to pay for that. These fucking jeans weren’t cheap.” She hoped they cost him a full day’s salary. That was, if he even had a job. She turned back to Jason after Donovan made his escape. Maybe this was her chance to run too. Not that she would get far without her wheels. With her plans whizzing through her head, she looked down at Jason. His eyes were even bluer than before. This shit was not happening again. “Down, boy. Down.”

“I am not a dog.”

“Okay. How about you tell me just what the hell you are?” she asked as she moved to sit on the stool Donovan had vacated.

“If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.” He smiled at her, but she didn’t smile back.

“You’re going to do that anyway. Just go ahead and tell me.” She watched as some of the blue in his eyes drained away. Somehow, after seeing the vibrant blue there, his blue-gray eyes looked washed-out.

“It’s not that we—I mean, *I* want to kill you. It’s just that I have to protect others.” He stopped and turned his gaze toward the ceiling before looking back down at her. “The pack moved here in 1895. Back then, we were just one more group of settlers. We chose a wooded area so that when our wolves wanted out, we could let them free.”

“Wait. I’m not asking about the town. I’m asking—”

“I know what you’re asking. Just shut up and listen. This town was built on top of the scrap of a town my ancestors created. They didn’t complain but instead immersed themselves into the new community.”

“That still doesn’t explain about the wolf thing. Are you a werewolf?” She fluttered her eyelashes and let fake excitement color her tone.

“We’re shape-shifters. We have the ability to change into wolves. Which doesn’t explain the how or the why. I can’t give you those answers, because I don’t know. I was born as I am.”

“And your bite can change me into a shape-shifter?” She didn’t know what to think.

“Only if I bite you while in wolf form and you possess the enzyme to transmute the shifter poison.”

“Poison? Poison?” She stood and took a step toward him.

“When you answered my knock, we figured that since you hadn’t died, either I bit you and you’ll change, or I didn’t and I’ll have to kill you.” The matter-of-fact

way he announced he'd have to kill her made her hand itch with the need to slap him.

"If I don't go all wolfie, I die. And if I do go all furry, what happens then?" Exasperation filled her voice.

"If I did bite you? An Alpha's bite is very potent, even a retired one. You'll go into heat before the night is over. You'll want sex, and a lot of it."

"Not fucking likely." She stared at him in disbelief. "You're not only a shape-shifter, you're also a freaking pervert."

"Unmated females in heat will eventually fuck anyone. And while you're in heat, you can transform others without being in animal form. We can't risk a new shifter converting or killing mass amounts of humans."

Gio pinched the bridge of her nose. She needed to concentrate. "Let me see if I got it right. If you bit me, I'm going to turn into a furry nymphomaniac. And while I'm in a cock-crazed state, the only person I'll be able to have sex with is you?" She pointed at him. "Does that cover everything?"

"Essentially." A shadow fell across his eyes.

"Well, fuck you." She turned quickly and raced toward the door. Her car might be gone, but she could disappear into the woods. "You're going to have to kill me."

Just as she touched the door handle, she felt the heat of him. She knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't help herself. One look back and one missed step had her crashing into the floor.

She cracked her head against the door, cutting off her scream. He was the big, shaggy brown wolf. And once again she was helpless on the floor. When she went to sit up, he was right there, breathing over her. His hot breath tightened the skin on her leg.

"Back off." She shook her head and pulled up to a sitting position. When the animal took another step closer, she squinted at him. "I'm sure you can get me before I get out the door, so please back the hell off."

The animal whined and nudged her leg but didn't move closer. Thank goodness. Her head hurt so much that she thought she might vomit. No, that wasn't true. Her head hurt, but it wasn't the pain of hitting her head. This was more internal. She had a headache that radiated through her eyes. She massaged her temples as if the simple movements were somehow going to ease the pounding pain.

"Why the hell did you knock me down?" she asked, looking at the wolf between her fingers.

The wolf let out a high-pitched whine, then sat on the floor and folded his front paws in front of him. He never took his eyes off her. Instead he looked to be waiting. *Waiting on what?*

"I don't feel good." She scrambled to the bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom, just making it to the sink before she threw up. Bye-bye, omelet. Then bye-bye, water, until she started throwing up some yellow junk and dry heaving.

It had been a very long time since she'd last thrown up. She felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach repeatedly. A few seconds later the wolf nosed into the bathroom.

"Get out," she mumbled as she splashed water on her face. Pain radiated down her jaw, through her neck, and then along her shoulder, down her arms, and straight to her fingertips.

The wolf whined, then moved closer. She looked down and saw the towel between his teeth. She didn't want to take it, but a cool towel on the back of her neck sounded like heaven. She put some water in her mouth and rinsed out the taste of bile. Once she felt like she could bend without having another bout of nausea, she grabbed the towel. The damn wolf sat back and watched her.

If she didn't think she would fall, she would have kicked the damn thing. Right in those all-knowing eyes. She didn't have to tell him he'd bit her. He knew it. Which meant he was probably thinking he was going to get some tonight. Over her dead body. She moaned as his words came back to her. It just might be over her dead body.

A fire started at the base of her feet and burned up her legs, to the pit of her stomach, and through her chest, before reaching her head and exploding into a world of pain. She doubled over and lay on her side, then pulled her knees to her chest. Every single cell of her body was screaming. “What the hell did you do to me?”

She moaned and closed her eyes, hoping that blocking out the light would help with the pain stabbing at the back of her eyes. Most of the heat and fire were gone from her feet and legs, but her stomach, chest, and head were going up in painful flames. It was beyond anything she’d ever felt before.

She opened her eyes and stared at the wolf. Watched him watching her. He had the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. She blinked several time as she tried to see past the excruciating misery raging through her. A boisterous chiming went off in her head. The honey brown wolf in front of her moved toward the door, as if he heard the chiming too. How was that possible? He padded out the room and nudged the door shut. She was going to die. A horrible, painful, agonizing death, all by herself.

* * *

Jason waited until he was out of the bathroom and back in his chair to shift to his human form. He knew if he’d come to that door as a man, she would’ve locked herself in. She was going to need him. As soon as the sickness left, the sexual heat would hit her hard. The longer she’d gone without sex, the harder her need would be. And from her attitude, he’d bet it had been a long while.

The doorbell rang again. He rolled back to his room and snagged a pair of dark blue jogging pants. If he was right about whose scent that was, he really didn’t want to answer the door naked. Working the pants on took a few more seconds than he wanted. Anyone who was nonpack would have left, thinking he was not at home. Only a pack member would be able to smell him.

“Open the door, Jason.” The dark timbre couldn’t be anyone but Dane Pearce—the arrogant fool who’d called himself Alpha after Jason gave up the position. He and his few cronies made sure no one openly challenged him.

Donovan was about the only man in the pack who could have taken them all on, but Donovan still considered himself Jason's beta. Not to mention that Donovan liked being the sheriff of Climax too much to want to give it up to be pack Alpha. The job sucked, or it did if the Alpha was acting in the best interest of the pack.

Jason opened the door a crack. "What do you want, Dane?"

"Can I come in, or do you usually talk to people on your doorstep?" Dane smiled, all humor and warmth absent from his face.

Jason knew Dane was looking for a reason to kick him out of the pack. And, as much as he wanted to slam the door in the man's face, he knew that Dane would take that as a challenge for the Alpha position. And if Dane won he would let the single men of the pack use Gio while she was in her heat and then kill her.

"Some of the pack complained that you used some kind of residual Alpha influence to call the wolf out of them without any warning." Dane walked past him into the living room, then sniffed.

Had Gio already gone into heat? Could he smell her? "Actually, I don't think I've ever heard of a residual Alpha power."

"That's because most Alphas fight to the death, they don't walk, I'm sorry, *roll* away from the position. Without an old Alpha, there is no old Alpha effect." Dane said the words as he walked the perimeter of the room, smelling the air each time he stopped.

"True, but since I walked away from being the Alpha, I can't be made to fight for the position. Maybe only those who still consider me their Alpha answered the call." Jason stayed close to the door.

"So you admit to making other pack members shift?"

"No, I admit that I shifted yesterday. Since I'm not the Alpha, no one should have shifted because of it, unless...you're not really an Alpha. In that case, maybe my shift caused a lot of the pack to shift." He should not be antagonizing with Gio going into heat any minute, but he also wasn't the type of man who would let a challenge, even an unvoiced one, pass.

“Maybe we should take care of this at the solstice ceremony?” Dane continued to sniff the air.

Jason opened his mouth only to close it quickly when something made his nose twitch. *Oh shit. I need to get Dane out of here. Now.*

“I hate to be rude.” He smiled as he said it, belying the tension humming through his body. Maybe Jason was sensing her heat because he was looking for it. Dane hadn’t said anything yet, so maybe he didn’t sense it. “But I have things to do.”

“What could you possibly have to do? Roll around this place doing wheelies?” He curled his lips up in a sneer.

Heat suffused Jason. His beast roared to the forefront. He wanted to taste the man’s blood and watch his face contort as he was pressed down into submission. The entire pack would feel it when Dane surrendered to Jason. “Be careful, Dane. I may not be pack Alpha, but my beast is still alive and kicking.” After that last word, Jason growled low and threateningly. He watched the other man’s eyes widen as he stepped closer to the door.

“This isn’t over,” Dane said as he walked out.

Jason quickly turned the deadbolt. He would have to deal with the man soon enough. Right now his main concern was Gio. He wheeled to the bathroom and knocked.

“Are you okay?” He leaned against the side of his chair to press his ear against the door.

“I will not have sex with him. I will not have sex with him. He is an Internet perv who tried to molest my baby sister.” Her voice was tiny as she repeated the same thing over and over.

“I am not a pervert, and I did not try to molest anyone. The person I talked to online sent me your picture, called herself Gio, said she owned her own business, and was interested in learning about a Dominant-submissive relationship. We

talked for three months. Did you ever think your sister might have been trying to set us up?" he asked.

"She wouldn't do that."

Her scent was getting stronger. It was a cross between true vanilla straight out of the bean and a musky citrus. The kind that was sweet but also carried the bite of something a bit more spicy. But as he pulled the scent in, it turned into something deeper and more intense. His sinuses opened as the aroma burned down his airways like an intense peppermint.

"She couldn't know. There was no way." Her voice was more muffled, quieter.

"Know what? That you liked to be spanked?" He waited for her to deny it, but his only answer was a strong wave of her scent flowing over him. "Do you want me to spank you, Gio? Maybe I'll spank you softly at first, just to make you jump, to get you wet. Then I'll really spank you."

Another strong wave hit him. It was a gamble talking to her like that, but he wanted to make sure she was open to it. That it excited her. He would have helped her through her heat regardless, but now he knew he could be himself. Totally. As soon as she opened the door.

Chapter Three

Gio pulled her knees up to her chest and slowly rocked back and forth. Her entire body was on fire. Sweat dripped down her face, legs, and arms. She could let him help her through this. No doubt he would make it really easy.

“Open the door.”

She shivered as his words washed over her. He sounded so good. His voice caressed her, indulged her, made her want to do anything he said. Dangerous. She reached up with shaky fingers and grabbed the doorknob. Her throat closed as she took a deep breath and quickly turned the lock.

If resisting got to be too much, she didn’t want him just busting in here. “Go away. I’ll be better in the morning. I won’t be jumping into bed with anyone. Once you see that, you’ll have to let me go.” It made sense. If she could resist him, then everyone else would be a piece of cake.

“It’s going to get worse. Much worse. Soon that little cramping pain is going to grip your stomach so tight you’ll feel like you can’t move. And the longer you push against it, the longer it will take us to make it stop.”

“Just shut up, okay.” Her legs were going numb. Or maybe they weren’t numb, maybe it was the cramps slowly crawling up from her upper thighs and contracting her stomach. Another cramp hit her, and she moaned out loud. Inside her head, she heard a *pop* and looked around, expecting him to have broken in. But things were worse than she’d thought, because the door looked funny. The color was off somehow. Without moving, she caught sight of a mosquito on her right side. She should have had to turn her head to see that, but she didn’t. “What did you do to me?”

“Just let me help you.”

She heard the anguish in his voice but couldn't let that sway her. She didn't know if she could let herself be so vulnerable. And she had no illusions—she would be at his mercy. Her nipples hardened as she imagined him spanking her. She didn't know whether to believe her sister had tricked him or what. Her stomach cramped again, pushing almost every single objection down. How much longer was she going to be able to resist opening that door?

After another pain ripped through her body, she pulled in a shallow breath and smelled something spicily irresistible. Every cell in her body told her to open the door and find out what it was, but she was too afraid it would be him, and if it was, she knew she wouldn't be able to say no to him again.

More of that tasty scent filtered into the bathroom. It had to be him. Saliva pooled in her mouth, and her throat dried up, and suddenly she couldn't swallow. He was the nice cool drink she needed.

“You're starving the wolf inside. Eventually she'll break loose and take over. Then you won't have a choice. I'm not going to let you hurt yourself.”

Her stomach tightened again, and this time she also felt the clenching inside her sex. She moaned. The pain in her belly only barely outpaced the pleasure from the hard clamping of her muscles. She felt empty. Another cramp tightened her pussy walls, and pleasure flooded her. Without the pain to keep her focused, she knew she was going to lose her will—fast. The smell was too good. She needed to move away and maybe it wouldn't be so strong. Gio held her breath and crawled over to the toilet. Another cramp hit her.

Before she could move, the door slammed in. She was amazed, because it was as if it all happened in slow motion. She saw the slight bend of the wood before it shattered around the lock. She scooted away as he rolled his chair into the room.

