



CAROL'S

Mate

Loose Id

ZENA WYNN

True Mates:
Carol's Mate

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www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

Carol Scott crossed the campus green, backpack slung over her shoulder, face raised to the warm sun. She both loved and hated this time of year. The cool, crisp breeze combined with clear skies, lots of sunshine, and chilly temperatures made it wonderful to be outside. In contrast, it was a pain to be indoors, closed inside stifling hot buildings with the overwhelming scents of perfume, chemicals, and body odor.

Sometimes it was rough being a shifter.

Right now wasn't one of those times.

She stopped, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Nothing but pine, dirt, and sunshine. It was great. So wonderful, she did it again. This time, along with the cleansing aroma of nature, another scent came to her. One that had her senses humming. She turned, trying to pinpoint where the luscious smell was coming from.

There, in the center part of the bowl-shaped green, a group of men were playing football. Not that she could blame them. This was the perfect weather for it. Somewhere in that group of players was where the scent emanated from.

Carol shook her head and forced her feet to keep moving. Those men were human. Ignoring the slight disappointment she felt, she reminded herself that she wasn't here to find a mate. She only had a couple more semesters of school and then her internship before she got her degree. That was her primary objective. Everything else would have to wait.

"Watch out!"

Instinctively turning, Carol reached out and caught the football spiraling toward her head with one arm. Adjusting her grip, she shot it back to the guy running at her, then kept going.

“Wait!”

Sighing deeply, she stopped to see what he wanted.

“That’s quite an arm you have,” he said as he jogged up. “You snatched that ball right out of the air.”

Carol shrugged. “Years of playing ball with my pa—cousins.” Crap, she’d almost said ‘pack.’ Time to go. She pivoted and made to move on.

“Don’t leave.” He placed a hand on her arm.

When she stared down at it, he hastily removed it. “We’re one man short. We could use you on our team.”

She was already shaking her head. “I don’t think so.” Playing with the pack was one thing. These guys? Something else.

“Come on,” he appealed. “We really could use the help. We’re getting slaughtered.” He gave her an engaging grin that showed a lot of teeth.

Carol bit her lip in indecision. She loved football, and it had been a while since she’d played. While she debated, another guy came running over.

“What’s the holdup?”

“I’m trying to get her—what’s your name?—to play on our team.”

“Name’s Carol,” she answered.

“I’m Otis, and this joker here is Brad. So what do you say?” Otis asked.

“You’re sure the other guys won’t mind?”

Brad laughed. “It can’t hurt. Might even help.”

Otis still had a pleading look on his face.

Carol shot a quick glance at her watch. “Okay, fine. But only for a little while.” She’d just have to be careful not to do anything suspicious.

Otis gave her a huge, pleased grin. "Great. Come on. I'll introduce you to the rest of the guys."

As they rejoined the group, Otis made introductions. "Guys, this is Carol. Carol"—he pointed to each one as he said their names—"Kevin, Jose, Pete, and Mike. She's agreed to help us out. Carol, what position do you play?"

She arched an eyebrow. "What do you need?"

"Ooooo, I like her," Brad said, and one of the other guys—Jose?—shoved him.

"You like every female," Jose told him.

Ignoring their byplay, Otis continued, "Fine, we really need a quarter. Kevin's okay, but I think you have a better arm. Brad, you and Jose receive. Pete and Mike will block. Kevin, you center, and I'll run interference. Okay?"

"How much are we down by?" Carol asked.

"Twelve points," Kevin said. "We've been running the ball because they pick it off whenever I throw."

"I'll keep that in mind."

When they got into formation, the opposing team heckled them. "What a bunch of pansies. You had to get a *girl* to come help you out?"

Another made kissing noises. "You sure you want to play, *chica*? We don't want you getting hurt. This ain't no sissy flag game."

Carol rolled her eyes and concentrated on the snap. "One, two, three, hut!"

She caught the ball and danced back, eyes focused on her two receivers running down the field under heavy coverage. Using shifter reflexes, she dodged the airborne body that made it past her blockers, danced around another, and, seeing no one open, tucked the ball in close and took off running for the end-zone markers.

Reminding herself she was supposed to be human, she kept her speed within the realm of believability but still quickly outdistanced everyone chasing her and crossed into the end zone with yards to spare between her and her closest pursuer.

Carol spiked the ball and allowed herself a small victory dance as her teammates caught up with her.

“Dang, woman, you’re fast,” Otis breathed out.

“I ran track in high school,” Carol told them. It wasn’t true, but it would explain her quickness.

“All right, all right. You got some skills,” one of the guys who’d taunted her earlier conceded.

After that, things moved quickly. Carol lost track of time as she got caught up in the competitiveness of the sport. With her help, her team found new energy and drive, forcing the opposing team to step up their game as well. Soon the score was tied in a gridlock neither team seemed able to break.

Carol’s team had the ball. In a bold move, she sent five of the guys running downfield, leaving only Kevin to block for her. She darted back, eyes grimly focused on her men, waiting for an opening.

Kevin went down, and she had to scramble. Right when she thought she’d have to run the ball herself, she noticed Mike was wide open. Aiming for his chest, she drew back her arm and released the ball like a bullet shooting from the chamber of a gun. Seconds later, a hard body slammed into her, knocking her to the ground.

Carol didn’t know which stunned her more: the hit or the luscious scent of the sweaty, large male body pinning her smaller one to the earth. No nonshifter male should smell this good. He smelled like a true mate, but that was impossible. Shifters couldn’t mate with humans, not anymore. They were incompatible with her species, and she wanted children someday.

She could feel her beast stirring, roused no doubt by his tantalizing scent. Carol shoved at his shoulders, trying to get him off her before she did something stupid, like lick him from head to toe.

“Are you all right? I didn’t mean to hit you that hard,” he said.

"I'm fine. Or I will be as soon as you move. You're kind of heavy." Actually she was enjoying the weight of his body a little too much. It would be even better if they were naked. She bit back a moan as she got a visual.

"Oh, sorry." He sprang to his feet and held out a meaty hand to help her up.

Carol pretended not to notice. Instead she rolled over onto her knees and slowly pushed to her feet.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"Yes, just stiff," she assured him. She might be a little sore later. He may only be human, but he hit like one of her kind.

Before he could say anything else, her teammates surrounded her. Once they were assured she was okay, they regaled her with a replay of the touchdown she'd missed. She congratulated them and, with a glance at her watch, announced she had to leave. "I've got tons of studying to do tonight, and now I'm behind schedule."

With her departure, the game broke up, with calls for a rematch soon sounding in the air. She grabbed her backpack, tossed it over her shoulder, and headed once more for student parking.

Halfway to her destination, she heard a voice calling out, "Carol, wait."

Oh damn. It was Mr. Luscious Smelling. Not only did he smell good, but he was one fine, attractive brother. As dark as a milk chocolate bar, he was handsome enough to give Blair Underwood a run for his money. In other words, he was trouble, and she was too interested. She tucked in her chin and pretended not to hear him as she subtly picked up the pace.

He came jogging up beside her and held out a familiar-looking navy blue piece of clothing. "You forgot your hoodie."

She chanced a quick glance at his face as she reached for it. "Thanks. I would have been looking for it later."

“My name’s Mark Johnson,” he said as he fell in step with her. She couldn’t help noticing he was a perfect match for her own five-eleven stature. Where she was slender, he had the body of a shifter—big with lots of muscle.

“Carol Scott,” she automatically replied, then wanted to smack herself. He already knew her name. To cover her embarrassment, she swung her bag around and pulled her keys out of the front pocket.

“Say, you want to get a cup of coffee sometime or maybe see a movie together—my treat?” he asked.

“No.”

He stopped. “No?”

She kept walking, fighting a smile.

He quickly caught up to her again. “You’re seeing someone?”

“No.”

“So what’s the problem?” he asked, as though unable to believe she’d turned him down. *Hmm, much too cocky for his own good.*

Carol finally stopped and looked at him. “I’m here to get an education, not find a boyfriend or a husband.”

“What about a friend? Can you manage one of those?”

“With you?” Starting at his feet, clad in high-priced if a little beat-up tennis shoes, she worked her gaze up his body: long legs and thick, muscular thighs stuffed in faded denims that were white at the seams; trim waist and flat stomach that revealed a hint of muscle in the tight black T-shirt he wore; massive chest with clearly defined pecs; broad shoulders; corded neck and face that looked better the longer she gazed at it.

Some of the attraction she was feeling must have reflected in her expression, because he straightened and took a small, determined step forward. “No,” she stated firmly, answering both his question and the sexual intent of a prime male on the prowl she could see on his face.

With that, she pivoted and walked off, but not before she saw the small, sexy smile creeping across his face...

* * *

She came back to the present to see that same sexy smile on her mate's face as he watched her. "Merry Christmas, beautiful."

"Merry Christmas, yourself," she replied with a grin.

"Where were you? You appeared to be a million miles away."

She rolled to face him, tucking an arm beneath the pillow cushioning her head. "I was remembering the day we first met."

Mark groaned even as he grinned. "The day you shot me down in flames? The guys harassed me for weeks over that."

She laughed. "Serves you right. I didn't even know you and could tell you were a player."

"It was all practice for you, babe," he said in a voice as smooth as silk.

"See what I mean?" She hit him with her pillow.

He growled playfully and wrestled her for control of it. Finally, after a few moments of tussling, he managed to snatch it from her and toss it to the floor. She tickled him, and he cried out, "This means war!"

They grappled, making a mess of the bed and its covers. Carol laughingly surrendered when Mark pinned her to the mattress with her hands over her head.

"I married a crazy woman."

"A crazy woman who loves you dearly."

"Not as much as I love you." His mouth covered hers.

As usual, it was like setting a match to tinder. They both went up in flames. It didn't matter that they'd been together for years and made love countless times. Each time felt like the first.

"Oh, baby, I can't get enough of your pussy," Mark told her as he drove into her. "It was made just for me. Tell me you feel the same."

“I do.” She moaned. “I can’t get enough of your big, thick cock.”

He rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. The sudden movement dislodged him. “Ride me. I want to watch your tits bounce as you take your pleasure.”

Carol spread her knees on either side of him for leverage and, taking hold of his penis, guided him to her opening. She impaled herself on him, inch by marvelous inch, back arched, one hand braced on her thigh for balance.

“You are so sexy. Take all of me.”

Carol took her sweet time about it, loving the stretch and clasp of her sheath as he filled her completely. Once their pubic hairs meshed, she commanded, “Move with me.”

“Whatever you say, baby. Tell me what you need.”

“Deep and hard, but not too fast,” she instructed.

She reached behind her to rest her hands on his thighs, knowing the position thrust her breasts out at him prominently. He groaned his appreciation, gaze glued on her nipples, which were tight and puckered as though begging for his mouth. As she ground down on his cock in a circular motion, he pumped his hips up. Their position allowed him to ram deep with little effort.

Soon she was moaning, claws extended and fangs showing. Mark growled, his eyes glowing gold in the muted light of the room. They were both close. He scraped her clit with the tip of his claw, and she came, screaming.

Clamping his hands on her hips and using the mattress as a springboard, he bounced her up and down on his cock until he howled his release. She fell forward, shuddering, on top of him. Their hearts pounded in rhythm together.

As their breathing slowed, Mark drawled, “A very merry Christmas to me already. After this, anything else will be icing on the cake.”

“If I’d have known you were this easy, I’d have saved my money.”

In retaliation for her sass, he slapped her on the ass. She tickled him to get even, and the loving started all over again. Today was shaping up to be a very merry Christmas indeed, she thought.

Chapter Two

Mark watched his wife dress. There were days when he still couldn't believe this sexy, beautiful, smart, and talented woman belonged to him. She was more than he'd ever hoped for. More than he deserved.

Carol was right. Back in the day, he'd been a major player. He looked good, and he knew it. Always a nice dresser, he carried himself in a manner that drew women to him. The military had only increased his appeal to the opposite sex. Women loved a man in uniform.

Then *she'd* come along and ruined him for any other. He wouldn't trade her for the world. She'd thought he was joking earlier, but all the others were only practice for her. Because of them, he'd learned how to satisfy a woman, so that when the real deal came along—Carol—he'd known exactly how to please her and keep her satisfied. No way was she looking elsewhere. He'd make sure to always give his woman everything she needed and more.

Mark remembered the first time he'd seen Carol. He'd been playing football with a group of guys, and she'd joined the opposing team. After four years of active duty in the army's GI program and an additional four years serving in the reserves, he'd had no problems with females playing what most guys considered to be a strictly male sport. Long and lithe, even in the baggy sweat suit she had been wearing, he'd had no doubt she could handle herself.

Ignoring his fellow teammates' heckling as they'd tried to intimidate her from joining the game, he'd settled down to play the sport he loved. He had been doing a good job of treating her like one of the guys until she took off the hooded jacket. The sweet curves that were revealed had done a number on him.

Her breasts were high and firm, and it hadn't looked like she was wearing a bra under the fitted, dark blue T-shirt. If she was, it hadn't done much to hide her peaked nipples. And when she bent over, the curve of her ass had made him want to take a bite out of it. She had a sistah booty. Not too big but high, tight, and definitely prominent enough to make a man sit up and take notice.

He'd had a hard time keeping his head in the game after that. He was too caught up in watching her move. They'd already realized she was quick on her feet, but she was also graceful like a gazelle, with the ability to slip through their fingers like water. A pure pleasure to watch. Her pecan brown complexion, coupled with dark brown eyes with a hint of gold, had drawn his gaze again and again. Long microplaits of what looked to be her real hair and not weave had fallen in a wave down her back, making him want to tangle his fingers in it as he drew her to him for a kiss.

He'd never been so enthralled by a woman.

Then came the last play of the day when he'd unexpectedly tackled her hard. He'd fully expected her to dodge him as she'd done any of the other guys who'd gotten in range, so he hadn't held back. He didn't know who was more surprised when they'd bounced off the ground before settling in a tangle of arms and legs—her or him. Immediately he'd become concerned he'd hurt her.

He should have known better. Despite her delicate looks, she was tough. When she'd left the game soon after, he'd followed and asked her out, unable to help himself. She'd shot him down. At first he'd been shocked.

At twenty-eight, he was older than most full-time college students. His time in the military had given him an air of competency and maturity that a lot of other college guys lacked, as well as a buff, muscular physique he'd kept up even after his discharge. He didn't have a problem gaining female companionship, and he was attractive enough that women sought *him* out. But this one, she'd said no. No explanations, no qualifications, just no.

He'd pushed until she gave him some lame excuse about focusing on her education, but the look she'd given him... She'd wanted him, and the feeling had been mutual. He determined then and there he'd have her.

It turned out to be easier said than done. She'd avoided him at every turn. Refused every invitation. Wouldn't tell him where she lived or give him her phone number. If he showed up at some place where she was, she'd leave soon after.

Carol hadn't been playing hard to get. She really wasn't interested in a relationship with him or any other guy. Mark knew because he'd asked around. She hadn't dated anyone in the three, almost four years she'd been on campus. He should have left it alone. Left *her* alone, but he couldn't. It was as though he was being driven to pursue and possess her. He couldn't understand—not then—why he'd wanted her in a way he'd never wanted another female. Now he knew it had been the mating fever at work.

It had made him crazy. He'd had a hard time concentrating on his studies. Finally he'd cornered her...

* * *

"Look, I don't understand what it is about you that has me acting like a crazed stalker. I'll make you a deal. Have a cup of coffee with me in the student lounge. Just one. Spend a few minutes getting to know me, and if, at the end of that time, you still aren't interested, I'll leave you alone."

Her gaze was uncertain. "You promise?"

By this point, he was beyond ego. It had been a little over six weeks since their first meeting, and his attraction to her was getting worse, not better. Maybe if he could convince himself she wasn't feeling it too, he could have left it alone. But every time he caught her off guard, when she didn't think he was looking, he could see a matching hunger in her eyes. "Yes, I promise." God help him to keep it because he was at the point where he didn't think even a restraining order could make him leave her alone.

"Okay." Though she agreed, she still sounded hesitant.

Before she could change her mind, he grabbed her arm and towed her with him to the nearest student lounge. He purchased two cups of coffee and guided Carol to a corner table in the back, where they'd have a bit of privacy.

"So what are you studying?" he asked.

