

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

Shifting Desires

Janet Eckford

Shifting Desires

Ganet Eckford



www.beautifultroublepublishing.com

Shifting Desires

Janet Eckford

Copyright © 2010 by Janet Eckford

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including but not limited to: printing, photocopying, faxing, recording, electronic transmission, or by any information storage or retrieval system without prior written permission from the authors or holders of the copyright.

This book is a work of fiction. References may be made to locations and historical events; however, names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination and/or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), businesses, events or locales is either used fictitiously or coincidental. All trademarks, service marks, registered trademarks, and registered service marks are the property of their respective owners and are used herein for identification purposes only.

Published by
Beautiful Trouble Publishing, LLC
PO Box 61
Colfax, NC 27235
www.beautifultroublepublishing.com

Cover Art: Marteeka Karland
<http://www.marteekakarland.com/>
Editor: Stephanie Parent
Proofreader: Novellette Whyte
<http://proofreadernovellette.blogspot.com/>
Formatter: Savannah J. Frierson, <http://sjfbooks.com/editing/>
E-book Conversion: Jim & Zetta, <http://www.jimandzetta.com/>
ISBN: 978-1-936271-91-7 (e-book)

I would like to thank my grandmothers. I carry your
stories in my heart.

Note about ebooks

eBooks are NOT transferable. Re-selling, sharing or giving eBooks is a copyright infringement.

caveat

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Chapter One

The Past

“Isn’t this exciting, Diana?”

Diana suppressed a sigh at her foster sister’s squeal. It was just her birthday, like any other year. She really couldn’t see what all of the excitement was about.

“I really didn’t want a large party, Kia. I don’t know why Papa had to go to all of this trouble.”

Diana winced as the younger girl pulled her hair.

“Diana, don’t be ridiculous. It’s your eighteenth birthday—of course Papa had to do something big. You are his eldest daughter; what would everyone think if he didn’t mark your birthday properly?”

“But I’m not a wolf, Kia. It doesn’t matter if I have a big party or not. Ouch. Can you please stop tugging at my hair like that?” Diana asked as she tried to pull away from Kia’s grip.

“You might not shift, Diana, but you *are* a wolf. Besides, it would cause the family great shame if your coming out was not recognized properly.”

Diana sometimes marveled that her sister could sound like some of the older matrons of their Pack. She knew Kia meant well, but she just didn’t see the

point of a huge coming-out party if she wasn't going to be betrothed at the end. Her family might consider her a wolf, but the rest of the Pack sure didn't. It was all a pretty extravagant showing for nothing.

"But I'm not a wolf, Kia, and I think it would have been better for Papa to save his money for your coming out instead."

"Please, Diana. What's the point of being wealthy if we can't spend the money as we please?" Kia asked as she made a final twist and stepped back to examine her work. "All done now. Oh, Diana, you look so pretty. I'd be jealous if I didn't have such strong self-confidence."

Turning to look at herself in the mirror, Diana had to admit Kia had done a great job. Her usually unruly mass of brown curly hair was contained in an assortment of gold ribbons that looked artfully messy and yet classy at the same time. It went well with the midnight blue Grecian-style dress with gold accents she and Kia had selected.

Diana was a bit wary at first, as the dress's style would allow for more exposure of her more-than-ample cleavage, but Kia convinced her it would look great with her athletic frame. Spinning to get a better look in the full-length mirror, Diana had to admit that once again, her sister was definitely in the right.

“Well, at least I got a pretty kickass dress out of this,” she said as she turned and embraced her sister. “Thanks, Kia, you’re the best.”

“Considering I’m the one paying for everything, shouldn’t I at least get some recognition?” a deep, slightly accented voice asked from the doorway. Laughing, both girls turned and ran over to their father. Diana gave him a fierce hug. No matter how much she grumbled, she was happy Albert LeMonge had adopted her so completely as his daughter.

Diana could still remember being that scared little girl of seven sitting in the lawyer’s office, waiting for Albert LeMonge to come claim her. Wearing a cast on her arm from the car accident that had killed both her parents, she had no idea who this man was, though everyone said he was her guardian. When he walked in the door, she knew everything was going to be okay.

“Ah, little one, if you hug me any harder I won’t be able to breathe. Now let me see where all my money has gone,” Albert said with a chuckle.

“Even though I don’t care about the party, I’m vain enough to admit that I really love my dress.” Diana giggled as she twirled for her father.

“Isn’t she pretty, Papa? I can’t wait to see everyone’s reaction. Won’t she make a good match tonight?”

All of the happiness Diana had felt in that moment seemed to evaporate.

“Kia, please,” he admonished his younger daughter.

“What does she mean, Papa?” Diana said, looking at the man she truly thought of as her father.

“Diana, my love, this is not how I wanted to tell you this,” he said with concern in his voice.

Diana scrunched her face up in confusion. “Tell me what? I can’t get betrothed tonight, Papa. I’m not Pack.”

“My dear, you may not be wolf, but you *are* Pack.” He paused and gave his youngest daughter a look.

“I’m sorry, Papa. I thought she knew,” Kia said in a small voice as she walked out of the room.

“Thought I knew what, Papa?” Diana asked. She was starting to feel as if the room were getting very small while she stayed very large.

“Come here, my love. Let’s sit, and I’ll explain some things to you.”

She let her father guide her to the small couch in her bedroom. Claspng her hands in his, he let out a

weary sigh. Diana searched his face for any signs of what he was going to say.

“You look so like your mother tonight. When your father first saw Gwen, he said, ‘*That’s the woman I’m going to marry,*’ and he did.” He brushed a curl from her forehead, and Diana smiled at the affectionate gesture.

“Diana, when you were born your father asked me to be your godfather.”

“I know this, Papa.”

“Ssh, child, let me finish. When he asked me, I don’t think either of us ever thought we’d have to make use of the arrangement. In the Army we were very close, like brothers, and since he and your mother had no family he probably wanted to make sure he had a backup plan.” He squeezed her hand and gave her a sad little smile.

“Diana, by human law I’m your guardian, but by Pack law I am also your father. You may not be a wolf, Diana, but you *are* Pack. As such this is not just a birthday party for you, my love. This is the day you pick your mate.”

Diana felt as if the room were spinning. This couldn’t be happening to her. She wasn’t a wolf and didn’t need to worry about having a mate.

“But I don’t understand, Papa. I’m not a wolf, I’m human. Who would want to marry me?”

“Diana, by Pack law you’re my daughter, and though you might think of yourself as only human, there are quite a few young wolves who would see a match with you as advantageous. You inherited money when your parents died, which I have invested wisely, leaving you quite wealthy in your own right. But you will also receive money and rank upon my death.”

Diana felt tears begin to fall at the mention of her father’s death. This was all too much for her. She didn’t want to think about money and rank. That was all Pack stuff. She was human. She just wanted to go to college.