“Come here.” He held his hand out to her. His sexy large tanned hand.

She shuddered and scooted farther into the room until her back hit the cool tile of the bathtub. There was nowhere else to go. She knew if she tried to run, he would grab her. He might not be able to walk, but his arms worked just fine.

“Why are you doing this? You’re going to kill me anyway.” Her breath caught as the pain of the stomach cramps raced through her, chased closely by the pleasure of the lower spasms.

“I’m not going to kill you. I will take care of you until you find a pack member to mate with.” His voice was low and soothing. And it grated on every single one of her nerves.

“What if I don’t want to mate with someone? Do I die, then?” She felt like she was dying now. Why the hell should she suffer twice?

“No. I turned you, so I’ll teach you and help you when you go into heat. You’re my responsibility.”

She squinted at him. “I haven’t been anyone’s responsibility for a very long time. And I’m not about to start now. Put me in a room with a good lock. This need has to go away, right?” She slowly counted to ten. When she looked up, she tried not to notice his muscular arms and abs. This man was so mouthwatering. She wanted to reach out and stroke him to see if he was as hard as he looked. She bit her bottom lip as she curled her hands into tight little balls. *Don’t touch him. Don’t touch him.*

“Fine, we’ll do this the hard way.” He rolled the chair backward out of the room. For a second she felt like whimpering because he’d left her. She should not be sad over his leaving, but there it was. She closed her eyes. Then she heard the soft sound of wheels on the linoleum. She peeked and saw him coming in backward. *Oh shit.* She looked around. There wasn’t anywhere to go.

Before she could scramble over the side of the tub, he grabbed her. The second his hand touched her, heat exploded up her arm, and her entire body burst into flames just below the skin. She closed her eyes, determined not to look at him. She pulled in a breath, and his smell punched her in the gut. Her stomach cramps stopped, and the pussy cramps shot into overdrive. *Don’t move. Don’t move.* She

tried not to. But something just below her skin itched with need, and she couldn't keep still. One small twitch while sitting on his lap and she felt something hard dig into her hip. *Please be the chair. Please be the chair.* Definitely not the chair.

"Breathe or you will pass out." His voice was soft, deep, and it made her heart jump.

She didn't realize she was holding her breath. When she let it out, she sagged into him. Into his warm heat. Into that hard body that burned away all her resolve. If she fucked him, the feelings would go away, and she could deal with the situation. One time and she could think enough to find a way out of this cluster fuck. *Mmmmm...fucking.* She had to get her mind on something else.

He draped one arm around her waist and used the other one to roll the chair out of the room. She should fight him. She should twist out of his arms and onto the cold, hard floor. She should do anything other than sit here and fantasize about running her hands down his chest and over his tight abs. Jason with no shirt on was more temptation than she could resist.

She was going to regret this in the morning. Hell, she was going to regret it the moment her body stopped beating her mind into submission.

"Tell me this is going to go away. I won't feel like this anymore after we have sex." At this very second she wanted to hear the words, regardless of if they were true.

"I'm not going to lie to you. It takes hours to satisfy the mating urge under normal circumstances. But you were bit by an Alpha. It will take a lot longer. And fighting it until it builds to an almost uncontrollable level will only prolong things."

Gio raised her hand and patted his face. "Your bedside manner sucks."

When he lowered his face a bit toward her, she couldn't help but tilt her head. She wanted to kiss him. Needed it. One kiss. Just one kiss. Maybe it would help. Like a little bit of alcohol the morning after helped to cure a hangover. Right?

"Wait until you see my manners inside the bed," he whispered.

His lips descended on hers, and there was no turning back. He stopped moving the chair and wrapped his other hand around her. She should have pushed him back, but she didn't. When he traced her lips with his tongue, she opened her lips. He surged inside and curled his tongue around hers. He tasted hot and spicy. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close. Really close. Damn, he smelled good.

"Jason, I thought I saw Dane driving away—"

Jason broke the kiss and groaned. "Never should have given him a key."

Gio licked her lips and listened to her thundering heart. She should have been the one to end it. But her body was still zinging from that kiss. One kiss. More like the match that sent her into an inferno. What the fuck had she been thinking? Kissing him had only made things worse.

"Sorry." Donovan stared at them. He held three large paper grocery bags in what looked like an uncomfortable stranglehold, but he didn't move to set them down.

Well, she was sitting on Jason's lap, and just a second ago she had been so wrapped around him that anyone might have thought she was trying to crawl into him. Well, at least she could fix one of those. Gio pushed at Jason's arm to dislodge his hold, but he didn't budge.

"Yeah. Dane stopped by. He said I caused a pack shift." Jason moved one arm down to control the chair but kept the other wrapped around her waist.

"Bet that pissed him off," Donovan said as he walked into the kitchen.

Jason wheeled after him. Gio didn't look at either man. Her first priority was getting up. Her second was figuring out what the fuck she was going to do. Locking herself back in the bathroom just seemed childish.

"Stop moving. I do not want to fight Donovan for you," Jason said in a huffy voice as he tightened his hold.

“Why would Donovan fight for me? He doesn’t even like me.” She faced Donovan. The man looked at her, then cocked his head to the side.

“It’s not a matter of like. It’s a matter of want. And once my wolf smells you in heat, he’ll fight to take over. If he does, either Jason or I will die.” Donovan turned to the pantry and started stacking food. “I thought I would have enough time to put the food away, but that was before I opened the door.”

“Was it that strong?” Jason asked as his forehead creased into little lines. He readjusted Gio over his legs. “Do you think Dane smelled it?”

A fresh wave of desire swept through her. She stopped trying to get away from him and went still. Maybe if she didn’t move, her body wouldn’t start... An intense cramp pulled the walls of her pussy together once. Then again and again. She bit her bottom lip to keep from moaning.

“I would be more surprised if he didn’t. I’ll call deputies Kane and Abel to watch him.” Donovan put the last of the groceries away and balled his fists. “I need to go. Call me when you come up for air.” He stalked across the room and was out the door in a flash.

“Come up for air?” She wanted to be pissed, but the small movement to speak those four words took every ounce of concentration she had. Her body was on a tight wire. If she moved too fast or too far, she felt like she’d lose control.

“The longer you deny the wolf inside you the satisfaction she needs, the longer it will take her to be satiated. The first heat usually lasts three to four days. But denying your wolf makes her stronger, and it may take double or triple the time—”

“Triple?” She couldn’t imagine dealing with this for a week or more.

“So do we start fighting again, or do we pick up where we left off?” He shifted, bringing the hardness of his erection against her hip. Her convulsions set off, and she closed her eyes as her body shook with the spasms. When they stopped, she lifted her eyes to his. There was only one answer.

She bent and pressed her lips to his. The moment she touched him, it was as if they'd never stopped. His taste flooded her mouth, and she moaned at the way her body tightened and released with each breath.

He broke the kiss and pulled in an audible breath. "I don't think we're going to make it to the bedroom before I taste you."

When she looked down at him, she saw his eyes. One blue, one gray. Then she felt it—longing she couldn't describe. Just as much as he wanted to taste her, she had the uncontrollable need to taste him.

He didn't wait for her to agree. Instead he grabbed her around the waist, picked her up, and set her on the counter. She held on to his arms until she found her balance. She still had on her jeans. They itched and irritated her skin. She wanted to shuck them but didn't know if he was going to let her down long enough.

"Take off your pants." His voice was gruff with an underlying command that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Let me down—"

"No. Do it right there." He ran a finger just under the edge of her pants near the middle of her stomach. That tiny caress was her undoing. She unzipped her pants and pulled them down as far as they could go. Then she tilted her hips off the counter and pushed the material off her hips and down the top of her thighs. When she shifted backwards, she gasped at the cold stone pressed against her ass. He pulled the jeans down her legs and threw them on the floor, then grabbed her feet. At the first touch, she wanted to laugh and twist out of his grasp. But he wasn't looking to tickle her. He spread her legs.

He traced twin paths up her thighs, stopping on her pink cotton boy shorts. If she had known someone was going to be seeing her like this, she would have worn something super sexy.

"You won't need these." He grabbed the thin pink fabric and ripped one side open, then the other. He pulled it from beneath her. He made a movement to throw her ruined panties over his shoulder, then stopped. She watched him pull the fabric

to his nose and inhale—a chest-moving, deep breath. Her breath hitched. When people in the movies or on TV did that, she always thought it was disgusting. But knowing Jason was so turned on by her that he wanted to bask in her scent was definitely stimulating, not that she needed more. But she knew she would never forget that little possessive gesture.

He massaged the juncture between her legs and pussy. The skin was so sensitive that each touch made her jump, then moan in pleasure as the tiny circles he was making warred with the twitching of her sex. He bent his head and kissed the very top of her mound.

He dipped his tongue down her slit. The soft heat of his mouth as he teased her nether lips open made her shiver with anticipation. He licked up and down her slit, and stopped at her clit each time to tease the tiny, stiff bud.

She clamped down on her bottom lip. The urge to purr roared through her. No, she didn't want to purr. She wanted to open her mouth and scream, shout, roar with the pleasure of it.

He pressed his tongue inside her, and she flew apart. The orgasm ripped through her. She clenched on his tongue. Riding his mouth until the blood rushing through her reset to a whisper of what it had been.

"Oh God," she uttered.

He lifted his head. "You want more?"

She wanted to tell him she wanted it all, but she couldn't make her mouth form the words. The cool air on her wet flesh should have tamped down her ardor. But she was hot and getting hotter. "It's starting again." A surge of painful cramps started in her stomach just as one ripped through her sex.

Her body was too tired to go through another cycle of this pain and pleasure. She pried her eyes open and saw him lifting up on one arm and pushing his shorts and underwear down one side, then the other.

"Come here." He held his arms out to her. She looked at his naked legs and swaying cock.

“What about condoms?” She wasn’t stupid and had no intention of getting pregnant. She didn’t care how much pain she was in.

“Condoms wouldn’t do you any good. You need me inside you in order to stop the heat for a while.” He wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her up then settled her down on top of him. “Don’t fight me. One of your eyes is already blue. Your wolf is close to taking over.”

She put her hands on his shoulders as he positioned her legs over the sides of the chair. The tip of his cock was positioned to surge right into her. If she just let go, gravity would press her down on him. In this chair, in this position, she would be in control. She could do this. She had to do this. She was going to do this.

On her next breath, she lowered herself slowly. The tip of his penis glided through her wet flesh, and she caught her breath as it stretched her open. As she pulled up, she felt him slide out of her. His penis danced along the rim of her opening then slipped right back inside as she lowered herself onto him again. This time, more than just the head slid in.

“You feel so good,” he muttered.

She went to lift up again, but then he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her down on him. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and dug her nails into his shoulders. She sucked in a breath then clenched her pussy muscles down hard, then loosened for less than a second before she squeezed again. He pulled her close and moaned into her neck, then painted a circle on her with his tongue. He held her tight and continued to push her down until she felt the hairs around the base of his cock rubbing against her smooth skin.

“Now. Ride me.” He lifted his hands and grabbed the bottom of her shirt and ripped it open. The polo had been brand-new. Now it was only good enough to be a rag.

“Hey, I liked that shirt.”

“I’ll buy you another one.” He grabbed her breasts and massaged the outer rims, moving toward the center until he reached her nipples. When his fingers

flittered over that puckered flesh, he pinched her tiny little peaks and rolled them back and forth between his fingers.

“Harder.”

She looked up at him and raised her eyebrows.

“Ride.” He pinched one nipple. “Me.” He tightened on the second one. “Harder.”

Gio sucked in a breath as the pain in her nipples collided with the pleasure of being filled by him. She lifted herself off his cock, then slammed down on him so hard she heard the slap of her flesh on his. She continued to use her weight to pound against his flesh.

“Harder.” He slapped her ass on the left side as she rode him. When she lifted, he slapped the other side. She clasped down on him as heat infused her ass. She was getting close to coming again. *Hell*. She had to make him come—doing that was a matter of pride. She ground her teeth and pushed back the feeling of being overwhelmed by pleasure.

When she lifted off him again, she clenched as hard as she could. He sucked in a breath through his teeth. Music to her ears. But keeping her body tight on him when she slipped back down the length of him was like a double shot of pleasure. He pulled in another breath, then wrapped his hands around her hips. He held her in place while he thrust his hips up and down, pumping into her.

She stayed tight until he slammed into her and broke through her resolve and kicked her straight into an orgasm. The air left her lungs in a *whoosh*, and her body froze as pleasure seized every cell. Her toes curled as a frenzied fit of pleasure attacked her control. His arms clamped around her, and he opened his mouth. The sound that came out was more wolf than human.

Then she felt it. His essence flowed into her, making the fire deep inside cool. It didn’t go out, but it did back off enough that she could think straight.

She felt normal. A sudden thought hit her. Was it like a vaccine? Have sex, and you were instantly cured? She wasn’t that optimistic. “How long will it last?” she asked, trying not to sound as out of breath as she felt.

“What?”

“I don’t feel out of control anymore. How long will that last?” Her head wanted him to say the fire that had almost burned her to a crisp from the inside out was gone for good. But her body hadn’t come down off its orgasmic high yet, and a small part of her wanted more. Okay, maybe it wasn’t a *small* part of her.

“I don’t know. This is the first time I’ve actually helped a human through a changing heat.” His breath was as strangled as hers. “Maybe fifteen minutes. Or up to thirty.”

“Thirty would be nice. I want to lie down.” She tried to get off him.

“No. If you stand up, my cum will leak out, and the heat will return. Takes a few minutes for your body to absorb it all.”