"Right now I'm in the nursing program to be an RN. I'm considering whether I want to continue my studies and become a nurse-practitioner."

"What's the difference?"

"An NP can do more. What about you?"

"I'm in pharmacy school with a minor in business management. Eventually I'd like to own my own pharmacy."

"Really? How'd you get involved with that?"

"I've always liked medicine and studying sicknesses and diseases but didn't want to be a doctor. This was the next best thing. What about you?"

"My pa—town is small and always in need of trained medical staff. I wanted to help out, and fortunately for me, I've always had a fascination with medicine and a desire to help people," she explained.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"A small town a few hours from here, up in the mountains. I doubt you've heard of it. What about you?"

He took a sip of coffee before responding. "Originally from Philly. My last duty station was here in North Carolina, and I stayed to attend school."

"You were in the military?" she asked.

"Army. Eight years altogether."

Carol played with the empty sugar packets on the table. "You didn't want to go back and be with your family?"

"Nah. With the gangs and stuff, Mom was glad to see me go, make something of myself. She was scared if I returned I'd fall back in with the same do-nothing

crowd. Since it was always a possibility, I heeded her advice and came here instead. I take it after you get your degree, you're going back home to your family?"

She gazed over his shoulder, her eyes unfocused and a little sad. "My parents died in a car accident when I was nine. There is no other family that I know of. I was raised by my court-appointed guardians."

"That's sad." He reached out and touched her hand where it lay on the table, sorry he'd brought up the subject. He could tell their deaths still bothered her.

Carol's gaze met his. "Yeah, but I was lucky. They treat me like one of their own, even after I was such a horrible pain in the ass to them."

"I'm sure they understood that you were grieving."

She shook her head. "Back then I was angry at the world."

"So you were an only child?"

"The only child of my parents, yes. My guardians have a son who's older than me." She burst out laughing. "I made Alex's life hell. He gave as good as he got, though."

He smiled. "Sounds like you two are close."

"Now we are. Back then...?" She snickered, shaking her head.

Mark laughed with her, understanding completely what she meant. He was the oldest of three boys and knew what a pain younger siblings could be. The conversation flowed easily between them, bouncing from topic to topic. Before they knew it, it was evening and the student lounge was preparing to close.

"It's getting late," Carol said. "We'd better go."

"I'll walk you to your car." He scooped up their empty cups and packets and threw them in the trashcan.

"There's no need—"

"I'm walking you to your vehicle. It's late and dark. This isn't optional."

"All right."

When they arrived at her car, he asked, "Are you busy Saturday? I thought we could catch a movie."

Carol stood in the opening, one hand braced on the roof, the other on the door. "Mark, you're a very nice guy, and I enjoyed our time together, but I haven't changed my mind. You and me?" She shook her head. "It's simply not a good idea."

That was not what he wanted to hear.

Having spent hours talking to her, he was surer than ever that he wanted her in his life. He stepped closer, crowding her, ignoring how her eyes widened and the way her pupils seemed to expand. "Before you make your final decision, you need to take this into consideration." Mark snaked a hand around her nape, used it to haul her closer, and kissed her.

Carol stiffened, and he thought he'd made a mistake. Then she released a small, sexy growl and kissed him back. Her mouth opened, and he immediately thrust his tongue inside. Her taste went to his head so fast he became light-headed as all the blood in his body pooled to his dick. He was painfully hard in seconds.

Mark shifted her so that her back was against the rear car door, gripped her by that ass that one day he wanted to take his time and savor, and lifted her until her sex cradled his hardness. He ground against her, letting her feel in graphic detail just how much he desired her. He forgot they were in a well-lit parking lot and that anyone could be watching. He slid his hands lower and inward, separating her thighs so he could settle closer. Then he brushed the inseam of her jeans, and the heated moisture he felt scorched him.

She arched into him, riding his cock while making hungry little noises, and his sanity slipped a notch. Mark felt the sharp bite of her nails digging into his shoulders seconds before she shoved him hard enough that he stumbled back a couple of steps, releasing her completely. He immediately reached for her again.

"No," she cried out sharply. "We can't... I can't..." She closed her eyes, took a deep, shuddering breath, and seemed to fight with herself. Her hands, which hung by her sides, were fisted so tight, he could see the veins straining.

He wasn't in too much better shape himself. A little more and he'd have taken her where they stood. He'd never gotten so out of control so fast with a woman before. Mark took an additional step back and turned partially away, giving both of them the space they needed.

When Carol finally opened her eyes, he was breathing a bit easier and didn't feel like his cock was going to burst through his zipper at any moment. "This can't happen again," she said evenly.

"But..."

"You promised," she reminded him.

Mark reluctantly nodded, afraid to open his mouth lest he beg her to reconsider.

She slid into the driver's seat and, before closing the door, looked at him and said, "I'm sorry." The hell of it was, he knew she really meant it.

It was a poor comfort as he watched her drive off, leaving him with the worse case of blue balls he'd ever experienced. After that incident, he tried to forget about her, interest himself in other women. It did no good. He went out on a few dates, but his cock refused to come to life for anyone else. The thought of her made him hard as a rock. Let another woman get close, and he went limp as a rag...

* * *

"Mark!"

"Yes, baby?" he responded absently, mind still in the past.

"I asked if you had the turkeys ready to fry." She gazed at him in the mirror as she put one of the small diamond stud earrings he'd given her as an anniversary gift in her right ear.

He smiled at her. "Don't worry, babe. Me and Alex, we got it all under control." His wife was something of a control freak, but he loved her anyway, even with her OCD tendencies.

Mark moved behind her and placed his hand on her stomach. "I want you to relax and take it easy today. Remember you're carrying our baby."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm a shifter. We're tough. Besides, with Mona and Tom here, we're going to have the entire pack running in and out of the house all day long. There will be too much for me to do to simply sit around taking it easy."

"Yeah, well, I was human, and this is my first child. Take it easy for my sake, and I'll make it worth your while." Left unsaid was the reminder of what had happened to her mom. Carol was in such a good mood he didn't want to spoil it, even though these days the thought was never far from his mind.

"Really?" She arched an eyebrow. "How you going to accomplish that?"

He unsnapped her jeans with his left hand and sent his right seeking inside her panties for her clit. The scent of her instant arousal perfumed the air as he lightly stroked her in the manner he knew drove her crazy. Her earring tumbled to the floor as her hands dropped to rest on top of his and her body slumped against him.

He watched in the mirror as her face went slack, her eyelids heavy as she rocked on his questing fingers. He loved how sensual she was. "How's this, baby? Is this enough of an incentive to do as I ask?"

"Almost," she gasped. "I think I need a little bit more persuasion."

"My pleasure. Bend over and brace your arms on the dresser." He pushed her jeans and panties down to her ankles, then loosened his belt and unzipped his pants, shoving them to his knees.

Moving into position behind her, Mark entered her slowly, watching for any signs of discomfort. Penetration was deeper in this position, and with her pregnancy, he wasn't sure how much she could handle. He rode her slow and easy, taking his time.

"Harder, baby," she commanded.

"Not yet. You give me what I want, and I'll give you what you need."

She groaned and shuddered in a way that signaled he'd hit a particularly sensitive spot. He did it again and again until she was panting and pleading with him. It was all he could do to hold back. "Promise me, babe. Promise me you won't overdo today."

"Yes, yes! I promise."

The beast in him growled in satisfaction at her surrender. His mate may have been a shifter longer than him, but he was more dominant. Sometimes his wife forgot that and Mark had to prove he was wolf enough to force her to submit, but he always did it in ways they both found enjoyable.

He let go of her hips, allowing her to thrust back on his cock, trusting her not to take more than was comfortable for her. With one hand, he tweaked a nipple while with the other, he rolled her clit. It didn't take long for her to erupt.

He immediately pulled out.

"You're not going to come?" she asked in disbelief, gazing at him in the mirror.

He gave her a feral grin. "Tonight, if you're good, I'll come."

She closed her eyes on a moan, and he could smell her pussy release a flood of moisture. He gave a low hum of satisfaction. The longer he delayed his release, the longer and harder he'd ride her when he finally let himself go.

Hearing a vehicle in the driveway, Mark adjusted his pants. "They're here. I'll go let them in."

Chapter Three

Thoroughly sated, Carol straightened her clothes and finished putting on her jewelry, checking to make sure her makeup wasn't smeared. Before leaving the room, her gaze fell on the family portrait in a prominent position on the dresser. The man sat behind the woman, his hands possessively cradling her bulging stomach. The expression on his face as he gazed at his mate was lovingly intent, as though his entire world began and ended in her.

The woman looked at the camera with a Mona Lisa smile of contentment. Anyone looking at her could see she was well loved and knew it. Staring up at the couple with adoration in her eyes was a little girl with pigtails. Her small hands also rested on the woman's belly, and there was a sparkle in her eyes as though she knew something no one else did.

Carol remembered that day vividly. She and her parents had posed for pictures to insert into their Christmas mailings. Afterward they were headed to the ice-cream shop, where her father had promised her two scoops of her favorite flavors. A month later, both her parents and her unborn baby brother were gone.

Sighing deeply, Carol kissed her forefinger and touched it to the glass protecting the photo, refusing to give in to the sadness lurking in her heart. Today was a good day. A day of possibilities. Shaking off the past, she went out to greet her former guardians, Mona and Tom. They were seated in the living room and stood when she entered the room. Mona gave her a hug, and the alpha pecked her on the cheek. She could tell how pleased they were to see her.

The move to Arizona had been good for them. When they'd left, Mona's long, thick, straight black hair had fallen to her waist. Now it was cut in a short, stylish

bob that lightly touched her jaw. Her gray eyes had a few more lines around them, from squinting in the bright desert sunshine, Carol was sure. Her olive complexion, which showed her Mediterranean roots, was even more tanned.

Thomas Wolfe was just as handsome and muscular as ever. Though he was in his eighties, you couldn't tell it by looking at him. His black wavy hair, cut military short, had very little gray in it. His black eyes were just as piercing, and other than his face being more tanned than usual, he didn't look a day over fifty.

"Look at you. You're positively glowing," Mona stated. "I don't have to ask if Mark's treating you well. I can see for myself that he is. Pregnancy agrees with you."

Carol smiled a bit nervously now that the moment was upon her. She'd told Mark what she intended to do and had his full support. Mark nodded encouragingly and clasped the hand she held out to him, holding it. "That's what I want to talk to you about." She motioned for them to be seated as she settled beside Mark on the arm of his chair.

Mona and Tom exchanged glances and then sat as instructed. Mona seemed tense. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

"No, everything's fine. There have been no complications."

"Oh. Then what's this about? The last time you were this nervous is when you told us about Mark."

"Honey, give her a chance. You keep asking questions, and we'll never discover what this is about," Tom said to Mona.

Carol took a deep breath and, with another glance at her mate, began. "First, I want you two to know how much I appreciate all you've done for me. The way you took me in and raised me as your own after my parents died—"

"There's no need to thank us, honey," Mona interrupted. "We were happy to do so."

Tom motioned for Mona to be quiet. "Let her finish."

“When you wanted to adopt me, I refused because I thought letting you claim me as your own would somehow take away from my parents, like you were trying to erase them from my life. I thought accepting your offer would be a betrayal of their memory.”

Mona gasped. “Oh, honey, I had no idea. We would never do such a thing.”

Carol smiled. “I realize that...now. Being pregnant has given me a new perspective of the whole situation. God forbid, if anything were ever to happen to me and Mark, I’d consider my child very fortunate to have someone as loving as you two to raise him. I know it’s too late to agree to that adoption, but my baby—”

“Our,” Mark interjected.

“*Our* baby needs grandparents, loving grandparents who understand who and what he is, who will be a source of wisdom and encouragement in his life, the way you were in mine. I’d be honored if you’d fill that role.”

Mona and Tom looked at each other again, the silent communication she remembered from childhood taking place. Carol dug her nails into Mark’s shoulder. He gently pried them loose and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping both arms around her. She settled into him, trying to relax as she waited for them to come to a decision.

Mark had told her it was foolish of her to be so nervous, that she was blowing this whole thing way out of proportion. Tom and Mona loved her, considered her their child, and any child she had would automatically be their grandchild, but Carol didn’t want to assume. Not on a matter this important. Not only that, Carol knew in her heart that the apology she’d just given them was long overdue.

Tom indicated for Mona to answer for the both of them. “Yes, we’d be honored.”

Carol let out the breath she was holding. Clearing her throat, she added, “Since you’re being so agreeable, is it okay if I call you Mom?”

Mona’s eyes filled, and the tears overflowed. Overcome, she simply nodded rapidly.

“I object,” Tom said firmly.

Carol sucked in a harsh breath, and Mark squeezed her, a silent command for her to be quiet and wait.

“You can’t call my mate Mom unless you agree to call me Dad,” he finished with a smile.

She laid her hand on her heart and let out a sigh of relief. “You scared me. Yes, I’d be happy to call you dad, Dad,” she told him.

Mona rose with arms extended. Carol stood and walked into them. At five-six, Mona was much shorter than her. Despite Mona’s petite stature, she was a fierce little thing, able to make grown men back down much bigger. As teenagers, neither Carol nor Alex had been able to get away with anything. Mona—make that Mom—had somehow always known what they were up to, and she was as protective of them as any mama bear with her cubs.

Carol hoped that when her baby was born, she’d be at least half as good and understanding a parent as Mona had been.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” Mona said. “The pack should begin arriving any minute. I know you have things under control, but two hands are always better than one.”

“I appreciate the help,” Carol told her and ignored the way Mark pretended to have a heart attack at her words.

“From your reaction, I can see my cub hasn’t changed much,” Tom stated.

“You have no idea,” Mark stated.

“Trust me, we do. Why do you think we made her the pack’s beta?”

Both men laughed.

Carol rolled her eyes and, as she led the way to the kitchen, asked Mona, “Would you like a tour of the house?”

“Of course.”

Carol showed her around the multilevel, three-bedroom/two-and-a-half-bath home she and Mark had built. They'd moved in less than six months ago, and this was the first time her parents had seen it. It was set on a half acre of land with lots of trees for privacy.

"This is beautiful. You two have done well for yourselves. I still wish you would have let Tom and I help you," Mona said as they reentered the kitchen.

"You've done so much for me already. This was something Mark and I needed to do for ourselves," Carol explained.

Mona shook her head, causing her hair to swing into her face. "So stubborn, just like your brother, Alex."

Carol winced. "Never say those words."

"Which words?"

"That Alex and I are alike."

Mona laughed. "Of course you are. Why do you think you two fought so much when you were younger?"

"Jealousy on my part because he still had his parents and I didn't, and resentment on his because he was no longer the only child?"

Mona turned serious. "Maybe in the beginning, there was a little of that while you two adjusted to each other. Later I believe it was because you're such a fiercely independent little thing and Alex is extremely protective of those he cares about. He wanted to wrap you in cotton, and you wouldn't let him. Wouldn't let any of us. It used to bother me the way you held yourself apart from the family. I understood, but it was hard not to push for you to let us in. I thought maybe if we adopted you by human standards, it would give you a sense of security."

Carol turned to the smaller woman. "One thing I never doubted was your love for me. I could see it, sense it, smell it. If I feared being turned away, I wouldn't have acted out nearly as bad. You and To—I'm mean Dad—were patient but firm with me, treating me the same as you did Alex. Looking back, I can see I was angry

my home had been torn from me and my family lost, instead of being grateful that there was someone as wonderful as you waiting in the wings to pick up the pieces.”

Mona shook her head. “You hurt in a way that you didn’t know how to deal with. Grief counseling would have helped. Unfortunately as shifters, we couldn’t take the risk. There wasn’t anyone trained that we trusted enough with your safety.”

Carol pondered Mona’s words as she took the party platters out of the fridge and handed them to Mona to set up. She was right. She’d been hurt and angry, but so had her wolf. Any counselor she’d seen would have had to be capable of handling both.

Losing her parents had been bad enough, but it was the manner in which she lost them that had caused her the most heartache. By pack standards, Carol was just as much the alphas’ child as Alex, but until she’d become pregnant, it was something she had never wanted to acknowledge. Being the kindhearted people that the Wolfes were, they’d never pushed the issue, though it had to have hurt.

They worked together in silence, having done this many, many times when Mona and Tom were still in their position as alphas of the Raven pack before turning control over to Alex and her. When finished, they settled at the breakfast table with cups of hot chocolate.