Pulling her into a hug, her father began to stroke her back as she cried softly. “Now my dear, don’t cry. I said there were a few young wolves interested, but I didn’t say I was going to make you marry them. I’m telling you this so you can be on alert tonight.” Looking deeply into her eyes, he sighed. “I wish Christine was still alive—she was so good at this stuff.”

Diana wished the same thing. Her foster mother had always seemed to know how to explain difficult life decisions; having her die so suddenly three years ago had left everyone in a tailspin. Still, regardless of what she wanted, wishing wasn’t going to get her out of this mess. “So do I, Papa. Tell me what I need to know,” she said with one last sniffle.

“That’s my girl. Like I said, there are quite a few of the young wolves from lesser families who would see this as an advantageous match. As long as you don’t encourage a suitor, you can refuse any one of them.”

Diana listened closely as her father told her how to make it through the night without waking up someone’s mate in the morning.

Chapter Two

“Nico, my dear, will you please stop fidgeting. You’re making your father very upset,” Isabelle Sindri said as she placed a hand on her eldest son’s arm.

“Sorry, Mother,” Nico replied with a distracted air about him.

Isabelle wasn’t fooled. Nico wouldn’t stop fidgeting until the object of his affections was in view.

“I don’t care how much your mother encourages you, Nico; you do not have my permission to make any promises to that young human. No matter how pretty she may be,” Xander Sindri said with a pointed look at his son. The boy’s obsession with Albert LeMonge’s young ward was amusing when they were children, but Xander could not tolerate it now.

As son of the Alpha, Nico had to make an advantageous match with a she-wolf. Though he would never admit it publicly, Xander did have a soft spot for the young human girl, but not soft enough to allow his son to marry her.

“Of course, Father,” Nico said, still staring out of the limo’s window. Nico would say whatever his father needed to hear to make sure he still got to attend Diana’s betrothal party. He knew his father would never give permission, but he wanted to make sure he

was there to prevent some other wolf from being silly enough to think he could get her as a mate.

Diana Clemmings was his mate.

“Oh my gosh, Diana, look who just walked in.”

“Ouch, Kia—I think I might be deaf in my right ear now.” Diana giggled.

With the advice of her father, Diana had so far managed to avoid any possible entanglements and was actually having a fun time. The DJ Kia had found was great, and Diana had to admit the Pack really did know how to party. Her father had a huge tent installed on the grounds to accommodate the guests. The inside was decorated in a Moroccan theme with deep rich colors, low tables, and cushions on the ground. Diana made sure the dance floor was in the center so she and her friends would have enough room to really let loose. Unlike most Pack parties, there were actually a few humans attending tonight. Diana was able to invite friends from school after she was assured that other Pack members would be on their best behavior.

Before Diana could turn around to see whom Kia was exclaiming about, she felt as if all the hairs on her body were standing up and her skin was trying to

crawl off of her body. Taking a deep breath, she felt as if the room had gone completely silent.

Dammit. The Alphas.

“Come along, my dear. We have to pay our respects.” Albert seemed to have materialized at Diana’s elbow and was guiding her toward the entrance of the tent.

Diana tried her best to hide her annoyance as her father greeted the Alpha family. Diana refused to fall all over the arrogant Alpha male and his mate. Well, she did like Isabelle Sindri, but it was just unfortunate that she was mated to one of the most unpleasant males in the world. And the fact she’d birthed the second most unpleasant was an even bigger travesty.

“Diana, isn’t it a great honor that the Alpha and his family were able to come tonight?” She could hear the pleading in her father’s voice and decided that for his sake she would be on her best behavior.

“It was so nice of you to come. I am greatly honored, your grace,” she said, executing a perfect curtsy.

Okay, so maybe not her *best* behavior, but close enough.

Looking up, she could see a brief twinkle in Xander Sindri’s eyes before it was replaced with his usual haughtiness. With his ice blue eyes, fair skin,

imposing height, and white-blond hair, he looked like the poster child for Scandinavian people.

Actually, everyone in the Pack looked as if they'd just stepped out of Norway. Except for her father, who had married in and had the darker coloring of his French ancestors. It wasn't just her human status that made Diana stand out so completely. Though tall at five nine like most women in the Pack, Diana's dusky brown skin, hair, and eyes didn't help her to blend in.

"Always a pleasure, Diana. Your charms seem to increase every time I see you," Xander Sindri replied with a dry humor.

Diana struggled to not roll her eyes but instead focused on Isabelle Sindri. Smiling, the older woman reached out and gave her a warm hug. Diana couldn't help taking in her scent. She smelled of the beach and flowers. That scent always made her happy.

"My dear, how you have grown into such a lovely young woman. Oh, but I have a little gift for you." Isabelle pulled a simple gold locket from her purse and handed it to her.

Diana felt as if all of the oxygen were sucked from the room. Looking at Isabelle with a confused expression, she turned toward her father for some guidance. This was one of the "things to be avoided" he'd told her about. Taking a gift from the mother of a young wolf was basically an acknowledgement of her

son's proposal. But Diana couldn't believe that was what the Alpha's mate intended.

Looking at Xander didn't help Diana either, because he seemed to be just as shocked as she was.

"Well, my dear, don't you want my gift?"

"Um, Mrs. Sindri..."

"Why, my dear, call me Isabelle. You are of age, after all," Isabelle stated, interrupting Diana's stuttering response while still holding the locket out to her.

Diana felt as if everyone in the tent was staring at her. She wondered what her human friends thought was happening. The Sindri's were one of the wealthiest families in their small Southern California community. While the rest of the Pack knew what this gesture meant, Diana was sure her human friends thought it was just a nice gift.

Worrying her bottom lip, Diana looked over at Nico Sindri. Like both his parents, Nico had the looks of his Scandinavian ancestors but with sun-kissed skin. The way he was currently staring at her made her feel he was closer to the Viking side of his family, though. Squinting at Nico with annoyance, Diana realized Isabelle knew exactly what she was doing. The slight blush that crept across Nico's cheeks confirmed her suspicions.

Turning to glare at Xander, Diana didn't care that she was being disrespectful to the Alpha. He should be the one to stop this, not her. She knew damn well he didn't want her for his son's mate.

"Well, isn't this the point where you go all Alpha and decree this shall not be?" Diana asked Xander.

"I don't know what you mean, my dear," he replied, slightly raising a blond eyebrow.

"You know exactly what I mean," Diana hissed, cutting Nico a dirty look. Now he was in a full-blown blush.

"Do you accept Isabelle's gift, Diana?" her father asked tensely from beside her.

Sighing, she turned back toward Isabelle. "Isabelle, though it is a very lovely locket and I am deeply honored by your gratitude, I'm sure you will understand why I can't accept it."

Diana watched as a smile quirked the other woman's lips and she put the locket back in her purse.

"Well then, I will keep it safe until the day you can."