“I don’t want to get pregnant.” She was going to say it had nothing to do with him, but that wasn’t true. He was a werewolf, or something close to it. Her life was hanging by a thread.

Chapter Four

“Only mated pairs can conceive.” He didn’t look up at her. Seeing the disgust on her face at the thought of having his child just might break him.

“It’s not you. I just don’t know what’s going to happen to me. It would be unfair to add an innocent to the mix.”

It made sense, but he didn’t know if he believed it. None of the many women of his pack would want to have kids with a father who was stuck in a chair for the rest of his life. He couldn’t teach them to hunt or run. As a wolf, he was useless.

“Can I move now? My legs are cramping.”

“Give me a sec.” He pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind as he grasped the wheels and rolled them out of the kitchen, down the hallway, and to his bedroom. The only difference between her and the women of his pack was that she needed him and didn’t know he wasn’t the best choice. For her, he was the only choice. And seeing as how she was most likely his last chance, he had no intentions of letting her go. He had less than a week to get her to start falling for him. And damn it, for the first time in his life, he was going to be selfish and tie her to him as best he could.

“Go through that door, and you can take a quick shower. There isn’t enough time to soak in the tub. After the first time, the wolf won’t wait long for more. She’s going to get ugly,” Jason told her. Which wasn’t exactly true. She probably had twenty-five to thirty minutes, then it would slowly begin to build again. So she had almost an hour or more before it got bad.

He helped her stand and smiled as her legs shook slightly. It was good to know he hadn’t lost his touch during his sexual hiatus. When she closed the door, he

hurried out of the room and into the guest bathroom. The blood was pounding through his head as the cool water of the shower hit his hot skin. His wolf didn't want to leave her. The wolf wanted to devour her. And if he were truthful, he'd admit the man did too.

* * *

Gio turned the lock and slumped on the hard wood of the floor. Why did the most intense sexual experience of her life have to be with a stranger? She should run. She should get the hell out of here as soon as possible, no matter what the consequences were. She should walk back out there and beg for more.

No! Where the hell did that come from? True, he was a sexual god, but sex wasn't everything. He was a freaking werewolf. He'd threatened to kill her. Images of him slapping her ass assaulted her mind as memories tingled down her skin. She swore she could feel the heat of his hands on her. *Don't forget he wanted to kill you.*

To be fair, that wasn't exactly true. He'd said if he didn't bite her and she didn't turn, then he'd have to kill her. The way he'd said it was like he didn't have an option. That was crazy. There was always an option. Wasn't there?

Desire pooled in her stomach. She pushed herself up. She had already spent too much time on the floor. In this case, there was only one option. Take what he was offering until she could figure a way out of this screwup.

Gio slowly got up and walked over to the shower. That she stumbled only once was something she was proud of. With unsteady fingers, she turned the water on scalding hot and got in. As she washed the sweat and sex from her skin, she noticed the water didn't burn like it should. *Come the freak on!* She loved hot showers; they helped her clear her mind and think outside the box.

"Are you okay in there?" The voice startled her. Was he sitting out there waiting on her?

"Yeah." Why did this remind her of the awkward morning after? It hadn't even been fifteen minutes. Would he want a repeat performance? She didn't know anything about having sex with someone in a wheelchair. He'd seemed to enjoy it,

but then again, it wasn't like he would come out and say that was the worst sex of his life.

Gio lifted her face to the water and smacked her cheeks. *Snap out of it.* She wasn't some pathetic creature to wonder how good she was. If he hadn't liked it, then that was his problem. She'd enjoyed herself, and she refused to be sorry for that fact. She refused.

A tiny cramp tightened her gut. She quickly finished the shower and wrapped up in a towel. She opened the door and found him moving from the chair to the bed. He was naked. Gloriously, deliciously naked. Every defensive thought washed from her mind as images of tasting him like he'd tasted her drowned her reasoning.

"Did Donovan bring in my bag?" She swallowed hard and moved to the other side of the room.

"Why?" His eyes crinkled at the sides. He was trying not to smile at her and was failing miserably. She could see his amusement, and it pissed her off.

"Because my underwear is in it," she said through gritted teeth. He could go commando all he wanted, but she knew she needed some type of barrier between them. Not that it would make a difference, but if neither of them were wearing anything, she knew what would happen. And that would make what had happened earlier look like an appetizer.

"Why? It's not like you're going to need them." He turned on his side and looked at her.

She tried not to notice how sexy he looked just lying there. It would be so easy to slip under those covers and pretend she was the type of woman who could sleep with a man without second thoughts. But she wasn't. She was having second, third, and fourth thoughts.

"Stop thinking so much and come to bed." He patted the bedcovers.

So easy. So damn easy. Too easy. Gio bit her bottom lip and swallowed hard.

“Your wolf is all about sensations, and if you deny her, she will take over, and neither of us wants that.” His voice stroked up one side of her and down the other.

She didn’t know if she believed him. But his constant talk about her wolf taking over was starting to make her a little paranoid. Why was he so adamant that she didn’t want her wolf to take over? “And why don’t we want that to happen?”

He sat up, making the sheets fall to his waist. “You don’t understand. When our women go into heat, they need to be satisfied, or they’ll go into a wild lust that will take on a destructive edge. One female could fuck and turn many men before she could be put down.”

“You make it sound like putting down a rabid dog or something.” Gio rubbed one arm. So essentially her choices were jump into bed with him and maybe live, or jump into bed with countless men before someone shot her dead. Some choice.

“In essence, it’s the same thing. Except they would cause an epidemic. Our men don’t go into heat like the women, so we would add even more unmated men to the pack, which would make it harder for everyone to find mates. Men would start turning humans, and the cycle would become a spiral, until the entire pack had to be wiped out.”

She was sorry she’d asked. So which was it to be? Gio closed her eyes and gave up the fight. Better the wolf she knew. With that one little choice, everything suddenly seemed so easy and impossible at the same time. All she had to do was walk about six steps to the bed. But then again, she had to walk those six steps to a man who knew what they were about to do.

Taking a deep breath, she dropped her towel and took a step. Her hands itched to cover her slightly protruding stomach or her breasts, which felt like double Es. But she wouldn’t. If he wanted her, he needed to want all of her, not just the warm and toasty parts. She put her left foot in front of her right and took a step, then another. If she were really brave, she would look him directly in the eyes instead of just past him.

“Beautiful.” He whispered the word so low she initially thought she’d imagined it.

She dropped her gaze slightly to the right and was caught in his stare. She didn’t detect a hint of disgust, dislike, or disdain in him. No, he looked like a man about to die of thirst, and she was a tall glass of water.

When her legs bumped against the side of the bed, she let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. He reached out and snagged her just above the hips. She didn’t struggle as he pulled her to him. When she was securely beside him on the bed, he rolled on top of her.

The hard length of him pressed into her right thigh. If she twitched to her right a little, it would poke her in just the right place. She bit her bottom lip to hold back the moan crawling up her throat.

He rose on his elbows, then used one hand to smooth her damp hair away from her face. Then he bent his head and kissed her. No tongue, no teeth. Just lip to lip. It was a small act. Probably the most tame thing he’d done to her since they’d met, but it was also the sweetest, most endearing, and most dangerous. When he pulled away, she turned her head. It wasn’t that she didn’t like it. If only that were the problem.

He moved his lower body, and she felt the slight shift of his erection. She turned her head in time to catch the pleasure wash over his face as he surged inside her with one thrust. Her cunt was still swollen from their earlier encounter, making him feel bigger. She swallowed hard and closed her eyes as pleasure washed over her. It was like gunning an engine and going from zero to sixty in five seconds.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, and each time he pulled out, she pushed her ass into the bed, and each time he surged forward, she lifted. Every movement sent her body into overload. She didn’t know if she was going to be able to last as long as him. Each time he slammed down, it was harder, deeper, and more intense than before. A bolt of pleasure zinged up her chest, jawline, and straight to her brain.

If she was going to hit the point of no return, she was determined that he would hit it with her. She clenched on his next downward stroke. The sensation of being so filled pushed her over the edge. Her orgasm rushed over her, tightening every muscle. He kept moving, prolonging that soul-wrenching pleasure.

Gio let the pleasure surround her, flow through her. Then he stiffened above her and in her, and she fell apart again. She sucked in breath after breath but still felt like she couldn't pull in enough air.

"Oh my God." She'd never come so hard, so fast, or so much in one day. Her ears rang as her heart rate return to normal.

"That good?" he asked as he rolled to the side of her, then propped up on one elbow. He was smiling—the kind of smile that reached his eyes and transformed his face making him so gorgeous she could have swallowed her own tongue.

"I should be good now for like twenty-four hours. I don't think I'll be able to move for a long, long time." Then she felt it. Like something crawling under her skin. She threw the covers off and hit her arms and legs. There was nothing there. But she could have sworn something was rippling through her. It chased away all her euphoria.

"Stop. Stop." Jason grabbed her hands and pulled them away from her body. "That's just your wolf. The more sex we have, the closer she gets to the surface. You won't be able to change until after the solstice ceremony."

Gio snatched her hands away. "What did you just say?" She had to have imagined that.

"What? New wolves all experience their first change at either the summer or winter solstice. The call of the wolf is at its strongest then. After—"

"Not that." She scooted away from him and rubbed her left arm. "The part about us having sex bringing her closer to the surface. You never said anything about that. You said if I didn't have sex, I would lose control and turn into a fucking nymphomaniac. Now you're saying when we have sex, the wolf gets stronger?" The

need to hit him burned through her. She stopped rubbing her arm and started scratching her palm.

Dumbass. Dumbass. Dumbass. Why had he said that? The wolf had to get stronger. It was a natural progression. The wolf was like an infant. The more times she came to the surface, the tougher she got. And to emerge at the solstice ceremony, she would need to be capable.

“Look, it takes a lot to change. Your wolf has to be robust enough to finish the change, or you could be stuck somewhere in between. I’ve seen that, and believe me, you don’t want that.” And neither did he.

“What you’re saying is if we didn’t have sex, I might have been able to control the wolf?” She was pissed. He heard it in the gruff undertone of her voice.

“You can’t control the wolf by starving her. All that does is turn her desperate. I’m sorry that having sex with me was such a hassle. But it was necessary—whether you believe it or not.” He knew he shouldn’t be mad at her. She was most likely tired and scared. But going from an *oh my God* to a not-so-subtle reference that she would rather not have had sex was too much of a swing for him.

Jason moved to his side of the bed and lowered himself into his chair. He wheeled into the bathroom and took a quick shower. No one had ever said finding a mate would be easy. Nothing worth having ever was.

“Hey.” A soft voice sounded from just outside the shower stall. He was getting slow. First Dane, now her. He was going to have to start paying more attention to those around him. “Look, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to insult you.”

If that was not trying, he’d hate to see what happened if she put her mind to it. “It’s okay. You can grab a shower; then we’ll get some sleep. If I know Donovan, he’ll be over bright and early. And we need to figure out how to introduce you to the rest of the pack.”

“You don’t think they’ll like me?” Her voice quivered. “Is it because I’m black?”

He opened the door and stared at her. She stood near the doorframe looking as if she didn't really care. He wasn't fooled. "No. Race isn't an issue in the pack. We're all different: skin color, hair color, and eye color. We get a lot of outcasts up this way, so anything goes."

"Why wouldn't they like me?" She pouted as if begging for him to kiss the hurt away. And her forehead scrunched as if she was going over her image in the mirror, looking for a reason.

"It wouldn't be you. It would be me. A lot of them don't think I should mate. I know, I know," he said when she started making sounds as if she was going to argue. "We aren't a couple, but since humans can be changed, and you are changing, they will assume you're going to stay with me."

"I thought wolves only had one mate. You know, soul mates." She waved her hand in the air.

"Yeah. That's if you're lucky. Not everyone finds their soul mate. Wolves make the same mistakes as everyone else. We rush into a mating that is destined to fail. And when it does, both parties are miserable. But wolves mate for life. Most make the best of the situation. A few leave. Same as anywhere else, except there is no such thing as divorce for a wolf."

"Basically you're saying you guys only get one chance to get it right? One chance at happiness. If you jump too soon, you doom yourself."

"Yes. That's why we only have mating ceremonies twice a year, during the solstice celebrations. The entire pack shows up. Everyone has a chance to sniff out the potential mates, and if there are no objections, they are accepted into the group. It's also when we welcome new members; most are new mates although we do get one or two loners looking for a permanent home.

"So because you turned me they wouldn't be looking at me as a new member, but as the new-mate material for you?" She didn't look like she liked that.

He nodded. "Don't worry about it tonight. Just jump in the shower, then come and get some sleep."

She moved past him toward the shower. He looked at her reflection in the mirror. Who would have thought he'd be reduced to trying to trick a converted human into being his mate? He watched her step into the shower and pushed down the little piece of him that told him he wasn't being fair to her.

* * *

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

Gio lifted her head, smelled the coffee, but refused to crack an eyelid open. "No," she muttered into the pillow. Her entire body was limp and heavy. She didn't want to wake up. Not to that voice. If she did, it would mean it had all been real.

"Donovan will be here soon, and it doesn't look good."

Doesn't look good? What the hell was that supposed to mean? Gio flipped the covers off her head and sat up. She smoothed her hair down and leveled him with a searing gaze. There was no window in this room, but she would have sworn it wasn't much past sunrise.

"Define *doesn't look good*," she demanded as she pulled the covers up to hide her breasts.

"You know that visitor I had yesterday?"

"No. I didn't know anyone but Donovan had been here." She hoped no one else had seen her lying on the floor cuddling with the toilet.