“How’s the pregnancy coming?”

Carol smiled. “So far so good. A bit of nausea from time to time, but that’s to be expected. Otherwise I feel great.”

“That takes care of the physical. What about mentally? Any concerns?”

“No, it’s all been great,” she cheerfully replied.

Mona pinned Carol with a look she remembered vividly from childhood. As the silence grew, Carol fought not to squirm. In the end, she did what she’d always done: cracked under the pressure. “Okay, I’m a little nervous. As a medical professional, I know what happened to Momma was a fluke, but the woman in me...”

Mona wiped her hands on a paper towel and then cupped Carol's face. "Things are different now. When your mom started having complications, there was only the pack's midwife and Tom to handle things. Unfortunately Tom had the knowledge but not the equipment to handle placental abruption."

Placental abruption, a condition in which the placenta separated from the uterus, didn't only affect human women. Shifters suffered too, and often bled out if swift medical treatment wasn't given. Her father had been rushing her mother down the mountain in an ice storm to get to Colbyville's emergency room when he spun out on one of the curves in an effort to avoid an oncoming vehicle in the wrong lane, went over the railing, and down into a ravine, where the car had exploded.

"You know one of the reasons Mark and I decided to wait before getting pregnant is for things to be settled with the pack. Then there was his business. We wanted it to be firmly established. But a deeper reason, for me at least, was that I wanted to make sure the clinic was equipped to handle any kind of medical emergency that could arise before we made an attempt, just in case."

"That's very wise of you both," Mona said approvingly.

"At first, there was a whole bunch of excitement. Now that it's tapered off, I find myself thinking about the past a lot."

Mona gave her the same gentle smile that had comforted Carol more times than she'd ever admitted while growing up. "It's only natural. You're entering a new phase of your life. Reflecting on the path that got you to where you are today is only to be expected. And it won't stop, either. Trust me. Your child will do or say something, and a memory will come out of nowhere. It's part of the cycle of life. I look at you now, all grown-up and married, carrying a child of your own, and I remember the day we brought you home. How lost you were. I wanted to wrap you up in my arms and promise that nothing would ever hurt you again, not if I could help it. You were such a fierce little thing, trying so hard to be brave and strong. Your pride was all you had to cling to, and I knew I had to give you space, let you handle things your way."

Carol reached out and laid her hand on Mona's. "Thank you for that. My parents had taught me that wolves were strong. That day, when you told me what happened, their words were all I had to cling to. Now I've been blessed with another family to replace the one I lost: you, Dad, Alex, Mark, and the cub on the way."

"And Christmas is a wonderful time to count and share with others the many blessings the Creator has given us in our lives."

The doorbell rang, and they went out to greet their guests. Soon the house was overflowing with neighbors and pack members bearing presents and food. Gifts were exchanged, food eaten, and laughter and conversation rang throughout the house.

Despite the snow on the ground, one of the guys produced a football, and before she knew it, an intense game was in progress. With her mate's permission, Carol was roped into playing. Not that she minded. She loved the game. Being a nurse and the pack's beta didn't allow her nearly enough time to play. Since both Alex and Mark were on one team, she joined the opposing one. After an hour, she decided she'd had enough fun and retreated to the sidelines to watch the game. She knew the guys would have more fun, be more aggressive without her in the way.

One of the women brought Carol a drink and a chair, and she sat, feeling protected and coddled by her pack. The birth of a new pack member was something they all celebrated and took part in. Though they hoped for a girl, most likely it was a boy. Not that it mattered. Every shifter child born was one step further away from their extinction as a species.

Her attention was drawn back to the field as Mark scored a touchdown. Her mate. As he played, she could see the steely determination that was so much a part of his nature, which had allowed him to claim her as his own. Under the weight and pressure of "doing the right thing," she would have walked away and been miserable for the rest of her life. Thank God Mark hadn't let that happen. Even though she'd pushed him away countless times, he kept coming back. She remembered the last time vividly...

* * *

Carol stared at the open textbook in front of her and sighed. Unfortunately she couldn't concentrate worth a damn. Not since The Kiss. It had happened over a week ago—ten days, three hours, and twenty-two minutes, not that she was counting—and she still hadn't been able to put it out of her mind.

Once again she went through her litany of reasons why a relationship between them wouldn't work. They were two completely different species. Her kind were known for their rough sexual play. She might do serious damage to his fragile human body, and he didn't have a shifter's ability to change and heal. Already she'd had to stop herself from clawing his back and sinking her fangs into his neck. And then there was the fact that he didn't—couldn't—know what she was. Sex brought out the beast. In orgasm, it was impossible to control the shift. Glowing eyes, fangs, and nails turned to claws were a little difficult to explain.

Strong sexual attraction aside, this guy really got to her on an emotional level. Getting more deeply involved with Mark would only lead to heartache. Once these last two semesters were finished, she was returning to Refuge and her pack to complete her internship and, later, to work. She'd settle down with one of her pack mates, push out some pups, and life would continue on.

She couldn't see a city boy like Mark being willing to settle in some small, one-traffic-light town way up in the mountains, surrounded by a bunch of shape-shifters and humans with extrasensory perception. Even if he was, there was still the fact that they were genetically incompatible. She'd like to have children one day—at least two. Maybe more. That wouldn't be possible with a human as a mate.

Resolve once more firm in her mind, she focused her attention on the text, only to have a determined knock at the door interrupt her. Carol groaned. She had end-of-semester exams coming. She needed to study.

She rose, went to the town-house door, and looked out the peephole. It was Mark. She was too stunned to question how he'd discovered where she lived. She'd certainly never told him. Not that it was a big secret or anything.

She leaned her forehead against the wood, breathing hard as the arousal that had never completely dissipated since their kiss coursed through her body, gaining strength. This close, she could smell him. His lust hit her like a tidal wave.

Carol took a step backward as he pounded on the door again.

“Carol, open up. I know you’re in there.”

With her car in the driveway, there was no way she could pretend the house was empty. She had to deal with him, with this. “Go home, Mark.”

“I’m not leaving. Open the door.” When she didn’t respond, he continued banging, causing the whole frame to shudder. “Carol!”

“Go away. I’m studying.” She couldn’t open the door to him. If she did, all the reasons in the world wouldn’t matter. She’d be on him in a heartbeat.

“Carol, please.” He sounded like he was pressed right against the wood. “I know I promised to leave you alone but...”

She came forward and placed her hand on the door. “Mark,” she sighed.

“Baby, let me in.”

She could fight his demand, but his pleas? Her hand moved and slid back the chain, almost with a mind of its own, then flipped the dead bolt. When she reached the doorknob, she hesitated, her conscience warring with her instincts.

“Baby, please don’t send me away,” he begged.

It was the nudge she needed to let him in. “This is a bad idea,” she stated as she slowly opened the door.

“Then we’ll just have to make it good,” he pronounced as he strode inside and kicked the door closed. He stripped off his jacket and let it fall to the floor as he reached for her. “Woman, you’re driving me crazy. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. All I can think about is you.”

“This is nothing more than an intense physical attraction. We’ll get over it,” she said a bit desperately, hands braced on his chest in a weak attempt to hold him

off, fighting what she knew to be a losing battle. Already her wolf was stirring, adding heat to the lust coursing through her system.

"Too late," he muttered before his mouth claimed hers in a kiss that blasted apart the last of her remaining barriers.

Carol raised her arms to circle his neck and clung to him, plastering her body against his. Mark's head twisted from side to side, searching for that perfect angle, his tongue deep in her mouth, tangling with and stroking her own until her senses were overwhelmed with the taste and scent of this forbidden human.

They fell against the wall in a tangle of groping hands and fevered kisses. Carol heard herself growl and tried to stop.

"Shit, that's sexy. Do it again," he ordered, gasping for air.

The growl morphed to a moan as his mouth latched on to her T-shirt-covered breast. She clutched his shoulders and had to make a conscious effort to keep her claws from sprouting.

"You make me crazy the way you go around braless. I see these tits, and I want to taste them, tease them. See how much of it I can fit into my mouth." He stripped her T-shirt over her head and tossed it to the side. Gazing at her breasts with what appeared to be reverence, he said, "They're even prettier than I imagined."

Mark flicked one of her nipples with his thumb, and it instantly hardened, while her hips jerked forward. His gaze flew to hers. "How sensitive are they?"

She hissed. "Very."

The grin he gave her was savagely sexy. "This is going to be fun."

He dipped his head, mouth opened wide, and latched on to her breast. He consumed the whole thing. Carol had never been happier that her breasts were small.

Mark drew so strongly on it, her nipple was flattened against the top of his mouth. She let out a keening cry, and grabbed his head, holding him to her.

He switched sides. She went a little crazy, clawing at his shirt, trying to get to skin. He stopped long enough to help her remove it before his mouth was right back at her breasts, his hands cupping her ass.

Carol ground herself on his cock. The feel of his hard flesh pressed to her soft contours was exquisite. Mark inserted a leg between her own and rubbed his sex against her. Back to the wall, she arched into him and rode the ridge of his erection, the flimsy material of her gray jersey shorts and cotton panties no barrier.

“Need...to...be...in...you...now,” he panted as he ripped open the zipper and shoved down his pants.

His penis—tall, strong, and thick—fell out of the opening. Carol wrapped her greedy little fingers around it, instinctively pumping up and down.

“Shit, that feels good. Too good. Stop or this will be over before it gets started.”

She removed her hand and pushed her shorts and panties down her legs, stepping out of them when they dropped around her ankles. Mark went still as stone, barely even breathing.

“Is something wrong? Am I moving too fast?” she asked worriedly.

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. When he re-opened them, they held so much heat she felt seared where she stood. “You are so damn beautiful. Even more than I’d imagined.”

Having always been somewhat of a tomboy, she was embarrassed by Mark’s praise. Carol could feel her face flushing.

“Baby, I hope you’re ready for me, ’cause I don’t think I can wait much longer,” he confessed on a groan.

“Take me,” she said, reaching for him.

His mouth slammed down on hers in a kiss that another woman might have called brutal. To Carol, it was an indicator of how far gone he was. He grabbed under her left knee and lifted her leg. One of his hands felt along her slit and slid inside her sheath, testing her readiness. “Fuck, you’re wet. Tell me it’s all for me.”

"It's for you."

In a display of brute strength worthy of a shifter, Mark lifted her up high on the wall. "Wrap your legs around me," he commanded.

Carol curled both legs around his waist. Mark lined his sex up with hers, rubbing back and forth until he prodded her opening.

He played with her, drawing the moment out until Carol thought she'd lose her mind. "I thought you couldn't wait," she bit out.

"I can't," he said and slammed home. "Shit, condom," he stated as he withdrew. "I need..."

"I'm protected," she cried as she desperately tried to get him back where he belonged.

"Thank you, God," he breathed out and, gripping her ass, pulled her down to meet his thrusting cock as he impaled her again.

Carol bit down on the tendon between his neck and shoulder, her fangs locking, while taking a layer of skin off his back with his claws.

"Ahhhh! That's right. Bite me. Scratch me. Show me how good it feels to you." He adjusted his hold on her and began a pounding rhythm.

Mark quickly took her to the edge and then shoved her over. She bit down so hard trying not to howl that she tasted blood. He accepted her abuse and demanded more. "Give it to me, baby. Let me feel that sweet pussy tighten on my cock. Milk me, baby."

His upper body pinned hers to the wall. Holding her by the ass and bending at his knees, he drove into her with his whole body. Growling noises rose up from her chest.

"Oh hell yeah. Growl for me, baby."

She growled and snarled and muffled a howl as she came again. She'd thought a human couldn't handle her, but Mark was proving her wrong. He worked her until she saw stars.

“Give it to me. You feel so good. Come for me again. Just once more,” he demanded, and her body obeyed.

As she climaxed for the third time, Mark drove into her to the hilt, the force of his thrust denting the thinly plastered drywall behind them as it gave under their combined weights. Limp with pleasure, Carol could do nothing but hold on as his knees buckled and they slumped to the floor.

She glanced over her head. “We broke the wall.”

Mark’s head rose from her shoulder, and his gaze followed hers. “I’ll help you fix it.”

Now that she was sated, sanity returned. She pushed on his shoulders, trying to rise and free herself. “This was a mistake.”

“No.” His hand wrapped in her braids and tugged so that her face lifted to his. “You will not push me away. Not now, not after this.”

“What this? It was just sex,” she lied, knowing it was so much more.

He gently shook her. “It’s more, and I’m not going to let you run from what’s between us.”

She vigorously shook her head from side to side. “You don’t understand.”

“Then tell me. Tell me why we can’t be together, and don’t give me some bullshit about not wanting to get attached until you get your studies out the way. I’ve never felt about any woman the way I feel for you. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you toss away what could possibly be the best thing that ever happened to me without at least giving us a try.”

Carol stared at him. She couldn’t tell him the truth, and he’d already shot down her only other reason.

“Carol, give us a chance,” he said, gazing deeply into her eyes.

Unable to see a way around it and knowing she really didn’t want to, she hesitantly nodded her head. “All right.”

He smiled in relief and leaned forward, then laid a gentle kiss on her lips. She could feel his cock stirring inside of her. Unable to help herself, she arched her hips and tightened her sheath around him.

Mark planted his hands on the wall, caging her in. "You said something about studying?"

Carol rocked on him again. "It can wait."

"Exactly what I wanted to hear." He lifted her off him, rose to his feet, and helped her stand. "Which way is the bedroom? That was nice, but this time I want a bed."

She pointed up the stairs and started toward them. Mark caught her from behind. In a quick motion, he had her turned and flipped over his shoulder. Letting out a Tarzan yell, he carried her upstairs and into her room. After tossing her playfully on the bed, he removed the rest of his clothes, then pinned her to the mattress with her hands above her head.

"I don't know what it is, but you bring out the beast in me," he told her.

"It's only fair since you do the same to me."

His eyes lit up, and he smiled. "Now...where were we?"

Carol wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself for his possession. "Right about here."

"Oh yes, now I remember," he stated as he sheathed his cock inside her.

Chapter Four

Being Mark's lover was a heady experience. In her near-virginal state, she didn't have the necessary emotional savvy to handle how he made her feel. Her one previous sexual encounter had taught her that it was hard to hide anything in a houseful of shifters who, with one sniff, could smell sex and identify the culprits. Between the alpha and Alex, the guys of the pack quickly learned to turn their attentions elsewhere or suffer the consequences.

She reveled in being able to touch, taste, and fuck to her heart's content. The more sex they had, the more she wanted. Her world narrowed to Mark and school. Even her grades would have suffered if it hadn't been for Mark. He forced her to study and to attend class, stating that they'd come too far and were too near the end to mess up now.

For the first time in her life, Carol was in love. It was breathtaking, exhilarating, and so incredibly wrong. Their very relationship was taboo and destined not to last, which made her desperate and greedy to capture and hold on to every moment they spent together.

Mark virtually moved in. When he wasn't with her, she was with him at his place, but he had a roommate. It was only in her town house—or rather, the pack's town house—that they could truly be alone. There wasn't a room in which they hadn't made love. They couldn't keep their hands off each other, and when Mark confessed his love for her, she was over the moon.

He spoke of the future as though it was understood they would be spending it together. This would be the last semester of classes for both of them. The next phase

was internship before they earned their respective degrees. Because of their fields of study, their options were almost limitless.

The alpha would understand, she told herself. She loved Mark, and that was all that mattered. She was ready to give up everything—her pack, her home, her chance to have children of her own—to be with him. Somehow, someday, she'd pay back the money the pack had spent financing her education.

It would all work out. *Please, God, let it work.*

* * *

"Mmm, that feels good." Mark's hands tightened painfully in her hair.

Mouth full of cock, Carol hummed her appreciation, loving the way his thighs clinched and his hips jerked in response.

"Yeah, that's it," he groaned. "Suck it just like that."

She swallowed the entire length, loving the way he smelled. She smiled inwardly when her wolf rolled over onto its back, luxuriating as the residue of their combined cum coated her nose. It was pleased that she'd left her mark on him, however temporarily. With her wolf so close to the surface, every sensation was magnified—touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell.

She slowly withdrew until only the tip was in her mouth, sucking strongly as she did so.

"Fuck, baby."