Snorting, Diana's mouth seemed to work faster than her common sense. "Well, then you'd better preserve it as an artifact, because it won't be happening in my lifetime." As the words left her mouth, she felt the hard stare of the Pack Alpha on her.

Shit.

“What exactly do you mean by that? Don’t you find my wife’s gift worthy?”

God, Diana hated Pack politics. Looking over at her father, she hoped he would find a way to help her. She didn’t even bother to look at the rest of the Pack members in the room. Even though everyone was pretending to enjoy the party, she knew only the humans were oblivious to what was going on.

“Um...well, of course. I...oh shit.”

Diana’s nerves seemed to settle some after Isabelle began to laugh. It was actually pretty infectious, and she couldn’t help giggling herself. It wasn’t until she saw the deadly stare of both father and son that she squelched her remaining giggles.

“Oh, my dear, let’s just enjoy the party.” Isabelle tugged her husband away.

Xander looked as if he wanted to protest but allowed himself to be taken toward the other expectant guests.

Diana didn’t bother looking at Nico but gave her father a quick hug and went to join her sister and friends, who were waiting eagerly for her.

Chapter Three

Nico didn't know what to do. He wasn't prepared for Diana to know about the Pack courting rituals. Damn Albert LeMonge. He must have told her more then he let on. Nico was just going to have to find a better way of getting her mated to him, or at least making sure no one else did before him.

Since the first time he'd spotted Diana, Nico couldn't remember a time when he didn't feel an emotional pull toward her. Nico didn't care that she couldn't shift either. She was more wolf then almost all the she-wolves in the Pack put together. And it didn't hurt that he found her absolutely beautiful. Her warm brown skin and soft brown eyes made his body clench in anticipation of touching her.

Watching her walk away, he knew his disappointment was clearly visible. When she placed her slim hand on the shoulder of one of her male human friends, he had to push his wolf back from charging. The irrational wave of possession that swept over him wouldn't help him win his cause. Nico knew it would take patience and all the skills of a future Alpha to claim what was rightfully his.

Aside from the locket incident, Diana was having more fun than she'd thought possible. Her cake was beautiful and the food was delicious. All of her favorites were being served, and she was pretty happy she had on a loose-fitting dress. Standing outside of the tent under some of the large trees on the property, she was convinced this was the most perfect night of her life. Nothing could spoil it.

"So this is where you've escaped to."

Okay, maybe there was something.

"I just needed some fresh air, Nico." Diana turned toward the intruder.

"It is pretty hot in there." Stepping closer, Nico walked into Diana's personal space.

Even though she'd spent the majority of her life with Pack, she really hated when people got in her personal space. Nico was the worst. The few occasions she had to be in his company, he always stood just a little too close. But she knew she couldn't take a step back, or it would allow him that little bit of dominance over her.

"Yep, it's pretty hot. But now I think I'd better go back in because I didn't bring a jacket with me." Diana made a move to leave, but Nico stayed firmly in her path.

Shrugging off his tuxedo jacket, Nico handed it to her. “Here—take mine. I run a little hotter than you, so I should be fine. I thought we could talk. You’ve been so busy we haven’t had a chance.”

Diana looked at the jacket Nico offered like it was a snake. Was that a gift? Would she be agreeing to some silent pact? God, this was all so confusing.

As if reading her mind, Nico began to frown. “I just want to talk. It doesn’t mean anything if you take the jacket, Diana.” He waved the jacket in her face.

Biting on her bottom lip, Diana brought her arms around herself and shook her head no. “That’s okay. I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

“Dammit, Diana, you’re cold and I’m not. There isn’t anyone to see us under the tree anyway.”

Instead of the statement making her feel better, Diana began to grow alarmed. She’d specifically chosen this spot because it was particularly secluded but not that far from the tent. With all of the noise inside, people wouldn’t be able to hear her if she cried out for help.

Wow, where did that come from? Looking at Nico, she could see the pleading in his eyes. She felt a bit guilty thinking about how suspicious she was being. But after the locket incident, she really didn’t want to take any chances. Actually, thinking about the locket fiasco began to warm her up with a bit of anger.

“What the hell was wrong with you, trying to have your mother give me a gift like that? Have you lost your mind?” she asked, standing at her full height. Of course it was a poor comparison to Nico’s, but she was indignant at the moment. Plus she’d kicked his butt when she was ten; she was pretty confident she could do it again.

Okay, maybe not that confident, but she probably could outrun him if she had to.

“Diana...I...well...” Nico said with a slight stutter.

“I, well, what, Nico? You knew what it would mean if I took that locket. And you know your father would never let me be your mate. So because of *your* ego, you were willing to humiliate me.” Diana didn’t know if she was shaking more from the crisp night air or rage.

Nico had to know his father would never let him mate with her. She was human and he was not. Now if he decided to mate with Kia, Xander might not be that pleased, but it would still be seen as a good match.

“I don’t care what my father wants,” Nico said with a stubborn lift of his chin.

“Do you care what I want? Do you care what my family wants? Or do you only care what Nico wants? This isn’t about you, Nico. This is about me and my life.”

Diana was practically vibrating with anger now. The arrogant bastard always seemed to get on her nerves.

“It’s about me *and* it’s about you. It’s actually about us. You’re my mate, Diana,” Nico said, moving in closer and wrapping his jacket around her shoulders.

Diana was too stunned to move. After settling the jacket around her shoulders, Nico grabbed her upper arms and pulled her body closer to his. She watched in slow motion as he lowered his head and gently kissed her on the mouth. Pulling back, he looked to her for a reply, but when she just stared back at him, stunned, he took it as an invitation to make the kiss deeper.

First his kiss was soft, his lips gently tugging on hers, but as Diana gasped from shock Nico gently pushed his tongue in to explore her mouth. Unfortunately, as her mind was yelling, *danger, danger*, Diana’s traitorous body was responding to Nico. Before she could think, she gasped again, but this time from pleasure, and began to give just as well as she was getting. Her skin felt as if it were on fire and she needed to touch as much of him as possible to ease the ache that was slowly building inside her.

Letting his jacket fall, Diana wrapped her arms around Nico’s neck and pushed herself deeper into his

hard body. Nico felt like magic. She hadn't even realized he'd pushed her against the tree until the bark began to scratch lightly at the exposed parts of her back.

But she didn't care, because Nico and his magic hands and lips were making it all worthwhile. Of course there was a very tiny voice telling her she should stop, but not until she had just a few more kisses.

If she was going to be honest with herself, she'd always found Nico attractive in an annoying sort of way. Ever since she broke his nose when she was ten and he was twelve, she couldn't deny he had a special pull on her. So much so that she decided to keep a wall erected firmly between them. They could never have a future. She was human and he was Pack. It didn't matter what her father said. She could never be Pack.

But as Nico's hands began to gently pull her dress up and caress her bare legs, she found she could forget all of that. It was her birthday, and no one would know.

"Mine," Nico whispered as he began to nibble at Diana's neck.