"Suffice it to say, he's not going to be your biggest fan."

"Ahh. One of those people who don't think you should mate. Gotcha." Was that coffee he was holding for her? She lifted an eyebrow and looked from his face to the cup. "Is that for me?"

"No. You shouldn't have any stimulants until after your first change." He gulped more of what she was betting was some prime-grade stuff.

She had the childish urge to stick her tongue out at him.

"And no, Dane is not one of those who don't want to see me mate. He's the leader of the ones who think I should be dead."

She stopped eyeing his cup and zeroed in on his face. “Dead as in dead-dead?”

“I don’t know any other kind, do you?” He smiled.

“Why are you smiling? He wants you dead, and he came over here yesterday. Shit if he wants you dead, I probably don’t even warrant a thought. So I’ll just be collateral damage when he comes back to finish you off?”

“Stop.” He wheeled his chair close to the bed. “He’s had three years to try to kill me. He hasn’t even tried.”

“Yet,” she finished for him. “He hasn’t tried yet, but that doesn’t mean he won’t.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s what I’m here for.” A gruff voice came from the edge of the room. *Donovan*. Gio pulled the covers higher before she chanced a glance at the man. “Get dressed. I have more news.”

Jason moved to the dresser. He opened several drawers, pulled out clothes, and threw them at her. “Just put these on.”

“I still need underwear, and as much as I would *love* to wear some of yours, I think it’s time for Donovan to get my bag from the car.”

“Your car isn’t here,” Jason said without even turning around.

She didn’t like the sound of that. “Then where is it?”

“About seven hours from here, sitting at a truck stop. Someone will most likely steal it. But whatever the case, it’s no longer our issue.” He wheeled to the door and then turned to stare at her. “I told you that you couldn’t leave. That hasn’t changed.”

Chapter Five

Gio was dressed and tearing out of the room in three minutes flat. Who the hell did he think he was, taking her car? No, stealing her car and then driving it somewhere to get re-stolen?

What was she going to do about Cel? Gio shook her head. She couldn't think about her sister. Not now. She would worry about it when she worked all this crap out.

Jason and Donovan were in the living room, their heads almost bent together. They must not want her to overhear their conversation. She didn't want to anyway, but the fact that they were being so secretive pushed her straight over the edge.

"Who the fuck gave you permission to take my car and things? What if I'd had something important like medicine in there?" She put her hands on her hips and started toward them down the small path between the coffee table and the other furniture.

"Well, we can't make you disappear if we leave the car right outside the house, now can we? No doubt someone would search, and it wouldn't take them long to find you. Kind of defeats the purpose?" Donovan said with more laughter than fear in his eyes.

She wanted to rush over there and bite him. Knock him down and take a chunk out of him for teasing her. Not only had they screwed up her DNA, fucked up the minivacation she'd planned to take after she told Jason off, but they'd stolen her fucking panties—the good ones—and now they had the balls to laugh at her?

She didn't know what came over her. One moment she was staring down the small space separating them in anger, and the next she was flying through the air over the table with Donovan's head as her main target.

He scrambled away at the last second, but not far enough. She knocked him to the floor.

"Gio," Jason said, reaching for her.

She snapped at him. Then she heard a growl come from her lips. *Her lips*. She couldn't control it. The colors in the room went from vibrant to a soft, cool, flavorless version, all the vibrant hues gone. Just like in the bathroom—what she lost in shades, she picked up in depth perception and her almost preternatural ability to see motion. Donovan was about to try to push her off. She could see the muscles in his neck bunch. She jumped off him before he got the chance to throw her.

He stood slowly, never taking his eyes off her. "She's changing too quickly. Her wolf is too strong. You aren't going to be able to handle her cooped up like this unless you plan on fighting or fucking every second until the solstice."

"What do you suggest? You said Dane is watching. If I take her outside to run, he'll know about her and—no doubt—pull something." Jason backed away from her too.

It was almost a clear shot to the door. She didn't know where she would go with no clothes and no car, but something deep inside was urging her to run. *Just run*.

"He already knows. He threatened every female pack member and human who knows about us to stay away from you. Told them that if they don't, they'll be strung up naked to be a pack party favor at the solstice. I figure he knows you have a human here, because otherwise why not just talk to the pack?"

"Well, that's fucking great," Jason said. "So how many men does he having watching the house?"

"Enough that I have three of my deputies watching them." Donovan didn't look too concerned.

“If he captures her, he’ll kill her just to provoke me into a fight.”

“I told you we should never have admitted him into the pack,” Donovan pointed out.

The words floated over her as she kept an eye on the door. Well, not all the words. She caught the *kill her* and snapped back to attention. *Run. Run. Run.* There it was again. This time stronger.

Donovan moved closer to Jason and opened up a direct path to freedom. She watched the two men for a full minute before she ran for it. She didn’t glance behind her. When she reached the door, she threw it open and raced outside. The cool air hit her in the face and exploded into her lungs on that first breath. Gio had never been much of a runner, but it seemed effortless now. Legs, arms, breasts all moved in sync, and laughter bubbled up her throat as she ran.

Jason wheeled out the door just behind Donovan. Neither man had been expecting Gio to run. Once she was out of the door, her graceful gait carried her to nearby woods at an outrageous speed.

“This isn’t good. She can’t be running like this with Dane and his people out there,” Donovan said, shaking his head.

“Well, go get her,” Jason said, clenching his fists. It wasn’t as if he could chase her himself.

“The only way to catch her is to change. At best she’ll run from my wolf. At worst she’ll fight me. She got intimate with you. She’ll recognize your scent. You might get close enough to stop her.” Donovan glanced at him.

“I haven’t run in three years. Even if I wanted to try, how the hell do I run with one bum leg and another that can’t hold any real amount of weight?”

“Your wolf moved pretty fast when Gio first got here.”

“I have no clue as to how I did that. And besides, if I transform, the assholes watching us for Dane might too. Then Gio will really be in trouble.” Jason listened

to his words and knew it was a losing battle. If those men watching Gio caught her alone, they'd get her anyway. "I don't know how well this is going to work. Watch my back."

"I always do," Donovan said, moving back a few steps.

Jason let the anger and frustration rush through him. His wolf rippled right below the surface. It built up beneath his skin, until deep brown fur burst through his skin. His bones shifted. Muscles stretched, broke, then reconnected. Pain surged forward as his wolf surged through. It only took about two minutes, but it felt like he'd been changing for almost an hour.

He leaped from the chair and landed on three feet. His one functioning back leg could take some weight. He let his wolf take over, and although it wasn't the comfortable, easy motion he'd known for years, he was actually running. He concentrated on her scent as he ran, blocking out the smells of nature. Her scent was getting stronger. He was getting closer.

Jason skidded to a halt and tumbled and fell. Something was wrong. He felt eyes on him. The forest was full of movement, so he couldn't find who was watching him. A scream filled the air; then he was knocked sideways. Jason pushed up and lifted his claws, preparing to fight.

He stopped just in time to see Gio looking down at him. Her eyes were wolf blue. It seemed that having sex all day and night yesterday hadn't helped. Her wolf had taken over. And she wanted to play.

He should lead her back to his cabin. He should make her understand the danger to them both. He should not be getting turned on from her fingers stroking his side. There were a lot of things he should do. Instead he rolled on top of her, doing his best to keep the majority of his weight off her.

When she scrambled from beneath him, he let her go. She crouched and watched him, then pounced on his back. Heat burned through his fur where her legs wrapped around him. She might as well have been naked. He could feel her fire and smell her arousal.

If he could smell it, so could they. That realization sent thoughts of play from his mind. They would be watching, and Donovan would make sure that was all they did, until they smelled her arousal. Then all bets were off. Those who hadn't mated in a while would consider her fair game. And the others would definitely report the scent of her heat back to Dane. The second he could live with. The first? Not a chance.

He shook her off of him then backed up a few feet and growled. She got up on all fours and stared at him. Jason sniffed the air. They didn't have time for this. Her scent was getting stronger. She growled back.

He nipped at her. This time letting his teeth slice a little cut in her skin. She jumped back, and he surged forward. She moved back again; then she started to run. He easily kept up with her. When she tried to veer to the left or right too much, he growled deep and butted his head against her hips. By the time the cabin came into sight, he could feel the anger rolling off her. Which was too damn bad.

He followed her onto the porch and pushed her inside. Once she was safely in the house, he scanned the woods. There were four other wolves in those trees besides Donovan. They were watching, but not interacting. Which meant Dane had a plan.

He shifted, then used his arms to crawl into his chair. He wheeled back into the house. Donovan would report back after he followed Dane's spies back to the man. Jason pushed through the slightly ajar door and slammed it. He watched Gio pacing the living-room floor. That little bite was going to cost them. It would make her wolf stronger. Kind of like taking a double dose when one was more than sufficient.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Her eyes blazed a vibrant blue.

"Did you not hear Donovan and I talking about people trying to kill you?" Anger flowed up from his stomach as his words hit him square in the chest. The taste of it burned his throat and tongue.

“Honestly, no.” Her anger seemed to whoosh out of her with those two words. “When the idea to run hit me, it turned into the most important thing. I might have heard the word *kill*, but it didn’t matter. I just needed to run. I couldn’t stop myself.”

He’d told her that her wolf could take over. She hadn’t believed him. She hadn’t been prepared. She should have been.

“Seems your wolf wanted to come out and play.” Her wolf would have to be very strong in order to take over just to run.

“You told me as long as I kept her satisfied, she would be dormant.”

“Look, it’s not as if I do this every day. It’s different for everyone.”

“What’s so different about me?” She stopped and stared at him.

“I don’t know. Maybe because you were bitten by an Alpha? I have no idea. All I know is if you go outside again, Dane and his men will snatch you and kill you. Until the solstice, you need to stay here.”

Gio heard him, but this was crazy. Why kill her? It wasn’t like she’d done anything to anyone else in the pack. “I still can’t really wrap my head around the fact that they want to kill me because I’m here with you?”

“To get to me.”

“And why do they want to kill you?”

“Because I used to be the Alpha. I’m the one that made all the rules about how to deal with humans, about how to handle the newly converted wolves—all of this.” He waved his hands in the air.

“This is your fault.” She took a couple of really small steps. “Well then, you can fix it, right?”

“No. I used to be the Alpha. After the accident, I stepped down.” He moved the chair back and rolled around her.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you step down?” She followed him into the bedroom.

“Why the hell do you think? An Alpha has to be able to take all comers. How the hell am I supposed to do that with this damn chair and only two good legs in wolf form?” He turned on her, almost running over her foot.

Gio stumbled back into the wall, then quickly righted herself. “Your wolf looked fine to me. You scared me to death. And out there in the woods, you ran without a problem. So what’s the real issue?” She crossed her arms.

“Have you ever seen wolves fight?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. “It’s not a fair fight. You always go for the weak spot. Mine is so evident it wouldn’t be much of a fight. And I would be so busy trying to protect my backside, it would only take a few seconds for the right wolf to end the fight.”

“You don’t have much confidence in your ability, do you?”

“Look. I was Alpha of this pack for almost six years before the accident. I know I can’t be Alpha in this chair. Every second, another newbie would come out of the woodwork just *knowing* it will be a cinch to kill a handicapped Alpha. The pack would never know a second of peace.” He wheeled over to his dresser and pulled out a pair of sweats.

“And then again, if you soundly beat one man, all the others might take notice and decide it wouldn’t be worth it.” She wasn’t going to let this go.

“There is no sound beating. A fight for Alpha is to the death. If the challenger or losing Alpha is still alive, then the new Alpha isn’t considered strong enough to make the final blow for the well-being of the pack.” He pulled a shirt over his head.

“How many of these Alpha fights did you win?”

“Enough,” he told her as he pulled his pants on. He looked really uncomfortable as he basically rocked his way into his pants. “If they catch you, Dane will force me into an Alpha fight. And they will kill you when I lose the fight.”

“What about Donovan?”

“Donovan can’t help me during an Alpha fight. Not to mention that Dane would be sure to take care of Donovan before he challenged me. Are you done with the questions?”

“Just one? Can my wolf come out to play?”

He looked up and saw the blue gleam of her eyes. She licked her lips and stalked over to him. As soon as she was within reach, she ran her hands up and down the sides of his arms.

“What does your wolf want to do?” He was a bit wary. There was no way he was agreeing to *play* if that was her code word for taking a run.

“I just want to taste you,” she whispered as she moved in front of his chair.

Jason closed his eyes and relaxed. He felt her massage the tops of his thighs. When she started tugging on his pants, he propped his hands on the chair arms and lifted his body up. The pants slid straight down. As soon as the elastic of the waistband slipped over his erection, it sprang to life.

It had been so long since he’d felt lips on his cock that he knew he couldn’t have stopped her even if he wanted to.

Gio stared at his erection and licked her lips. Suddenly, tasting him had become as essential as breathing. Something deep inside her wanted to taste him, and although she wanted to tell herself that it was just her wolf, she knew it wasn’t.

“Open up,” he told her as he ran his hands along her cheeks then down her jawline and under her chin. The husky, masterful tone of his voice sent a thrill through her. It was almost as good as having him slap her ass during sex the previous day.

She crouched up so she could take the head of his cock in her mouth at a good angle. The second she touched the soft flesh of his cock with her lips, she was lost. She wanted him. Everything he had to give and more.

He guided her head up and down. At first he started with her only taking the head of his cock in her mouth. She moved her tongue along the length and over the top of his shaft. Before she could get used to the rhythm, he pulled her head down farther. She put a hand at the base of his cock, and as she moved one hand up and down, she also tightened the fingers encircling the bottom of his penis. He sucked in a deep breath, and his hands went a little slack on her head.