Mmm, not yet, but soon. Her nether lips were still swollen and slick from their earlier joining, but she was hungry for more. She slowly slid her fingers down her stomach to stroke her throbbing clit.

"Are you touching yourself, Carol? Is sucking my cock making you hot?"

Carol released him long enough to murmur, "Yes," then took him back into her mouth.

"Swing that pussy around here, and let me eat you out."

At his order, a delicious shudder shook her body. Rising quickly to her knees, she crawled alongside his body, turning so she straddled his face. Mark's hands came up to grip her hips, positioning her to his liking, then licked her from clit to anus.

"Hey, I wasn't ready," she complained.

"Too bad. I am." He licked her again, this time swirling his tongue around her protruding, oh-so-sensitive nub.

Not to be outdone, Carol quickly lowered her lips and scooped his penis up so that it filled her mouth. She suckled strongly, then swallowed, smiling when his fingers dug into her hips.

"So you want to play?"

Carol hummed her agreement, knowing the vibration would drive him crazy.

"Okay, baby. Show me what you've got, but remember who holds the title of King of Pleasure."

What followed were several moments of slurping, licking, and sucking, as each fought to bring the other off without coming themselves.

Carol was trying her best to focus on everything but what Mark was doing between her thighs when a familiar-sounding vehicle turned into the cul-de-sac and she tensed.

"What's wrong?" Mark asked, displaying his sensitivity to her sudden change of mood.

When the car slowed to a stop outside of the town house, Carol forgot about sex, scrambled off the bed, and flew to the bedroom window, which overlooked the street. "Shit! Hurry; get dressed," she hissed.

She panicked. There was no disguising what she'd been doing, or with what. Damn, she thought she'd have more time. She should have known they'd come to check up on her, especially after she blew off Thanksgiving and the entire Christmas break to spend time with Mark. Not that she'd do things differently,

given a second chance. Mark had wine and dined her, treating her like a queen. Dates to the movies, the mall, flea markets, not to mention the fine restaurants and nightclubs he'd taken her to or the gifts he'd showered on her. Anything she'd wanted was hers for the asking. That kind of thing quickly went to a girl's head.

Mark still lay propped up on the pillows, languidly stroking his erect cock. "Come back to bed. Whoever it is will go away when we don't open the door."

Scrambling around, she snatched his jeans and sweatshirt off the floor and threw them at him. "It's my guardians," she informed him in a fierce whisper as two car doors slammed shut.

"So? We're both—"

"Shh! Lower your voice. They'll hear," she admonished him, despite knowing that with their sensitive shifter noses, Tom and Mona had most likely already picked up his scent and knew Mark was in the house, even if the extra car in the driveway didn't clue them in that she had company. By now she had on everything but her socks and shoes and was balancing on one leg at a time, putting them on.

"Carol, you're being ridiculous. There's no way they can hear us up here. The window's closed," he told her, but he'd lowered his voice and, catching a bit of her urgency, finally moved. He rose and began pulling on his jeans.

"Close the door behind you when you come down, and *hurry up*." She left the bedroom. As she closed the door, she could hear Mark muttering about women who didn't know how to stand up to their parents as an adult.

Heart pounding, Carol took the stairs in a single bound and sped into the kitchen. She snatched up the damp dishrag and a bottle of air freshener and raced around the living room, straightening pillows, wiping down tables, and spraying the couches and carpets—every surface where she and Mark had made love. It wouldn't mask what they'd done, not from shifters, but it would tone it down, make it less obvious. She hoped.

She could sense them standing at the door, politely waiting, and knew they could hear her frantically scrambling around inside. Carol dashed back into the

kitchen and grabbed a trash bag. Two pizza boxes, newspapers, a couple of empty two-liters, empty plastic water bottles, and multiple chip bags later, she tossed the now full trash bag in the pantry, wiped her hands on her pants, and went to the door, trying to calm down.

Saying a brief prayer, she swung open the door. "Alpha, Mona. I didn't expect you."

Mona came inside and gave her a brief hug. "I told Tom we should call first."

Nostrils visibly twitching, Thomas Wolfe, the Raven pack's alpha, glanced around briefly before his gaze locked on to Carol. She swallowed hard and lowered her gaze submissively. He stepped forward, and his mate moved to the side to give him room. "Family never stands on ceremony," he stated as he swept Carol into a brief but powerful hug that lifted her off her feet.

Upstairs, the bedroom door opened and closed; then Mark's slow and steady tread sounded on the stairs. The scent of sex, followed quickly by Carol's fear, filled the air. Tom's eyes went wolf, and a low growl vibrated through him. Carol shot Mona a pleading look.

Mona took his arm and said, "Let's go into the living room and give Carol a moment to collect herself."

He allowed himself to be led away but kept looking back. Not at Carol, but to the opening of the stairwell. The minute he was out of sight, Carol turned to confront Mark as he stepped off the last stair. "You need to go," she said in a low voice. "Now."

Mark narrowed his eyes, his expression one of disbelief. "I'm not running out of here like some teenage boy caught with his pants down."

"You don't understand," she began.

"No, you don't," he corrected. "I'm a man, and you're my woman. Now, unless you're ashamed of me...?"

"I'm not," she rushed to assure him. Scared Tom would rip his throat out, yes. Ashamed of her relationship with Mark? Never.

"Then we're going to walk in there like adults, and you're going to introduce me to your parents."

"Guardians," she corrected absently.

"They're still your family, whatever you call them, and they're important to you. Now come on." He took her arm, much like Mona had taken Tom's, and led her into the living room.

Mona and Tom stood when they entered. "Alpha, Mona, this is Mark. Mark, my guardians, Mona and Thomas Wolfe." Carol cursed inwardly at her slip, hoping Mark wouldn't ask what an alpha was. *Way to go, stupid, as if you're not in enough trouble already.*

Mark leaned forward with his hand outstretched. "Sir, ma'am," he greeted them.

"Nice to meet you," Mona stated.

The alpha gave Mark a measured glance as he shook his hand. Carol held her breath. Finally Tom nodded and said, "Have a seat."

The alphas settled on the couch like they owned it—which they did—and she and Mark sat on the love seat across from them. Carol had to make a conscious effort to keep her leg from shaking. Tom hadn't tossed Mark out on his ear. So far so good. Shifters respected courage. Mark couldn't have known her guardians would hear every word he'd spoken earlier, and that made his actions all the more courageous.

"So how did you two meet?" Mona asked.

"A group of us guys were playing football on the green. The opposing team asked Carol to play, and we were introduced," Mark answered.

"You're a student here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“What field of study?”

“Pharmacy.”

“You’re a little old to be a full-time college student, aren’t you?” Tom asked, speaking for the first time since they’d sat.

Mark nodded. “I served four years full duty to get the money I needed for school, and another four years in the reserves.”

“What branch?” Tom asked.

“The army.”

The alpha nodded once and sat back, allowing Mona to continue her grilling, disguised as polite conversation. Carol sat tensely, speaking when spoken to but otherwise remaining silent.

After about fifteen minutes of tortuous questioning and answering, the alpha interrupted. “As pleasant as this is, we came to see Carol on a matter of important family business. I’m sure you’ll understand and excuse us,” he said dismissively as he came to his feet.

“Of course, sir,” Mark stated agreeably as he rose to a standing position. “It was nice meeting you,” he said to Mona.

“You too. Carol, walk your young man to the door,” she commanded.

Carol stood and led the way. As soon as they were out of sight, Mark caught her to him and kissed her soundly. “Call me.”

She nodded as she opened the door and all but pushed him outside. As soon as the door closed, Carol turned and, taking a deep breath, prepared to face the music. Before she could take the first step, Mona called out, “Go shower and change into something nice. We’re taking you out to eat.”

A reprieve, she thought, as she ran up the stairs.

* * *

They were seated in the high-back, U-shaped booths of the local expensive steak restaurant, whose low lighting and spacious seating offered the illusion of

privacy from other diners. Carol was in the curve, with Mona on her right and Tom on her left, hemming her in. Not that she was intending to run. The Wolfes had been extremely good to her. She loved them as much as she could love anyone who were not her parents. They took their responsibility toward her seriously, and she knew they'd made it a point over the years to treat her with the same loving care that they gave Alex, their birth son. Still, she was extremely uncomfortable.

Her alpha let loose with another growl.

"Thomas, quit growling at the girl. Carol, stop fidgeting," Mona scolded.

"She's afraid—of us, her *parents*," he ground out in a low voice.

"She's *nervous*," Mona contradicted. "She was caught, if not with her pants down, then close." She sighed and pushed her glass and silverware out of the way and rested her forearms on the table with the wrists crossed. "I can see that neither one of you is going settle down until we get it out of the way, so let's discuss what happened so that we can move on to the purpose of our visit."

Carol shifted in her seat again, then froze when Mona pinned her with a stare.

"Now, Carol's twenty-three, more than old enough to experience her first taste of passion. The Creator knows, between you and Alex, she'd never have gotten the chance at home, but I think every woman should have the opportunity. I know you were hoping she'd remain pure until her mating. You don't want to see her hurt, but that's not realistic in this day and age, and there's no guarantee that she'll find her one. Do you really want her being overwhelmed by the first male strong enough to take her without having any kind of relationship experience of her own to know how to handle him?"

Tom grumbled something indistinct in reply but subsided.

Mona then turned to Carol. "I know we've taught you to stay away from relationships with human males, but really, as a means of testing your wings, they're perfect. You don't have to worry about pregnancy or being mated against your wishes. Disease isn't a concern. You can learn about what it means to be a woman and a sexual being in your own right without the possessiveness of a male

wolf to contend with. Just remember that while human men are fun to play with, you can't let yourself get too attached, and you have the added complication of having to hide what you are. Besides, we need all the females that we have. You know all about our low birthrates, so there's no need for me to go into it again. I'm sure you'd like children someday, and with so many viable males to choose from, it's really not a lot to ask, now is it?"

"I love him," Carol said in a low voice.

Mona reached out and patted Carol's hand gently. "I'm sure you do. That's what makes it all so exhilarating. That first rush of love, the challenge of something new and exciting. Eventually it will fade. You'll see. I know you don't believe me now, but I went through the same thing when I was your age. That's why it's better this happened with a human male. This way you won't be tempted to make a mistake—an unwanted mating—that will haunt you for the rest of your life."

"I marked him."

Carol kept her gaze lowered, but she could still see the stunned glance her guardians shared and feel the sudden tension in the air. Mating marks—a bite one shifter gave another, usually on the tendon that joined the neck and shoulder—were nothing to play with. Shifters were taught from early childhood to only bestow them on the mate they planned on spending the rest of their lives with. After all, mating marks in the shifter world were as sacred and binding as human wedding vows. Only unlike in the human world, there was no divorce, no way to undo it once it was done.

Their waiter returned to the table with their orders. No one said a word as he set the sizzling plates of food before them. The tension was so thick, the waiter kept glancing from one person to the other. He rushed to finish his task, haste making him clumsy in his effort to escape before the eruption.

Not daring to look at the alpha, Carol raised beseeching eyes to Mona. "I didn't mean to. I know the rules. My beast...it just"—she shrugged helplessly—"it took over."

Mona's expression changed from concerned outrage to something Carol couldn't identify. She shared another speaking glance with her mate, and the atmosphere altered. It was still charged, but...Carol tried to put a name to what she was sensing and couldn't.

"I think you'd better explain," Mona told her gently.

Carol took a deep breath and began her tale. "I noticed his scent first. He smelled so good. If he'd been a shifter, I would have sworn he was my one. It was like everything you told me to expect, you know? But he couldn't be, because shifters and humans don't mate." She paused to see if Mona understood. She still couldn't bring herself to look at her alpha.

Mona nodded encouragingly.

"I tried to stay away from him. He asked me out. I told him no, that I was busy with schoolwork. We know some of the same people and haunt some of the same places. Whenever he'd show up, I'd leave. If I saw him coming, I'd change directions. I knew a relationship between us was wrong and couldn't go anywhere. I thought he'd get the hint and leave me alone."

"But he didn't?" Mona asked.

"No. He said later he was as drawn to me as I was to him. Mark finally cornered me and asked me to have a cup of coffee, promising if I'd sit and talk with him, get to know him a bit, and afterward still wasn't interested, he'd leave me alone." Carol's voice trailed off as she thought back to that night. It seemed so long ago, but it had only been a few weeks.

"What happened?" Mona prompted.

"We talked...for hours. It was scary nice, you know? We have so much in common, and Mark's really a great guy. Mature, has a great head on his shoulders, feet firmly grounded. He knows what he wants out of life and has the drive to obtain it." Carol sighed again, this one a reflection of the regret she'd felt after that first get-together. "He walked me to my car, and I explained again that as much as I'd enjoyed myself, nothing had changed. I still wasn't interested." She paused.

“Then he kissed me and my”—she glanced around quickly, her voice lowering as years of keeping what she was a secret automatically kicked in—“that *other* part of me tried to come out.”

At her words, Tom stirred for the first time. Mona’s gaze sharpened, but she said nothing.

“I shoved him away, reminded him of his promise, and drove off.”

“But he didn’t stay away.” This came from the alpha.

She glanced briefly at him. He wasn’t looking at her, but off into space with a contemplative look on his face.

“Mark said he tried. That he attempted to find another woman to interest him, one that would take his mind off me, but couldn’t. He showed up one day at my door, and...and I let him in,” she finished softly, feeling her cheeks warm at the memory of what followed.

There was another silence, this one longer. Finally Tom said, “Eat. We’ll finish this discussion later.”

Carol’s nostrils quivered as she tried to scent what the alpha was feeling. She didn’t sense or hear any disapproval or anger. Whatever he was thinking, he kept to himself.

She looked at the twelve-ounce porterhouse, which had blood and juice coming out of it onto the specially designed plate the restaurant used to keep the food warm. Her loaded baked potato was just as she loved it: topped with butter, sour cream, cheese, bacon, and chives, and with steam still rising from it. The steamed broccoli was cooked to perfection. It all looked and smelled so good and, as far as Carol’s stomach was concerned, was as appetizing as burned wood. She had to force herself to pick up her knife and fork and begin eating.

Mona started discussing the progress of the new medical clinic that was being built, of which Alex would be in charge. A government grant they’d applied for had been approved and was being used to purchase some state-of-the-art medical equipment. In addition to federal and state funding, the local and surrounding

communities were going all out to raise money to make Refuge's clinic the best in the area. Not only would it provide jobs, but having a facility of their own meant no more forty-five minute drives down the mountain to get to the closest hospital in emergency situations.

The clinic was scheduled to open in a few months and was where Carol had been planning on doing her internship until this situation with Mark had come up. Now she didn't know what to do. She was so conflicted. The pack *and* her guardians had invested a great deal of money into her training—for the benefit of the pack. Yes, she'd earned good grades in school and received several scholarships and grants because of them, but they didn't cover everything. Even the town house she was living in had been purchased by the pack, specifically for her use, at the alphas' direction. Something she didn't think they'd done for any other Raven pack member.

So how was she supposed to tell them she'd changed her mind, that she wanted to follow her mate instead? She couldn't. The small amount of food she'd managed to consume turned to rocks in her belly.

Chapter Five

“Your love life is not what we came to discuss,” Mona said later in the meal. “The reason Thomas and I decided to drop in on you unannounced is to tell you that we’re stepping down from our position as alphas of the Raven pack.”

Carol almost choked on the lemonade she was drinking. “What? Stepping down? But...are you sure Alex is ready? He’s only a little over thirty.” It was well-known within the pack that Alex was being groomed to take over. Most alphas were older. A lot older. Like in their midforties. “Does Alex know?”

“Yes. Had you come home for Christmas, we’d have discussed this with you then, when we broke the news to him,” Mona said.

Her own problems forgotten, Carol tried to wrap her mind around this coming change. “But he’s not mated. How’s he supposed to deal with everything on his own?” Having lived with the alphas, Carol was well aware of all that was involved in leading the pack.

“That’s where you come into the picture,” Mona told her.

“Me?” her voice squeaked.

“Yes, you. We’re making you his second. The elders have already approved our decision,” Mona calmly informed her.

“But...but...” Carol was speechless.

“We’ll still be around to help and to give counsel, but for all intents and purposes, you and Alex will lead the Raven pack,” Mona continued.

Carol shook her head, completely bewildered. “I don’t understand. I’m not an alpha like Alex, only a beta. Don’t you want someone stronger?”