At his whispered word of possession, it was as if cold water was doused all over her. Pushing at Nico's chest, Diana looked at the confused expression he was wearing. She was wrong. Someone would know

because Nico could never be quiet. He was stupid enough and arrogant enough to think this would work out.

Panting heavily, Diana tried to think of what she was going to do to get herself out of this.

“Diana,” Nico said, reaching to grab her.

Dancing out of his reach, she realized that if she let him kiss her again she was going to be in big trouble. So she did the only thing she could think of.

She ran.

Chapter Four

The Present

Diana had been running for over ten years, and she'd decided it was time to stop. That night at her eighteenth birthday, she took off and never looked back. Albert LeMonge must have had a feeling something big was going to happen, because when he'd explained "the things to avoid" to Diana, he'd also given her an escape plan.

Staring at Nico and the raw need and desire on his face, she'd known she was in big trouble. Mostly because she could feel it too. Now as an adult, she realized it was just the hormones of an eighteen-year-old virgin. And if she had stayed in the shadows with Nico, she would have done something to change both of their lives forever.

So she ran.

Even with her sandals slipping on the dewy grass she got away. It may have been the shock of her taking off like a gazelle avoiding a predator that kept Nico from following, but she made it to the house. Once inside, she circled back through the kitchen and the servant's quarters and made her way to the room where Albert had put her escape clothes.

Not knowing how much time she would have until Nico found her, Diana didn't even bother changing. She grabbed her stuff and the keys to the car her father had gifted her and made a run for the garage. When she heard the howl of a lone wolf, she almost lost it. If Nico had caught her, that would've been it. He would've tried to claim her, and she wasn't that sure she would have been able to resist.

As she sped out of the garage and down the gravel path toward the gates that would lead her out of the property, Diana glanced quickly in her rearview mirror and wasn't surprised to see Nico standing there. *So close*, she thought just before she gave a triumphant yelp, *but not close enough*.

But now she was tired of running. Ten years of having to see her foster family in secret. True to her word, Kia got mated on her eighteenth birthday and never looked back. With three little cubs of her own, she was in seventh heaven.

Three little cubs Diana only ever saw through pictures or the occasional time Kia was able to sneak away to New York with Albert on the pretense of joining her father on a business trip.

Kia's mate Grant was a good enough guy, but he could never directly disobey his Alpha, so it was better not to have his principles compromised.

Which really burned Diana. After her hasty escape, she drove all night to the little house her parents left her up in the central coast of California. She didn't bother calling Albert until the next day because that was their agreed upon location.

When they did talk, she found out the Alpha had issued an edict that she was to be found and brought back for questioning. That weasel Nico told his father that Diana had agreed to be his mate, and he wanted to claim his right.

Of course it was all bullshit, but it seemed the Alpha was going to play along. But what they didn't know was Diana had her trump card. She may have been viewed as Pack, but she wasn't wolf, so that same day she drew up a letter formally leaving the protection of her foster father and disavowing herself of Pack status.

Not wanting to chance it, she had the letter delivered and immediately left for New York. Now what she didn't understand was the Alpha going ballistic and banning all contact between Diana and her foster family.

Ass.

But ten years was long enough, and Diana missed her family.

She was going home.

Chapter Five

“Papa!” Diana exclaimed, drawing the older man into a deep embrace.

“Diana, my love. Oh my, what have you done to your hair?” Albert LeMonge said, giving his daughter a critical look.

“Don’t you like it? I thought it made me look pretty chic,” Diana said with a wink, patting the back of her short pixie haircut.

“Well, it does bring more attention to your eyes. Very lovely eyes, I might say,” her father replied, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Sitting at the table on the little café’s outdoor patio, Diana couldn’t help but smile. Granted, she had just seen her father three months ago, but it wasn’t the same as seeing him at home. He was still as handsome as ever, a fact evidenced by the amount of women both young and old giving him approving looks. His rich chestnut hair had more gray, but that only added to his chiseled good looks. His soft brown eyes danced as he watched her watching him.

“And I don’t remember that from the last time I saw you,” he said, giving a pointed look at the tattoo on the inside of her left forearm.

“Oh, this little thing.” Diana giggled.

The “little thing” was actually a tattoo of a new moon with a wolf sleeping under it. Though it may seem cheesy to others, Diana liked having reminders of her namesake in her tattoos.

“Is that a wolf?” her father asked, brushing his fingers lightly over the skin.

“No it’s just a really big dog,” she replied with a grin quirking her lips.

“Umm, it actually looks a bit familiar,” he said, concentrating on the image.

Diana couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face.

“Oh yeah, and who would that be?”

When he looked up, Diana was startled by the expression on his face—so much so the smile she was wearing seemed to die.

“Papa, it’s you. I thought you would like it,” she said softly.

Her father continued to look at her strangely and let out a soft sigh.

“My dear, that’s not me. See here, how the color is different around the muzzle. Also the frame isn’t mine. I’m not that large.” He pointed out all the little details Diana made sure the tattoo artist got.

“Of course it’s you, Papa. It’s just hard to tell because it’s not in color. I thought it would be nice to

keep it like a sketch. But if it was in color you would see all the details.”

“And what color would I be, my dear?” he asked softly.

“Well, you would be a combination of colors. Light browns and grays, with your paws being a little lighter,” she said, leaning in some so the other patrons wouldn’t hear them.

Sighing, Albert took Diana’s hands and began to rub them softly. “Diana, I’m mostly black and dark browns.” With a grim look on his face, Albert continued, “My dear, you’ve described Nico.”

Diana felt as if a Mack truck had hit her. No—that couldn’t be true. She’d drawn this tattoo herself as a tribute to her foster father. It was not Nico.

“No, Papa. This is for you. I...I...got this because I had the one for my parents, and I wanted this one for you,” she said, trying not to cry.

“I know, my dear, but I’m letting you know that this wolf is not me.” Sighing, he added, “I just wish you had not gotten it in such a prominent place.”

“Maybe I can have them change it. Maybe if I color it.” Even as she made the suggestions, Diana knew it wouldn’t make a difference.

“Oh, my dear, don’t fret. We’ll just have to make sure it’s covered up when we meet with the Alpha and his family.”

“What!”

“Xander has requested your attendance at his anniversary party, my dear.”

“But I’m not Pack anymore. I don’t have to go,” she said stubbornly.

“Diana, my love, please let’s not make this difficult. This is an olive branch, and I think we should take it. Now we just have to make sure you wear long sleeves,” her father said with a wry smile.

“But it’s August. Who wears long sleeves in August?”

“My goodness, Diana, you have to be hot. Who wears long sleeves in August?”

Diana gave her foster sister an exacerbad look. “Obviously, I do.”

“Well, she has enough of her back exposed to make sure she doesn’t die of heat exposure,” Kia’s husband said with a conspiratorial wink.