“So good,” he murmured.

She clenched her fingers and started a pulsing rhythm right above his scrotum. She tried to stay at a slow pace, but it didn’t work. Every small moan that escaped his lips enticed her to go faster and suck harder.

Within minutes she was taking him deep enough for the tip of his cock to knock against the back of her throat. He moaned low, then let go of her head and put his hands on her shoulders. She pushed farther and felt him knock into the tight lining of her throat. She pushed him out almost immediately, then pulled him in again. If the way his fingers were squeezing her shoulders were any indication, he liked that. She did it again.

“I’m about to come.”

Just as he said the words, she felt a tensing along his shaft. A spray of cream flowed into her mouth before she could move up. When he finished, she walked over to his bathroom and stepped inside. She bent to spit out the cream in her mouth. But before she could think about it, she swallowed. She coughed several times then stared at herself in the bathroom mirror.

“Look, we’re going to have to come to an understanding. I don’t like to swallow.” She knew she was crazy for talking to herself, but at this moment, she didn’t care. “I am in control here. When I’m down on four legs and covered in fur, then you get to be master. Not now.”

This had to be how insanity started. Doing things you wouldn’t normally do. Talking to yourself as if you could answer. Not to mention she was actually starting to care about a man who’d turned her life upside down and inside out. Her entire

world was being washed away because of a bite. How could she even think about liking him? As she looked in the mirror, she realized she wasn't about to get any answers—at least not ones she was ready to face.

“Are you ever coming out of there?” he asked from the bedroom.

She barely managed to keep from screaming that she was coming. The fact that she really wanted to run out there and dive into the bed held her back. She couldn't want him like this. It didn't make sense. Her girl parts were tingling as she thought of him touching her again.

“If you don't come out, I'm coming in.” Was he right outside the door? He sounded like it.

Shit. Gio sucked in a breath and walked out and right into him. Had he been there the whole time?

“Give me some room.” She pushed at his chair, but he didn't move. She squeezed past him and stood behind him. “Have you ever heard of personal space? I require three feet.”

He turned around then raised a brow. “You need to relax. And I know just how to make that happen.”

Gio looked at his smirk and narrowed her eyes. What did he mean?

He rolled toward her, and she backed up. He moved closer, and she moved away. They played the cat-and-mouse game until she felt the edge of the bed at the backs of her legs.

“What are you doing?” she asked, more than a bit nervous.

“Helping you relax.” He took her legs and pulled, making her fall backward onto the bed. He trailed a finger up and down her legs.

She knew what he was going to do, and his little touches were doing nothing but torturing her into jumping and shivering in anticipation. Then she felt his teeth on her. There was a sharp, scraping pain followed by the soothing caress of his tongue. He bit up one leg and down the other.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on not shattering right there. Her body was still humming from earlier, so she had no clue how long she would be able to hold out.

He used his tongue to trace the sensitive skin covering her clit, and she grabbed the sheets. "Jason, please."

He dipped through her wet crease and stroked her tiny bud. She was so sensitive that she almost screamed at the first touch. But after a few more swipes, she was riding a cresting wave and ready to come. She was almost there; all she needed was a little more.

Something must have tipped him off about her upcoming orgasm. He pushed two fingers inside her and sucked her clit into his mouth at the same time. Fire started deep in her belly and worked its way up and out to every cell in her body. She released the sheets and let the fire burn straight through her.

When she could suck in a breath and concentrate enough to open her eyes, he was gone.

"Are you hungry?" he called from outside the bedroom.

She was starving. But food wasn't number one on her list, and that scared her. His relaxation technique had done nothing but make her want to jump into bed with him again. Her need to be with him was going beyond the need to quench that fire smoldering inside her. She actually liked being touched by him. And touching him. The man in that chair was vulnerable, approachable, and so drop-dead delicious in bed that she couldn't imagine... *Stop. Stop right there.* She was not about to do this. He wasn't her type. And she wasn't his. Wasn't that what had started this whole mess in the first place? No more thoughts about him, the future, or anything else that led down that forbidden path. Right now she needed to live day to day. Concentrate on surviving.

When she walked out of the bedroom, he was nowhere to be found. The smell of toast pulled her into the kitchen, where he whizzed around, popping something into the oven.

“What’s for lunch?” she asked, putting on a cheery face—one that probably didn’t fool either of them.

“A precooked roast Donovan picked up.” He looked over his shoulder at her. His phone rang, and whatever else he was going to say died on his lips. He opened the phone and put it up to his ear. “What’s up, Donovan?”

“I just left Dane’s house. It looks like Toni is headed your way. I think Dane’s trying to get info on Gio. Be careful. A lot of the pack is about to go into heat.” Donovan’s voice was as clear as if she had been on the phone with him. How the hell was she hearing that? She doubted Jason’s cell phone could broadcast that loud. And it wasn’t as if she had been specifically trying to listen in.

“Thanks,” Jason said then shut the phone.

“Who’s Toni?” It could be a guy. It could. But hadn’t Jason said only the females went into heat?

“Huh?” He looked at her as if she’d grown another head.

“Don’t know how, but I heard your entire conversation. Who’s Toni, and why is she headed this way?” He blushed, and suddenly she was on high alert. It was a simple question. He held her gaze for several seconds, long enough for her to know she wouldn’t like his answer.

“Toni is Dane’s sister and one of the stronger females in the pack.” He turned his head away from her as he said the words. “She’ll be here in about fifteen minutes with the way she drives. Stay in my bedroom. No need to give Dane more information than he already has.”

“Hold on. His men have already seen me, so what difference does it make if I meet this Toni?” She felt her wolf rising to the surface. The primal need to fight burned through her. She wasn’t a meek little mouse. She never hid from a challenge. Not before this change and she had no plans on doing it now.

“A dominant female can spot another one. Her wolf will come out, and knowing her, she will either test you with a fight in human form, or she’ll transform into her wolf and try to tear you to pieces.” He looked directly at her. “Either way, if I help

you, you'll be seen as weak. I prefer to wait till after your change, so you will be on somewhat fairer footing."

"How can it be fair? She's been a wolf for how long? And I've been a half wolf for what...a few days?" She shook her head at his logic.

"When you shift, the wolf inside will know what to do. It's not like being born; you don't have to be taught everything. Some things are instinctual. If you're dominant, you'll fight. If you're submissive, you'll submit." He didn't smile, didn't offer her comfort.

"Basically I hide so this bitch coming to visit doesn't try to tear me a new one. Gotcha." Even as she said the words, her wolf cried out for her not to do it. To stand strong and fight. But what if she was a submissive? She didn't want to bow down to another woman with him watching. Then again, she didn't want to get her ass kicked in front of him either.

As she heard the car pulling up, she walked into his bedroom, fighting her wolf the entire way. She left the door cracked enough that she could see into the living-room area.

She held her breath as the doorbell rang; and he wheeled over to the door. She didn't know what to expect but sure wasn't prepared for the icy blonde who stepped through the doorway. She was impeccable. Her hair was perfect, although Gio knew the wind was blowing pretty hard, from the gush of cold air that followed her in.

"Hello, Jason." She slipped off black gloves, then her coat.

Surely she wasn't going to be there long enough to need to take that stuff off. Gio had no intention of staying hidden for longer than was absolutely necessary.

"Toni, what can I do for you?" He sounded too welcoming for Gio's taste.

"Dane says you caused a shift. That you were actually healing." She sounded surprised.

Gio saw her big, encouraging smile and felt her wolf growl. She didn't hear it; she felt it like a vibration through her skin.

“What? You came to see for yourself? Sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t change on command. I guess you’ll just have to take his word for it.” Something about his surly voice made Gio shift her gaze from Toni to him. Why did the woman’s concern make him so aggravated? Something wasn’t right.

Gio sniffed the air. She smelled something that made her want to walk out and rip every strand of hair out of the blonde bimbo’s head.

“Don’t be like that, Jason. Even our doctors said you wouldn’t heal. That you’d never shift again. If anyone had ever hinted that you would be able to shift and run—”

“Then what? You wouldn’t have called off the engagement? You wouldn’t have told everyone what the doctors said? You wouldn’t have threatened every female who showed me the least bit of sympathy?” The anger and resentment in his voice were strong enough that Gio felt them like a backlash. She watched Toni snap back as if she’d been slapped.

They’d been engaged? And the bitch had called it off after the accident? He’d failed to mention those two things when he’d convinced her to hide from his ex. For once she was in total agreement with her wolf when she opened the door and strode through.

“It wasn’t like that. I didn’t tell them to do anything. They did it out of respect for me. For us. For what we had.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. You don’t control all the women of the pack. And the ones I trust aren’t afraid of you—”

“You got that shit right,” Gio said, taking the few steps to fully enter the room. She wasn’t sure Jason trusted her, but Little Ms. Perfectly Proportioned Blondie didn’t need to know that.

“This is the human you converted?” Toni said in a tone that didn’t hold a second of surprise. She let out a little laugh, then glanced at Jason. “Was she the best you could do?”

“From where I’m standing, his taste has actually improved.” Gio cocked her head to the side. “Something about that accident must have knocked him around enough to see you for the soulless bitch you are.”

Toni sucked in a breath as her gaze swung back to Gio. The first thing Gio noticed was her fiercely blue eyes. The second was the way the muscles in her legs tightened. She sprang and pounced.

Gio ducked, tucked, and rolled out of the way. She crouched and watched the woman slam into the wall. The woman shook her head and growled.

“Yeah. That growling? Not doing a damn thing for me.” Gio watched the other woman. Her muscles bunched again. Her legs bent slightly and the muscles in her arms tightened as if getting ready. She was going to try to ram her. Gio didn’t know how she knew it, but if her wolf believed it, so did she. Toni shifted, then burst forward.

Gio waited until she was close, then jumped. Toni couldn’t stop fast enough to prevent herself from running into the wall. This time there was a definite *crack*.

“Bitch,” she screamed.

“No, honey, you must have me confused with you.” Gio stood and backed away from the woman when her wolf screamed at her to run forward and squeeze the life from her creamy throat. “That sounded like a bone snapping. I would get that looked at. I mean, if it doesn’t heal exactly right, you could be deformed.”

“Just wait. This isn’t over.” Toni cradled one arm while she used the wall to help her stand up. She ran toward the door, never taking her eyes off Gio and not getting too close to her either.

A very silent Jason sat near the door, holding her coat and gloves. She snatched them from him as she barreled out of the door. He slammed it after her.

“Why couldn’t you stay in the room like I told you?” he demanded.

The euphoria of victory slowly drained out of her, leaving behind a definite sense of betrayal. “Well, gee, that was kind of hard when your ex walked through that door looking like she wanted to eat you up.”

“You’re exaggerating. She hasn’t voluntarily touched me since she broke off the engagement.” He laughed. But it wasn’t a funny ha-ha laugh; it was more the ironic kind of laugh you did when the information wasn’t something you were proud to share.

“What? You wanted her to come in here and fall all over you? Take you back.” Her wolf howled inside her head at the thought. “She was just feeling you out. I could hear the bullshit from your room.”

“No, I didn’t—don’t want her. She was about to admit why she was here before you stepped outside and decided to ruin everything. Now she’ll run back to Dane and tell him about you.”

“What’s she going to say? You picked a fat black bitch that could kick her ass?”

“No. That I have a woman strong enough to mate with. That’s why he sent her—to determine how strong you were. Now he knows, and he’ll plan for it. Not to mention she’s going to go around and tell the entire pack how you broke her arm for no reason. And that’s if we’re lucky. She could say that I broke her arm.”

“You know what? Don’t turn this on me. You should have told me she was your ex. That you were engaged.” She felt her throat close and tried to swallow. Her skin tightened below her right ear, and pain shot along her throat. Her chest filled with pain as she pulled in a breath. “I don’t know if you hid me because you were ashamed of me or because you wanted her back. Either way I wasn’t good enough for you.”

“Gio!”

“No. You don’t get to say anything. You’ve made my life a living hell, telling me if I made the wrong move, I was going to die.” She swallowed hard. “And I trusted you. I listened to you. I had sex with you. At no time did I treat you as less than your worth just because you’re in a wheelchair. But the first chance you got to do

me that same courtesy, you hid me away. And you pretended it was to keep me safe? Don't lie to yourself."

"I did do it to keep you safe. If she had believed you were too weak to come out here and challenge her, it would have bought us a few more days."

"Are you sure about that? Are you sure it wouldn't have just made Dane bolder? If I were weak, I wouldn't have posed much of a threat. You don't know what would have happened." She turned and walked to the guest bedroom. If she had to chain herself to the bed, she would. There was no way she was going to sleep with him again. Not tonight. Not ever. For the second time that day, her wolf agreed. Before she closed the door, she said in a very quiet voice that did nothing to hide the tears she refused to shed, "I'm trying to figure out if you're hiding here for the good of the pack, or because you're scared to even try."

Chapter Six

Jason watched her walk out of the room. He wanted to go after her, but she was in no mood to listen to him. What could he say? He'd had no idea she or her wolf was strong enough to stand up to Toni without fear. The strength of your wolf was determined by how strong a person you were.

There was no way for him to explain this to her without sounding insulting. If she had truly been the woman he'd been e-mailing, he would have been able to read her strength through the e-mails. Through her responses to his commands, he would have known her wolf would have been Alpha mate material.

He slowly wheeled over to the door and listened. He heard the soft whimpering and knew she was crying. Those tears were his fault. Each and every one. How was he supposed to make this up to her? Sorry just wasn't going to cover it. He had no clue what would.