The alpha spoke. "No. This wasn't a sudden decision. He isn't the only one we've been grooming for this day. You have a heart for the pack. You proved it when you gave up your dreams of being an ob-gyn and pursued nursing instead because it's what the pack needed."

It was true she'd wanted to be an obstetrician, but she was still in the medical field. She didn't feel that she'd made a sacrifice, simply traded one degree for another. She would have the best of both worlds. She could give the pack what they needed and still satisfy her desire to deliver healthy babies into the world by training to be a licensed midwife. Since the alphas were working on a deal with the local state university to have the clinic set up as an adjunct training facility, she wouldn't have to be away from the pack as long to complete her studies.

"And despite your many disagreements, you and Alex work well together. He won't have to worry about you overstepping your boundaries or trying to take the pack away from him," Mona added.

It was true she and Alex fought a lot, but it was more in the nature of siblings than anything else, not that she'd admit that to him. He was already too cocky for his own good. It was her duty to knock him down a peg or two whenever the opportunity presented itself, something she relished.

"And you said the elders have already agreed?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't they?" Mona asked. "It's not like this is a surprise to them. They've known our intentions since you were young."

"But I'm not blood," Carol argued. Yes, it was traditional that whenever possible, the alphas' eldest offspring led the pack after the demise or retirement of the current alphas. Also, in large packs like theirs, it wasn't unheard of for the responsibility to be split among siblings, as long as a clear leader was established.

"You're the daughter of our heart and in the eyes of the pack, therefore every bit as much our child as Alex, so I'll hear no more on that subject, young lady," the alpha said sternly.

"Yes, sir," she said, suitably cowed.

Mona reached out and took Carol's hand in hers. "Carol, you can do this. We have every confidence in you. We know it; the elders know it; now you need to realize it."

"What does Alex have to say about all of this?"

"My son wisely stated that he wouldn't have anyone else but you as his second." Thomas's pride in both of them was evident.

The waiter returned to the table, which gave Carol time to digest all that had been said. She was going to be the Raven pack's second in command, in line to lead if anything happened to Alex. It was a lot to take in, and something she'd never even dreamed of, let alone considered might happen.

As second, her choice of mate was of paramount importance to the pack, as he would share her position and ranking. Her heart throbbed and she rubbed her chest, but the pain was emotional. The pack would never accept a human male as her mate. Not now. She had to let Mark go.

Everything in her cried out against it, but it had to be done.

"Carol, did you want dessert?" Mona asked.

"No, ma'am." From the concerned look Mona shot her, she knew Mona could smell her pain. Before she could misunderstand its cause and think her ungrateful, Carol sighed and said, "I'd hoped that somehow, someday, Mark and I could be together in spite of our differences, but the pack would never accept him. Not now."

"Never say never," the alpha stated cryptically. "If you ladies are ready, we can leave."

Carol tried to puzzle out what his statement meant the whole way home. Was he saying there was a chance she and Mark *could* be together? But how? Even if the pack *would* accept a human as her mate, she was forbidden to reveal to him what she was. Not only that, but Mark had big city dreams. She couldn't ask him to follow her to Refuge, where the population was small and the job opportunities few, and she couldn't betray the confidence the alpha and elders were placing in her. If

that wasn't enough, Alex needed her. There was no way she'd leave him to handle things alone.

They were silent on the drive, each busy with their own thoughts.

When they arrived at the town house, Carol went upstairs to put fresh sheets on the bed in the master room while Tom removed their bags from the vehicle. This wasn't the first time her guardians, as well as other members of the pack, had come to visit. It's one of the reasons she didn't have a roommate. Well, that and the whole being-a-shifter thing.

Once finished, she opened the window in her room and closed the bedroom door, hoping it would lessen some of the smell of sex. Mark's scent permeated the room, sending a surge of lust and longing through her. No matter how understanding Mona might seem about her having an "adult" relationship, there was no way she could call Mark over to spend the night. Not while they were here.

Besides, she might as well get used to sleeping alone again since that's what she'd be for the foreseeable future—alone.

She could hear Mona moving around in the kitchen as she fixed their usual after-dinner pot of coffee. The alpha came up the stairs to deposit their bags in the room, and though the two bedrooms were separated by a long hallway that spanned the length of two full-size bathrooms, a hall closet, and the HVAC unit, his nostrils still twitched and the look he shot her showed his displeasure. Carol flushed guiltily and ran down the stairs to join Mona. When the alpha arrived, the conversation picked up where it had left off.

"We're not just dumping the pack on your laps," Mona stated. "Tom and I will be there to assist and offer advice when needed. We simply want them to get used to coming to you."

"We'll ease you and Alex into it," the alpha added. "Slowly turn more and more of the responsibilities over to you until you're running the whole pack. We think that will allow everyone time to adjust to the changes. Besides, with both you and Alex still trying to get established in your respective careers, and the medical clinic

we're trying to get up and running, there's no way you could do all of that and handle the pack too."

"And then there's the fact that neither one of you are mated," Mona said.

"Which brings us to our next item of discussion," Thomas said as he settled on the couch with his coffee. "Mark."

On the oversize ottoman, Carol drew her legs up to her chest in an unconsciously protective movement. "I already know the pack won't accept a human as my mate, even if I *could* tell Mark what I am and he accepted me."

"At this point, you have no choice but to tell him what you are if he is what we suspect," Mona told her.

"I don't understand," Carol stated after a few moments of quiet.

"What we're about to tell you, while not exactly a secret, has occurred so rarely that most shifters believe it to be a myth."

"We teach the males about it during the course of their training because frankly, with the growing lack of available mates, they need the small bit of hope it provides. But rarely, if ever, do we mention it to the females, with good reason," the alpha said.

With each word they spoke, Carol was more and more confused.

"Do you remember what I taught you about mates?" Mona asked.

"That mating is forever, so be very careful in my selection. Find a male that's strong, one that will be a good protector and provider for me and my cubs, who will treat me well. Not only do I have to accept him, but for there to be peace and harmony in our household, my wolf must respect him as well. You also stated that if the Creator smiled on me, I'd find my true mate, my one, and I would recognize him by his scent. We'd be drawn to each other, and when we mated, it would be like two halves of one soul, separated in eternity, reconnecting here on earth." Carol had never forgotten those words. In fact, she'd longed for and prayed to the Creator that she'd find her other half ever since Mona had told her about it.

“What we didn’t tell you was that on rare occasions—”

“Extremely rare,” the alpha interjected.

“True mates have been found among humans,” Mona finished.

“A human mate?” Carol’s forehead wrinkled as she tried to digest this new concept.

“Yes. The historians speak of it, though I’ve never known it to happen in my lifetime or even my parents’ time,” the alpha stated.

“But...but...” Bewildered, Carol searched for words. “I thought mating with humans was forbidden.”

“Not forbidden, discouraged,” Mona corrected.

“For good reason. With our increasingly low birthrates and more males than females being born, mating with humans would only speed us toward extinction as a species. However, there are always exceptions to every rule. This is one of them.” The alpha took a sip of his coffee.

Mona drained her cup, leaned across the alpha to set it on the table, and settled back against his side before continuing. “Human true mates are compatible with our species. Let me clarify: a human true mate is only compatible with their shifter mate. Legend says there are certain indicators, signs that will enable a shifter to recognize one. The first one is scent. You stated Mark’s scent caught your attention, correct?”

Carol slowly nodded. “I smelled him before I saw him.”

“And his scent caught the interest of your beast?”

“Yes.”

“The second marker is that of taste. I’m going to assume that the kiss you and Mark first shared was a passionate one, involving the mating of tongues. After which, your wolf tried to break free,” Mona continued.

Another slow nod on Carol’s part.

“The third and final indicator is what we call the mating fever. That’s the part where you two can’t keep your hands off each other for any length of time. From the smell of this place, I don’t have to ask if that part of the legend is true.”

Carol felt her face flush and hurried into speech before Mona could speak any more on the subject of sex between her and Mark. “So you’re saying Mark is my mate?”

“Yes and no,” Mona answered.

Once again Carol was confused.

The alpha took pity on her and explained, “You began the mating process when you marked him. For the bond to become complete, Mark has to accept you as his mate and mark you in return.”

“That’s why you said I have to reveal to him what I am?” Carol asked.

Mona shook her head. “It’s part of the reason. The main reason you must do so is because with each exchange of body fluid, your DNA is changing him into a wolf-shifter like us. He has a right to know what’s happening to him and make an informed decision before it’s too late. Once done, the process can’t be reversed.”

Carol was floored. If they said anything else, she didn’t hear it. Her mind was racing. Mark, a shifter? Dear God, she breathed, not sure if she was praying or what. Vaguely she felt Mona rub her cheek with a soft hand and the alpha pat her on top of the head before leaving the room.

How was she supposed to tell Mark? More importantly, how would he react?

Carol felt sick to her stomach. She could only imagine how she’d feel if someone told her she’d never be able to shift again. Never feel the wind in her fur or her voice raised in a chorus of howls during a full moon. Never feel the strength of her beast inside or scent the wind and identify with startling accuracy what she smelled.

She loved Mark desperately, but did she love him enough to give up her very identity, what made her who and what she was? She didn’t know but was very

afraid the answer to that question was no. Could she expect Mark to feel any different?

Some undetermined length of time later, Carol rose stiffly from her chair, turned off the lights, and headed upstairs. She could hear the soft sounds of lovemaking coming from the alphas' room, and it brought a bittersweet smile to her mouth. She'd grown up around such loving devotion. First with her parents, and later the alphas. She'd looked forward to having the same with her mate. Now she knew she never would.

There was no way Mark would ever agree to give up his humanity to be with her. She'd have to hold on to every moment, every memory they created, and pray that it was enough to sustain her into old age. She'd never love another the way she loved him. Eventually, hopefully, when enough time had passed and the pain wasn't so fresh, she'd find a male she and her wolf could tolerate. Maybe one who'd lost his mate as well and was only looking for companionship.

She closed her bedroom door behind her, stripped, curled up on the bed, burying her nose in the mattress that held their combined scents, and allowed herself to grieve.

* * *

After a leisurely breakfast, the alphas left around noon to return to Refuge. Carol got into her car and drove to a nearby state park. She strolled one of the lesser-used wooded paths until she reached a remote area. Testing the air, she assured herself that she was alone before taking off her clothes and hiding them behind a tree. Then she gave over to her wolf and lost herself in the joy of running.

She hunted a few rabbits, squirrels, and raccoons that came out of their dens, more for the fun of the chase than for any desire to eat. Later, she lay on a fallen log near a small, icy stream and basked in the sun. As the sun sank in the west, she slowly made her way back to where she'd stashed her clothing, shifted, and dressed. Shivering a bit in the dropping temperatures, she picked up the pace to get her blood pumping since she wasn't dressed for the weather. As a shifter, she could

tolerate the cold better than humans, but without her fur, even she could feel the cold if not properly attired.

Upon arriving home, she found Mark planted on the stoop of her doorway like he'd been there for hours and was prepared to linger for several more. She opened the car door, and he was there.

"You didn't call," he growled.

Everything in her came to a boiling point. The feelings she'd spent the day attempting to outrun erupted in a conflagration of desire based in desperation, and she launched herself at him. Mark caught her midair. Carol fused her mouth to his as she wrapped her arms and legs around him like an anaconda.

Carol didn't know how they made it into the house. When she came back to herself, they were on the wooden floor of the foyer. What clothing hadn't been ripped to pieces was shoved out of the way.

Mark sprawled on top of her, panting. "Damn, baby, if being around your people makes you respond like this, they need to come more often."

Carol closed her eyes and gently ran her hands over his scalp in a tender caress. "I missed you last night." Inside, her conscience was screaming, *Tell him!* She swallowed hard.

He ran his hand down her side from breast to hip, displacing the few scraps of clothing that remained. "I stayed up late, waiting for your call."

"I...we sat up late talking."

He raised his head and looked at her. "Everything all right? You seem disturbed."

She forced her eyes to open and gave him a smile that was strained around the edges. "A bit. The news they came to give me was...surprising." *Mind-blowing was more like it.* "I'm still trying to process."

"Bad news?" She could feel waves of concern emanating from him. "No one's sick, are they?"

She shook her head. "Nothing like that." She racked her brain for something she could tell him that was close to the truth without revealing everything. "They announced they're retiring, well, stepping down from the organization they run. I wasn't expecting it. Not this soon."

"Oh."

She could see he was wondering why that particular news would be so upsetting to her. Before he could ask more questions, she told him, "Why are we laying on the floor when we could be upstairs in bed?"

Diverted, a sexy grin crossed his face, and he rose to his feet, pulling her up with him. "Now you're talking. Go on up. I'll get my stuff and lock up. It's late. Have you eaten?"

She gave him a smoldering look. "The only thing I want to eat is you."

He groaned, and for a second, she could have sworn his eyes glowed gold. The sight of it made her blood run cold. Mark tugged his jeans up on his hips and cupped his crotch. "I'll give you all of this you can handle, as soon as I get into the room."

She smiled, but her heart clutched in fear. She was remembering the alphas' words. "*With each exchange of body fluid, your DNA is changing him into a wolf-shifter like us... He has a right to know...before it's too late.*"

As she jogged up the stairs, love and her innate sense of fair play and honesty compelled her to tell him the truth, now, before this thing between them went any further. Fear held her back. One more night, she bargained. Let me have one more night with him, and then I'll tell him. One night to hold me for the rest of my life.

But one night became two, and two rolled into three. Before she knew it, a week had passed...

Chapter Six

Carol startled when her arm was jostled. Sometime during the last few minutes, her chair had been joined by others, and now she sat in the middle of a rather rowdy cheering section. She looked to the right to see Lulu, one of the pack's elders, settling into a seat.

"Lulu, glad you could make it."

"And miss a chance to say howdy to the alphas? Now you know better than that."

Carol allowed a rueful smile to cross her face. Indeed she did know better. Lulu, Tom, and Mona were great friends. Of course she wouldn't let this opportunity to see them pass when they'd been gone for almost two years now.

"How you feeling?" Lulu asked. "It's not like you to sit."

"Wonderful, but my mate doesn't want me overdoing," she stated with a roll of the eyes.

"I hear you, child," Lulu said on a chuckle. "A little *setting* never hurt anyone. You listen to that man of yours. He has your best interest at heart."

"I know. That's why I'm here and not out there." She indicated the game in progress; then she glanced around. "Ms. Emma didn't come?" Lulu and Ms. Emma were thick as thieves, and since being widowed, you rarely saw one without the other.

Lulu frowned and shook her head sorrowfully. "I tried, but since Ned died... I'm scared for her," she admitted.

Ms. Emma's arrival had proved that Carol and Mark's mating wasn't a fluke. She and Mr. Ned had met on an Alaskan cruise, and he'd known instantly that she was his true mate, despite her being human. By the end of the fourteen-day trip, the two were married. Like she'd told Carol, at her advanced age she'd known a good thing when she saw it and was too old to play games. Ms. Emma went home to pack up her house and, with her mate by her side, moved to Refuge. They'd been together ever since, right up until the moment Ned was killed by some hunters that had mistaken him for a wolf.

"It still burns me that we never caught his killer," Carol stated. "I wish he'd come to us when he noticed signs of someone being on his land instead of trying to handle it himself."

"Dang fool poachers. Must have come up from Colby way. Everyone knows these here are protected lands. No hunting allowed, with signs posted everywhere. There was no way Ned could have known things would turn violent."

Carol let out a low, sorrowful moan. "And now Ms. Emma's grieving herself to death. Is there anything we can do?"

Lulu shook her head. "Maybe if her girls came to visit, she might perk up, but that would only be a temporary fix. Without her mate, she's lost the will to live."

"You know, that's the only downside to this true mate business," Carol griped, unable to imagine her life without Mark in it.

"It doesn't have to be. A body can survive the loss of a mate, if the will is strong enough. It helps when there are young to see to," Lulu stated, and Carol knew she was speaking from experience. Lulu had lost her mate while her pups were still fairly young. With the support of the pack and the knowledge that her children were depending on her, she'd managed to survive. "It's not easy, and you never forget, but it can be done," she added.

Action on the street caught Carol's attention. Trey, Ms. Lulu's grandson, made a play that had Carol up on her feet, clapping and cheering and chanting his name, much to her mate's disgust.