Diana wasn’t sure she was going to like Grant, but he was perfect for Kia. Where she was high strung and full of energy, he was low key and calm. They actually made the perfect couple in a Malibu Barbie and Ken sort of way.

Giggling, Kia waggled her eyebrows at Diana. “It is a bit risqué, Diana, but very lovely.”

Diana had actually been worried until her designer friend Sandy whipped up the stunning emerald green dress she was wearing now. With her athletic build and full breasts, Diana was always concerned that she looked like a boy with breasts, but she felt very feminine in Sandy’s design. The best part was the back that dipped so low you could see the dimples just above her backside.

“Yeah, and that’s a pretty wicked tattoo, Di.” Usually Diana didn’t like people abbreviating her name, but Grant had somehow won special privileges.

“It’s so sweet how you got that for your parents, Diana.”

Diana shot a secret look to her foster father. She was still upset over the fact her subconscious had ruined the tat on her forearm. But the fir tree under a new moon on her lower back with her parents’ initials in the trunk was still special.

“Thanks, guys. If you keep showering me with compliments, I might just ink you on me also.” She gave them a warm smile. Kia squealed and Grant just blushed, which made Diana realize just how much she missed her family.

“My dear, will you please stop fidgeting? You’re going to upset your father,” Isabelle Sindri said to her son.

“Sorry, Mother,” Nico replied distractedly. He was too busy scanning the crowds for her. Ten years. Ten years he’d waited patiently, but tonight he couldn’t promise he would be so good.

“Nico, the Drakes are here. I would like for you to come and pay your respects.” Xander Sindri never asked for what he could get by commanding.

“Yes, Father.” Nico didn’t care; he would play along, but when Diana Clemmings got here, she wouldn’t get a chance to run away from him again.

Diana was reluctant to admit that she missed the Pack. She kept telling herself she’d wanted to come home because of her foster family, but she’d also missed the Pack. And the way people greeted her, it seemed as if they had missed her also. She’d forgotten how nice it was to be touched and not have to worry if someone had ulterior motives.

“Well, my dear, time has been very gracious with you.”

Diana couldn't help the smile that formed as she turned toward the voice of Isabelle Sindri. Walking into the older woman's embrace, she let the feeling of maternal warmth flow over her. In her youth, she couldn't quite understand what it was about Isabelle that she loved so much, but when she left it became clear.

She was a mother.

"Well, if time has been gracious to me, it must have worshipped at your feet, Isabelle." She pulled away from the older woman to get a better look.

Just as she remembered, Isabelle still possessed her icy beauty, coupled with a softness that time had not touched.

"Still the charmer, my dear. I must say I love your new look. Very sophisticated." Isabelle gave Diana an admiring look. "Now you must come with me. Xander will be most anxious if you do not come and pay your respects."

Before Diana could protest or look around for her family, Isabelle was guiding her toward her mate and son.

"Look who I've found, my dear," Isabelle said as she presented Diana to father and son.

"Well, the prodigal daughter has returned." Xander gave her an appraising glance.

Unlike when she was a young girl, Diana didn't fear approaching the Alpha. She was no longer Pack and didn't have to play by his petty politics. Granted he could try and keep her family away from her, but he couldn't harm her for being disobedient. She had human law on her side.

Giving him a huge smile, she looked him directly in the eye. "Xander, how nice to see you after all these years. Time has been kind, I see."

Actually, as in the case of his wife, Time was a devoted follower.

"Yes, well, I can't complain." Xander replied.

Diana refused to acknowledge Nico and would just as soon walk away, but she could feel him staring at her.

"It was kind of you to invite me, Xander. It's nice to be back amongst my family." Having not broken eye contact, Diana watched as Xander's lips formed a hard line.

"Well, it is nice to have you back, Diana. How long are you planning on staying?" Isabelle asked in an apparent attempt to break the tension.

"Indefinitely, I hope."

"Well, I'm sure that can be arranged," Xander said with firmness in his tone.

Diana wanted to feel as if she had won a small victory, but there was a certain gleam in Xander's eye that had her on high alert.

"Well, I don't want to keep you from your guests..."

"Don't I get a hello, Diana?"

Trying not to roll her eyes, Diana turned to face Nico.

"Hello, Nico. I would say it's a pleasure, but I hate being dishonest."

"Really? That's funny, you never seemed like the type to struggle with that."

"Actually, I thought you did a better job than me."

Diana couldn't say when Nico began to invade her space, but he was definitely crowding her. Balling her hands into fists at her sides, she had to resist the urge to growl at him.

"I'm not the one who ran," Nico practically shouted.

"Yeah, but you were the one who lied," Diana hissed, becoming aware that people were starting to stare.

"Enough. I want both of you to go to the study and wait for me," Xander commanded in his usual manner.

But before Diana could reply in the negative, Nico grabbed her arm and began dragging her across the room.

“If you don’t stop struggling, I will just throw you over my shoulder,” Nico growled into her ear.

Looking around for her family, Diana started to feel like the fly being led into the parlor.

Chapter Six

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Diana began to pace the room while simultaneously ignoring the intense vibes coming off of Nico.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“You should probably stop doing that,” Nico said with a low growl.

“What?” Diana shouted, twirling around to face her nemesis. When she got a good look at his eyes, she felt as if all of her body had gone on high alert.

Diana could see that Nico’s wolf was just below the surface of his human veneer. Taking a deep breath, she tried to put as much distance between her and Nico as possible. She realized that she couldn’t panic. Panicking would just set him off.

“Um...so, Nico, you look different.” Diana was scrambling to think of things to say, as Nico seemed to close in on her.

The responding growling noise he made didn’t really help her formulate a good plan.

Diana could see the French doors just to her right. Maybe if she kept him talking she could get away to the limo. She’d outrun him once; she was pretty sure she could do it again.

“If you run this time, I will catch you, and when I do, I don’t plan to let you go, mate.”

Diana froze in place. The voice didn’t even sound like Nico’s. The rough growl sent shivers down her spine.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Diana was momentarily upset with the high squeak of her voice.

“Of course you do. Go ahead and run. I would love a good chase,” Nico purred into Diana’s ear.

Diana would not be intimidated. This was the lanky boy she’d popped in the nose when she was just ten years old.

“I’m not afraid of you, Nico. So I suggest you back up right now.” Diana actually did growl this time. She watched as a slow grin spread across Nico’s handsome features.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

How was it possible that someone could get even better looking in a ten-year period? It was completely unnatural. But there was Nico standing in front of her like some Viking marauder, with his hard, chiseled features and tall, muscular body.

I don’t like blonds was the mantra Diana kept repeating in her head to help squelch some of the erotic thoughts making their way from her subconscious.

"I don't want you to be afraid of me, Diana," Nico whispered close to her ear. His warm breath caressed her skin even more than his voice.

"Then back up," she said, shoving at his chest.