Instead he wheeled to the kitchen and finished preparing lunch. He fixed her a plate and wheeled it to the room. "I've got some food. I'm going to leave it here."

"I'm not hungry!" she yelled.

"You need to eat. I'm going to leave it here. You don't need to talk to me or eat with me. Just—"

"Fine."

He was surprised when she stepped out, grabbed the plate, and walked over to the bar in his kitchen. He was not expecting that.

"Feeling better?"

“No. I’m not feeling better. I haven’t let anyone make me feel ashamed of who I was since high school. But I trusted you and... Never mind. It doesn’t matter. I was stupid. I won’t be again.”

She didn’t say she was stupid for trusting him. She didn’t have to. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. What could he say? *Trust me now. I won’t let you down again.* He closed his mouth and just wheeled away from her.

“Don’t starve your wolf to punish me. She’ll get stronger and pop out on you at the wrong time.” The second the words left his lips, he knew it was the absolute wrong thing to say.

“Don’t worry. I think we’ll be just fine. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll be sleeping in the guest room tonight.” She picked up a forkful of the salad and pushed it into her mouth. She chewed, but she didn’t look like she was enjoying it.

“So you’re not going to talk to me anymore?” The time left until the solstice was going to drag on forever if all they did was ignore each other.

“If by *talk* you mean sleeping together, then no. We won’t be doing that. But talking? It doesn’t make sense to walk around each other and not talk.”

The fact that she wasn’t arguing with him anymore and didn’t sound remotely concerned worried him. Maybe they just needed to change the subject completely. It wasn’t like they didn’t have things to discuss.

“We need to get out of this house. Maybe we can do a little damage control.” He watched her as he said the words. Her body stiffened at the mention of going outside. “We can go into town and meet some of the pack before Toni has time to do much damage. But...”

“But what?” she asked, putting her fork down.

“But you’re going to have to pretend you actually like me. If you’re standoffish at all, they’ll know something is wrong, and Toni can be really convincing. She had me fooled for over a year.” He knew he shouldn’t have added the last part. Mentioning his ex was not going to help Gio forgive him.

“See, I don’t understand that. From the second she opened her mouth, I had her pegged as a power-hungry conniver. How could you not see it?”

“I’ve asked myself that question a lot in the last three years.” He shrugged. There was no good explanation for his lack of common sense here. He knew it. And he also knew that if he got Gio out of this house, he might be taking a step in the right direction—if not in her case, then definitely in her wolf’s.

“And it’s not that I don’t like you. More like I don’t trust you.” She finished her food. “Thanks for cooking. And if it will earn me an afternoon out of here, then yeah, I can play the adoring girlfriend.”

“We can go shopping too. Get you some clothes.” He waited. A few hours ago she might have jumped in with a smart-assed comment or a joke. But instead she got up and rinsed off her plate. Their easy camaraderie was gone. He hoped that if he proved he trusted her and wanted to be seen with her, she would also believe he was only trying to protect her.

He waited until she was done to show her out to the garage and to his modified truck. It had cost him a small fortune, but he could drive using hand pedals. After they were both in the truck, he pulled out.

“You left your chair?”

“I only use the manual chair in the house. For trips out, I have a mechanical one in the back.” He nodded toward the back of the truck. He’d also modified it so he could crawl through the back to get to the wheelchair.

“There’s a women’s-wear shop on Main Street. We can stop in there to see what they have. Sarah Jane and her sister, Ambriel, own the shop, but Ambriel basically runs it for the day-to-day stuff,” he told her as they pulled into a parking spot near a storefront sporting mannequins in swimsuits. He shook his head. Ambriel never paid attention to the seasons. Gio got out the passenger-side door, and he pulled his way into the backseat, then pushed a small button and lowered two small sections so he could reach the chair. He pushed several buttons to fire that puppy up. It hadn’t been used in a while. A long while. He pressed another few

buttons on his key fob, and the truck's cab lowered and a ramp extended down. He wheeled over to Gio's side and took her hand.

He watched her muscle tighten in her arm as if she might yank her hand away—or something worse. He wasn't going to give her that chance.

"If you pull away, people will see." It was an excuse. A poor one, but he was grasping at straws. He needed to make sure things got back to normal before the solstice. After it her heat would be gone, and she wouldn't need him anymore. It was plain and simple that they didn't have enough time. He needed, no wanted more.

As they slipped inside, an intense floral scent hit him square in the nose like a heavyweight prizefighter. He coughed twice before his body adjusted to the aroma. He didn't remember it being so strong before. Gio cleared her throat. Her ears had gotten more sensitive, but her nose wasn't there yet. Either that or she liked the smell.

"Jason? I swear my eyes are playing tricks on me." A small petite pixie of a woman came from behind the counter with a burst of speed and headed straight for him.

Gio held her breath. She wasn't a jealous woman, or at least she'd never been before. She pulled in a breath and told herself that not all women wanted Jason. And even if they did, she couldn't take them all down. She exhaled slowly. No way did she want him to think for a second that anything he did affected her. He wasn't hers. She had to remember that. Even when everything in her told her he was.

"I heard someone busted Toni up. About damn time. I would have done it myself if it wasn't for the business."

The woman pulled her down into a hug. Gio didn't know what to do. Her wolf didn't want the hug. She wanted to tear the woman's arms off and beat her with them for wrapping them around her. When she looked over at Jason, he was

smiling. She pushed the woman away as politely as possible, then extended a hand. “My name is Giovanni, but everyone calls me Gio.”

The woman shook her hand and sniffed her. Actually put the hand up to her nose and sniffed. “My name’s Ambriel. My husband, Nickolas, works at the fire department. Maybe you can stay for dinner tonight.”

“Sorry, Am, we’re only here to do a little shopping.” He maneuvered a joystick, and his chair vibrated to life, and within seconds, he was by her side, stroking his thumb against her palm.

“Oh, I remember what it used to be like. That mating heat lasts until about the first child comes.” A smug smile lit up her face. “Then the kids come, and it gets worse, because you have to get adventurous. Sex in the laundry room, in the car, in the garage—and that’s just at home. Eventually you get desperate enough to do things outside, where strangers may see you.”

Gio couldn’t help but take a step back at the word *kids*. Her throat closed at the thought that she was never going to have kids. Her entire life gone in a flash, to be replaced by this joke where the one person who’d come to mean something to her was ashamed of her.

“I don’t—”

“We aren’t planning on having kids right away. We want a couple of years to ourselves,” Jason said, raising Gio’s hand to his lips.

The contact was both calming and inflaming. She’d been fine at lunch. On the drive down, she thought she’d been okay, that the need for him could be controlled.

Ambriel waved her finger at Jason. “Did he tell you that after seeing my brood, he bet my husband that he would have more? He’s planning on having his own baseball team.”

Gio swallowed hard. “No, he didn’t tell me that.”

Jason dropped her hand and looked away, then cleared his throat. “That was before the accident.”

Gio rolled her eyes. “You know you are the most self-pitying son of a bitch I have ever met. You’re in a wheelchair. Get over it. Lots of men in wheelchairs are great dads. I’m sure a few of them even have nine or ten kids. The only difference between them and you is they know that their lives weren’t over when they lost the use of their legs.” Gio walked toward one of the racks of jeans. She was sick and tired of hearing how his life had changed and the shit he couldn’t do. Hell, the only thing he couldn’t do was stand.

Ambriel walked over and stood next to her. “You know, when they told me you broke one of Toni’s arms, I knew I was going to like you. But after that, I think I might be a little in love with you.”

Confused, Gio turned toward her. She wasn’t angry? Gio was expecting to get ripped into shreds verbally for talking to Jason like that.

“Now if you had smacked some sense into him, I might have had to sign up as your love slave.” There were tears in Ambriel’s eyes. Not the type of tears that spilled down your face with a good cry. These tears made the woman’s honey brown eyes extra bright.

Gio wasn’t trying to impress anyone, and truthfully, after she’d heard his words, she’d forgotten the other woman was there. “Thanks.” She couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Pick an outfit out. It’ll be on me,” Ambriel said, smiling.

“No. I couldn’t.” Gio didn’t have any money, and she really didn’t want Jason buying her anything, but she didn’t want to take anyone’s charity either.

“I can pay for an outfit,” Jason said as he wheeled up behind them.

“I didn’t ask you,” Ambriel said, dismissing him without a glance. “Why don’t you go over to the couch and wait?”

Gio decided right then to take the woman up on her offer, for no other reason than to spite Jason. He’d hurt her, and he thought buying her an outfit was going to fix something? *Hell no.*

“Okay. One outfit. Jeans, shirt, and some underwear,” she told Ambriel.

“No underwear,” Jason growled.

Was he serious? She’d told him that ship had sailed. No way was she going to willingly give herself to someone who made her feel so second-class.

“Don’t worry; I’ll take care of you. Why don’t I just get a dressing room ready?” Ambriel moved through a doorway quickly—too quickly.

“If you get some underwear, I’m going to rip them to shreds.” He was whispering, but she heard every word clearly.

“And I thought I told you I was not going to have sex with someone who was ashamed of me.” She kept her back to him and her voice low.

“I told you I was not ashamed of you. I was only trying to protect you—”

“Keep believing that. But I protected myself. I didn’t see you running in trying to save me. And it turns out your ex was the one who needed protecting. I could have hurt her worse.” Anger was working through her body, making her hot. She needed to calm down before her wolf came out.

“If you had tried to hurt her while she was down, she would have changed on you, and her wolf would have torn you to shreds,” he whispered, his anger running down her spine like a mild caress. Her wolf purred beneath her skin.

“You don’t know that. I—”

Ambriel poked her head through the door. “Come on back. I picked out some of our new arrivals for you to look at too.”

Gio lifted the three pair of jeans she’d been holding and walked into the back room. Ambriel had to have heard every word she and Jason had said, but she wasn’t showing it. Gio could come to like her.

“So how’d you meet?” Ambriel asked as she perched on one of the benches in the large dressing room.

Gio looked around. There was nowhere for her to move to. To hide. She was supposed to get undressed here? In front of this woman, who had to be a perfect size 6? Really?

“We met online.” There was no way Gio was about to say anything about the mix-up with her sister.

“Wow. Bet you thought you were dreaming when he started spouting fur.” Ambriel giggled. The grown woman actually giggled.

“You could say that.” Nightmares counted as dreams.

“Um...can I get the underwear first?” she asked before she lifted the sweatshirt over her head.

“Don’t worry, honey. Nickolas ripped through so many of mine, I rarely wear them now. You get used to it.” The woman grabbed a pair of panties and a bra that looked to be about the right size, handed them to her, then stepped away and turned her back on Gio.

Gio hurriedly threw her clothes off and stepped into the underwear, then pulled her bra on and stuffed her breasts in. The underwear looked substantial but wasn’t more than just a thong with lace around the sides. It screamed *rip me off*. She wanted big granny panties. Anything to turn down the fire Jason ignited without even trying.

“These won’t even last the night,” she muttered to herself. It would be different if she were just fighting Jason. Gio bent and pulled on a pair of jeans, then quickly buttoned them up. She smoothed the material over her thighs and smiled. These were awesome jeans. They hugged her curves, and miracle of miracles, no muffin top.

She pulled on the blouse, and although it looked good, she knew it was probably going to end up in a pile next to the underwear and bra. “Do you have a shirt that’s a little bit more...sturdy?”

“Honey, he’s going to rip through whatever I give you. You should just enjoy it and wear it as long as it lasts—which might only be until you get home.” The darn woman giggled again.

“How about I take two pair of pants and just wear his sweatshirt? That way if he rips something, it’ll be his own shirt, not mine. And I will have a pair of pants to wear while I wash the others.”

“You drive a hard bargain. But if you talk Jason into bringing you by for dinner after the solstice celebration, then you have a deal.” The woman smiled.

Gio wasn’t fooled. The woman wanted to make sure Gio at least ran into Jason once after being admitted to the pack. But two pair of jeans without having to feel indebted to Jason? It would be worth it. “You’ve got a deal.”

When she came out of the room, she made sure the underwear peeked out of the jeans. She bent over to hand him the bag, letting his sweatshirt move up enough to show off that hint of thong.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her onto his lap. She fell on him, doing her best not to scream. She opened her mouth to ask him what the hell he was doing, when she heard the jingle of the bell as someone else stepped into the shop.

The woman was a brunette who looked a hell of a lot more interested in Jason and Gio than in the clothes. Gio started to get up but couldn’t; then she felt the tightening of the band of the underwear. Before she could slap his hand, the fabric snapped. It was like a gunshot. She looked up, and Ambriel was smiling. The woman at the door cut her eyes at them, then turned around and left.

“Damn it,” she told him and jumped off his lap. This time he let her up.

“That was Toni’s best friend, Becca. Someone probably told her you guys were over here, and she decided to get a look at you,” Ambriel told her as she came over and hugged Jason and Gio again. “Now, you two head on out. I’m going to take a break and see if my gossip is better than Toni’s.”

She grabbed Gio’s hand and squeezed. The woman passed her a scrap of fabric. *Please let that be another pair of underwear.* She started to open her hand, when

she heard the roaring. She caught sight of Donovan parking on the sidewalk, blocking the door. He stepped inside and turned the dead bolt.

"Is your back door locked?" he asked Ambriel.

She looked from Donovan to Jason. "Yes, why?"

"We've got to get them out of here. Dane went ballistic when Toni got home and admitted Gio was a potential Alpha's mate."

"And being a potential Alpha's mate is rare?" She couldn't believe it was.