“Where’s the love?” Mark shouted. “What happened to standing by your man?”

She laughed and called back, “You know I love you, baby, and I’ll still love you after my team finishes stomping yours into the ground.”

Everyone burst into laughter. She turned to Lulu and said, “I’d better make sure we have enough food and drinks set out. The guys are working up quite an appetite.”

Lulu waved her off. As Carol headed into the house, she remembered how Trey had been the catalyst in her revealing all to Mark...

* * *

Once again she was walking across the crowded campus green. A homecoming pregame pep rally had just ended, and everyone was dispersing. Carol was lost in her own little world, worrying about the problem of what to do about Mark. Last night she’d wasted yet another opportunity to tell him what she was and how her DNA was changing him.

Almost three weeks had passed since she’d found out about true mates. Mona called daily now to see if she’d done the deed, and the alpha was threatening to come and tell Mark himself. She knew they were right. If only she could break free of the paralyzing fear that seized her tongue whenever she tried to force herself to speak of it.

The scent of pack and home hit her senses seconds before a pair of wiry arms hugged her from behind. “Carol,” a welcoming voice exclaimed.

“Trey!” She turned and gave him a big hug, nuzzling his cheek affectionately. “What are you doing here?”

Trey was five years her junior and one of the younger members of the pack she’d babysat on various occasions. Whenever the pack met, the older youths were put in charge of watching the younger ones. With his grandmother being an elder and his parents strong betas, she and Trey had spent a lot of time together over the

years. Additionally, Trey was so fun loving and good-natured, he was one of her favorites.

"Me and some of the guys came for the game," he told her.

He'd changed since she'd seen him last. Still tall and gangly, his chest had broadened, giving hint to the strong male shifter he'd mature to be. Even his face was losing its boyishness. He appeared older than the eighteen he actually was.

"It's so good to see you," she said on a happy sigh. "Tell me about home."

They were standing close, deeply engrossed in conversation as Trey caught her up on all the pack news, when a deep, angry voice snarled, "Who the hell is this, and why is he touching you?"

Sheer startlement had them springing apart. Their reactions must have made them look guilty as hell. It's hard to sneak up on a wolf. Yet somehow, Mark had managed to catch both of them unawares.

Trey took another step back, lowered his gaze, and bared his neck. "Sorry, sir. I was so happy to see her I didn't realize she was mated. May I extend my congratulations to the two of you?" To Carol, he said, "What pack is he from? Will he be joining the Ravens, or are you going back to his territory?"

A deep sense of foreboding filled Carol as she processed Trey's rapid-fire speech. He thought Mark was a shifter.

"What the hell is he babbling about? Pack, Ravens, territory? Carol?" It was a demand for information.

Trey's scent changed from embarrassment of overstepping his bounds to confusion.

"Trey, it was good seeing you again. Tell everyone at home I said hi and hopefully I'll see them soon."

Recognizing a dismissal when he heard it, Trey left after one last puzzled glance at the two of them.

"Carol..." The scent of Mark's anger agitated her beast.

She sighed deeply, knowing she couldn't put it off any longer. "Come to the house. I'll explain everything."

"I thought you had to study tonight."

"I do, but this is more important." She turned on her heel and hurried off before he could ask more questions.

* * *

She was pacing the living room floor when she heard the purr of a motorcycle engine throttling down. "That can't be..."

It was. Mark coasted into the driveway and parked the bike next to her car. She went to the door and opened it. "You brought the bike? I thought it was too cold, that you'd garaged it until spring?"

He placed his helmet on the seat and strode determinedly toward her while unzipping his leather jacket and tugging off gloves, both black, of course. Mark brushed her question off with a brief, "Feels good to me." He pushed past her into the town house. "Now what was that all about? Who the hell was that guy, and why was he touching you? Why did you allow it?"

Carol closed the door and turned to watch him, still trying to come up with the necessary words to explain what she was and what he was fast becoming.

Tossing his jacket on the couch, he faced her with hands on his hips, one leg thrust aggressively forward, and pinned her with a stare. "Let's get something straight. You're my woman, and I don't share. This is an exclusive arrangement. Got it?"

The arrogance in his tone alternately thrilled and dismayed her. Thrilled because he was as possessive about her as she was about him, but dismayed because he sounded like a typical male shifter. Apparently she took too long to answer, because he stalked over and stood directly in front of her, crowding her against the solid door. "Understood?"

"We need to talk," she quietly stated, nibbling her lower lip as her gaze darted away from him.

"About what?" His voice was dangerously low, and the hairs on the nape of her neck lifted in primal response to the hint of danger inherent in his tone.

"There's something I need to tell you about myself. Something that affects you."

His fists hit the door beside her head, and she instinctively flinched. Mark didn't even notice. He'd already walked off, hands on his head. "Damn it, I knew it! Knew this thing between us was too good to be true." He swung around. "What is it? You're married, engaged?"

"What? No!"

Those hands landed back on his hips, and he tilted his head sideways, a scowl on his face. "You have some sort of disease? Herpes, AIDS, HIV? Do I need to go get checked out?"

The ridiculousness of his guesses pushed her past fear into outrage. "None of the above. You think I would have hid something like that from you? What type of woman do you take me for?"

"I thought I knew until I walked up to find you rubbing yourself all over some dude and letting him do the same to you. You've been acting strange ever since your parents were here. What did they do? Threaten to tell homeboy you were making it with someone else while he wasn't around? That's it, isn't it? That's why you didn't call me when they left. Why you've been giving me one lame excuse after another about why I shouldn't come over."

"You've been here every night," she protested vehemently.

"That's 'cause I came over anyway. You want to talk? Talk. Give it to me. Let's hear what you have to say."

"Fine." She'd give it to him all right. She'd let him have it with both barrels. "I'm not human. I'm a shape-shifter, a wolf-shifter to be more precise."

He stared at her for a moment in complete silence. She met his gaze, waiting for his reaction. The tension, already high, built to explosive proportions. Mark took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His fists, hanging by his sides, tightened and relaxed in a steady rhythm as he struggled with powerful emotions. Face to the ceiling, he swallowed hard enough to make his Adam's apple bob. She could see, smell—hell, almost taste—his mounting fury.

“This is a bunch of *bullshit!*” He spun on his heel and strode to the couch, snatching up his jacket in one fluid motion. “If you don’t want to be with me, fine. But don’t hand me some asinine shit about not being human. You must think I’m some sort of...”

Carol, who’d stripped while his eyes were closed, waited until Mark’s attention fell on her. Then she shifted to wolf. No warning. No explanation. She knew what he saw. One minute a woman. The next a larger-than-average brown wolf with gold-tipped fur. She stood on all fours, leaning slightly forward with her mouth open so he caught a glimpse of fang.

“Holy shit!”

In the blink of an eye, she shifted back to her human form. Naked, she stood there with her hands on her hips, silently daring him to disbelieve the proof of his own eyes.

Mark stumbled back and collapsed onto the couch cushion, eyes still fixed unblinkingly on her. “You...you’re...”

“A shape-shifter,” she finished for him, her manner deceptively calm. Inwardly she was a mass of nerves. Could he accept her, *all* of her? And if he somehow miraculously managed to deal with his woman being not quite human, what would his reaction be to the rest of her revelations?

One step at a time, she cautioned herself as she dressed. Don’t get ahead of yourself.

He shook his head slowly from side to side in stunned disbelief, appearing to be beyond words. Beginning to feel like a sideshow freak at the circus, Carol crossed

over to her favorite seat—the extra-large ottoman—and settled into it with her legs drawn up to her chest.

When the continued silence grated on her nerves, she began to speak in a soft, soothing voice. “We are nothing like television and the movies portray us to be. We weren’t cursed by gypsies. The same God that created you created me. We aren’t controlled by the full moon, although it does affect us, as it does every living thing on this planet. I don’t do that half-man/half-wolf, werewolf thing like you see in the movies.” Carol conveniently left out the fact that their strongest males could maintain a partial shift for extended periods of time when in the grip of a strong emotion like rage.

“My mother and father were wolf-shifters, as were their parents, and so forth and so on. We’re human, but more. There’s a little something extra in our DNA that allows us to transform into our beast. I’m not a werewolf, nor am I an animal, not exactly. The wolf’s a part of me, but not. It has its own mind, its own ability to reason.” She paused. Having never before put into words exactly what being a shifter meant, she floundered. “Wolf-shifters have a lot in common with wolves. Because of our beasts, our senses are enhanced. Our vision is sharper, sense of smell stronger, and hearing better. Physically we’re stronger as well.”

She fell silent to give Mark the opportunity to speak, ask questions, do something. He sat with his arms resting on his knees, head hanging down, gazing at the floor between his feet.

After a few uncomfortable minutes in which she couldn’t tell if he was listening to her or not, she continued. “Like wolves, we mate for life. We’re territorial and live in social groupings called packs. We take care of our young and protect our old.”

Another deep silence. “When I first met you, even though I was fiercely attracted to you, I turned you down because dating outside of my species is forbidden. For obvious reasons, so is revealing what we are to humans. Falling for

you meant I would have to leave my pack and everything familiar to me, hiding who and what I am for the rest of my life if I wanted to be with you.”

He stirred at that. His head slowly raised, and his piercing, direct gaze met her wary one. “But you told me. Why?”

Guilt forced her to lower her eyes. “When my guardians came, I was scared they were going to tell me I couldn’t see you anymore. Surprisingly, Mona was all for me having a little fun as long as I didn’t let things get too serious. I told her it was already serious. That I love you and want you for my mate. Then I told them how my wolf responded to you.”

She glanced at Mark. He watched her with the intensity of a predator spotting prey. Carol swallowed, then looked away. As a predator herself, she wasn’t used to feeling like quarry. “Normally, humans and shifters are incompatible.”

“Define incompatible.”

“Can’t have children together.”

“That explains the lack of birth control,” he murmured. Up until this moment, she hadn’t realized he knew she wasn’t taking anything like she’d originally implied.

“We didn’t need it. You can’t impregnate me, and I’m immune to human diseases,” she explained.

He nodded abruptly. She took that as a signal to continue. “But there are rare cases...sometimes... What I’m trying to say...”

“Spit it out,” he commanded sharply.

She brought her hands up to her head and held it like they were the only things keeping it from flying apart. “Do you know what a soul mate is?”

“Yes.”

“Well, apparently shifters have an equivalent, only we call them true mates. It’s the one person predestined by the Creator to be our mate. Until recently, I believed my true mate, should I be fortunate enough to find him, could only be

another wolf-shifter like me. Mona and Tom told me that in rare instances, true mates have been found amongst humans. From what I'd told them of how we met and everything that followed, all the signs indicate that you are my mate."

"So," he mused, "based on this information, they gave their blessings?"

He went back to contemplating the ground and didn't appear to be as shocked or angry. Maybe it was true what they said. A soft, soothing response did turn away wrath. At least he was listening. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

She brought her hands down from her head and crossed them over her chest. "Sort of. The normal rules don't apply to true mates."

"Why?"

It was beginning to annoy her the way he kept his gaze focused on his feet. "For one thing, true mates *are* compatible, so there isn't the same concern about not having children. A true mate is considered a gift from God, and highly prized as a result."

"So what makes me suitable when other human males aren't?"

He still wasn't looking at her, though he was responding, asking questions. He seemed to have recovered from the shock. She tried to sense what he was feeling, but it was like hitting a blank wall, and with his head lowered, she couldn't pick up any visual clues to his mood. His hands were loosely linked together, and he appeared to be relaxed, so she continued cautiously. This is where it got tricky. "The alphas said—"

"Alphas?"

"Mona and Tom, my guardians. They're also the head of our pack."

"Hmm."

"They said the mating fever—the explosive sexual attraction between us that causes us not to be able to keep our hands off each other—serves two purposes. It ensures we stay together long enough for the mating bond to kick in, and we have the ability to procreate."

“How?”

The question was asked in such a mild tone of voice, a teeny-tiny spark of hope lit inside of her. He hadn’t stormed out or turned away from her in disgust. If they could just get past this last part...

Maybe if she started by explaining exactly why being able to have children was so important. “We don’t have a lot of women, or children for that matter. The ratio of male to female is four-to-one. For that reason, there’s a lot they don’t tell the females. They don’t want us looking for mates elsewhere when so many of our men need one.”

She took a deep breath and continued. “My first time learning about human mates was that night the alphas met you. They said”—she swallowed hard and sent up a brief prayer to the Creator that Mark would understand—“that every time we touched, kissed, or made love, with each exchange of body fluid, you were becoming a shifter like me, and that once complete, the process was irreversible. That’s why they gave me permission; actually, they ordered me to tell you so you’d have a choice in the matter before it was too late.”

Carol waited for his response. With each minute that passed, the silence became more oppressive. Her nerves strung tighter and tighter. Her beast stirred, sensing a threat but unable to determine the source.

Chapter Seven

Slowly, oh so very slow, he raised his head, and what she saw in his eyes caused her to suck in a sharp breath. Fury such as she'd never seen before—and prayed to God never to see again—was directed at her. It consumed her, setting her ablaze where she sat.

Then he spoke. "You conniving, manipulative bitch."

There was more. Much, much more. Mercifully, over the years, time and loving penance by Mark had dulled the memory of all that he'd said, but nothing would take away the guilt and the residual pain. Each word was like razor-sharp daggers thrust into her soul until she withdrew so deep inside herself she was deaf, dumb, and blind to all around her.

"...Your pussy was good, but no cunt is worth giving up my humanity to become a monster, an animal like you." The slamming of the door punctuated his words.

She had no idea how long she sat there in that chair, unable to move or think, barely breathing. Pain was a living, seething entity that consumed her entire being.

"Carol! Carol!" She was shaken roughly. "Snap out of it!"

"He's gone," she said in a dull voice unlike her own.

"Who's gone?"

"My mate. He left." She drifted back off into space. Another rough shake roused her.

"What happened?" A command, one she couldn't disobey.

Carol repeated word for word everything Mark had said. She heard the words, knew it was her speaking, but she'd disassociated herself to the point where it seemed to be coming from someone else. "He's right, you know? Everything he said was true." That was her sin, her shame.

"No, he's not. Look at me. Damn it, I said *look at me!*" The command of an alpha. The voice of power.

Eyes gone wolf, shining pure gold, fangs showing, Alex was furious. She was so tired. She didn't have the energy to deal with him, with life. "Let me go, Alex," she pleaded wearily.

His claws bit into her scalp where he held her head, forcing her to meet his gaze. "You will not grieve yourself to death over him. I won't allow it. We won't let you. Come back, Carol. We need you. The pack needs you. I need you."

Then he snatched her out of the chair, onto her knees, and into his arms. Other arms surrounded her, enfolding her. She drowned in the scent of pack, of home, of family, and most of all, of love. Deep male voices murmured. Hands stroked and touched. The feeling of being safe broke through the grief.

She clutched at Alex. "It hurts. God, it hurts so bad." Then she cried.

An ocean of tears later, Alex lifted her and carried her upstairs to the alphas' room. The bed still carried their scent. He laid her in the middle of the bed, and they all crowded in around her. Exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep...

* * *

A strong, masculine hand rifled through her hair, messing up her 'fro. "Why are you out here in the cold, brooding, instead of inside with the rest of the pack?"

Alex.

"Just thinking," she replied, shaking off the past.

"Hmm..." He laid his arms on her shoulders and crossed them under her neck, pulling her back into his body in a loose embrace. "Since you're calling Mom 'Mom' now, does that mean you're gonna start referring to me as your brother?"

She elbowed him in the side and smirked when he grunted. "Hell no. I'm not claiming you."

He laughed as his grip tightened, playfully threatening to choke her.

"I might let the baby call you uncle," she conceded.

"It's a start. Someone's got to keep the tyke from being the hellion his mother was. I'll keep working on the brother part," he said, and she could hear the humor in his voice.

They stood quietly, watching a fox creep out of the woods before it caught their scent and darted away.

"Are you happy, Carol?"

"Yeah, Alex. I am."

He sighed deeply, the way he always did when something was troubling him. She waited. After a while, her patience was rewarded. "Dad's been hinting that it's time for me to start a family, for the good of the pack. Hell, it's not like I'm against the idea. I want a mate. I'm tired of being alone...lonely."

"But...?"