Big mistake, of course. Touching Nico made every nerve in her body stand up and take notice. His hard muscles flexed under her hands. And those hands, she noticed, were running up and down his hard chest.

Traitorous hands.

Looking at her hands, she tried to send a silent signal to let go, but now her body was disconnecting from her brain as well. When she felt Nico's warm hands begin to move up and down her bare back, she sank into him.

This was what she ran from.

This was what she wanted to avoid.

Diana was no wolf. Neither her instincts nor her body controlled her. She was human, and humans did not have reactions to other humans like this. But as Nico growled softly in the back of his throat while he nuzzled her neck, controlling herself became that much more difficult.

Cupping the back of her head, Nico brought his mouth down upon hers. His kiss was explosive. There was none of the hesitant young man of twenty. This kiss spoke of possession and need. This was a kiss that

had Diana clinging even closer to Nico. Wondering, if she pressed that much harder, would they become one?

Running her fingers through his thick, wavy hair, Diana poured the ten years of longing she had denied into her kiss. She let her body speak her fears, wants, and desires. Clinging to Nico, she kissed him as if she would never have the chance to kiss him again.

When she felt as if she had stored up enough reserves to get her through the next ten years, she tugged his face from hers and looked into his eyes.

She saw so much hope and longing there that it brought tears to the back of her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Diana whispered against his lips.

“For what?” Nico whispered back.

“For this,” she whispered just as she kneed him in the groin. She only saw the brief look of horror before she made her way to the French doors and did what she had always done best.

She ran.

Chapter Seven

Nico was stunned with both physical and emotional pain. She'd done it again. But this time she wasn't going to get away.

Taking chase, Nico pushed through the doors she'd used as an escape. Scenting the air, he caught the direction she was running. The knowledge she was headed toward the line of limos comforted him. Backtracking, he decided to circle around and catch her before she left.

Running back through the study, Nico stumbled as the door opened before him. Staring back at him with an annoyed air were his father and Albert.

"Can you please make sure not to let her get away again? I don't think I can take another ten years of your sulking," Xander said with his usual dry tone.

"Yes, Father," Nico replied, sprinting past the men, back through the main hall and out the front door.

He got to the line of limos and cars just in time to see Diana running toward her family's car. The look of shock on her face was priceless. The fact that they both stopped in their tracks was also probably causing a great deal of enjoyment for the guests looking on.

“Diana, I’m giving you the chance to stop playing games and come here,” he said with more calm than he felt.

“I don’t think so, wolf boy,” she shouted snidely.

“Man, Diana. Wolf *man*,” Nico said just as he leapt toward her.

Her small yelp of surprise was all he heard before she leapt into the car closest to her. Slamming the locks, she scrambled to the driver’s seat. Standing next to the window, Nico looked on in amusement as she searched frantically for the keys.

“I’m sure the driver has the keys, Diana. But even if they were in the car, how were you expecting to get out?”

Diana looked frantically about, and Nico smiled when he saw her realize the cars were parked tandem. There was no way she was getting out.

“Nico, this isn’t funny. I’m not playing with you,” she shouted through the window.

“I’m not playing with you either, mate.” He leaned down and smiled through the glass.

“I’m not your mate, Nico. I mean it. If you don’t leave me alone...I’ll...I’ll press charges.”

Nico couldn’t help himself; he bent over laughing from her accusation. When she started honking the horn of the car, he laughed even harder.

“Nico, stop laughing at me. Nico, do you hear me? I’m serious.”

Catching his breath, he answered, “I hear you, mate. And who do you presume you will make these charges to?”

Nico watched as Diana chewed at her bottom lip. He was getting hard again thinking about being able to sample her delectable mouth. The way her eyes widened, he was pretty sure she knew what he was thinking.

Leaning closer to the window, he took a deep breath and was able to catch the slight scent of her arousal. Growling, he reached for the handle of the car.

“Don’t you dare, Nico, I’m warning you.” Diana tried to hold onto the door from the inside.

“Let go of the door, Diana. You gave a good chase, and now you’ve been caught.” He leaned closer to the window.

“I’m serious, Nico—you’d better leave me alone. We all know what happens to the Big Bad Wolf at the end of the story,” she said with a bit of menace.

Smiling, Nico looked at his mate. Ever since the day she’d stood up to him when they were kids, he’d known she would be his. As the son of the Alpha, people usually walked around Nico as if they were on eggshells. Early on he’d tired of the “yes people” in his

life. His parents were actually no different. As an only child and possible next Alpha of the Pack, they made Nico believe he was untouchable.

But this little human was different. Even now she would make him work for what she already knew was his. God, he loved her.

“Diana, you know Pack rules regarding mating. I’ve shown interest twice. The first time, I will admit I was not a worthy enough choice, hence your getting away, but I have proven myself worthy this time, and you are mine.” Nico couldn’t help smiling at the look of surprise on Diana’s face.

Granted, it was a pretty archaic law that many of the Pack did not adhere to—but he was going to use it.

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m not Pack anymore, Nico.”

“Yes you are. You requested status from my father in front of the Pack and were granted it. I stated my intentions in the study, and you accepted. You have challenged me, and I have won. Now either you open the door, Diana, or I will rip it off,” he informed her with a calm air.

“What...no...I...you just kissed me. What do you mean I challenged you?”

Nico actually felt a little sorry for Diana, just a very little, as she sat sputtering in the car.

“Open the door and I will explain it to you.”

“No, get my foster father and I’ll get out of the car.”

He sighed. “I’m not stupid, Diana. The minute I leave, you’ll take off to Timbuktu for all I know.”

“No I won’t. You have my word I’ll stay in this car until you bring my foster father to me.”

Nico was wary, but she gave her word and with a great deal of sincerity, so he was going to have to trust her.

“Okay. I’ll be right back, Diana. I’m serious, though—if you break your word, I won’t be so nice next time.”

“God, Nico, I gave you my word. Hurry up—I’m getting cold in here.”

Giving her one last warning glare, Nico turned and jogged back to the house.

Chapter Eight

Diana sat rubbing her hands up and down her arms in the cold car, trying to figure out how she'd gotten herself in this mess.

It was all Nico's fault—Nico and his magical kisses. The man should be outlawed from coming in contact with the female population. Hell, maybe even the males too.

Shivering, Diana wondered what was taking them so long. She was really freezing, and she'd lost her shoes when she took off running, so her feet were still kind of damp from the dewy grass.

Diana screamed at the light tapping on the window next to her.

"Diana, my dear, I didn't mean to startle you," her father said.

Looking through the glass, she could see him looking back at her with concern. Before she could even stop herself, she let out a huge sob.

"Papa, I don't want to be Nico's mate."

"Ssh, Diana. Come on, my dear—open the door, and we can try and figure something out."

"But he's going to try and take me away and try and make me have his babies and try and keep me locked in the house," she rambled, sobbing.

“Diana dear, no, he isn’t; just open the door and we can talk about this,” her father soothed.