"Alpha's mate is a female wolf strong enough to mate with the Alpha and keep the female half of the pack in line. Not everyone can be an Alpha's mate." Ambriel took a step closer to Donovan. "Do I need to call Nickolas?"

"No, you need to go see him. We have no clue who might be just standing around. The last thing we need is for one of Dane's men to overhear." He turned back to Jason. "Dane has stepped up his schedule. He has his men out looking for you. They tried the cabin, but you weren't there. Now they're searching through town." Donovan looked up and down the street through the windows.

"We need to get you guys out of here. As soon as possible. Dane's men have orders to snatch her at all cost. He's going to force you into issuing the challenge," Donovan said, zeroing in on Jason.

"He can't do that, can he? Just kidnap me in broad daylight?" For a moment Gio couldn't swallow.

"It is illegal, but none of the pack will stop him, because you aren't pack. He wants to make sure you don't become pack either. If Jason dies in the Alpha fight, he'll sic all his men on me, and if he knows Ambriel has met you, he'll go after her and Nickolas next."

"Hey. Nick and I can take care of ourselves," Ambriel told him.

"I know, but what about your children?" Donovan asked. Ambriel swayed.

"He wouldn't," she whispered.

Donovan raised an eyebrow. "Are you willing to chance it?"

None of them answered.

"It doesn't matter, as long as he doesn't know you were here with them. If you—"

"Becca was just here. She saw them and left," Ambriel answered.

"Shit." Donovan ran a hand over his face, then shook his head.

"Am, do you mind if I leave my chair in your dressing room?" When she nodded, Jason turned and looked at Donovan. We'll all stay at your place. We can hole up there for the next two days."

Everything seemed to shift into fast-forward. The second he turned the chair off, Donovan picked Jason up and carried him to the truck. It didn't take them but a hot second to leave town. As they passed out of town, she turned to him.

"Are you going to fight to be Alpha again, or are you going to let this hurt the people who matter to you? And don't say you're doing this for the good of the pack. Personally, I don't see how you could be a worse Alpha."

He didn't answer her. Instead he just continued to drive.

"Look, I understand about you being ashamed of me. Believe me. I know the only reason you had sex with me was because you turned me. But—"

"Have I ever said I didn't want you?" He took his eyes off the road for an instant to look at her. "In fact, I think I have told you time and time again that I like touching you. If I didn't want to touch you, I wouldn't have, whether I transformed you or not."

"Have you ever changed anyone before?"

"No. I was always careful."

Until her.

"And if we make it through the next couple of days, I'm going to show you how much I like touching you."

She watched his hands flex on the steering wheel. She bit her bottom lip, then asked quietly, "You really like touching me?"

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Toni. When she left me, she told me she couldn’t see tying herself to half a man. And after the accident, I was. Before you, I hadn’t had sex since before the accident. I couldn’t. I couldn’t get an erection no matter how much I tried.” He pulled in a breath and stretched his fingers before tightening them on the wheel.

“I lost everything in the accident. Absolutely everything. I couldn’t be Alpha anymore; I couldn’t transform. And then to find out I might never be a father. It devastated me. About three months ago I finally got feeling back in my cock. I could get hard; I could come. If nothing else, I could be a father.” His voice quavered.

Then she came along and fucked up his entire storybook world. “I’m sorry Celestine tricked you.”

“I’m not. Otherwise I wouldn’t have met you.” He licked his lips. “When we get to Donovan’s, I’m going to show you how much I want you.”

Gio hadn’t been expecting that and had no clue as to how to reply to it. Another thing she wasn’t expecting was Donovan’s house. That sucker was at least two times the size of Jason’s. “Let me guess. He wants to have two baseball teams?”

“My emergency basic wheelchair is behind the seats. Can you get it down for me?” he asked as he pulled into Donovan’s garage. Lights sprang up everywhere.

“Donovan takes security to a whole new level, doesn’t he?”

“You haven’t seen his gun collection,” he told her as he opened his door.

She moved the seat, pulled the chair out, opened it, and rolled it over to the driver’s side. Jason climbed into the chair and breathed a deep sigh.

“Go down the hallway to the last room on the left. And while you’re in there, take off any clothes you don’t want me to rip off.”

Gio opened her mouth but didn’t say anything. There was no one here, and her life might be on the line. Was she really going to fight the chance to feel special to him for one more night?

Jason watched her. Things were spiraling downhill so quickly that he didn't have time to check the feelings he was developing for her. Every time he told her something he'd given up, she made him feel stupid for not realizing he could still have those things, still have a life. Kind of hard not to fall for someone who did nothing but uplift you.

He stopped in Donovan's office and turned on the motion cameras and alarms, and cut the power to the garage. The only way in was straight through the front door. And five inches of reinforced steel weren't going to give easily.

The most important thing he needed to do was show Gio he wanted more of her. That he loved touching her, pleasuring her. That although it had started as a way to ease her ache, it had turned into something neither of them could stop. But first he wheeled into Donovan's room. It only took him five minutes to find what he was looking for.

When he opened the door to the guest room across the hall, he watched the light caress Gio's naked flesh. She was sitting on the bed, waiting on him. His cock jumped at the sight.

"I told you that making love to you wasn't a chore. I enjoyed it as much as you did. And before the night is over, you won't be able to doubt it any longer." He wheeled into the room and up next to the bed.

"Now it's making love and not just sex?" She shifted her hips to the left and stared at him. Her breasts were almost directly lined up with his mouth.

He swallowed as his palms burned, and he remembered the feel of her flesh as he squeezed her soft skin. He opened his mouth and cleared his throat. "Lie facedown on the bed and spread your arms and legs. Wide."

He watched her hesitate for a second, then move back on the bed. She flipped over and stretched out. Her legs were wide, but not wide enough for what he had in mind.

"Wider."

She spread her legs until he could see the strain in her calf muscles. She jumped when he grabbed her ankle, and slipped the velvety-soft material of the restraint over her foot. It only took a few moments to hook her arms and legs up to the bedpost. He'd picked up a blindfold too, but he wanted to be sure she'd remember who'd touched her tonight. He wanted to see the passion in her eyes.

"I'm going to start at your feet and work my way up. Then I'm going to work my way back down." He picked up one of her feet and massaged it with his thumbs. Soft moans escaped her lips as he worked his hands up her calf. When he reached her knee, he repeated the process on the other leg.

He grabbed the side of the bed and pulled himself up and over her. He positioned himself directly between her open calves. Jason leaned forward and traced a small line up her thigh with his mouth. He nipped her, he kissed her, and then he sucked on her flesh. Taking his time to drive her into a heated frenzy.

"Please," she begged less than ten minutes later. "Please put it in."

"Not yet." He'd made a path up her legs, over her ass, up to her neck, and finally back down. His cock was painfully hard. He pulled off his shirt and threw it on the floor and next shucked his jogging pants.

He worked his way up her legs again. This time he stopped at her sex and slid his tongue over her clit and up. She shuddered and bucked against him. He pressed his tongue into her center. The sweet flavor of her cream filled his mouth. If he kept this up, he would come all over himself. He shifted and kissed the rounded globes of her ass and pulled up along her back. After he got to the point where his cock slipped into her wet heat, he slowed down. He pushed up on his arms and used his strength to rock backward and forward, in and out.

He wasn't going to last much longer. He pushed hard into her, and then she shattered, crying out as her muscles spasmed on his cock, ripping away his tiny shred of control. It was over too quickly, but that was okay. The night was young.

"Give me a minute and we'll start again." After tonight was over, he wasn't going to be the only one who couldn't walk.

“Start over?” she asked, her breath coming in fast puffs.

“This is just the beginning.” He rubbed up and down her arm. “But next time I want to see your face when you come.”

She leaned up on one shoulder and stared at him. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she just exhaled and fell back on the pillows.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She didn’t look at him. He grasped her chin in his fingers and turned her face so he could look her in the eyes. “What is it, Gio?”

“Nothing.”

He heard fear in her voice instead of annoyance. What was she scared of? Why had she turned jittery all of a sudden? He didn’t ask again. Instead he just continued to touch her, stroke her. Her breathing returned to normal.

Every time he stroked her, blood rushed to his penis. It jumped and pulsed until it was erect again. He tapped her twice, then dipped down for a kiss. It was time for round two.

He pulled her face to his. He wanted to brand the taste of her into his mind. He would take this slow, savor her feel, her taste. Everything.

Her breasts felt familiar in his hands. He bent and kissed them, then turned up to her face. She was watching him.

“I want you to ride me. Hard.” He reached up and released her wrists then moved down and let her legs loose.

She sucked in a breath and bit her lip, then nodded. They both moved as she rolled on top of him.

He was more than surprised when she lowered her head and lightly bit his left nipple. Flashes of pleasure and pain shot through him. She moved to his other nipple, and his cock jumped when she bit him.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her down on his hard cock. It slid straight inside. Her swollen flesh made her tighter. He gritted his teeth to hold back the almost immediate need to grab her hips and slam her onto him.

“Don’t move,” he told her as he tried to regain a bit of his control.

“No.” She pumped her hips, taking him inside again and again. It felt like she was slamming her entire weight onto him. He bit his lip and tried to hold back.

“Gio,” he moaned.

The muscles of her pussy tightened on him as she lifted herself up, and he lost his slight hold on his control. He grabbed her by the hips and raised her up, then slammed her down. It didn’t take long for him to feel his release coming on.

Jason reached between them and stroked her swollen clit. When his release slammed into him, he pinched her sensitive nub and felt her shatter.

It took several minutes for the room to come back into focus. When he lifted his head, he found her lying next to him, her breathing low and constant. She had to be wiped out.

Jason slid off the bed and into his chair. He made quick work of getting a towel and cleaning them both up and then pulled himself back onto the bed.

He wasn’t sure when Dane was going to make his move. Maybe he would have another chance to make love to her? Hell, he hoped so.

* * *

The sound of the alarms going off woke Jason with a start. There wasn’t time to go check to see where they were. He cradled his head and rolled off the bed. The slap against the hard floor was enough to knock any lingering sleep from him.

“Jason?”

“They’re here. We need to get ready.” He rolled his shoulders to relax. He saw her yank on some lacy scrap over her hips, then pull on some jeans. “I hope you know those little things are toast after this is over.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” she told him as she blew him a kiss.

His chest swelled with pride. Lots of women would have been quivering in a corner, but not Gio. She pulled on his sweatshirt then looked at him expectantly. He winked at her, then concentrated and wolfed out. He sent a burst of power out with the transformation. It had been a few years since he'd tried to force a change. He doubted Dane's stronger lackeys would be affected, but it might just give Gio and him better odds.

"What was that?" Gio put a hand to her chest and took several deep breaths.

"One of the benefits of being pack Alpha is you can force the change. Anyone in the house should have changed into his or her wolf form." That was the kind of power Dane lacked. It wasn't that he wasn't man enough; he just wasn't the right man for the job.

The door to their room slammed open, and three large, blue-eyed brown wolves stared at them. All three set their sights on him. That was fine; he could handle them. The one on the right pounced. Jason jumped and landed on the bed. The second wolf jumped, and when Jason tried to move out of the way, his bum leg got caught in one of the bedsheets. The wolf's attack launched Jason over the side of the bed. The other two wolves raced around Gio.

Gio stuck her foot out and tripped one, sending him flying into the hardwood dresser. When the wolf got up, he locked his gaze on her.

"Sorry," she said, shrugging.

The animal took a step toward her; then he turned his head in the direction of the scuffle with Jason. She waited until she thought he might be about to take a step in that direction, and then she took off for the door.

Just outside the doorway, a hand came down on her forearm. Gio didn't look to see who it was or what they wanted. Instead she slammed her hand down on top of the hand and twisted. The guy who'd grabbed her smacked into the wall with a resounding *thud*.

When she did look up, she took a deep breath. “Dane.” It had to be him. He looked too much like Toni not to be.

“Ahh. I see that Jason told you about me.” He rushed her.

She moved the same as she had with his sister. But he wasn’t as easily tricked. When he passed her, his fingernails scratched along the fabric of her side through Jason’s sweatshirt. As pain burned above her stomach, she realized he hadn’t just sliced through the shirt.

He laughed at her, then turned and pounced at her. This time he landed at her left. She went on instinct and kicked him in the gut as hard as possible. He staggered back, but not far enough.

He didn’t wait, just rushed her. She hadn’t recovered yet, and he wrapped his arms around her. She elbowed him repeatedly, hoping to break a rib. He grunted with each blow.

“Stop that,” he yelled.

She used the other elbow to catch him in his vulnerable side. The sound of his bones cracking was like a roar of thunder echoing through the hallway.

“Stop fighting me, damn it,” he said, twisting her around to face him.

She hit his chin with all her strength with her open palm. He yelled and threw her into the wall, then followed her.

“I was going to leave him here tonight—alive. But if you don’t stop, I’ll tell my men to kill him now,” he all but whispered to her.

“You’re lying. If I stop fighting, you’ll kill us both.” She thrust her foot out at his shin.

“No. I need him to fight me in an Alpha challenge. That means lover boy and you both get to live long enough to see the ceremony. But keep fighting and I’ll call in the men waiting outside the door. We’ll kill you and dispose of the bodies. Everyone will suspect we did something, but they won’t be able to prove it.” He let her go and sneered. “So what’s it going to be?”

He could be bluffing. She was going to call his bluff if there was no one standing outside that door. He didn't walk out but instead whistled. There was growling, and suddenly six very large wolves filled the room. Now it was up to her. They either died tonight or on the solstice. She had to believe Jason would come up with a way to save them both.