"I see Mom and Dad, and you with Mark, and I want what you have. Sure, I could pick one of the females of the pack and settle down, but..."

Carol reached up and crossed her arms on top of his in an awkward hug, resting her weight against him. "Then pray, Alex, and wait. Don't settle for less than you deserve. There's someone for you out there, and when it's time, she'll come across your path."

He rested his head on top of hers. "You think so?"

"I know so. We didn't even know this true mates stuff was real until it happened to me. Don't give up. If it happened to me, and Ned and Ms. Emma, it can happen for you too. And when it does, hopefully you won't have half the problems Mark and I had."

“You didn’t know, Carol. When are you going to stop beating yourself up about it? Your being with him went against everything we were taught to believe. Things got a little rocky, but it all worked out in the end. That’s all that matters.”

In an attempt to lighten the mood, she asked, “So what did you get me for Christmas?” Though they’d given out gifts to the pack, the family had yet to exchange them. That would come after dinner, which would include only family and a few of the elders.

“A present? For you? Sorry, kid. I only bought my family gifts this year,” Alex said, tickling her.

“Oh, you...” She squirmed, trying to free herself.

Alex held her with one arm and rubbed the knuckles of his free hand on top of her head. She squealed, and they tussled like the kids they used to be.

“Are you molesting my wife?” her mate asked as he came out onto the deck.

“More like mauling me,” she answered. “Get him off me. You know I shouldn’t be jostled in my delicate condition.”

Both men snorted.

Mark bent over to knee level so he could see her face since Alex had her in a headlock. “Aren’t you the same ‘delicate flower’ that tackled me earlier during our football game?”

“Well...”

“Yeah, she hit me so hard I saw stars. That’s what I get for trying to take it easy on her,” Alex griped.

Mark gently freed her from Alex’s hold, but that didn’t stop the teasing. Instead it intensified as the two ganged up on her. Carol smiled, happy to see two of the most important men in her life getting along so well, despite their rocky start...

* * *

The night she and Mark broke up, the alpha, sensing something was wrong, sent Alex, Sam, Craig, and Seth to attend to her with the command to remain until

the semester was over. Then she was to come home to Refuge. The alpha had already made arrangements for her to intern at the hospital in Colbyville, only forty-five minutes away, until the new clinic was operational.

To say the guys were protective was an understatement. They shadowed her every move, following her to class and sitting beside her. Not that she minded. Emotionally, she was such a mess that their very presence was a comfort to her. They smelled of pack and home, something she desperately needed as she licked her wounds and struggled to make it from day to day.

More than pain, it was the crushing guilt of keeping her secret for so long that truly tormented her. Mona had urged her to tell Mark as soon as she'd discovered the truth, but she'd held off out of fear. She loved him so much, she hadn't wanted to chance losing him. Not only had she lost him, but she had only herself to blame.

She was curled up on the couch between Sam and Alex, being drilled by the latter for an upcoming exam, when the knock came at the door. His scent hit her immediately. She stiffened and let out a small whimper.

Alex broke off midquestion, observing her. "It's him, isn't it?"

All she could do was nod.

"I've got this." Alex's normally dark brown eyes were gold, wolf barely held in check.

"No, Alex, it's all right. I can handle it," she protested and struggled to get to her feet, though she really didn't want to, but the guys were worrying her. All of them were bristling like wolves whose territory was being threatened. Mark was strong, but he was human and no match for an alpha like Alex.

"Guys." That's all Alex said, and immediately Seth, Craig, and Sam formed a wall between her and the door.

Alex snatched open the door so suddenly, Mark's fist was still raised to knock. "What the hell do you want?" he snarled.

Mark appeared taken aback, but he quickly gathered his senses. "I want to see Carol."

"No," Alex announced calmly and slammed the door.

"Alex..." she chided and tried to move forward, but the guys tightened ranks so that she had to rise to her toes to see over their shoulders.

There was a thud as the door met an obstacle and stopped short of closing. "Listen, buddy, I don't know who the hell you are, but I'm not leaving until I see Carol."

Alex growled, and from Mark's reaction, Carol guessed he was showing fang. "I'm the guy who's going to chew you up and leave your carcass for the buzzards if you don't leave."

She thought Mark would give up, but he proved he was made of stronger stuff. He placed his hands on the door and countered the strength Alex was exerting to force the door closed. "Do your worst, but I'm not leaving unless Carol tells me to."

Alex looked over his shoulder at her. Whatever he saw in her expression made him hesitate. Finally he backed away and allowed Mark to come inside. Two steps into the house, he commanded, "That's far enough."

Mark looked like he was going to argue. Then he caught sight of the rest of the guys and Carol hovering behind them. "Carol," he said quietly, "can we talk?"

"I think you've said enough," Alex told him.

"Privately," Mark added.

Alex snorted. "Anything you want to say, you say it now. We're not leaving her alone with you, not after the last time."

The guys nodded their agreement. The aggression in the room rose dangerously. Fearful for Mark's safety and not sure she was ready to deal with whatever he had to say, Carol told him, "Mark, I think you should go."

"I'm not leaving until I've had my say," he stubbornly insisted.

Alex smiled, more a baring of teeth. "Oh, I think you will. Sam..."

"Alex, don't," Carol pleaded. She tried to push through Seth and Craig, but they caught her and held her back.

Ignoring her protests and her struggles, Alex grabbed Mark by the arm. Mark swung, connecting with Alex's jaw with a force that had Carol wincing. Alex's head snapped to the side, and when he turned back to Mark, he was smiling. *Oh shit!*

"You'll have to do better than that, human."

Carol closed her eyes. There was the sound of scuffling and flesh striking flesh, and then the door opened. Carol looked up in time to see Alex and Sam toss Mark out of the house, then slam the door shut and secure it. They high-fived each other as Craig and Seth grunted in satisfaction, releasing her now that Mark was gone.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at them all. "Why did you do that?"

Alex walked right up to her and cupped her chin in his hand, glaring down at her through wolf's eyes. "No one, and I mean no one, treats you the way he did and gets away with it. If he wants you back, he's going to have to come through me. Got it?"

This was Alex the alpha speaking, not her quasi brother. "Yes, alpha," she said and lowered her eyes.

Alex groaned and pulled her into his embrace. "Carol, you're not just pack; you're family. I couldn't love you more if you were my own flesh and blood. I'm not going to let him get away with the vicious things he said to you. You think I can't smell how much you're hurting? He's lucky all we did was rough him up a bit."

The other guys murmured their agreement.

"But it was my fault," she protested.

"No one, Carol," Alex reiterated strongly. "For any reason. I don't care who he is."

She looked at all of them. In this, they were in agreement. She sighed and wrapped her arms around Alex's waist. The other guys came close and surrounded her in a group hug...

* * *

It took some time, and there were some tense moments for a while after she and Mark had reconciled, but eventually Mark managed to prove himself and all was forgiven. Now, looking at the way he, Alex, and the rest of the guys interacted, you'd never know there'd been a problem.

"So, babe, when are we eating? Your man's hungry."

She laughed. "Let me see if Mom and Dad are ready to eat," she said as she freed herself from his embrace and headed into the house.

As she closed the sliding glass door, she heard Alex say to Mark, "Can you believe she's claiming my folks but still won't claim me as family?"

"Hell, I wouldn't claim your ugly ass either," Mark joked.

"My mug's better looking than yours," Alex fired right back.

She smiled and shook her head. There was nothing like family.

* * *

Mark hummed a happy tune under his breath as he finished cleaning the kitchen and took out the rest of the trash. Today was a good one. He'd enjoyed being together with the pack, and the glow on his wife's face made all the extra work they'd done to celebrate the holiday well worth the effort.

In addition to the large quantities of appetizers and treats laid out for the pack, he and Alex had fried five turkeys, and Carol had baked two massive hams. With an assortment of side dishes and desserts that would have done a buffet restaurant proud, they'd consumed quite a spread. Now everything was cleaned and put away, and he was free to join the rest of the family and relax.

He flipped off the kitchen light and headed toward the family den. As he neared, the sound of laughter and teasing carried as clear as if he were in the room with them. Standing in the shadows outside the room, he studied the tableau before him.

Christmas carols played softly in the background. A fire burned merrily in the hearth, its soft, flickering light lending a mellow glow. In one corner of the room, the seven-foot Douglas fir added additional light and color, its multicolored twinkling lights reflecting off a multitude of Christmas ornaments of all shapes and sizes. Only two lone presents resided under its branches, the rest having been distributed earlier.

Mark crossed his arms over his chest, leaned against the archway, and smiled. Carol and Alex wrestled on the floor like kids, laughing and playing and simply goofing off. It was good to see them being so lighthearted and relaxed, for once free of the cares and responsibilities of being leaders of a large pack. Their parents, Mona and Tom, sitting together on the couch like honeymooners, gazed at them indulgently. Of the pack, only two remained, Ms. Lulu and Hiram, elders both of them. They sat on a nearby love seat and spoke with the former alphas in quiet tones.

Mark watched Tom Wolfe as he interacted with the elders, his children, and most importantly, his mate. He owed this man a debt of gratitude he doubted he'd ever be able to repay. Left to his own devices, he would have allowed fear and pride to keep him from the best thing that had ever happened in his life: Carol. Thank God Tom had come and talked sense into him. More importantly, he'd taught Mark everything he needed to know about being a male shifter, including how to care for his mate.

In his position, Mark sincerely doubted he'd have done the same if it had been his daughter. His attitude would have been more like Alex's: hostile, protective, and completely unforgiving. He thought back to those dark days...

* * *

He was a miserable wreck. He couldn't eat. He couldn't sleep. He was so irritable and short-tempered even his friends avoided him. He wanted his woman, but there was no way she'd forgive him, not after the ass he'd made of himself.

Mark had known when he met Carol that she was sheltered. There was something innocent and a bit naive about her. After spending time with her and hearing about her dad and brother, he had realized his first impression was correct. Not only was she sheltered but pampered as well. She was by no means spoiled. He could tell she'd come from a good home and that her family was well-off. Nothing like the hood he'd grown up in. She lacked street smarts and that hard, wary edge that people who grew up in dangerous neighborhoods learned early in life.

The first time they'd made love, though she'd met him passion for passion, her inexperience showed. She was the closest thing to a virgin that he'd ever been with, and while he was all for women's rights and women going after what and who they wanted, he was glad he didn't have to wonder how many men his woman had been with, and how he compared to her former lovers.

Carol was a lady, and he'd cursed her out like a common street whore.

In his mind he could still picture the way she'd slowly folded into herself. The flinches she'd made as each word hit its target. Another woman would have cursed him back, the black in her rising to the forefront as her neck rolled, finger pointed, and she "handled business." Not Carol; she'd sat there and taken it. Once his initial fury had cooled and he could clearly think again, guilt hit him hard.

Along with the sure knowledge that he'd screwed up—royally.

Even knowing that he was wrong and owed her an apology, he couldn't force himself to go to her. He was still upset. She'd lied to him. Used him. She claimed to love him, but if she really did, wouldn't she have told him what was happening as soon as she discovered the truth? It was his life, his humanity she was fucking with. And for that reason, his anger still burned.

It didn't help that now that she'd brought it to his attention, he was noticing things. Changes in himself he'd previously dismissed as being his imagination. His reflexes were quicker, senses sharper. And there was this *thing* growing inside of him. He could feel it, and it scared the crap out of him.

He didn't know how to deal with it or himself. He wasn't a man that was used to being out of control. He needed help but was too stubborn to ask. Help meant going to Carol, the one person who knew what he was becoming, and he wasn't ready to do that. Not yet.

Besides, he didn't trust himself around her. Every time he saw her, she was with some guy, or a group of them. The thing inside of him didn't like their close proximity to his woman. It didn't know, nor did it care to know who they were. It simply wanted them gone. The man in him was in total agreement. He hadn't decided if he still wanted her yet, but he damn sure knew he didn't want her with anyone else until he'd made up his mind.

Finally he realized that this thing inside of him wasn't going away.

Swallowing his pride, he went to Carol to find out what he needed to know to deal with it, only to be thrown out. At least he knew who one of the guys with her was: Alex, her brother. That explained a lot. Unfortunately the incident at her house pissed him off all over again and messed up his head more than it already was.

It took one of his professors confronting him about his dropping grades to make him realize he'd better get his head back in the game. He'd come too close to achieving his goals to flunk out now.

The next few weeks he spent catching up on missing assignments and bringing up his grades. When he surfaced for air, Carol was gone.

He never thought she'd leave. He assumed that when *he* was ready, they'd work things out. After all, he was the one who'd been wronged. Why the hell had she left? The semester wasn't finished. In another two weeks, they'd be taking final exams.

If that's the way she wanted to be, then screw her. He didn't need this shit. There were plenty of women out there. He'd eventually find one that didn't make his skin crawl.

Mark made it through final exams. Not the best work he'd ever done, but he passed. At this point, that was all that really mattered. Deciding to take the summer off to get his head together, he focused on work. His internship began in the fall, and he needed to rebuild his savings since he'd be working without pay.

To make sure he didn't have time to think, he worked two full-time jobs. When not working, he exercised. He ate enough to keep moving but didn't find any pleasure in it. Sleep only came when exhaustion overtook him.

He'd been doing that for about month when a knock came at the apartment door. It was one of his rare days off, so he was home. Mark finished tying his shoelace on his athletic shoe, grabbed his gym bag, and headed for the door, not in the mood to entertain.

Snatching open the door, he came to an abrupt stop. "What are you doing here? I got the message from your son. Your precious daughter is off-limits. I get that."

Thomas Wolfe raised one eyebrow and examined him. Something about his manner made Mark swallow and look away. Maybe it was his focused gaze with those weird eyes. This man wasn't someone to toy with.

"My daughter is grieving for you, pup. If you love her and want her back, I can teach you what you need to know to claim her. If you're not interested..." He made to turn away.

"Wait!" The word leaped out of his mouth.

Tom paused. "Yes?"

"I love her," Mark choked out the words. Like a dam bursting, it came pouring out of him. "I can't sleep. I can't eat. I feel like I'm losing my mind. On top of that, there's this...this *thing* inside of me. It's making me crazy."

The look Tom gave him was full of sympathy and approval. "That's all I needed to hear."

Chapter Eight

The next eight weeks put his time in the military to shame. He thought he'd worked hard for Uncle Sam. The government had nothing on the training Thomas Wolfe put him through.

The first order of business was to declare his allegiance to the Raven pack and Tom Wolfe as alpha. Next, he quit his jobs, packed his belongings, and moved in the dark of night to a small hunting cabin deep in the mountains of what he was told was Raven pack territory.

His new alpha taught him everything he needed to know about being a wolf-shifter. His lessons included how to hunt, track, and fight in wolf form. For the first three weeks, the only food he was allowed was what he managed to catch. Any aversion he might have had to eating raw meat was quickly lost when the hunger of his beast kicked in.

Next Tom taught him how to tap into the power of the wolf while in human form, using its advanced senses to his greatest advantage. Once Mark learn how to control the shift and change in an instant, the alpha taught him how not to lose himself in his beast while in shifted form. He taught him how to control his emotions, and therefore control his wolf rather than let it control him. Most importantly, he taught Mark how to think like a man while in the body of his wolf.

And that was just the beginning.

He called in the pack's historian, a little Chinese man named Hiram. From Hiram, Mark learned the history of the Raven pack specifically and wolf-shifters in general. He learned who the Ravens had alliances with, those they maintained an uneasy peace with, and those he needed to avoid at all costs. He learned which

packs and species ruled what territories, and what size and type of packs or groups they were. The complexities of interpack/intraspecies relations made NATO seem juvenile by comparison.

From Ms. Lulu, a large, elderly African American woman who reminded him of his paternal grandmother, the first thing he learned was that with shifters, neither race, color, nor ethnicity mattered. Shifters didn't see in terms of color but species and strength. A person was either human, shifter, or vampire. Among shifters, there were wolves, cats, foxes, coyotes, hyenas, bears, and so much more. Vampires were the strongest of all the supernaturals and generally distrusted.

She also taught him wolf-shifter etiquette, which varied from pack to pack but had common rules governing them all. Mark likened it to being in the armed forces, dealing with the different branches. For instance, the army did things one way, the navy another, but they were all part of the United States Department of Defense and therefore governed by the same laws. Like the military, each person within the pack had their own rank and file, from the highest to the lowest, and there were rules governing the way each rank was to be treated.