“He tricked me, Papa, with his magical kisses.” Hiccupping, she sniffled and tried to look for tissues in the car.

“I did not trick her.” Diana could hear Nico’s denial in the background.

“Liar,” she shouted back.

“I am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Oh, this is absolutely ridiculous. Albert, you have completely spoiled the girl. Diana, you will open that door immediately,” Xander said, leaning toward the window.

“Only if Nico steps away from the car,” she answered, trying to peer around Xander’s imposing frame.

Xander sighed. “Nico, will you please step away from the car,” he said with frustration.

“Okay, and now you step back too.” Diana looked Xander in his eyes. She saw that brief sparkle of a twinkle before he stepped away from the car.

Unlocking the door, Diana got out of the car and went straight to her father’s arms.

“There, there, my dear. It’s all going to be all right,” he said, holding her in an embrace and stroking her head like he did when she was a small child.

“Can we please go inside the house now?” Xander asked off in the distance.

Sniffing once more into her father’s chest, Diana stepped back and pulled herself to her full height. Unfortunately, when she went to step in the direction of the house, she felt a sharp pain start at her arch and shoot up her right leg.

“Ouch.”

“What’s wrong?”

Before Diana could stop him, Nico was kneeling down and examining her foot.

“I’m fine. I think I may have cut it on something when I was fleeing.” She knew she sounded a bit petulant, but she couldn’t help it.

“I’ll just have to carry you, then.” Nico swept Diana into his arms before she could even protest.

She had every intention of telling him where he could stick his arrogant behavior, but her foot did hurt and she was pretty cold, and, well, he was very warm.

When they got back to the study, Nico placed Diana on the soft leather couch. Standing up, he walked back out of the room. She was a bit shocked by his abrupt departure but didn’t have much time to

think about it before he came back in, carrying a bowl of water and a first-aid kit.

“What are you doing?” she questioned nervously.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Nico replied tersely.

“That’s okay. I can do it myself. I don’t want this to be confused with some archaic mating ritual,” she stated snidely.

“Too late, and stop yanking your foot before you hurt yourself more.”

“Diana, just let him do it, dear,” Albert said, walking in through the French doors.

“I would like to state I find this all ridiculous, and I at no time insinuated I was going to be Nico’s mate. I mean I’m human, after all,” Diana said, trying to tear her eyes away from how gently Nico washed away the dirt from her cut and began applying antiseptic. It didn’t help that his lightly calloused hands were making her body warm up in a very erotic way.

“Yes, well, that can’t be helped, but you are Pack,” Xander replied as he entered the room.

“I think that’s enough, Nico,” Diana said softly, trying to get her foot out of his grip.

With a light brush up her ankle to her calf, Nico released her foot and took his supplies back out of the

room. Diana was a bit surprised when a soft sigh of contentment escaped her as she watched him leave.

Closing her eyes in frustration, she turned toward the Alpha and her father and hoped they hadn't heard the sound. Looking at the expressions of both men, she knew they'd heard her.

"Papa, it's not what it looks like. I swear."

"I was worried this was going to happen," Albert said, taking a seat next to Diana on the couch. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he pulled her in for an embrace.

"What do you mean?" she said, leaning into her father's shoulder and trying not to cry.

"What he means, Diana, is that you have been playing this game long enough. You had ten years to dither about, but now you are back home, and against my better judgment, I am allowing Nico to take you as a mate. Either that or have my only child turn rogue," Xander said, sitting behind his desk. "What shall be the terms, Albert?" he asked as he began typing on the computer at his desk.

"I will give the same as I did for Kia. I do request a namesake right. Grant's father agreed for one of the cubs, and I would like the same privileges for at least one of Diana's."

Diana stared in amazement as the two males began to discuss the details of her mating contract.

Her mating contract.

“Now just wait a minute. I did not agree to anything,” Diana said, pulling away from her father while trying to stand by balancing on her uninjured foot.

“What are you doing?” Nico’s growl came from the doorway.

“Whatever I damn well please,” she growled back.

“Your foot is injured—you need to rest it,” Nico said, stepping into the room and crowding her space.

Diana would not be intimidated. Poking Nico in the chest for emphasis, she said, “Seeing as it’s my foot, I will do what I damn well please with it.”

“Woman, must you be so stubborn?”

“Yes, I must, because if you think you’re going to be my mate, I’m not going to be pushed around by you.”

Damn. Did she just say that? From the feral look in Nico’s eyes, she did in fact say that out loud.

Before she could even protest her last statement, Nico gathered Diana in his arms and covered her mouth with his.

“Mine,” he whispered against her mouth before he dove in for another kiss.

Every cell in his body was on fire, and the only way he could avoid spontaneously combusting into flames was to keep Diana pressed closely to him.

From the soft mewling noises she was making in the back of her throat, he knew she was feeling the same way.

“Well, it appears that I found this just in time,” Nico’s mother said from the doorway, dangling the locket he’d intended for Diana all those years ago.

Looking back down at Diana, Nico could see both humor and lust in her eyes.

“I guess I will be accepting that gift after all, Isabelle,” Diana said, still looking at Nico.

Chapter Nine

“Oh my, you look so beautiful, Diana!” Kia squealed from the chair in the room Diana was using to prepare for her mating ceremony.

“Thanks, Kia.”

“How you’re not nervous is beyond me. You are going to mate one of the most important males of the Pack, and you’re just as cool as a cucumber. When I was getting mated to Grant, I was sure I was going to puke all over the place. I was just a ball of nerves.”

Diana looked at Kia’s reflection in the vanity mirror and gave her a tight smile. She knew her sister was trying to support her, but it wasn’t helping.

Of course she was nervous. She was also wondering, just how stupid could she have been? She should have kept running and never looked back.

Okay, that was a lie, but sitting here getting ready, Diana felt she was entitled to her fantasies.

“Your short hair is actually growing on me. It looks really great with your dress, Diana,” Kia said with an approving nod of her head.

Turning from the vanity, Diana stood to get a better look in the full-length mirror by the closet. At first she really hadn’t seen the point of having a big

production, but with Isabelle and Kia's help, it all seemed pretty painless.

The halter-style blue dress helped to accentuate her curves and brought out the warm browns of her skin. The simple antique gold locket Isabelle had gifted her and diamond studs were the only pieces of jewelry she wore.

Nico had requested she choose a dress without long sleeves so she could showcase his tattoo. She'd threatened to have it removed or covered up if he didn't stop gloating.

Insufferable creature.

"Are you ready, my love?"

Diana looked up at the sound of her father's voice and felt she was experiencing déjà vu. Smiling, she walked into his arms.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"I don't think I'm ready yet."

Diana was trying very hard not to panic, but the way Nico looked at her throughout the mating ceremony had her on edge.

This was going to be the night they performed the final rituals of their joining. It wasn't the sex part Diana was worried about. Much to Nico's chagrin, she

wasn't a virgin. No, it was the marking part that was freaking her out. Isabelle had said there would be some pain, but it soon passed.