"Now. Walk out the door." He was puffing up now that he had backup. She wasn't scared of him. When she walked by him to get out the door, she jumped toward him. He flinched and moved back the tiniest bit, but she'd seen it. And guaranteed if she had seen it, so had they. She smiled up at his angry face.

He smacked her hard enough to knock her to her knees. Her vision blurred with tears of pain, and her cheek was on fire, but it was worth it to show his lackeys their Alpha was afraid of her, a nonpack hybrid who couldn't shift yet.

"Take her out to the car." His voice boomed through the room. Two of the wolves shifted into naked men. They grabbed her by the arms and lifted her. Once she was on her feet, they pushed her through the door, which had keys hanging from the lock.

She was almost 100 percent sure Donovan hadn't given those keys up. Which meant Donovan was either dead or somewhere unable to help them. The other men weren't following her, which meant they were all going inside to gang up on Jason.

Fire flamed to life in her belly. She pushed against one of the men with all her weight, then kicked out at the other. She hit his knee. Bone snapped, and he went down screaming. The other man tightened his grip on her, but she didn't want to kick him. She pressed more of her weight on him, and when he tried to put some distance between them, she jabbed him quickly in the nose. Then she turned and kneed him in the gut. He still didn't let her go. He lifted his hand to strike her, but she saw it coming and flattened her hand and struck him in the throat. His fist glanced off her cheek, but it didn't have much force. He reached for his neck. The second he let go of her, she raced for the house.

Those two men hadn't expected her to fight back. She walked up to the door but didn't see anyone. They must all be in the bedroom. She hurried inside and moved down the hallway.

"As soon as I kill you, I'm going to hang your bitch up to be taken by every man in this pack. Then I'm going to rip her throat out, just like I'm gonna do yours." He punched Jason in the side of his chest. She heard the faint *snap* of bone. The son of a bitch was breaking Jason's ribs.

She didn't know what happened. One moment she was crouching on the floor, peeking in the door. The next she was flying through the air, then landing on Dane. They seemed to hit the floor in slow motion. Before his men could pull her off him, Gio placed her knee on the right side of his body, on top of his rib cage, and put all her weight on that knee. The bones cracked before she was thrown backward to the floor.

She looked over at Jason. He was staring at her, shaking his head slowly.

"Get that bitch and get her out of here. Now." Dane got up, but he wasn't moving so fast. "I am going to enjoy killing you."

"Maybe and maybe not. I think I just evened up the fight." She smiled at him, knowing he was going to knock her out. When the blow came, she didn't even try to move. Besides, it was less fun to torture someone who was unconscious. Pain exploded in her head, and blackness raced up behind a blinding flash of white light.

Chapter Seven

Jason woke to someone shaking him. “What?”

“Get up.”

He stared up into Donovan’s very swollen face. “You don’t look too good,” Jason told him and wheezed as pain seared through his chest.

“You aren’t about to win any beauty pageants either. I take it Dane showed up here with his followers and took Gio?”

“He took her, but not before she cracked a couple of his ribs.” Jason sat up. He should shift and let the change heal most of his injuries. But if he did, he would be stuck in that form for hours. He just didn’t have the energy for back-to-back changes.

“What time is it?” Jason asked, turning his head to work the tension out of his sore neck. “We need to come up with a plan.”

“There’s no time. It’s eight o’clock in the morning. But it’s the twenty-first.” Donovan’s gaze was intense. The last time he’d seen that look, he’d lost the use of his legs in the fight. “What’s the plan?”

“We have to assume Dane and his men will be waiting for us. No doubt the entire pack knows that he stole Gio and that she’s mine. So—”

“She’s yours now?” Donovan asked with a hint of humor.

“She was mine long before tonight. I just didn’t see it. When she cracked Dane’s rib because he cracked one of mine, she proved to every man in the room that she’s Alpha. Most of them will be counting down the hours until they see what it feels like to fuck an Alpha. And if we don’t get her out of there, they’re all going to

take her; then Dane will kill her just because she's mine. I won't let that happen to her." That had been the easiest decision he'd had to make in the last week. She was not about to suffer for his stupidity. He should have taken care of Dane a long time ago. He should have never given up being Alpha. He also should have told Gio how important she was to him.

"What's your plan?" Donovan asked again.

"Call your deputies. Have them ready. I'm going to challenge Dane. The rest of the pack will keep the Alpha fight fair, but if Dane loses, expect the worst." Jason wasn't stupid. If he left Dane alive, he would have a constant bull's-eye on his back. Not to mention his punching Gio. For that alone Jason was going to rip him apart.

"While I'm fighting, you get her out of there. Whether I win or lose, you vouch for her and make sure she gets pack protection. I don't want her vulnerable to Dane or Toni. Even if that means you have to challenge Dane to an Alpha fight yourself." Jason looked him in the eye. Donovan never wanted to be Alpha. The only reason he'd agreed to be Jason's beta was because Jason had said he would never put Donovan in a position to be Alpha. He was going to have to break that promise.

"Jason. I can't—"

"Look. I know you don't want it, but you can't be worse than Dane. He's going to ruin the pack. People will start leaving. Soon everything you love about this town and pack will be gone. Not to mention, when I'm gone, you'll be the next target." Jason crawled over to his chair and pulled himself into it.

"I'm going to get cleaned up, and I'll meet you back here in fifteen." He wheeled into the connected bathroom, without wincing once, even though every move was excruciating.

He slid into the shower and let the hot water wash away the dried blood and sweat that coated him. He grabbed the soap and started scrubbing.

After twelve minutes he was in the hallway, waiting on Donovan. He would need someone else to push the pack into accepting Gio. *Ambriel*? No, he couldn't put her on Dane's hit list, just in case things didn't go as expected.

“We’ll go to the police station. Dane might decide he wants to try to rough you up again before the fight,” Donovan said, putting his gun holster on and going into his office.

It took them an hour to get to the station. Donovan called his deputies. Abel and Kane met them there. Both men were loyal to Jason and Donovan. Jason hadn’t expected Lucky, the only female deputy, to show up, but she did. Which meant he had a woman who Dane and Toni couldn’t intimidate to vouch for Gio.

The plan slowly came together around him. Donovan would get Gio to Lucky, then keep Dane’s supporters from reaching the women. Kane and Able would make sure the celebration continued as normal.

Six o’clock raced up to greet them. Jason had Donovan carry him to the truck. No need to take the chair with them when he wouldn’t be able to use it. It took them over an hour to drive out to the parking lot on the outskirts of the woods where the celebration would be held. Jason opened the door and shifted before Donovan could come around and try to carry him out.

“Go ahead. We’ll catch up,” Donovan said.

Jason raced through the woods. The solstice celebration was just starting, which meant he needed to hurry before Dane got to Gio and announced her status as a nonpack wolf. Three minutes of running at top speed had him skidding into the clearing just as Dane ripped a hood off her head.

The entire pack was watching Dane. None of them had changed yet. Jason pulled in a breath and pushed hard, making the feeling that overtook him during a shift expand and pressed the feeling outward. The people watching Dane slowly transformed, one by one. Even some of Dane’s men changed. Dane screamed and threw Gio to the ground away from him. Her body was convulsing. Jason’s forced shift was bringing her wolf to the surface too fast. Dane turned and faced him.

“Are you challenging me, Jason?”

Jason nodded. He never took his eyes off Dane. The pack closed around them in a tighter circle.

“This will be a fight to the death. I will kill you and take everything that was yours.” Dane dropped to his knees and turned into a wolf. He’d gotten faster at it than Jason remembered.

Out of the corner of his vision he saw Gio scoot to the edge of the circle. Dane tried to get behind him, but Jason had no intentions of letting the other man near his legs. That was where Dane would concentrate his efforts. Jason needed to use that to his advantage.

Dane surged toward Jason. Jason backed up a step, intending to move to the left at the last second. But backing up on two good legs and one leg that was barely able to hold his weight wasn’t a good idea. Jason just barely managed to evade Dane.

He needed to end this before Dane got in a lucky shot. Too many people were counting on him for him to fail.

Dane tried to get behind him again. As he sidestepped to match Dane’s move, Gio came into view. She was naked except for a pair of panties he hadn’t gotten around to ripping. His gaze would have swung back to Dane, but he saw Toni working her way up to stand behind Gio. *Shit. Where the hell is Donovan?*

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dane move. Instead of backing up, he charged too. Dane tried to stop, but he was moving so fast he couldn’t. When they collided, Jason bashed him with his left paw. Jason struck Dane in the right side—the side Gio had snapped earlier.

Dane fell to the ground, and Jason jumped on him and slashed down at the man’s neck with his claws. Dane moved his head to the left, exposing his neck. Jason surged forward and bit Dane in the neck. Dane clawed at him, slashing his paws along Jason’s sides. The roar of the crowd fell silent as Jason felt the slick blood running down his chin. He hated to kill someone like this, but he had no choice. The least he could do was make it painless. No matter what Dane had done he could do that.

Jason flicked his head and snapped Dane's neck. A lone howl broke the silence. Toni. He looked up to see her friends holding her as she cried. She was going to be a problem. He was sure of that. But she was pack. She was protected. Until she did something to be banished.

Donovan moved to the front of the circle to sit beside Gio. Jason looked around but couldn't see anyone looking to challenge him. Not yet anyway. Beating Dane hadn't been the issue—the problem would be the challenges that came from any lone wolf who thought Jason would be easy pickings. Jason shifted and pulled her into his arms.

"I'm sorry." He traced his hand over her swollen eye and cheek. "What did he do to you?"

"I knew you could do it." She rubbed her face against his hand. "You're going to make a great Alpha."

"Until the next cocky bastard comes in and challenges me."

"That's why I'm here. I'll crack all their ribs before the fight." She smiled. "You don't grow up this big not knowing how to fight."

He smiled and swallowed hard. It had been a barely a week, but he couldn't imagine living without her. She'd broken down three years of barriers in mere days. What would she do tomorrow?

"So you'll be with me when the next challenger shows up? That could be a long time from now. Are you sure you're in it for the long haul?" He knew what he was asking. He also knew that every ear in this clearing could hear their conversation. He looked down at her and saw the uncertainty in her eyes. It wasn't fair of him to ask her to tie herself to him after such a short time. Not to mention that he didn't know if he could have children. He'd already stolen one future from her; how could he take another? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked, her voice husky and unsure.

Gio wanted to believe he wanted her. Why else would he bring this up in front of so many witnesses? She wanted to look around, but the right side of her face was so swollen that she could barely see out of her eye.

“Are you crazy? If I didn’t snap you up, I swear Donovan would beat the daylights out of me. You’re mine, and even if you said no, I would hound you day and night until you changed your mind.” He bent and touched his forehead to hers.

He wanted her. She tried to smile but couldn’t make her bruised muscles obey. “Yes. I’ll stay with you as long as you want me.”

He pulled her into a kiss, but her mouth hurt so much she couldn’t enjoy it.

“Owww.” She frowned. Dang it, she wanted to kiss him too.

“You know, if you shift, you’ll be able to heal those wounds,” Donovan said from behind them.

“But first things first.” Jason surveyed the entire pack. “Gio is a new wolf, looking for a pack. Are there any objections to her joining our pack here in Climax?”

No one spoke up. Jason looked over to find Toni. He was sure she wanted to say something, but Becca and a couple of other women were crowded around her.

“Gio, do you agree to obey all the rules of the pack and promise to obey the pack Alpha and beta in all things?” He held her hand.

“Define *obey*,” she said, lifting her left eyebrow.

“That’s good enough for me,” Donovan told him. “Now help the lady shift.”

“Does your wolf want to come out to play?” he asked as his eyes shifted to that familiar bright blue.

Gio nodded. Her wolf wanted to do a lot more than play. In fact, so did she. “Bring it on, big boy.”

Epilogue

Gio felt Jason wheel up behind her and knew he was reading the e-mail on the screen.

“What the hell is that?” he practically yelled.

“That is Cel, agreeing to come spend her spring break and summer here with me—I mean *us*,” she said, turning around to face him.

“What about *you need to disappear* did you not understand?”

“I never agreed to anything. You decided I need to disappear, and I didn’t say anything because I wasn’t sure how things were going to work out. Now that I’m alive and plan to stay, I will see my sister. Besides, she would have figured it out eventually.”

“You know what could happen? If she becomes a liability, then things could go bad.” He grabbed her wrists. “Are you willing to risk that?”

“I can’t just leave her. She’s my family.” Gio turned her wrists and grabbed his hands. “Besides, she would have searched for me and made her way up here. And there are other humans who know.”

“Yes, but none of them are related to the Alpha pair.” He closed his eyes in obvious frustration.

“We’ll let Donovan assign someone to watch her. She’ll be fine, and so will we.”

“Why do I have a feeling this isn’t going to end well?”

“Because you are a pessimist.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t worry; what’s the worst that could happen?”

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Leila Brown

Pleasuring a Pirate
Solstice Heat

Leila Brown

I've been an avid reader since the fifth grade. As I aged I read everything I could get my hands on from horror, to mystery and finally stopping in romance.

While in college studying computer programming and electrical engineering, I realized what I wanted to do when I grew up. I wanted to write those stories that entertained me through more nights than I could count. Of course my first attempts were less than remarkable and have been destroyed to protect the innocent. :)

As the years have progressed, life kind of took over. I got married, had a son, changed jobs several times. But one thing remained constant—my desire to write.

Currently, I work a normal 9 to 5 in the IT world. I write during my lunch hour and at home after 9pm when everyone in my house is asleep.

Is it easy? Yes and No. Coming up with the stories is easy. Getting the words out of my head and onto paper is HARD! But I couldn't live without it!