From Mona he learned how to treat the females of the pack and, more specifically, how to claim and treat his mate after the mating. Lessons were given in how to care for the young and the proper respect given to the elderly. The young and elderly were to be protected above all. Mates were to be treated with love and respect. She taught him how to dominate his mate without being domineering.

After eight weeks of intensive training, the alphas deemed him ready to be introduced to the pack. They called a special, surprise gathering of all the Ravens. Mark stood downwind in the shadows, watching as they poured in—by car, on two feet, and four legs—until the clearing was full to capacity. They stood around talking in small groups, their curiosity palpable.

Mark kept his gaze focused on the object of his desire, his reason for suffering through shifter boot camp hell, wondering now that the moment was at hand, did he have what it took to succeed? Then his natural arrogance kicked in. He'd

survived the gangs in his hood, everything Uncle Sam threw at him, and six years of college. He could do this too.

Standing on a natural rise were Tom and Mona. Flanking them were Carol and Alex. To either side of them were Lulu, Hiram, and the other four pack elders. They faced a crowd of almost three hundred men, women, and children. As had been explained to him, the women, children, and elderly were placed in the center, surrounded on three sides by all the men of the pack who were of age. Mark moved until he was slightly behind and to the left of the pack, almost hidden by the trees, waiting for his moment.

Thomas raised his hands, calling the gathering to order. "Tonight I'd like to introduce you to the newest member of the Raven pack."

That was his cue. As the crowd murmured and looked around, he shifted into a large gray wolf with black markings and stepped forward. As his presence was noticed, they parted like water, allowing him to make his way to the front.

"His name is Mark Johnson, and he's already given his allegiance to the pack," Tom continued.

Carol gasped and took a step back. Alex and a few others immediately began to growl. As Mark neared the center of the clearing, a blur came flying at him from the right. A challenge for position, to determine his ranking within the pack. If he wanted to stand by Carol's side as her mate and cobeta of the pack, it started here. With no hesitation, he called on all the training he'd received and fought off his opponent, and the next, and the next, until he lost count. Good thing his instructors had warned him his induction into the pack wouldn't be easy, and the hardest part was yet to come.

Bloody, bruised, but not cowed, Mark continued toward his goal: Carol, his mate.

Three more wolves stepped out of the crowd to bar his way. From the smell of them, Mark knew these were the jokers that had shadowed Carol around campus before she left, and the guys that had held her back the night he came to the house.

He let out a snarl and charged forward, anger and justice on his side. He and his wolf united as one. Every obstacle would be defeated. Nothing would keep them from their mate.

The fight was vicious and bloody. In the end, Mark proved to be more determined, and the other wolves gave way, allowing him to pass. Less than six feet away from his goal, he was brought up short. A huge, snarling gray wolf with black tipped fur and golden eyes stepped forward, barring his way. Alex.

For the first time, the alpha intervened. "No."

Alex swung his muzzle around and growled at his father.

Thomas narrowed his eyes at him, and when he spoke again, his voice was entrenched with power, reminding Alex who was alpha. "You want to fight? Fight as men."

Mark was shifting to human before the last word was completely out of his alpha's mouth. "Gladly."

Alex changed as well, and the grin on his face would have scared a lesser man.

Mark raised both hands and motioned for Alex to bring it on.

Alex came forward, and the first punch snapped Mark's head backward. Mark gave his head a brief shake and rotated his jaw to loosen it. "That's your free one," he told Alex. "I owe Carol that much."

Then the fighting began in earnest.

The two were fairly evenly matched in terms of size and strength, though Alex stood about a head taller. Alex drew on his shifter reflexes and strength, but he didn't have the same edge that Mark did. Mark had grown up on the streets of Philly and knew how to fight dirty. What he hadn't learned growing up, the military had taught him, giving his already prominent fighting abilities a lethal sharpness.

They fought until the alpha called a halt. "Enough!"

Alex sank to his knees, sucking in deep gulps of air. Mark had the satisfaction of still being on his feet, even if he was bent over at the waist, his hands braced on

his knees the only things keeping him upright. He panted, trying to catch his breath. Alex packed a hell of a punch for a civilian.

The alpha was announcing to the pack that Mark, until recently, had been human. That he'd spent the last few weeks learning what it meant to be a shifter, all with the goal of claiming his mate—his true mate—Carol.

While the alpha was speaking, Mark regained his equilibrium. As soon as he finished, Mark pinned Carol with a look. "Carol..."

She looked uncertain at first; then her jaw firmed. "Yes?"

"Run."

Her eyes grew big, and she glanced around at her parents, Alex, and the rest of the crowd. Maybe seeing if anyone would stop him? *Not a chance in hell, sweetheart.*

"Now," he added gently.

She took one step back, and then another, before turning on her heel and sprinting off into the woods. Mark slowly straightened from his position. He rolled his shoulders backward a few times and shook his arms to loosen them. Then he bent his neck from side to side, grunting in approval as it gave a satisfying crack.

"If you'll excuse me," he said to the alphas, "I have a mate to claim." With those words, he shifted to wolf and took off after his mate...

* * *

Remembering how he'd caught and claimed her, first as a wolf and then as a man, reminded him of his promise this morning to make it worth her while if Carol took it easy today and didn't overdo it. As his cock rose to attention, he figured now was as good a time as any.

Striding into the room, he walked over to his mate, grabbed her by the forearm, and pulled her to her feet. "It's time for all good little mommies-to-be to call it a night. Tell everyone good night, Carol," he instructed as he towed her behind him.

"Mark," she scolded, sounding scandalized.

“Night, everyone,” he called over his shoulder. “Feel free to stay as long as you like. Lock up on your way out.”

A chorus of good nights and a few suggestive remarks greeted his announcement. He grinned, knowing they, as well as his mate, could smell his lust. Just as he could smell her embarrassment and growing excitement.

“You have until the count of five to get naked and onto the bed before I rip the clothes right off your body,” he told her as he closed and locked the bedroom door.

“Five seconds? That’s not a lot of time,” she argued, hands on her hips.

“Four,” he counted down as his shirt hit the floor.

“What about a bath? Don’t you think after the day we’ve had, we need to take a shower?”

“Three.” His pants dropped to the floor. “You’ll just get sweaty again.”

“What about our guests? You know they can hear us in here,” she protested, but she was fighting back a grin, and he could smell the cream oozing from her sheath.

“Two.” He stepped out of the white boxers he wore.

“You’re not really getting ready to tear my clothes, are you? I like this outfit, and it’s new, purchased for today.”

“One.” He held his hands out and watched his fingernails grow into claws. There were times not being human had its advantages. This was one of them.

Carol slowly and deliberately bent over to untie the shoelaces on her ankle boots, turning in a way that made sure he got a good look at the luscious ass that he loved so much. The tease! He let out a low growl.

“Time’s up.” He came forward determinedly.

She straightened, an expression of false alarm on her face. “Wait, wait! See, I’m undressing,” she stated, reaching for the hem of her shirt.

“Too late.” A few slashes of the claws, and her red velour tunic with the Christmas tree on it, whose ornaments really lit up, and the matching pants were

history. He paused when he caught sight of the red itsy-bitsy thong she wore beneath it and the matching push-up demibra.

Noting his interest, she asked, "You like?"

"Yeah. I don't remember you having that on this morning," he admitted.

A wicked grin crossed her face. "I didn't. I put them on when I changed for dinner."

Mark reached out and ran the tip of one finger over her lace-covered mound. "Nice," he drawled before snatching her panties off. The bra quickly followed, drifting to the floor in a cloud of lace scraps.

"Hey! I thought you liked these," she protested.

"I do. Make sure you purchase more," he stated as he crowded her in the direction of the bed. "On your hands and knees. I want to see that pussy. I have a promise to keep."

Carol's eyes bled to gold, and she shuddered. Wasting no time, she climbed onto the bed and presented her ass.

"Spread those legs, baby. That's it. A little wider now. Perfect." He knelt on the floor behind her. Nibbling on one cheek and then the other, he bit down gently with his teeth, smiling when she gave a small moan. She was so ready for him she was shaking, but he wanted more.

"Um, look how pretty this is." Mark ran a thumb through the moisture lining her slit and brought it to his mouth. "Since you've been pregnant, your essence has changed. It's thicker, creamier, richer. So sweet it leaves me craving more."

Separating her labia, Mark buried his face between her legs and ate.

"Mark, baby," she squealed, trying to scramble away. He clamped a hand around her hips and ignored her feeble protest. After all their years together, she still hadn't adjusted to the intensity of the feeling when he went down on her. It's why he loved doing it. He knew one lick and she went crazy.

Her cries became muffled, and he realized she must have buried her face in a pillow to keep from screaming out. When her knees were in danger of collapsing and he figured she'd had enough, he stood and buried his length in her sheath.

She tightened around him. His eyes crossed, and he had to squeeze his cock at the base to keep from coming. Popping her on the ass with the flat of his hand, he scolded, "Quit that. I promised you a long ride, and I'm going to give it to you." For good measure, he spanked her other cheek as well. As a shifter, Carol liked her sex rough, but in her condition he couldn't risk it. So to give her that edge of pain that she loved so much, he spanked her ass, alternating cheeks and rhythm so she never knew when the blow would land.

"Oh, God," she moaned and circled her hips as she clenched around him again.

"No, baby. The name's Mark," he said with a wicked chuckle.

He set a slow and steady rhythm, gliding deep and withdrawing until he was almost completely out before thrusting forward again. Mark rode her until the sweat poured down his face, and his balls drew up tight against his body as he fought to hold back his wolf. Finally he couldn't take it any longer.

"Hold on, baby; it's about to get little rough. Tell me if it's too much."

Mark climbed up onto the mattress and covered his mate, his arms planted on the bed by her head. Then he loosened the chain on the beast that was screaming to be free. His teeth locked onto her neck, holding her in place, and the sounds of wet suctioning and slapping flesh filled the room.

Carol's back bowed, and she came with a scream. The feel of her milking his cock caused him to let loose with a deep growl as his cock expanded to massive proportions right before the semen erupted from his body. He drove in to the hilt and held there as he came and came and came some more.

The tension left him in a rush, and he collapsed onto his side, pulling his exhausted mate down with him. He stroked her gently from breast to thigh as her breathing slowly evened out. "Did that make up for you having to take it easy today?"

She barked out a laugh, as though his question had startled her, and he groaned as the motion caressed his cock, which was still nestled inside her body. "Oh yeah," she assured him with a pleased sigh.

"Good. Got to keep my baby satisfied. Too many wolves out there looking for mates," he told her, only half joking. Mark never let himself forget how lucky he was or took his woman for granted. He didn't have to go far to find any number of men who'd be happy to be in his position.

"I hope Alex finds a mate soon. I hate seeing him so unhappy."

"He will. There are some nice women within the pack."

Carol sighed. "I know, but he doesn't want any of them. He wants what we have, and I can't blame him. Besides, Alex shouldn't have to settle, not in this. I know he'd be a good mate to any one of them, but he deserves more. He deserves love."

"Well, there's nothing we can do but be supportive of him and hope the Creator sends him a mate the way he did us," Mark reasoned. He sat up and disentangled his body from hers. "Come on. It's been a long day. Let's go take that shower you wanted earlier and get some rest."

"All right," she agreed and rose from the bed, a pensive expression still on her face.

"Hey!" He caught her by the waist. "Stop worrying. What will be will be."

A rueful smile crept across her face, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're right. I know you are. I can't help worrying."

Mark dropped a kiss on her lips. "Let's see if I can redirect your thoughts to something more pleasant." He hustled her into the bathroom and proceeded to make her forget about everything but the two of them together.

Epilogue

“Just a minute, son. We’d like a word with you.”

Alex paused with one hand on the car door handle. “Yeah, Dad?”

He waited while his parents crossed over to him, reining in his curiosity. They’d been together last night and all day today, discussing every topic under the sun. What needed to be said that hadn’t?

“The elders approached us today...” his father began.

“The elders? No offense, but if there’s a problem within the pack, as alpha, they should be coming to me,” Alex interrupted.

“They’re concerned about your lack of mate, and so are we,” his mother explained.

Alex felt the muscles in his neck tighten. “I—”

“You’ve been alpha for ten years now. It’s time for you to settle down,” his father stated.

Not this again.

“Don’t you think I want to?” Alex thought of the new home he’d built and the lone present sitting under his Christmas tree, purchased for the mate he wished he had.

“Then what’s the problem?” his mother asked, concern showing on her face.

“I want what you and Dad have and Carol and Mark found. I want my one.”

“Oh, Alex.” His mother stepped forward and laid her hand on his arm. “While your father and I love each other dearly and I couldn’t imagine my life without him, he’s not my true mate.”

"What?" This was the first he'd heard of this.

"Son, we're as happy for Carol and Mark as you are, but the facts are what they found is extremely rare. The odds of you finding yours, if she's even out there, are slim. You can still have a good, loving mating without finding your one."

Alex felt his expression harden into what his mother called his stubborn face. He knew he had a true mate. Rare to find didn't mean impossible.

His mother noted it and sighed. "Alex, at least make an effort. That's all they—we—are asking."

"Don't you think I've tried?" he burst out. His frustration with the situation was beginning to get the better of him. How many times were they going to discuss this? Pushing off the car, he stepped away from his parents, needing space. In a calmer tone, he reminded them, "None of the women in the pack interest me."

"There are other packs. The Sparrowhawks' alpha has a sister," his father said.

Alex snorted his contempt as he turned to face his father again. "The Sparrowhawks are throwbacks. The alpha killed his own father to take control."

"On the eastern seaboard alone, there are at least twenty other packs. One of them is bound to have a female that stirs you."

"The other packs are as short on females as we are. Besides, what do you want me to do, leave the pack to its own devices while I go mate hunting?"

"Carol is more than capable of handling the pack temporarily and the medical clinic."

"And my veterinarian practice?" Alex bit out, his tone heavy with sarcasm. "Who's going to handle *it*? Carol's a nurse, not a vet. Am I supposed to let it sit idle?"

His father's eyes narrowed in warning. "If that's what it takes. Far better than sitting on your ass waiting for your one to magically appear."

“Sitting on my—” His mother’s gasp made him bite off the rest. “I’ve been working my tail off trying to get this medical center on its feet, in addition to the veterinarian practice you left behind when you two went running off to Arizona.”

His father growled, and Alex felt his eyes go wolf as he took an angry step forward.

“Alex, Tom.” His mother got between them, hands outstretched to hold them apart. “Both of you, leash the beast. Right now.”

Alex spun away, hands gripping his head, appalled at how close he was to challenging his own father. He tried to remember this was his dad he was dealing with, a man he both loved and highly respected.

In the background, he could hear his mother murmuring to his dad, but deliberately blocked out what she was saying. Alex concentrated on the frigid night air, the snow on the ground, and the quarter moon barely visible above the tree line. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the night scents. Anything to settle his beast. Slowly his eyes rounded out, and his claws retracted. The muscles in his shoulders loosened.

A soft hand landed on his back. “Alex, we know this is a difficult topic. That’s why the elders came to us. Please realize we have only yours and the pack’s best interests at heart. Maybe you can put some feelers out. If you can’t go to them, I’m sure plenty of eligible females would be willing to come here to you. All we’re asking is that you do more than what you’re doing now. Relax your standards a little.”

“And know this: if you don’t find a mate for yourself soon, the elders will do it for you,” his father added in a hard voice.

Knowing any response he made at this moment would damage his relationship with his parents, Alex shrugged off his mother’s hand and took off running down the driveway and into the woods, stripping as he went.

“Alex!”

“Let the pup go. He’s got a lot to think about,” his father said.

There was nothing to think about. He knew what he wanted and refused to settle for less. He would have his true mate or no mate at all. He seamlessly shifted and ran into the night. He'd get his car later.

THE END

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Nikolai's Wolf

Carol's Mate

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I love to read. I love books that can take me out of my ordinary life into an extraordinary reality. I don't just read. I become. To me, a really well written book is like a mini-vacation, without all of the hassle. My greatest hope is that after reading one of my stories, you'll feel the same.

The mother of three (four, if you count Lady, our family dog) and grandmother of two, when not busy with family or church, I can most likely be found in front of the computer writing or escaping into a book.