But she was a wolf, and Diana was human.

"What are you not ready for, my mate?" Nico nuzzled her neck from behind as he undid her halter tie.

The top half of her dress fell down and gathered at her waist. Diana immediately brought her arms up to cover herself.

Stepping in front of her, Nico said, "Don't cover yourself from me, my dear. You are so lovely."

Taking a deep breath, she uncovered her breasts and watched as Nico devoured her with a hungry gaze.

Cupping her breasts in his hands, he rubbed his thumbs against her nipples. Diana's body instantly came alive. When he leaned over and caught one of her pebbled nipples between his front teeth, she was certain she had lost the ability to communicate in coherent sentences.

"What is it you're not ready for, Diana?" he asked again, drawing lazy circles around her areola with his tongue.

"Um..." Clutching Nico closer to her breast so his magical mouth could have better access, she forgot what they were talking about.

Chuckling, he repeated, "My dear, what are you not ready for?" He pulled away from her, then drew her closer to his body as he looked into her eyes.

Making a sound of frustration, Diana tried to pull Nico down for one of his drugging kisses. When he pulled her hands down to the sides of her body, she could have kicked him.

"Diana, I'm serious. What are you worried about?" he asked again, looking at her with concern.

Looking into his eyes, Diana remembered what she'd been concerned about moments ago, and some of her desire tapped down.

"I'm afraid it's going to hurt," she said softly, lowering her gaze.

"I thought you said you weren't a virgin?" he asked with a mixture of hopefulness and awe.

"Not that, you moron. Of course I'm not a virgin. I meant the mate mark. I'm afraid it's going to hurt." She pulled away from Nico with annoyance. Realizing it was silly to have this conversation with only half her dress on, she unzipped the rest and stepped out of it.

Turning to hang the outfit in the closet, she'd barely taken three steps before she felt Nico pressed against her back. Encircling her in his arms, he began to gently fondle her breast while he nuzzled her neck.

“I’m sure it’s going to hurt a little, but I promise I will have you so focused on other things you won’t even notice.”

“You’re that sure of yourself, then?” Diana teased.

Before she knew it he’d carried her to the bed, stripped her of her underwear, and had her lying in the center. Diana watched in fascination as he practically ripped his clothes from his body.

When he pounced on top of her like a giant cat, she couldn’t help giggling.

“Oh you laugh, do you?” he said with a wicked glint in his eyes.

“I guess you just have to stop being so funny.”

“Oh, I think I can do that,” he said as he leaned down and placed soft kisses down the column of Diana’s neck. When he got to her breasts, he caressed and suckled each one in such a way she was sure she was going to come just from the stimulation.

She moaned softly, her body arching into his kisses. As he began to move lower to her core, Diana was close to exploding. Nico lapped and suckled her until she felt the pleasant burning of an orgasm building low in her stomach. When he thrust two thick fingers inside of her, she came with a loud cry. But Nico didn’t seem to be stopping any time soon.

Pumping faster inside her body, he rode out her orgasm just to have another build again.

“You, I need you, Nico,” Diana said, trying desperately to pull his large body back up over hers. She wanted to feel every hard inch of him inside of her. Stroking her to completion.

Growling, Nico began his slow journey back up her body. Widening her legs so he could settle himself between her, he thrust forward, and Diana shuddered from the sheer pleasure of it.

Diana could tell this first time was not going to be gentle, which was fine with her. She had never felt such raw passion with another lover. She wanted to claim and be claimed. Wrapping her legs around Nico’s waist, she thrust up as he thrust down. Gave and took in equal measures. She bit and clawed, wanting to make sure everyone knew he was hers.

“Mine,” she growled as she tightened herself around him.

Looking into Nico’s eyes, she saw the pride reflected in his gaze.

“Mine,” he repeated before he leaned over and marked her.

“I love you, Nico,” she cried out.

After her explosion of pleasure, Diana lay cradled in Nico’s arms with an overwhelming feeling

of contentment. Then she realized she hadn't heard three little words from Nico.

"Well?" she asked, poking Nico in his ribs.

"Well what?" he replied, rubbing his hand up and down her hip.

"Mine' does not count, Nico," Diana said, pinching him this time.

"Ow. That hurts."

"Nico." Diana growled.

"I love you, mate," Nico said, chuckling as he rolled her back under his body.

Looking into her mate's laughing eyes, Diana knew she wouldn't be running anymore.

Chapter Ten

The Future

“Ally dear, will you please stop fidgeting? You’re going to make your father upset.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“She just wants to see that Drake boy.”

“Shut up, Ethan.”

Bouncing her baby Belle on her hip, Diana tried to separate her older cubs.

“Enough. If you two can’t behave, I’ll send you both back to the house,” she said, looking at her mate for assistance.

“Listen to your mother,” Nico said, giving the young cubs a stern look.

Rolling her eyes, Diana knew it was all for show. Though he was now Alpha of their Pack, her mate was a pushover when it came to his cubs.

“And what’s this about some Drake boy?” Nico added, halting his steps.

Diana sighed. She’d been wondering when young Ethan’s comment was going to make its way into her mate’s thoughts.

“Nothing, Papa,” young Ally said, giving her mother a beseeching look. At sixteen, their eldest was

a very striking girl and would have her pick of possible mates. Of course her heart was already set on one.

“Liar,” Ethan said with a smug smile.

“Shut up, Ethan,” Ally hissed as a slight blush tinted her cheeks.

Looking at his eldest and then his mate, Nico began to scowl.

“I don’t know what you have in mind, Ally, but you’re only sixteen. You have your whole life ahead of you. Now don’t get me wrong—I think that Drake boy is fine and all—but you don’t have to rush anything. Look at your Mama and me. We waited ten years after her coming-out party.”

“Is that how you tell the story, my dear?” Trying to hide her amusement, Diana placed a kiss in baby Belle’s hair.

“Well, that’s how it happened,” Nico replied indignantly.

“Yes, well, I wouldn’t worry too much, my love,” Diana said, walking ahead of her mate to the waiting Pack members on the lawn.

“And why is that?” Nico called after her with a look of frustration.

“I hear he runs track,” she shouted over her shoulder with a smile on her face.

Janet Eckford

Like most great superheroes (or super-villains, depending on who's telling the story) Janet Eckford lives a double life. By day Janet is a mild-mannered crusader for justice (or nefarious deeds, depending on who's telling the story) and by night an indestructible creator of prose (or pathological liar, depending on who's telling the story) while munching on her favorite cookies—oatmeal raisin. A native West Coaster who hails from the sunny state of California Janet, has loved the romance genre ever since she convinced her dad it was required reading when she was eleven. Janet believes love shouldn't have a color code and strives to create stories that represent that belief.

Send her your praise and adoration and she will return it in kind.

janeteckford@yahoo.com